
Authoring the “Unspeakables”, Moralising the Public Sphere: A Literary Examination of Social Commitment and the Artistic Vision in Sifiso Nyathi’s Oeuvre

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ABSTRACT

Literature offers a medium to speak directly about issues that society may veil because they are viewed as “unspeakable”. This study offers a much-needed critical analysis of how a Namibian writer, Sifiso Nyathi, through his oeuvre, commits to moralise the public sphere by authoring the commonly unsaid and veiled societal matters. The study employs a qualitative approach and data was analysed using content analysis. By adopting two theories; Maria Pia Lara’s illocutionary approach and the African worldview, the article reveals that Africans are highly spiritual, superstitious and their belief in ‘another presence’ is undisputable. The study reveals that there are certain issues in the Namibian society which are not openly discussed, issues which are commonly controversial or viewed as aggressive towards accepted knowledge. The study will offer renewed insight into Nyathi’s works and African literature in general. The unique approach of blending different genres of literature; plays, poetry and a novel in exploring the “unspeakables” will bring novelty to Nyathi’s and other literary works.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Unspeakable, Society, Moralise

Introduction

The study examines how an author enunciates, re-assesses, makes a judicious inquiry and articulates issues that defy articulation in a typical conservative African society by analysing how a Namibia author unveils the “unspeakables” in his *oeuvre*. The *oeuvre* is comprised of five texts, three plays; *God of women*, *The oracle of Cidino*, and *Tears of fears in the era of terror*, a novel; *The other presence*, and an anthropology of poems; *Ballads of insomnia*. Each text of the *oeuvre* deals with a kind of overarching ‘silence’ in society.

As a social art, literature is committed to societal values. Pankaj (2011) asserts that literature serves the role of a compelling medium of communication which entails more responsibility than privilege to the writer. Furthermore, the publication of a literary work is essentially an act of communication through which the writer enacts his personality and vision of life on the society (Pankaj, 2011). Nyathi employs artistic forms in various genres of the *oeuvre* to offer an approach that seeks to elucidate the theme of social commitment and public sphere moralising by unveiling the “unsayables”, therefore persuading the readers to act and change their attitude towards these “unspeakables”. Nyathi defies the norm by creating a platform to voice the realities of the various “unspeakables” in society. This subsequently offers an approach of addressing, interrogating and thinking through some of the most difficult fixations and

challenges society encounters on a day-to-day basis, allowing the silenced to be thought through in a new, perhaps digressive, evasive, oblique yet still meaningful and memorable way. According to Marewe (2008) since the ‘non-standard’ issues are peculiar in society, they are ‘othered’, rendering them either misrepresented or unrepresented. However, avoiding confronting the “unspeakables” shelters these taboos and obscures them in silence. The study therefore examines how Nyathi commits to uncover these silences, by incorporating that which cannot be said into the language of the text through the *oeuvre*.

Objectives of the Study

- Explore how the various artistic visions are employed in the three different genres of Nyathi’s *oeuvre* to bring to the fore the “unspeakable”.
- Critically analyse the presentation of the various “unspeakables” in Nyathi’s *oeuvre*.
- Examine how the public sphere is moralised through the articulation of the “unspeakables” as evidenced in the author’s *oeuvre*.

In order to meet the objectives of this study, a qualitative approach was employed. Since the study explores a qualitative, non-numerical and non-quantifiable phenomenon, the qualitative approach is best suited as it allows the researcher to utilise texts as primary data to analyse critically how the “unspeakable” attitudes, behaviour and opinions are authored in the quest to moralise society. The study is restricted to a desktop design. The study has employed purposive sampling, as Nyathi’s *oeuvre* was deliberately selected because each text in the selected author’s *oeuvre* deals with a kind of “silent” and “unspeakable” aspect in society. Data of this qualitative study has been analysed using content analysis.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Due to its broad nature, the study adopted two theories; the Illocutionary approach and the African worldview concept. According to Lara (1999) illocutionary refers to how collective narratives acquire normative legitimacy because they are filtered through the public sphere where actors create fragile and falsifiable agreements about what needs to be done in the social world. This study hypothesises that Nyathi creates an explanatory moral quest to reveal the “unspeakables”. The second theory is the African worldview which is based on African cultural beliefs, practices and values. It includes beliefs and practices such as belief in God, belief in ancestors, nature, adulthood, belief in witchcraft, traditional healing, polygamy and rites of passage (Thabede, 2014). Together, the two theories; Illocutionary and the African worldview are best suited for this study as they will facilitate bringing out the “unspeakable” aspects in the *oeuvre* by providing the appropriate lenses.

The Artistic Vision

Artistic vision is an artist’s way of perceiving matters, their perspective, the type of work they do and the story they wish to convey. According to Attinasi (1965) literature is art and meaning. In literature, the art is presented in a communicative medium of words, these words subsequently form the poetical part of literature, the structure, the phrasing and the description. All these

encompass an author's artistic vision. In any art, the artist faces the problem of presenting a creative vision through a medium. Thus, the literary artist's medium is and must be a message bearer. Nyathi, through the literary medium of words artistically creates typical African day to day experiences which society commonly chooses to veil. This includes creative artistic vision as created through the use of various descriptions and literary devices such as imagery and figurative language.

An artist develops their artistic visions over time. Nyathi overtime compiled an *oeuvre* which through its analysis reveals his artistic vision. Understanding the author's artistic vision is imperative as the author is part of a community and thus embodies as well as reflects the values, dreams and fears of that community. Nyathi's artistic vision is explored to reveal the social and cultural taboos through an incorporation of various creative processes.

Authoring the “Unspeakables”

The Namibian society often struggles to express and come to terms with matters regarded as taboo. These are commonly controversial issues or issues that are hostile towards accepted knowledge. Nyathi attempts to unveil and bring to the fore issues which are commonly concealed by mirroring them in the *oeuvre* therefore reflecting their existence. By voicing the unsayable, society ought to reassess its body of knowledge; accede its limitations and shift away from veiling the “unsayables”. Franke (2011, p. 65) refers to the “unspeakables” as “that which cannot be said”, while Marewe (2008) refers to the “unspeakables” as issues that society is usually silent on. This study analyses how Nyathi manages to articulate the qualitative aspects of life such as the spiritual and same sex relationships which are some of the issues which the Namibian society is silent on. Through the *oeuvre*, Nyathi defies the norm by making use of the platform to voice the realities of the various “unspeakables” in society through a variety of artistic visions. This study therefore explored his notion further by analysing how the “unsayable”, the taboo and the forbidden is articulated by Nyathi.

The Spiritual World, Belief in Ancestors and Superstition

Most African societies tend to be highly spiritual and superstitious. Acquah (2011) states that African cultures believe that there are unquestionable spiritual forces that are more powerful than humankind and this opens up the African to the divine and to seeking affinity with these spiritual powers, be it traditional or religious. Lewis (2006) concurs by explaining that the spiritual refers to personal beliefs that help people make meaning of phenomena in their lives. Death especially is considered as a phenomenon that cannot just come naturally. It is something that always happens because of the existence of another presence and not just mortality itself (Ziwira, 2015). Moreover, Africans believe in spiritual protection by the ancestors. Ancestors are believed to be elders who have passed on to the other world. In that understanding, most African communities believe that even if the dead were in an unseen world, they were still with them in the family and the community thus so much respect is accorded to the ancestors. Machinga (2011) stresses that offering sacrifices to ancestors demonstrates respect for the ancestral spirits, ensuring protection from the spiritual entities and creating a sense of security. Also, the graves of ancestors were usually respected and sacred shrines Gumo, Simon, Evan and Collins (2012). They further assert that, if community members allow the destruction of sacred spaces, it is believed that ancestors would curse or punish the offender with misfortune or even death.

Furthermore, superstitious beliefs are common in human societies and nearly all human societies have some superstitious tendencies, African societies and particularly Namibian societies are no exception. Superstition is a social phenomenon and a product of social context and conditions. Since wisdom is normally puzzling and troublesome, humans may prefer superstition to reasoning. When one is uninformed, lacks knowledge or has an irrational fear of ill fortune, chances of them being superstitious are very high (Aggarwal, 2012). Some humans tend to avoid knowing the true facts about major human events and choose to lean against superstition. Hence, it is not surprising that many superstitions deal with significant occasions in human life such as birth, marriage, pregnancy as well as death, to mention but a few. Therefore, to warrant that only good things happen and to avoid misfortune, people become superstitious. The aspect of superstition is exhibited strongly in the *oeuvre*, particularly in the novel *The other presence*.

Same Sex Relationships

Homosexuality is usually a taboo subject because of the controversial social and cultural issues which surround it. It is a subject most individuals choose to be silent about, however, in the quest to moralise society, Nyathi openly pens this unspeakable in the *oeuvre* thereby opening a platform to society for scrutiny of this rarely discussed practice. There are two main theories in attempting to find out what causes homosexual attractions. The first theory claims that homosexuality is determined by biological or genetic factors, the second theory is that homosexual attraction develops primarily as a result of psychological and environmental influences and early experiences (Crouse, 2016). Whatever the cause of homosexuality may be, in most African communities the act is viewed as sinful, unnatural and unacceptable.

Due to the strong negative connotations attached to homosexuality in African societies, most people choose to keep it a secret. Because of the strong cultural aversion towards the practice, many people choose to remain in the closet and live surreptitious lives (Obasola, 2013). South Africa is the only country in Africa which accords the most legal rights to homosexuals. The country offers full rights to people who engage in homosexual acts and legally allows same sex marriages. The rest of the continent has either outlawed and criminalised the activity or have specific laws which apply differently to heterosexual and homosexual individuals. Lopang (2014) argues that, an ideal African man is mapped out in African literature to have strong physical and spiritual characteristics to the effect that notions of homosexuality are seen as improbable or alien which might not necessarily be the case. Sex is seen in the context of reproduction in a heterosexual framework. Due to this fixed picture created and engraved in most African's minds, the opposite of what they believe becomes impossible and in cases where it emerges, it is viewed as taboo and unspeakable.

Analysis and Discussion: The “unspeakables” in Nyathi’s *oeuvre*

a. Nyathi’s artistic vision

Nyathi’s artistic vision is engrossed in day to day life matters in the life of a typical African community. It encompasses ways in which the author artistically creates typical experiences from an African worldview. It is noticeable from the different themes in the texts that Nyathi’s literature is not ‘art for art’s sake’ but the author endeavors to bring to the fore what concerns society, therefore moralising it. Nyathi’s vision is centred on veiled societal matters, which the author brings to the fore through various literary devices such as imagery. In the *oeuvre*, Nyathi

appeals to the readers in various ways. The *oeuvre* incorporates visuals through light or lack thereof. Light is used in the *oeuvre* to create the mood in the texts. According to Nulph (2000) light is a powerful tool that can communicate different moods of the same scene. In all the three plays of the *oeuvre* mostly dim and fading light is used. All the three plays; *God of women*, *Oracle of Cidino* and *Tears of fears in the era of terror* end with fading lights. The fading lights at the closing of the play gives an air of closure for the reader. The lights dim and fade to create and reinforce the mainly sad mood of the culminating scene.

The visual of light is also presented in the other parts of the scenes within the plays. In *God of women*, (Act II Scene III) the four women who were married to a patriarchal king come to the realisation that the polygamous marriage was detrimental to them. After all the rivalries and fights in the preceding acts, these women unite and embrace each other with a sentimental statement from all the women to Ma Inonge the eldest wife “We love you Ma Inonge” (p. 29). As they embrace and comfort each other, the lights fade out. The fading out of light gives an impression that there was bright light throughout the scene, but light began to fade at the climax of the play, the big realisation and the reconciliation of these four women, concluding the scene. The fading of lights in this case intensifies emotions causing the reader to sympathise with the four women. Foreshadowing is employed in the opening scene of *God of women*, the seer prophesies;

...father shall eat with son. Eating the abominable fruit of the son...your very unknown and yet known son shall rival you for one of your spouses. (p. 2)

Lewanika’s son, whom he did not know did indeed end up impregnating one of Lewanika’s wives just as the seer prophesied. The use of this literary device foreshadows what later transpired in the play, fortifying and fulfilling the words of the seer. Also, in *The oracle of Cidino*, the prophecy of the oracle foreshadows the fate of the king. Due to the king’s failure to appease the ancestors, the oracle reveals to the king that the spirits of the ancestors were disappointed in him and further prophesise that the king would be “**expunged**” of his “**lenses**” (p. 54) to mean that the king would lose his sight and indeed this too came to pass in the course of the play. By artistically and creatively incorporating foreshadowing in plays, Nyathi creates suspense and adds dramatic tension to a story by building anticipation about what might happen in the texts and further conveys information that helps readers understand what comes later.

Figurative language used in the *oeuvre* is mostly metaphoric in nature. Nyathi makes use of figurative language in the quest of bringing to the fore the “unspeakables”. Metaphors especially are heavily embedded in the texts.

A good example is in *God of women* when Lewanika attempts to find out whether all his wives were virgins before he married them. In the quote below, Lewanika metaphorically speaks to his wives;

...Ma Inonge, your granary has been depleted, Ma Ilinge, your traditional dish has lost its delicacy; and you Ntsala, all my hopes lay on you until you proved yourself barren beyond an ordinary desert. (p. 5)

Lewanika uses metaphors to describe Ma Inonge’s condition of being above the age of child bearing by referring to her ovaries being unable to produce eggs any more as a ‘depleted

granary'. While, Ma Ilenge's inability to sexually satisfy the king is compared to a dish that has lost its taste. Also, a metaphoric comparison is made between Ntsala's barrenness and a desert to indicate that she is unable to fall pregnant. In using these extreme metaphors, the author through Lewanika figuratively compares the three women's situations to contexts that the readers are familiar with, producing the desired effect of portraying Lewanika as a verbally abusive and patriarchal husband.

The Spiritual World

The *oeuvre* is strewn with spiritual encounters. In *The other presence*, the play sets off with a spiritual encounter. The mourners are gathered at Ma Simanga's compound to mourn the death of her son Akapelwa, when the peculiar whirlwind occurs. The reaction of the mourners is a clear indication that various negative spiritual connotations were attached to the whirl wind. Everyone starts "**panicking**" (p. 1) as they wondered what the whirl wind might be denoting, given the nature of their gathering. In most African cultures, death is considered as something that always happens due to the existence of another presence and not just mortality itself (Ziwira, 2015). As feared as death is in African societies, the whirlwind exacerbated these fears. Elder Neo advanced to stop the whirlwind in its tracks by chanting some words "**Find your path to your haven of peace and leave the children of life...**" (p. 2), which designates that the whirlwind was connected to another world unknown to humans. Also, while mourners were on their way from the hospital to the cemetery for the burial of Akapelwa, another whirlwind erupted to which Elder Neo enquired "**What is the matter with the other world today?**" (p. 87) This affirms the strong belief in the existence of an "unknowable world" (p.3) by this community.

All the texts of the *oeuvre* acknowledge the reverence accorded to the ancestors. The spiritual protection by ancestors is heavily relied upon by characters in the *oeuvre*. As alluded to by Rabaka (2007), the African view of their world includes among other things, the belief in ancestors. This fact is denoted in the way the characters in the *oeuvre* speak about the ancestors, their action as well as the fate suffered by some of the characters brought about by their disrespect in one way or another of the ancestors. The characters would acknowledge the presence of ancestors in their midst by offering them what they were drinking at that moment before the characters themselves take a single sip from the brew. In *The oracle of Cidino* Ma Inonge through the messenger reminds the king to feed his ancestors with the brew before he tastes its potency (p. 8). Similarly, in *God of women*, Neo, who is king Lewanika's friend requests the king to first render homage to the "invisible ones" with them, before he sends the calabash with the traditional brew around for everyone to consume the brew (p. 6). The invisible ones Lewanika is referring to are the ancestors. By offering the ancestors to take the first sip of the brew is a clear depiction of the respect the characters have of their ancestors and the fact that they acknowledge their presence, though invisible. Concurring with Acquah's (2011) assertion that although the dead were in the unseen world, they still continued to be part of the living community spiritually and were acknowledged.

Disrespecting of ancestors has detrimental consequences. In the *oeuvre*, disrespecting of the ancestors ranged from the destruction of the ancestral shrines or refusal to abide to their message. In *Tears of fears in the era of terror*, the guerrilla fighter expresses dismay on the destruction of the ancestral shrines by the enemy when he laments "**...you have insulted our ancestors by destroying their graves, their oracles, their caves...**" (p. 95) By equating the act

of destroying the shrines with insulting the ancestors one may deduce that, the ancestors ought to retaliate. Also, the poem *Ancestral rage* in *Ballads of insomnia* makes use of an imagery of a calabash to express the destruction of morals and values which were once put in place by the ancestors. Stanza one, lines one to three read; **“This moral calabash you have broken; This sacred token descended to you by our brave; ancestors.”** (p. 2) The last line of the poem offers the consequence of this destruction **“Now the curse is upon you”** (p. 2) Furthermore, in *The oracle of Cidino*, Neo narrates to the king peculiar happenings in the village recently. He narrates a story of a small cloud gathering in the sky, but the rain drops it produced were comparable to disastrous hail; He also talks of a strange sight which he observed of a dozen of crocodile eggs hatching at once in a dry cropfield (p. 40). The king’s granary also burnt down due to a mysterious fire. All these happenings came after the Town Clerk, who is a son to the king began to threaten the villagers to move from their village and make way for the building of a new town or they would be forcefully removed without compensation. This would mean that the graves and shrines of their ancestors will be destroyed. Mbeha, who is a member of the village heralds the Town Clerk in his statement **“Ancestors have cast a spell on the innocent because of your deeds.”** (p. 44)

In the same play, *The oracle of Cidino* the king’s granary is engulfed by a mysterious fire. The king naturally blames it on the children; however, the Messenger makes it very clear to the king that **“It is not the child that set the granary on fire.”** (p. 32) The messenger was very sure that it was the **“natural light”** (p. 32) The king was faced with unknown spells which were unclear to him until he was advised by his friend Neo to visit the oracle, a place where his ancestors were buried. The oracle made it very clear to the king that he had violated and endangered the spirits of the ancestors for agreeing that the village be destroyed to be replaced by the modern town (p. 52). The king was also blamed for not giving sacrifices to the ancestors in time and for the abominable act allowing cowardice to force him to resign before his time (p. 54). All these acts of not appeasing and violating the ancestral spirits led to the detrimental consequence of the king losing his sight and eventually his death. Clearly, from the *oeuvre*, when characters disrespect ancestors in any way, they face ancestral rage. This affirms what Gumo, Simon, Evan and Collins, (2012) postulate that if community members allow the destruction of sacred spaces, it is believed that ancestors would punish the offender with misfortune or even death.

Witchcraft

The African worldview also encompasses the belief in witchcraft which is one of the facets prominently depicted in the *oeuvre*. Mbiti (1969) asserts that there are good witches and wizards who are able to utilize their witchcraft power to assist people. In some instances, seers and witchdoctors were able to foretell the calamities which may befall characters. A good example is from the play *God of women*. The play depicts mystical powers possessed by seers and witchdoctors which were able to predict the fate of the king and those in his household. The play opened with a seer who predicts **“lust”** (p. 2) in King Lewanika’s compound. The seer makes it very clear to the king in his statement, **“your very unknown and yet known son shall rival with you for one of your spouses”** (p. 2). The king could not understand this prediction because he did not have a boy child by that time and if he was to have one in the future, by the time the son would be old enough to court women, the king would be dead by then, as he was already old. Little did the king know that he had a son out there whom his first wife had kept secret because they were not married when he was born and the king had instructed Ma Inonge to have an

abortion. Ma Inonge had not gone through with the abortion but she did not inform the king. The king therefore doubted this revelation.

In one of the King's visits to a witchdoctor, it was revealed to him that there was **“an infant on its passage due to incest and that death awaits the compound.” (p. 23)** All these predictions eventually came to pass as the King's youngest wife in the play is impregnated by the King's own son whom the king didn't know. Also, the king and his eldest wife Ma Inonge both die at the close of the play. According to Kagema (2014) witch doctors possess mystical powers and are able to reveal hidden information or reveal the future. Before the witch doctor's revelation, no one in the king's house detected that any one of the king's wives was sleeping with another man, let alone pregnant. However, after the revelation everyone became skeptical and the truth was later confirmed when John, the king's unknown son impregnated Joyce, the king's youngest wife. Also, the predicted deaths in the compound came to pass. This scenario confirms the mystical powers as being part and parcel of the African traditional religion.

Whenever unexplainable events happened in the *oeuvre* the characters sought assistance from diviners, witchdoctors or seers. In *The other presence*, a diviner is called to investigate the death of Akapelwa. Akapelwa's mother and the mourners wanted to know from the seer, who the culprit was. The whole village was caught up in a euphoric fit in anticipation of the drama about to unfold (p. 64). The drama is the anticipated seer's revelation of the name of the person responsible for Akapelwa's death. In the same novel *The other presence*, Ma Simangaplans that after Akapelwa's burial, she will travel as far as Malawi in order to get answers to the many deaths in her household from witch doctors. In *God of women*, in the opening scene, a seer cleanses the kraal from **“an evilcurse” (p. 1)**. The act of seeking spiritual protection affirms that mystical powers did exist. In the African worldview, no calamity happens by chance. The seeking of spiritual protection however came at a price. In *The other presence*, Ma Simanga's resolution is to use a large chunk of Akapelwa's savings on tracing his death by visiting witchdoctors. While in *God of women*, the king enquires what the seer's payment would be after the cleansing, to which the seer responded, **“A goat, and a white chicken” (p. 3)** which the king did not hesitate to pay. When the characters encountered unexplainable calamities, they seek out to witchdoctors and seers for assistance at any cost.

The facet of witchcraft accusations came out strongly in the novel *The other presence*. Although Adinkrah, and Adhikari (2014) posits that the vast majority of people accused of witchcraft are women, the opposite was true in *The other presence*. Elder Sinvula, a man was being accused of using witchcraft to cause the death of Akapelwa. During the mourning of Akapelwa's death, Neo and Dube, both elderly men of the village refuse to walk with elder Sinvula due to the fear of being accused of witchcraft. Dube expresses that a simple walk with Sinvula will be tantamount to people thinking that they (Dube and Neo) work with him (Sinvula) in his activities of the night (p. 19). According to Dahal (2013) the accusations of witchcraft lead to psychological abuse meant to shame the victim. These accusations psychologically affected Elder Sinvula and he decides to go to the hospital where Akapelwa succumbed to an illness to find out the exact cause of Akapelwa's death which he was being accused of. It was revealed later in the play that Akapelwa had succumbed to HIV/AIDS however, due to limited knowledge on the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, the community does not want to believe. Clearly, elder Sinvula's accusation of Akapelwa's death was due to an underlying social tension, in this case caused by the devastating illness which was causing so many deaths in society and elder Sinvula is used as

a scapegoat.

Superstition

The superstition facet is prominently presented in the novel, *The other presence*. The novel presents some characters who are ignorant to the truth no matter how irrational their reasoning may be. This fact is evidenced in the following excerpt from the novel;

There was always a terrible misconception about death. Death was always associated with some kind of spiritual mischief by somebody, there was always a scapegoat. Death is one of the major events of life which the African society avoids knowing true facts about and chooses to lean against superstition. As frightening as death already is, the situation in *The other presence* was made worse by the fact that Akapelwa's death was the fifth death in Ma Simanga's compound. Ma Simanga had already lost her husband in a car accident. She had also lost four of her children just few months between each other's deaths. They all had similar symptoms before their death. Their symptoms were described to include; strange rashes, weight loss, severe coughing and severe weight loss (p. 68). These repeated events have created fear in the mind of Ma Masimanga and fellow villagers alike and they begin to estimate this misery by another misery of superstition. In an outrage caused by the shocking death of yet another one of Ma Simanga's children, Kachana asks rhetorical questions **"Why is he dead? Why did they kill him?"** (p. 6) An indication that there is a general belief that someone is responsible for Akapelwa's death which expresses that in this society, death was a kind of spiritual mischief by somebody and not just mortality.

The characters were ignorant to the true cause of Akapelwa's death. Aggarwal (2012) attributes ignorance to the truth as having to do with being uninformed, lacking knowledge and having an irrational fear of something. This ignorance leads to illogical belief. Undoubtedly, most characters were ignorant of the fact that Akapelwa died of AIDS related illnesses. The disease was so feared that the characters are even **"afraid of mentioning it by name"** (p. 45). Thomas on the other hand who had just returned from his studies in the United States of America is open-minded about the realities of HIV/AIDS. Torgler (2003) posits that the social status of people plays an important role in the tendency to superstition, such that people with low social status have more tendencies to superstition. Compared to the other villagers, Thomas can openly talk about HIV/AIDS. Thomas openly probes Nico why he accuses people of having died of witchcraft while they know that they died of HIV/AIDS. This question stunned Nico and Kajaha as they look at each other in "shock" (p. 24). Nico and Kajaha were not as exposed to the information regarding HIV/AIDS as Thomas was, hence their surprised reaction.

This society was so superstitious such that everything in everyone's mind happened for a reason. As elder Sinvulalaments;

There was an explanation for every wind that blew off the thatched roof that was not tightly fastened down. There was an explanation for every cow or goat or even a chicken that died without any human involvement. There was even an explanation for any young girl who slipped and fell on those muddy soils next to the well. In all these, something closely observing man's activity was in charge. Something so divine was accountable. The irrational, or rather non-rational happenings, everyone had to accept, were due to the works of the other presence (p. 95).

In this rather seemingly exaggerated lament, elder Sinvula plainly brings forth the high level of superstition in his society. There always had to be a scapegoat for any unfortunate happening as it is believed that no unfortunate event happens naturally. This theme of superstition elucidates the leitmotif of the author committing himself to socially moralise the public sphere on superstition.

The “unspeakables” of same sex relationships

Nyathi commits to moralise society by incorporating the controversial theme of homosexuality in the *oeuvre*. This theme is notably presented in *The oracle of Cidino* as well as in *God of women* and *Ballads of insomnia*. The commonly discussed type of homosexual behaviour is that between a man and another man. In *The Oracle of Cidino* however, the author chooses to present a woman to woman lesbian relationship. Act I, Scene II of the play presents the two girls, Thelma and Peggy who are portrayed to be looking “Western in dress” (p. 11) compared to the general dresses of the other women. Already, this description sets them apart from the other characters. The description of how they are dressed foreshadows the ‘not so African homosexual behaviour’ in which the two later in the play engage in. The two girls profess their love for each other. Peggy begins with what at first sounded like a description of the traditional brew which they were consuming. However, as the conversation progresses it is clear from the artistic integration of their body language “inspecting her friend with her eyes” (p. 11) that the sweet words chanted were towards each other. The girls strategically employ the Songs of songs chants of King Solomon in the bible to express their feelings. Thelma utters; How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! Your eyes are like doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of the burning mountains (p. 11).

To which Peggy responds; Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come out from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them bereaved (p. 11).

These words, one would expect to be shared between a boy and a girl. From its origin, the poetic words are a testament to the beauty of the marital relationship in its fullness and they come from a man and are meant for his bride. However, in this case, the words are from a girl and meant for another girl. This exchange of rather intimate intones marks the start of the homosexual relationship between Thelma and Peggy in the play.

As the relationship between Peggy and Thelma advances, it becomes public knowledge. Other characters in the play do not approve of the homosexual relationship and see it as unnatural. This is evidenced in more than one instance when other characters try to clarify the unnaturalness of the relationship between same-sex species. The king uses imagery of crocodiles and crabs to detest the same-sex relationship between Thelma and Peggy, he states; “If crabs and crocodiles can see those of their other mate through the muddy waters of the river what blindness has

befallen my own flesh and blood?" (p.47). Similarly, Neo makes a comparison of the fowls in the air in his loathe for the homosexual behaviour. According to Neo, even fowls which are of lesser intelligence compared to human beings know how to play "mother and father" matters (p. 27). Clearly, the king and Neo see this behaviour as abnormal and unacceptable. From an African overview, homosexuality is viewed as abominable and un-African. It is denounced as evil, unnatural and incongruent to African culture and psyche (Obasola, 2013).

In an unexpected turn of events, Peggy breaks up with Thelma and runs off with the young lad Akapelwa. An opinion maintained by Bailey (1955) is of two types of homosexuality namely; condition and pervert. It appears Peggy was the former type because, the pervert homosexual engages in homosexual activities casually because of curiosity. This is confirmed when Peggy ends the relationship with Thelma. In trying to save the relationship, the heartbroken Thelma appeals to Peggy not to leave, however Peggy made it clear that she was not sure about the relationship and that she was just curious. This, she says before picking up her bags and leaving with Akapelwa. Evidently, their intentions for the relationship were not the same.

In *God of women*, the 'unAfricanness' of the homosexual behaviour is denoted. John who just returned from his studies abroad is seated with Joyce. In a conversation, Joyce asks John to confirm a rumour, whether in the Western world white men marry each other, to which John replies "yes, even women marry each other" (p. 19). Joyce finds this "outrageous" (p. 19) and juxtaposes the behaviour with an axe being meant for cutting wood, not another axe. Joyce believes that this behaviour is Western because obviously where she comes from, the assertion is that the African culture is rigidly heterosexual. However, Anderson (as cited in Lopang 2014) dispels the myth of African homosexuality being a culture from the west, arguing that a European concept of homosexuality may have been brought to Africa but homosexuality was not introduced to Africa, it existed. Similarly, In *Ballads of insomnia*, the poem *Letter to Grandma*, the poet narrates to the late grandmother of how things have changed due to modernity since she left decades ago. The first two lines of stanza 10 reads; Namasiku just got wedded to her girlfriend; Simataa just got courted by his boyfriend (p. 33). Namasiku is a female name, while Simataa is a male name hence the two lines depict homosexual unions. The poem suggests that modernity has made homosexuality acceptable in Africa. By authoring homosexuality, a platform is created to openly scrutinise the theme, hence educating the public sphere.

Conclusion

Evidently, in Nyathi's mission to moralise the public sphere, various artistic visions are incorporated. Texts are very rich in historical and cultural manifestations, which the reader can relate to. The *oeuvre* is also set in familiar everyday life and is characterised by recognisable people, unfolding in everyday logic of cause and effect, making it possible for the reader to relate and the author to achieve the purpose of moralising the public sphere through the authoring of "unspeakables". The study unveils these issues which are commonly masked, representing them and reflecting their existence. In so doing, an opportunity is created for society to reflect on its dispositions, allowing imagined alternatives and wide-ranging shades of opinions to be explored. The study serves as a stage to openly interrogate some of the issues which are viewed as taboo, unsayable and commonly concealed therefore offering a platform to further interrogate the notion of "unspeakables" in various Namibian societies. The study maintains that, Nyathi's work has a purpose, which is a responsibility towards society as it is noticeable from the unspeakable themes presented in the *oeuvre*. And that Nyathi's literature is not 'art for art's sake' but the author

endeavours to unveil concerns of society which are subdued therefore educating society.

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