And the stars saw

Abstract
While seemingly a spontaneous maiden-in-distress story, this narrative explores the marginalisation of females in third world countries. In particular, it examines how patriarchal attitudes, practices and behaviour—including those that encourage the existence of arranged marriages—severely restrict the destinies of girls and women.

Key words: culture, diversity, patriarchal society, short story

POM! PI! PO POM PI!

Drums vibrated in a booming cantata as the Abafazi celebrated their new bride. Bare torsos gyrated, gleamed with animal fat.

Our son has found a maiden!

Pure from the water nymph,

Such wonder she shines.

A swish of skirts here, a sway of neck there. And the feet! Caked with dust, toes tapped their dance in sync to the drums. A spray of soil from the ground formed a cloud that lifted to the horizon under the intense gaze of a yellow moon.

Fresh like the smell of rain!

Pure like a newborn,
Younger than morning dew.

Shani’s arms glimmered with cowry shell trinkets, red, green, and yellow. Her legs were folded, curled into something tragic. She watched as dancers pranced to fever pitch, swayed heads hugged tight with feathers.

*Tap! tap! jig! roll-a-hip! jig!*

One fair young woman, the one with the biggest sway, with the neck of an ostrich and the eyes of a gazelle, spat each time Shani caught her eye.

Babies wrapped in leaves first perked up to *pom! pi! pom!* then surrendered to happy sleep. Mosquitos, mellowed with drunken blood, swooned to the ground and trembled their feet, as fireflies flickered orange wings and played with a faint-hearted wind.

Where are you? wondered Shani.

Again Fair Gazelle spat.

Only moments ago, it seemed, the Abafazi had raced with her into the night. She was gagged with leaves and kicking, slung over one man’s shoulders. Jeru. Even then, she could have sworn she saw Bobbo, promise slinking from brush to brush.

*Cara mawa*—the son never had: Papa always said this of Bobbo.

Brave, dear Bobbo. Where are you?
Jeru sat to her right on the gazebo near a crackling fire. He preened himself like a cock, picked at dried mucus along the plateau of his nostrils, near a wart.

‘Finally,’ he said, and reached to stroke her chin with those grimed hands.

Shani hissed.

‘Spirit,’ he said. ‘That I love about you.’ Spittle fell from his mouth. He missed several front teeth. ‘But I’ll tame you. You’ll see.’

Shani spat near his feet.

His glee was more rasp than laugh. He rocked, almost fell into the flames. He was big like a toad, shaped like a toad, and overall—with bulge of eyes and pockmarked skin—resembled a toad.

Inwardly she shuddered at the lust in his eyes. Outwardly she glowered.

‘Only a coward steals a woman. Do I look like a goat to you?’

‘Had I asked, would your father have given me your hand?’

‘Never to Abafazi filth.’

‘There.’

‘And Father already has chosen another. More worthy.’ Daggers in her eyes.

‘Tonight I will take you, give you my babies. Even him, your worthy one, he cannot undo this. And then, I wonder—will you call our children Abafazi filth?’

Jeru was right. The land of Modo would never take Shani back. None of her
people would touch a fallen woman. The drums became soulful, distant. Jeru was now steamy drunk, filled with pride and liquor made from black bee honey. He poked out toad hands, warmed them above burning cinders.

‘Cheer up, beautiful one,’ he said. ‘Long night ahead.’

The soft curtain of Shani’s dark braids concealed her eyes as she stared unblinking at pulsing wood. Her Modo people, all of them except Bobbo, slept like dead people. Nobody would come looking for Shani tonight. And tomorrow, by tomorrow ... nobody ever would.

Jeru’s gaze ran along the toga that cut across her shoulder. He flicked a tongue over his lip. His loin cloth lifted with his desire. He could take her now, drag her into the bush, break her unwillingness. But the night was young, and it was rife with music. He cleared his throat, spat phlegm into crackling flames.

With impulse he tore himself from the ground. His legs, unwilling to leave newfound bounty but altogether entranced by the music, walked in different directions. His loin cloth loosened from his waist. It slipped to the ground, overwhelmed by a distended belly stuffed with gizzard and yam. He danced, oblivious to his nakedness, swayed to the rest of his clan.

Fair Gazelle gyrated her hips towards him.

Shani stretched her legs, away from the fire. She listened as needles in the nerves
of her toes died away. Slowly, she rose to her feet. She watched Jeru’s shudder dance. He half-limped, half-squatted, tapped the ground with his heel.

Shani’s beaded ornaments tinkled with motion. Fair Gazelle looked over her shoulder, continued dancing. More eyes of dancers followed Shani. They lost interest when she lowered herself into the bush. Beyond the village, the forest filled with wild animals. Evil spirits circled overhead. She couldn’t escape. No stolen bride ever had.

A tiny pool formed at her feet as her droplets fell. Three visits to the outdoor latrine each night, no wonder the Abafazi learned her pattern, snatched her that quick before she could raise an alarm.

Aroused by wetness, a green snake slithered close to her big toe.

‘Spirit of my fathers, bearer of good charm,’ she whispered to him.

He slithered into tussocks of grass.

The bush rustled, rueful branches bowing to the wind.

Crouching still, Shani parted the leaves and peered at the night.

‘Quiet,’ said a voice behind the shrub.

A woman emerged from a camouflage of leaves. It was Bobbo.

Shani felt weak at the knees, swooned, and fell into a warm and gentle arm.

‘Have they harmed you, radiant one?’ said Bobbo.

‘I’m fine,’ whispered Shani inside her sob.

Bobbo limped closer, her shuffle arising from childhood sickness that had
shortened an arm and a leg. But though her right foot dragged like a broken twig, Shani knew, Bobbo’s right hand had power to knock over a grown bull. Without big effort she beat men in wrestling. As for her left foot, it pulled her twig foot with the speed of a warrior. And while everyone stayed astonished, no one recovered enough to bring up the subject of marriage.

*Pom! Pi! Pom!*

The Abafazi!

‘You shouldn’t be here. Bobbo! They’ll kill you! This doesn’t look safe. They’ll kill us!’

‘Always the whiny one. You could have crawled away by yourself, yanked off these stupid things.’ Bobbo drew a knife from a sheath around the waist, snipped and Shani’s beads fell. ‘Big sister isn’t always there to protect you. But I *will* get you a chamber pot! Beauty is not everything.’

‘Never said it was …’

They stole away, away from the drums, from the Abafazi scouts. Her kidnappers would never get over the embarrassment of being outwitted by a woman. One-legged.

‘Dear Bobbo,’ whispered Shani.

‘Papa doesn’t call me *Cara mawa* for nothing.’

They exchanged a short glance. Now it was safe.

They leapt to their feet, surged into the wind homeward bound.
Dusk swallowed their litheness. Owl eyes lit their path. They raced through the wilderness, looping trees and shrubbery, chasing into darkness.

They jumped down a small valley, into open plains where the forest peeled back. Then it sprang up again as they made more ground into more thickets. Shani ran ahead into a whistling wind.

In a neon hue of orange, the moon smiled upon them, young and soft.

Behind them, rolling his waist and still smiling, muddy eyed and waving into the arms of a self-satisfied gazelle, Jeru gyrated and pranced to a cantata.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research background

Recent stories of freed Boko Haram captives gave focus to the plight of women and children in war-torn countries. Young girls and women were reportedly raped and impregnated (Haverluck 2015), forced to become sex machines for their Islamist captors (Joshi 2015), brain-washed into objects scarred with sentimental attachments to their terrorisers (Obaji 2015). The story of these once captives and those still detained is an example of marginalisation in contemporary Africa. ‘And the stars saw’ dramatises the challenges of the silenced woman. It draws attention to group practice, in particular to the patriarchal power that robs females of personal identity.

Research contribution

Shani’s story problematises the language one uses in relation to postcolonial societies. It raises questions about the appropriateness of qualifiers such as 'tribal', 'traditional', 'ancient', 'animistic', 'primitive', 'preliterate', 'Neolithic', 'underdeveloped' or the slightly more polite 'developing' (Conquergood 1991: 182), even ‘emerging’ in relation to the third world. To analyse culture’s logic is to search answers to the ‘why’ questions of a culture, to the ‘sense-making parameters of a society at the macro and micro levels’, in terms of normative values (Reeves-Ellington 2010: 251). But this narrative offers no answers to those questions.
Rather, the story draws from personal feeling of discontinuity and an awareness of being between worlds as an Australian migrant. As such, my ‘lived experience’ is that of having roots in a culture whose raw patriarchal influence is not dissimilar to the one this story describes. By crossing borders and acquiring ‘multiple identities and voices’ (Conquergood 1991: 185), as a writer I find myself existing in the ‘zones of difference within and between cultures’ (Rosaldo 1993: 28). This narrative is a writing of the self into a larger story across boundaries and borders, into a space of resistance between the individual and the collective (Denshire 2014: 834).

Research significance

This story borrows from cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s work on cultural citizenship, ethical versus cultural relativism, and how cultures are not separate; ‘they are not confined to their own individual museum cases’, but rather ‘exist side by side in the same space’ (Rosaldo 2014, ¶ 14).

With the self as subject, as both an informed insider and an outside participant, I offer in this story an autobiographical starting point to view the world, and (in the character of Bobbo) to view an empowered African woman who contributes to the shape of destiny. The narrative continues Rosaldo’s conversations on the interdependent world, one ‘marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power and domination’ (1993: 217).

References


