

Milieu and Its Effect on Characters in the Selected Xitsonga Novels by FA Thuketana

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ABSTRACT Every story has a milieu. The milieu can either be a rural or urban setting as it refers to a place of action or background against which a story takes place. The aim of this paper is to identify, explore and describe the different types of milieu and how they influence and shape the behavioral traits of the characters in the selected Xitsonga novels. The paper will also critically look at whether the milieu influences the character in a positive or negative way. The textual analysis and literary criticism will be employed to analyse the selected literary texts.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to analyse the effect of milieu on characters. The localities depicted in the selected Xitsonga novels are rural and urban. These localities play a very important role on the lives of the author's creations or characters. Chauke (1997) in his study describes how narratology features such as time, characterisation and theme are influenced by the setting in which a character finds himself or herself. Myakayaka (2011) focuses on the critical analysis of the role of characters and the milieu in the novels of Lubisi. In her study, Myakayaka's point of departure is mainly on how the actions of characters can influence the setting in a novel.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to explore the influence that the milieu has on the characters in the selected novels.

Literature Review

Mukherjee (2015) in the paper titled, *Social Milieu in Vikram Seth's Novel A Suitable Boy*, refers milieu as the immediate physical and social setting in which people live or in which something happens or develops. The paper further argues that milieu includes the culture that the individual lives in and the people and institutions with whom they interact. Whereas Mathebula (2015) in her dissertation titled, *Nxopaxo-*

po wa Theme ra Mbangu eka Tinovhele ta Tsevu ta Xitsonga leti hlawuriweke, discusses how milieu contributes towards the development of the plot in the novels *Ndzi ta n'wi kuma* and *Nsuku wa mina* by WR Chauke. She goes on to discuss the symbolic portrayal of the milieu of the novels *Mulunguntima* by TH Khosa and *Mibya ya nyekanyeka* by BJM Mtombeni. Mathebula (2015) concludes her dissertation by discussing the role of milieu on the development of characters in the novels, *I vutomi* by CM Lubisi and *Ri hava xilondza* by PH Nkuna.

METHODOLOGY

The research method followed in this paper is mainly textual analysis. This kind of methodology, as McKee (2000: 01) puts it, involves the performance of textual analysis on a text by making an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of the text.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Definition of Milieu

Milieu refers to the place of action or the background against which a story takes place. The concepts milieu and setting are generally used interchangeably to refer to time, place and social environment where the story occurs (Chauke 1998:46). A story consists of a setting category plus an episode system. It is important to recognise that the setting category serves

two functions in the story of a novel. It introduces the main character(s) and it describes the social, physical or temporal context in which the remainder of the story occurs (Stein and Christine 1975: 9). Heese and Lawton (1988: 139-140) give Marjorie Boulton's viewpoint on milieu as follows:

Marjorie Boulton points out that, in the serious novel, the background, 'does not consist just of scenery, which indeed is rarely of paramount interest, but of the whole environment', which includes the location, customs, economic level, religion, politics and moral assumptions.

Milieu embraces the whole environment, as well as the social, political, economic, and spiritual ways of life of the characters. It plays a very significant role in that it either influences or affects the behavior of the characters. This implies that the effect of milieu on characters may either be positive or negative. Heese and Lawton (1988:140) also distinguish a symbolic dimension of milieu (space) by saying that the background may also have a symbolic function, rather than being a purely realistic setting. Symbolic milieu is equivalent to space in this study.

The Social Milieu in *Xisomisana*

The rural environment in Thuketana's first novel, *Xisomisana* has a profound effect on the lives of his characters. The events in *Xisomisana* take place in different localities, for example, Xedzhewule, Mugerhweni, Muzephula and Hohloza. But Xedzhewule is of primary importance in that it is the main locality where the story begins and ends. The first chapter of *Xisomisana* shows it clearly that the environment is of a rural nature because the principal character, Xisomisana, is depicted as a goatherd:

Loko ndzi ri karhi ndzi byisa ntlhambi wa mina wa timbuti, ndzi kongoma emutini wa kokwana lowu a wu ri ehansi ka xintshabyana xa Xedzhewule, tiko hinkwaro a ro ndzava kunene. Tinyanyana ti ri karhi ti haha hi mintlhambi empfhukeni wa tilo ti kongoma evupe-la-dyambu; tiko a ro huuu! hi pongo ra varisi lava a va ri karhi va ku: "Ohuu! ohuu!" va gudula mintlhambi ya vona va ya eku pfaleleni emakaya (p.12).

(When I was driving my herd of goats, heading towards my grandmother's home, which is situated below Xedzhewule hill, the whole land

was alive with activity. In the sky birds were flying in flocks heading towards the west, the countryside was noisy with the shepherds who were shouting, "Ohuu! ohuu!", while driving their herds home for the night).

Thuketana presents one aspect of the social environment in which Moyasi finds herself as follows:

Loko vanhu va hangalakile, hi loko kokwana a suka a ya eka Phisana, yin'wana ta tin'anga leti a ti tiveka swinene laha Xidzhewule, a ya kombela murhi wa swilondza (p. 43).

(When people had dispersed, then grandmother went to Phisana, one of the well-known witch doctors in Xedzhewule, to ask for medicine to heal the wounds).

Yingwana suffers from a chest problem. Since N'wa-Bvuma is a traditional African woman in terms of behavior and attitude, Phisana is also summoned to come and give his medication in the form of herbs and rituals. The writer depicts the throwing of divine bones to determine the cause of Yingwana's illness as follows:

"Iii! n'wana loyi wa vabya! wa vabya ...! pfumela!"

"Si ya vuma!" Ku hlamula kokwana na Moyasi hi nomu wun'we.

"Ndzi ri wa vabya!"

"Si ya vuma!" (p.61).

("Yes! This child is terribly ill...! Agree!")

"I agree!", replied grandmother and Moyasi with one voice.

"I say he is ill!"

"I agree"!)

Although Phisana could not cure the chest problem of Yingwana, he cured Moyasi's wound. Thuketana further paints the following picture of the social life as follows:

Hi masonto laha Xidzhewule vanhu a va hungata hi swilo swo tala. Loko ku nga humesiwi tikhomba kumbe ku chongola, a ku biwa mindzhumba kumbe ku ya hlaleriwa swigubu enkomponi ya ka Maponyaponya leyi a yi ri emuse ka nambu wa Mude (p.33).

(On Sunday, people at Xedzhewule entertained themselves with a lot of things. When there were no initiation ceremonies for girls or dancing or drumming at the Maponyaponya compound, which was situated on the other side of Mude river.)

This suggests that rural customs and festivities are an integral part of Xedzhewule community.

At the Mugerhweni compound Xisomisana is forced by Moyasi to marry Xitapita. This desolate environment does not bring happiness:

Hambi leswi a ndzi nga n'wi rhandzi Xitapita, a ndzi n'wi vona a ri munhu wa tintswalo ni vunene. A ndzi ehleketa leswaku ka yena ndzi ta kuma ku hlayiseka. Na swona loko a ndzi teka, a ndzi ta n'wi boha leswaku a ka a ndzi heleketa ekaya (p. 115).

(Although I didn't love Xitapita, I perceived him as a kind and benevolent person. I believed that in him I would find protection. Again I had the idea that if he married me I would persuade him to take me home.)

After a short space of time they are evicted from the Mugerhweni compound due to Moyasi's unbecoming behavior.

At Muzephula, Xisomisana, Xitapita, Moyasi and her lover as well as Xisomisana's newly born baby find shelter on Madonora's farm. But Xisomisana could not find everlasting happiness and joy. Her happiness is short-lived. Her husband, Xitapita is killed by a lion. After the death of Xitapita, Xisomisana's life is full of sorrow and distress, and her only child drowns in a river whilst Xisomisana is trying to drink water.

Majuvana's home at Hohloza is characterised by peace. This home creates a different social environment for Xisomisana. Majuvana loves Xisomisana very dearly. Xisomisana gets all the support she needs. But when Majuvana returns to Barberton where he is employed in the mines, life becomes miserable for her. She finds the environment an insecure place to live in. She is accused of practising witchcraft after the death of N'wa-Mbaso's daughter. She is fortunately spared from an inevitable death through the help of missionaries. Hohloza can be considered as a place of blessing.

The Depiction of Milieu in *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*

The events of Thuketana's second novel, *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve* take place in an urban town called Louisdale. Although the larger setting is Louisdale, Thuketana confines the events to Khegu's house. The house serves a significant role in the development of the story, for it acts as a special place where meetings are held to discuss the abduction of Khensani. The author depicts Khegu's house as a notorious brothel, which is frequented predominantly by

thieves and hobos. The description does not slow down the action because it contributes to the development of the story. The wayward behavior of characters at Khegu's house points to a modern, urban environment or setting:

Loko a ku enyangweni ya yindlu gidy'a, o kuma yindlu tani hi masiku yi lo hontlo. Tinsulavoyaa, madlakuta, michonooo, ku hlava i ku twa khwiri ku xurha. Pongo a ku lo hlangana ko nturhe! Vanhu va nga ha twanani ni ku twanana loko va nulanula (p. 12-13).

(When he entered the house, he found the house full as usual with thugs, prostitutes, loafers, the list is endless. The noise was unbearable. People could not even hear one another when they spoke.)

The urban environment is depicted as characterised by destructive influences, which give rise to unbecoming behavior, lack of respect and intolerance among characters. The narrator shows that the urban setting is associated with decay:

"Doropa, doropa ri onha vana va vanhu kee! Phatimana wo hi hundzukela xi-nga-mafenyeni" (p.12).

(*"The city, the city ruins people's children. Phatimana, you have changed as though it was a joke."*)

Phatimana's life has changed completely since his departure from his rural village, Muswaname, to Louisdale. This has transformed Phatimana into a hardened criminal. Instead of ushering in new challenges, the urban environment has led Phatimana to a life of notoriety. He has fallen prey to gangs and has forgotten to live in line with the Christian values inculcated in him by his caring Christian father at Muswaname.

To Galachana and his gangsters, Khegu's house is a safe, secure and happy place because they are able to plan and execute their 'duties' without any interference and intimidation. In contrast, Khegu becomes insecure when the police discover that Khensani, the victim of the much-publicized abduction, has been held at her place. Khegu realises that her house is no more a safe haven and therefore plans to flee to a safer place. Galachana, Manghezi and Phatimana also become aware that Khegu's place has become insecure and therefore plan to take her (Khegu) to a safer place where she would hopefully spend her whole life peacefully.

It is ironic that Khegu feels safe, secure and happy while being transported to "the place of

peace” as anticipated by his friends. She only realises that her fate had already been decided when they reach their destination. Galachana and his gangsters become unfriendly, unkind and violent with her. Khegu is thereafter thrown alive into a mud stream where she dies a lonely death.

Reverend Nkuna’s pastoral home is connected with peace. Reverend Nkuna used to be a very close friend of Phatimana’s late father. When Phatimana flees from the police he seeks sanctuary at Reverend Nkuna’s place.

In *N’waninginingi ma ka tindleve*, Phatimana also displays different reactions to milieu. When he leaves his rural village for Louisdale, Phatimana decides to rub shoulders with criminals. In the company of Galachana and his gangsters, Phatimana becomes a hard core criminal. At Reverend Nkuna’s pastoral home, Phatimana whilst fleeing from the police, reacts to the environment as if he has repented from his sins.

Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 66) writes that a character’s physical surroundings (room, house, street, and town) as well as his human environment (family, social class) are also often used as trait-connoting metonymies. The description of Khegu’s special office in *N’waninginingi ma ka tindleve*, leaves one associating it with secrecy. This office is a metonym for her secrecy, since it is here where the abduction of Khensani has been meticulously planned:

... A a hlawule yin’wana ya tikamara ... a yi endla hofisi ya yena. Kamara leyi a yi tumberile, yi ri xikarhi ku lavana ni kamara ya yena ya ku etlela. Laha hofisini, hi laha Khegu a a amukela vanghana va yena lavo hlawuleka; hi laha yena n’wini a a tala ku tipfalela kona loko a nga lavi ku voniwa kumbe ku beriwa pongo. Hikwalaho a ku nga engheni mani na mani ... (pp. 16-17)

(... She had chosen one of the rooms...and turned it into her office. This room was hidden, and it was in the middle, adjacent to her bedroom. In this office Khegu received her important friends, this is where she used to lock herself in when she wanted to avoid other people and their troubles. Therefore it was off limits to every Tom, Dick and Harry...)

Another example is found in *Ndzi ngo tinciki*, when Manayila and Jamboti are on an outing to break the boredom and loneliness that pervade their existence. The place is characterised

by quietness and coolness. This is suggestive of a place free of grudges and hassles:

... a va vundze ehansi ka murhi wa ntoma lowo ti, ti, ti, lowu a wu ri kusuhi ni ribuwa ra nambu ... (p. 23)

(... They were relaxing under a ‘Jakkals-bessie’ tree whose shade was very cool, it was near a riverbank.)

‘The riverbank’ is a metonym for new life, in the sense that it is covered with green vegetation.

The Milieu of *Ndzi ngo tinciki*

In *Ndzi ngo tinciki*, Thuketana uses two major localities, namely, Rixongile and Bonn. But all the important events take place at Rixongile. Rixongile is a Black township situated just a few kilometers from the city of Bedford. Initially, Rixongile is presented to the reader as a place of peace because the story begins with a church service during which the readers hear these words:

“N’wana tani hi ximila, u fanele ku hlakuleriwa ni ku ololoxiwa a ha ri ntsongo”, ku chumayela nkulukumba Ntekele loyi a a tamele ndzimana ya sonto rhelero ekerekeni ya Rixongile ... (p.7).

(“A child, just like a plant, should be nurtured and corrected when still young”, preached Mr. Ntekele who was conducting the service on that Sunday at Rixongile church...)

But as the story develops Rixongile is depicted as a place characterized by gangsters:

Lefty a yi ri ndhuna ya “ti-vultures”, vuthu ra tinsula-voya leti a ti henyisa vaaki va ndhawu leyi ya Rixongile (p. 48).

(Lefty was the leader of “The Vultures”, a gang of robbers who terrorized the residents of Rixongile.)

At Rixongile, Manayila is not happy after the departure of her lover, Jamboti, to a neighboring town called Bonn. She is haunted by loneliness because she has lost contact with Jamboti. Things become worse when her father, Ntekele, loses his flourishing business to a fire. Thereafter, Ntekele forces Manayila to marry Muzayiwe in an effort to restore his transport business but to no avail.

The readers subsequently meet Manayila travelling by train from Rixongile to Bonn. During her travels, she meets Reverend John Chavani who eventually becomes her pillar of strength. When they arrive at John’s place, at Bonn, Manayila gets a warm and friendly wel-

come in spite of the fact that she is a complete stranger to John's family. Bonn is mainly linked to the search for Jamboti by Manayila. In spite of the warm welcome she receives from John's family, Manayila's journey of hope becomes hopeless. At John's home Manayila feels bitter and angry, because Jamboti is nowhere to be found:

Manayila a a nga tsakanga ni switsanana, hikuva hambi leswi lava ka Radio Tsonga, a va huwelela madyambu man'wana ni man'wana ku n'wi lavisa jaha ra yena Jamboti, Jamboti a ko fana ni kwala, a a cele micle a tiyimbela. Manayila loyi ekusunguleni, a ri ni tshembo wa leswaku lava ka Radio Tsonga va ta n'wi pfuna, a a heleriwe hi ntshembo (p.264).

(Manayila was not happy at all, because even though Radio Tsonga had a broadcast every evening on her wanted boyfriend Jamboti, Jamboti was nowhere to be found, he dug a hole and hid himself. Manayila, who at first believed that Radio Tsonga would help her, was now losing hope.)

As the narrative progresses to its climax, Rixongile turns out to be a comforting social environment when Manayila and Jamboti reunite peacefully and romantically at a local cemetery.

CONCLUSION

In this paper it has been shown that the environment is important in that it affects the behavior and action of the characters. Thuketana's characters react and interact in accordance with the types of milieu they are exposed to. For instance, Xisomisana, in *Xisomisana*, has acted differently in all the different localities she has been exposed to. At Xidzhewule, Xisomisana is depicted as a goatherd. She is also portrayed as a traveler exposed to all kinds of ill treatment in the company of Moyasi. She also reacts differently when being accused of practising witchcraft. She experiences joy when her life is spared by the missionaries. Xisomisana is also filled with joy and happiness when she is finally reunited with Yingwana.

Phatimana in *N'waninginingi maka tindleve*, also reacts differently to the different environments he finds himself in. When he leaves the rural setting (Muswaname village) for an urban setting (Louisdale) Phatimana decides to rub shoulders with the criminals. In the company of Galachana and his gangsters, Phatimana

becomes a hard-core criminal. At Reverend Nkuna's pastoral home Phatimana, whilst fleeing from the police, reacts differently to the environment. He pretends as if he has repented from his sins.

In *Ndzi ngo tinciki*, Manayila reacts differently to all the various localities she finds herself in. At first the readers meet her in a happy mood whilst in the company of her boyfriend Jamboti. At home Manayila feels unhappy, lonely and bored. She is subjected to harsh treatment by her father. She is forced to wed an old man. Thereafter she becomes an itinerant character, looking for Jamboti.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the researchers should make use of different literary terms to showcase the importance of both modern and traditional Xitsonga literature in the development and promotion of Xitsonga as one of the eleven South African languages.

NOTE

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