

A Postcolonial Feminist Exploration of Zulu Girl Child's Position and Gender Dynamics in Religio-Cultural Context

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Abstract : This paper critically examines the gender dynamics of a Zulu girl child in her religio-cultural context from the postcolonial feminist perspective. As one of the former colonized ethnic groups in the South African context, the Zulu tribe used to have particular and contextual religio-cultural ways of a girl's upbringing. This included traditional and cultural norms that any member of the community could not infringe without serious repercussions from the community members. However, the postcolonial social position of a girl child within this community became ambiguous and unpredictable due to colonial changes that enhanced gender dynamics that propelled tribal communities into deeper patriarchal structures. In the empirical study conducted within the Zulu context, which investigated the retrieval of ubuntu (virginity) as a Zulu cultural heritage, identity and sex education as a path to adulthood, it was found that a Zulu girl child's social position is geared towards double oppression due to gender dynamics that she experiences in her lifetime. It is these gender dynamics that are examined in this paper from the postcolonial feminist perspective. These gender dynamics are at play from the birth of a girl child, developmental stage to puberty and marriage rituals. These rituals and religio-cultural practices are meant to shape and mold a 'good woman' in the Zulu cultural context but social gender inequality that elevates males over females propel women social status into life denying peripheral positions. Consequently, in the place of a 'good woman' in the communal view, an oppressed and dehumanized woman becomes the outcome of such gender dynamics, more often treated with contempt, despised and violated in many demeaning ways. These do not only leave women economically and socio-politically impoverished, but also having to face violence of all kinds such as domestic, emotional, sexual and gender-based violence that are increasingly becoming a scourge in some of the sub-Saharan African countries including South Africa. It is for this reason that this paper becomes significant, not only within the Zulu context where the research was conducted, but also in all the countries that practice and promote patriarchal tendencies in the name of religio-cultural practices. There is a need for a different outlook as to what it means to be a 'good woman' in the cultural context, because if the goodness of a woman is determined by life denying cultural practices, such practices need to be deconstructed and discarded.

Keywords : feminist, gender dynamics, postcolonial, religio-cultural, Zulu girl child

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