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**Celebrating Africana Motherhood: the Shona Proverb and the Familial and Social Roles of Mothers as First Teachers, Cultural Bearers and Co-Partners**

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**Abstract**

The position and role of women in Shona culture has been largely distorted and misrepresented due to the influence of Western Feminist theoretical paradigm which seeks to define and construct the Shona and, by extension, the Africana women from the standpoint of its rootedness in its own struggles against European patriarchy. This has negatively impacted on the growth and transcendence of both continental and Diasporan Africana women who stand at the mercy of ‘marauding’ groups of European women and organisations peddling Western oriented emancipatory ideas. Owing to their ethnocentric grounding in the European conception of reality which masquerades as universal, these ideas cannot hold in a fast globalising world that plays host to a hodgepodge of cultural worldviews and their attendant problems and challenges. It is therefore the concern of this paper to explicate the values and roles of Africana mothers as celebrated in Shona proverbs. The argument is that Shona/Africana women have an influential position as custodians of Shona/Africana cultural values, first teachers and co-partners in the Shona/Africana struggle for well being, survival and transcendence. The Shona/Africana woman is therefore celebrated as the campus of every home and family. She is the cardinal point from which the energy and strength that sustains the home and family ensues.

**Keywords:** Africana Motherhood, Globalizing, Procreation, Celebrating, Cultural Bearers, First Teachers, Co-Partners

‘It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. .... And that is why we say that mother is supreme’ (Chinua Achebe 1958:94-95).

“The female gender is the centre of life, [the] magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive. Destroy her and you destroy life itself” (Zulu Sofola in Hudson-Weems 2004:66).

**Introduction**

The history of the Shona/Africana women has been distorted due to the colonial misalliance between Africa and Europe. This has been perpetuated into the post-colonial era by the feminist movements in their different shades which seek to universalise the white women’s problems and recruit all women into their fold, black women included. The onslaught targets the ties that bind Africana homes and families by inviting Africana women to link their familial and gender roles with patriarchal oppression and exploitation. It misrepresents the acceptance of Western culture as a sign of progress and modernity and celebrates the

denial of the biologically female roles such as child-bearing. This is evident in the western world where surrogate motherhood is given primacy by so-called progressive women. For such Western women, child bearing is a form of oppression and an impediment to their selfish and narrowly conceived ideas of progress and accomplishment. Thus as Emecheta (in Hudson-Weems 2004:33) rightfully explains;

They [the Western feminists] are only concerned with issues that are related to themselves and transplant these onto Africa....Western feminists are often concerned with peripheral topics and do not focus their attention on major concerns---. They think that by focusing on exotic issues in the "third world" they have internationalized their feminism.

It is imperative for women of Africana descent to revisit their history and cultural practices and derive inspiration from them in order to reclaim their dignity as enshrined in Africana oral art forms such as proverbs. These proverbs are "...the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics, and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination ...." (Chinweizu et al 1980:2). They express the Africana conception and understanding of life and its incessant challenges and blessings and are a result of close examination and analysis of phenomena over long periods of time. This paper foregrounds the importance of mothers in Shona/Africana families, communities and nations as revealed in selected Shona proverbs. This is done against the backdrop of the fact that:

Women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies (Kairen, in Hudson-Weems 2004:46).

Kairen's position gives credence to the view that Shona/Africana mothers are cultural

bearers, first teachers and co-partners in the survival of Shona/Africana families, hence the Shona proverb which says *musha mukadzi* (A home is because of a woman). This proverb entails that for a home to be stable; there is need for a woman to preside over it in concert with her male counterpart. This does not mean that the woman is restricted to the domestic sphere as would be argued in other circles where the idea of a home is narrowly defined as the domestic space. Rather, the woman stands at the centre of all the life-affirming activities and projects that sustain the family. She regulates and manages the rhythm of the home and the family and is free to perform her triple roles of, 'mother, partner and breadwinner' (Hudson-Weems 2004:67). The revisitation of the Shona proverbs is a way of redefining Africana women from an Africana-centred point of departure which helps to unmask the Feminist onslaught that seeks to scuttle Africana male and female relationships by misrepresenting the truth concerning them. The result has been discomfiture and conflict in Shona/Africana families as Feminist values have proved to be incompatible with the Africana perspective of gender balance and harmony. Thus, Na'im Akbar (in Hudson-Weems, 2004:85) encourages Africana women to;

...preserve the uniqueness of their separate, complementary roles... avoid ontological weakness which equates nurturance, dependence and supportiveness with weakness...avoid the highly destructive macho notions of manhood which are feverishly trying to be realized by both men and women in their striving for a faulty liberation.

The realisation of these values will make the Africana women transcend in their effort to realise their full womanhood. It is the appreciation and acceptance of time tested values that make a people dynamic, versatile and creative as they endeavour to inscribe their mark in the affairs of the world. Aldridge (in Hudson-Weems ed 2007:59-60) advises that;

Moreover, male-female relationships provide a vista for discovering stages of personal development, identity, and the revelation of who people really are. More significant, particularly for the Africana family, they are a measure of a people's capacity for struggle and social construction. As a fundamental unit of the nation, relationship (sic) and weaknesses determine the nation's capacity to define, defend, and develop its interests.

It is imperative for Shona/Africana women to join together with their male counterparts so as to be able to build their families and their nations since they are the heartbeat of every family and nation as enunciated in the Africana cultural matrix which celebrates their uniqueness as mothers.

In this effort, Africana culture should be taken, 'as an important matrix in the universe of symbols and in the development of human society' (Nascimento in Afolabi 2003:279).

The acceptance of the Africana cultural conception of motherhood will help Shona/Africana mothers to stand out as unique and autonomous cultural beings without reason to beg for acceptance into spaces that are not theirs. Thus, this paper is premised on the life-affirming values of the Africana Womanist literary theory which celebrates the roles of women as enshrined in African history and culture. Aldridge (in Hudson –Weems 2004:xii) has it that Africana Womanism "is lucid in characterising the Africana womanist as a self-namer and self-definer who is also family centered with a strong grounding in sisterhood and an unyielding belief in positive Africana male-female relationships as foundations for the survival of Africana people and humankind." The theory defines the Africana woman as self namer, family centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with male in struggle, authentic, whole, flexible role player, spiritual, respected, recognized, male compatible, respectful of

elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering and nurturing (Hudson-Weems 2004: xix-xx). The paper, therefore, celebrates the Shona proverbial canonisation of the role of mothers as first teachers, cultural bearers and co-partners to their male counterparts.

### **Mothers as Care Givers and Nurturers**

Shona/Africana proverbs are both philosophical and artistic. They are people-centred and are concerned with moulding the world outlook of members of the Shona/Africana society (Furusa in Chiwome et al 1996:91). The proverbs give a glimpse of what mothers do in their homes and families as care givers and nurturers. The expectations of the Shona/Africana culture on Shona/Africana mothers are captured in the Shona proverb which says: *mai vemba igonzo* (a housewife is like a rat (which stores up things)). This particular proverb makes it clear that in the Shona/Africana cultural conception of gender roles and responsibilities, mothers are family finance ministers who always see to it that the needs of the family are taken care of. They handle their families' budgetary needs meticulously as they cooperate with their male counterparts in sustaining the family. This explains why a mother "must be provided eventually with dwellings for herself and her children and with fields, *munda/tseu*, a kitchen and granary, *dura/hozi* for provision of food for the unit" (Masasire in E. Chiwome et al, 1996:42). Like a rat, the Shona/African mother gathers and prepares food for the family. She also provides comfort and adds to the general prosperity of the family through her industriousness (Masasire, in Chiwome, 1996: 43).

In today's world, Shona/Africana women are engaged in professional jobs in which they also co-operate with their male counterparts in the development of the family and the home. They do so not as appendages to men but as equal, respected and acknowledged partners. Therefore, "the women in Africa [are] not seen as a rib or an appendage, or an after-thought to man, but as his divine equal" (van Sertima, 1984:8). In line with van Sertima's position, Shona proverbs debunk the myth that

Shona/Africana women are peripheral and marginal in the management of family matters. Instead, the underlying position in this paper is that colonialism created the gulf that now obtains between Africana men and women. It distorted the position of the Africana woman to the extent that "...her reality as the equal of man in essence, her reality as a daughter, and her reality as mother - were drastically reduced, giving way to the prominence of her reality as a wife" (Sudarkasa 1987:26-27).

The realisation of the necessity of the complementarity of roles will help re-locate Shona/Africana women in their cultural spaces thereby affording the Shona/Africana family the cultural leverage it needs in order to thrive. Mariama Ba (in Hudson-Weems, 2004: 79) says that, "the success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony." The harmony creates a nexus of both purpose and creative energy in the family. That Shona/Africana mothers are family protectors is clear in the following Shona proverbs: *Rudo rwehuku kuisa vana mumapapiro ziso riri kurukodzi* (It is love that makes a hen shelter its chicks while her eye is on the hawk): *Tsuro kupeta nzeve kumbwa seisikazwi ziso riri kumwana* (A hare directs its ears towards the dogs while its eye is on the younger ones). Thus, in the Shona/Africana cultural understanding of things, mothers are the supreme care givers who are committed to the security of their families, communities and nations. They provide guidance to the children and teach them survival strategies. The Africana womanist "...stays connected to her family and participates in the collective liberation struggle, oftentimes assuming even leadership when needed, as did queens of antiquity" (Hudson-Weems 2004:53). Africa is awash with examples of such women: Queen Nzingha of Angola, Yaa Asantewa of Ghana and Nehanda of Zimbabwe who fearlessly led her people in the fight against the western imperialists and was hanged for challenging British colonial encroachment into her ancestral lands. The Shona/Africana woman's aptitude to provide protection to her family in the same way as the hen or the hare in the above proverbs speaks to her unflinching

commitment to the welfare of her family. Thus, Hudson-Weems (2004:53) notes that:

In fact, protecting her family, her children in particular, illustrates the high premium she places on family centrality, a critical component of Africana womanism. Lovingly and responsibly, the Africana woman is the mother of all humankind and thus, unquestionably the supreme mother nurturer.

Shona/Africana women do not cringe in the face of the responsibilities accruing from being a mother. They are adequately socialised by their mothers and aunts from childhood to develop into desirable and responsibilities-conscious members of the Shona/Africana society. In times of discomfort, children, young and grown, seek solace and comfort in the arms of their mothers and even when they cry, they call out to their mothers, which vindicates the belief that mother is supreme. This is embodied in the following proverbs: *Baba muredzi mwana kuchema anodaidza mai* (A father is just a nurse, when a child cries it calls out to the mother): *Mai musuva usingasehwi mumuto* (A mother is like a morsel which needs no dipping into gravy). In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo is accepted and consoled by his mother's people when he is banished from his fatherland for accidentally killing a kinsman. Thus, Shona/African women cannot afford not to fulfill their responsibilities. The evasion of their cultural responsibilities would seriously undermine their sense of self-worth and self-respect

### **Africana Motherhood and Procreation**

Childbearing is one of the definitive roles that Shona/Africana women proudly embrace as they regard this as a God ordained duty which they do not see as a form of oppression by men. Shona/Africana mothers regard giving birth and nurturing their progeny as another way of realising their full womanhood. They derive fulfillment from this biological and

natural necessity and the spasms of “joys of motherhood” (Emecheta, 1979) are an integral part of their whole existence. Anderson (in Hudson-Weems, 2004: 53) persuades us to recognise that:

Women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies.

Women are, therefore, the very foundation of life. Shona proverbs such as *mukadzi akanaka ndoune mukutu* (A good wife is the one with a carrying cloth): *Unaki hwemukadzi huri pamwana* (The beauty of a wife lies in the child): *Chikuru mwana, kurwadza kwenhumbu hakuyekwi* (A child is more important for labour pains are soon forgotten and *Mwoyochena una amai kuyamwisa mwana asiri wavo* (Compassion prompts a mother to suckle a child that is not hers) all concatenate to testify to the virtues of motherhood. They show that African mothers’ beauty and wholesomeness is realised through child bearing and rearing. They embrace and relish this task wholeheartedly and treasure it as a unique aspect to them which men can never experience.

Mothers can easily forget the torment that they have gone through when they manage to bring new life into the world. This makes them highly compassionate figures that even care for other people’s children to the extent of suckling them if the need arises. The compassion that oozes out of Shona/Africana mothers is out of the realisation that they are not only mothers to their immediate families but to their communities and their nations as well. This stands in stark contrast to practices such as surrogate motherhood. According to Arras and Steinbock (1995:425) surrogate motherhood entails “bear[ing] a child for another individual or couple.” The practice is popular in the Western world where the majority of women are not interested in conceiving babies because of so-called professional commitments, a euphemism for

revulsion towards pregnancy. Such women desire children but they are not prepared to bear the pain of motherhood. However, “the desire to have a child of “one’s own” is a couple’s desire to embody, out of the conjugal union of their separate bodies, a child who is flesh of their separate flesh made one” (Ross in Arras and Steinbock 1995:430). If procreation is the cornerstone of human perpetual existence, those women who are opposed to child bearing are dangerous to humanity. The practice “of course, may appeal more to radical lesbians or to radical feminist separatists” (Hudson-Weems, 2004: 25) who does not perceive anything awkward in such behaviour. Such people also agitate for same sex marriages in which the possibility of procreation is nil. Extremists of this nature disparagingly describe those women who see the need to fulfill their procreative roles as “child-bearing machines.” This helps them to manufacture a false justification for their wayward and neurotic behaviour.

More so, for the Shona/Africana woman to earn herself family and societal respect, she must fulfill her roles as a mother. If she chooses to renege on her motherly duties, she automatically severs the links that connect and bind her to her family. In the name of female empowerment, the feminists would wish to run away from home and seek sanctuary at the workplace. By so doing, they deny their traditional family hood as “[the] paramount part of their personal and professional lives” (Hudson-Weems, 2004:25). However, it is worth noting that Shona/Africana women never shy away from their responsibilities as reflected in the following proverbs: *Zhou hairemerwi nenyanga dzayo* (An elephant is not overwhelmed by its tasks): *Kamba hairemerwi nemakwati ayo* (The tortoise is not overburdened by its shell).

Thus, Shona/Africana women are not overwhelmed by the duties and tasks that await them in the home since they have been socialised and trained from childhood to prepare them for the inevitable tasks that await every Shona/Africana girl-child in adulthood. Instead, Shona/Africana women look forward to the pain and joy of child bearing and child rearing both of which are part and parcel of

Shona/Africana motherhood and womanhood. Aidoo (in Hudson-Weems 2004:34) captures Africana cultural conception of responsibility ever more compellingly:

For most West African women, work is a responsibility and an obligation. This idea is drummed into us from infancy. We never have had to fight for the “right to work” – a major doesn’t work. Consequently, there are not so many homes in the region today ... in which girls are discouraged from having ambitions of their own on the premise that they will marry and be looked after by men.

This stands true of many African societies as women do not go into marriage as passive receivers of their husbands’ benevolence. Rather, they go into marriage as a way of co-partnering with males in creating and developing families and nations.

### **Conclusion**

The training of a child begins from infancy. The immediate person to do that is the child’s mother who also receives support from the family and the larger community. The mother imparts life knowledge and values to the child through various cultural media and mechanisms. In doing this, she is actively complemented by her husband who is also culturally obligated to attend to the well being of the family and to ensure its harmonious existence. The women derive pleasure in fulfilling their roles as mothers such as, child bearing, nurturing, comforting and protecting. This paper has shown that cultural evidence in Shona/Africana proverbs reveals that life in the Shona/Africana home revolves around the mothers who would do well to refrain from jumping onto the bandwagon of Western feminist parochialism which is touted about as

capable of addressing the so-called Shona/Africana patriarchal oppression of Shona/Africana women.

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