



Gender Transitions: An Analysis of NG Sibiya's Novel, *Bengithi Lizokuna*¹

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i12.1679>

Abstract

In many countries², queer communities are subject to harassment, abuse and even death because of their sexual orientation and sexual identities. On the contrary, some laws in other countries, like South Africa, guarantee equal rights for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation. Using queer theory, the study explores how freely queer people are portrayed in the novel *Bengithi Lizokuna* (2006) by Nakanjani G. Sibiya using textual analysis. What is emerging from the study is that most of the heterosexually dominated communities are still not ready to accept queer people as being part of their lives. Most authors of African literature books often portray queer people negatively, which does not help the situation. Most Black African societies continue to believe that a normal romantic relationship only involves a man and a woman; once any relationship opposes that of heterosexuals, it is seen as abnormal, and they may even try to correct that 'behaviour'. One of the ways that this misconception could be changed is to introduce sexuality and gender awareness so that people can be educated about sexual diversity.

Keywords: *Queer; Sex; Gender; Transgender*

Literature Review

Very little research has been done regarding the portrayal of queer people in isiZulu literary works and with the research known to the researcher; none uses queer theory in textual analysis. With this challenge, the following literature review comprises studies about queerness and will be used to identify gaps that need to be closed.

¹ The publication of this chapter was made possible by the funding received from the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).

² The term queer will be used in the study to generally refer to any member of the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Others (LGTBQIA+) community.

Murray and Roscoe (1998) published a book with the title *Boy-Wife and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexuality*. This is one of the first and few books based on African gender studies. The book consists of essays about same-sex relations and mixed gender roles found before and after colonisation. What is common about these essays is that they all show patterns of homosexuality and that, in traditional societies, there are indigenous names used to refer to the homosexuals. These essays also show that homosexuality was never introduced by colonisation, it has always been an integral part of identity and cultural practices of certain African ethnic groups. Murray and Roscoe (*Op cit.*) also note that it was a culture shock when the first colonisers who came to Africa learned that homosexuality was normal in some parts of Africa. They add that these colonisers later introduced laws that were against homosexuality in their colonies.

Ntuli's (2009) MA dissertation, *isiNgqumo: Exploring Origins, Growth and Sociolinguistics of an Nguni Urban-township Homosexual Subculture*, just like in the above-mentioned book, proves that homosexuality has always existed in South Africa pre-colonisation. One of Ntuli's evidence is that in the Zulu culture, there were certain rites of passage where men would have sexual intercourse with other men in order to prepare them for adulthood. He finds that isiNgqumo, a Nguni gay language, was also developed as a secret language where gays could communicate with one another without anti-gays understanding them and this gave them some form of empowerment and belonging. With the Nguni gay men, known as skesanas, Ntuli finds that isiNgqumo is used to distinguish township skesanas from the city/suburban skesanas. The former use isiNgqumo as their language and the latter see it as colloquial speech. His research shows that queer people have formed subcultures, created secret spaces to survive and communicate.

Rudwick (2011), in her article titled *Defying a Myth: A Gay Sub-Culture in Contemporary South Africa*, also debunks the myth that being gay is 'un-African' by researching one of South Africa's gay sub-culture. This research is similar to Ntuli's as Rudwick was involved in it and both researches share similar findings. She discovers that there has always been a history of Zulu gay men, who have developed their own linguistic code, new meanings of being Zulu and re-defined culture, but still practice important Zulu cultural traditions. For example, these men speak isiNgqumo, believe in amadlozi (ancestors) and obey the traditional law of hlonipha (respect) which, according to Rudwick, does not make them any less Zulu.

Msibi's (2012) article with the title *'I'm used to it now': Experiences of Homophobia among Queer Youth in South African Township Schools*, looks at how black queer learners are sexually discriminated in one of KwaZulu-Natal's township. He finds that the queer learners' schooling experience is negatively affected by the disciplinary actions and hate speech often perpetrated by teachers and then spreads to the rest of the school. On the positive note, Msibi finds that the queer learners have learnt to develop a coping mechanism to resist the homophobia and he recommends that teachers have to be re-educated about sexual diversity.

Lake's (2014) *Black Lesbian Bodies – Reflections on a Queer South African Archive*, as an article, solely focuses on lesbophobia, which means fear, discrimination and violence against lesbians. She uses John Fiske's cultural theory to analyse Zanele Muholi's documentary photography on the representation of black lesbian identities. Lake investigates violence against black lesbian bodies as portrayed, and the reactions to the photography. She finds that women who have shared their lesbophobic experience are often revictimised by the media and the notion that homosexuality is 'unAfrican' is emphasised. She concludes her study by observing that the black lesbian body remains bold and resistant despite the discrimination and sexual violence the survivor may have gone through. This fierceness also challenges the social norm and opposes any harm against queer bodies.

Brown's (2014) article, titled *South Africa's Gay Revolution: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Rights in South Africa's Constitution and the Lingering Societal Stigma Towards the Country's Homosexuals*, documents the history of homosexual rights and laws in South Africa from apartheid to post-1994. Brown finds that gays and lesbians fought for their rights in the apartheid era and even before that. It was only worse during apartheid as the National Party (the previous ruling party) did not recognise the rights of people from a diverse sexual orientation and this led to gay revolution. He further finds that the laws became better when South Africa finally received its freedom in 1994. The parliament of 1996 saw homosexuals eventually having equal rights as heterosexuals. Brown concludes that even though that is the case, homosexuals do not enjoy their rights as homophobia still prevails and they continue fighting against the attacks.

Njilo's (2014) Masters dissertation, with the title *Ucwaningo Ngokuvezwa Kwabalingiswa Abanemizwa Yobulili Obufanayo Ezincwadini ZesiZulu Zamabanga Aphezulu Nokufundiswa Kwazo Esikoleni SaseMpangeni* (A Study to Explore the Portrayal of Homosexual Characters in IsiZulu Literary Texts and How They are taught in One Empangeni District School), explores how homosexual characters are portrayed in selected isiZulu literary texts taught in a school using Pharr's Theory of Oppression. In this study, Njilo comes to the conclusion that authors of the books that were analysed and the teachers, who teach them, perpetuate homophobia to the learners and the society as a whole.

Luttig's (2014) Master's dissertation; *Depictions of Queer Female Characters in Contemporary South African Documentary Film*, studies the depiction of Black South African lesbians in selected local documentary films. She finds that even though the depictions have grown, the representation of queer male identities remains more widespread than those of queer females. She also notes that the depictions of the latter are still negative and the stories told are stereotypical. According to Luttig, queer black identities in the films are negligible, made invisible and the films are often themed around "corrective" rape.

Mabokela (2015), in her Master's dissertation titled *The Viewers' Perception on the Portrayal of Gays and Lesbians in Selected Television Programmes*, compliments the South African television for increasingly portraying gays and lesbians in the last decade (2005-2015). Similar to Luttig's (*Op cit.*) research, Mabokela also criticises the negative and stereotypical portrayal of the minority group. She finds that gays are portrayed as feminine and lesbians are portrayed as masculine in most television shows, which is not often the case in reality. She further comments on the portrayal that it is inaccurate, affects gays and lesbians already living in communities that marginalise them and perpetuate homophobia.

Ekotto (2016), published an article with the title *Framing Homosexual Identities in Cameroonian Literature*. In this article, using selected contemporary Cameroonian literary works, Ekotto explores how space and language can be used to describe the experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) individuals. She finds that after analysing her own novel, *'Portrait d'une jeune artiste de Bona Mbella'* and Lobé's, *'39 Rue de Berne'*, same sex relationships have become important in modern Cameroonian literature because they were less valued in the past. Ekotto notes that these works create space within the imagination of Cameroonians about being a free queer person as it is still illegal in the country. Similar to Ntuli's (2009) and Rudwick's (2011) studies mentioned above, she also notes that lesbians do talk about homosexuality using coded language in order to avoid being judged by society.

Zulu's (2016) article, *A Textual Analysis of Male Gayness in Nakanjani Sibiyi's Novel, Bengithi Lizokuna*, explores how Sibiyi's novel represents gay images in relation to the South African gay rights using the Intercultural Communication Theory. Zulu's findings are opposite to those of Njilo referred to above, in that she sees the author of the novel demonstrating queer people as free to express themselves and are also accepted like any other communities in the new South Africa.

Devji (2016), investigates if there is a way for recognising queer rights in Africa, specifically South Africa and Uganda, in her article titled *Forging Paths for the African Queer: Is There an "African" Mechanism for Realizing LGBTIQ Rights?* She finds that the way forward is to increase the visibility of queer groups throughout Africa that will continue fighting for queer rights, especially in countries that criminalise being queer. She further adds that silence and the fear of coming out of the closet will only suppress queer people and that they may end up being forgotten by society.

Lee *et al.* (2017), with the article titled *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in South Africa: A Struggle for Equality*, investigate the homophobia that exists in certain parts of South Africa. In their research, they find that the LGBT people still suffer socio-economic and cultural discrimination influenced by some moral, religious and political beliefs. The research recommends that there should be social awareness about the diversity of sexuality and that well-known people should not shy away from declaring their sexual orientation publicly.

Mailula (2018), in her Master's dissertation titled *Violent Anxiety: The Erasure of Queer Black Woman in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, investigates different ways queer black woman/women is/are erased in South Africa by using an intersectional approach. She finds that these women are erased through the oppression they receive from racism, patriarchy and heterosexism. Her research is based on the queer black women who have been killed in South Africa because of their sexual orientation. Most of these women were raped and killed by men attempting to 'correct' their gender and trying to make them straight women. Mailula breaks down the erasure of queer black women into epistemic, material and symbolic nature.

The above sources will assist this study to identify gaps in queer studies in relation to African literature and to address shortcomings. This study will be different from the above-mentioned studies because it will give a detailed African perspective about queer theory and how it can be applied in a South African context through analysis of the selected fiction. The results will show that queer people are as normal as heterosexuals and that human beings should not be defined according to their sexual orientation and gender identity, but the value they bring to the society.

Synopsis of the Novel *Bengithi Lizokuna*

Bengithi Lizokuna, by Nakanjani Sibiyi, which can be loosely translated as 'I Thought It Would Rain,' is a novel of a first of its kind in isiZulu literature as topics around queerness are rarely written about in South African indigenous literature according to the knowledge of the researcher. The story and the events in the novel are centered on the main character, Mhlengi (Mhlengi will be used in this chapter to refer to Mhlengi before becoming a transgender woman), who is later known as Mahlengi (Mahlengi will be used in this chapter to refer to Mhlengi after transitioning to a transgender woman). Mhlengi's assigned sex at birth was male but the gender he identified with was female, he later changed his sex to match his gender and thus became a transgender woman with the new name, Mahlengi.

Before the transition, Mhlengi broke up with his girlfriend, Nontobeko, without providing any reason and also confessed to his father, Ngidi, that he was gay, and the news did not sit well with him. Ngidi was in disbelief, disgusted and shocked of the disclosure that led him to reject and chase away his son. Mahlengi continued to live her new life and was later in a romantic relationship with two men at the same time without both of them knowing that they were sharing the same girlfriend. Mahlengi's main boyfriend was Ndumiso, and she cheated on him with Xolani, who was married to Lungile. After some time, Ngidi and Nontobeko went out on a search to look for 'Mhlengi' who, to their disbelief and shock, learnt that he had transformed and had a new sexual orientation and gender identity. This revelation also took Xolani by surprise because he also found out about the news when he went to see Mahlengi on the same day that Ngidi and Nontobeko were with her.

Analysis of *Bengithi Lizokuna*

The following sub-sections entail an analysis of *Bengithi Lizokuna* and will discuss topics such as Mhlengi's name change, Ngidi's heteronormative nature towards Mhlengi, how Mhlengi performs gender, the coming out and not coming out of Mhlengi, assumptions about Mhlengi as a queer person, and the assumed curse brought by Mhlengi for his queerness.

From Mhlengi to Mahlengi

In this section we will look at Mhlengi's name before and after transitioning, and the importance of personal names amongst transgender people. Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 30) see a personal name in many cultures denoting a person's gender and that humans are conditioned from any early life to associate a certain name with masculinity or femininity, depending on the spelling of that name. The same can be said with the African culture regarding child naming. Name giving is a particularly important cultural practice amongst African people, as names are not only used to identify an individual but also carry significant meanings and aspirations that parents may have for their new-born. At the same time, a name given to person does not mean that they may accept it or even like it, especially if that name does not define who they are or does not match the gender they identify with. Having a name that does not match your gender identity happened with Mhlengi when he changed his name to Mahlengi.

Mhlengi is typically a masculine name amongst the amaZulu people and Mhlengi decided to change it to Mahlengi in order to make it sound feminine and denote his new identity. The changing of Mhlengi's name took place after he had a gender reassigning surgery. It is also worth mentioning that the name Mhlengi comes from the verb, *hlenga*, which means to help the helpless or to save someone's life. Mhlengi's birth helped relief his parents from the distress of struggling to have children and they were saved from being a childless couple (see Sibiyi, 2006: 11). Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 30) further explain the importance of name change in transgender people as follows:

Adopting a new name and new pronouns is a central part of transition. The move from birth name to preferred name is about altering both how we think of ourselves and how we expect others to view us; the new name is a reflection of who we were, and who we hope to become. The choice can be a positive affirmation and a statement to one's world that we, as individuals, have made the decision upon our own authority to pursue a different course for our existences than those anticipated by our family and society. It is an act of empowerment.

The above quotation relates to Mahlengi, as the change to a new name had to show that she had transitioned from being male, erased the attributes that were attached to Mhlengi and had also left her past behind to establish a new life that shows who she has always wanted to be. Mahlengi's changed name gave her power to be a complete woman and to be addressed as one because had she not changed her name, she could have been mistaken for a man.

The prefix '-ma-', according to Doke and Vilakazi (1964: 473), is used to form compound nouns, generally noun class 1a proper names, indicating "the daughter of" applied to married or "lobolaed" woman", for example: uMaMhlongo (the daughter of the Mhlongo clan. When used as a noun, '-ma' means "my own mother (variant of *umame*, used only of one's real mother)" (Doke and Vilakazi: 473). The 'Ma-' found in the name Mahlengi may not necessarily mean 'daughter of Hlengi' or 'mother Hlengi' but based on the explanations given, the term 'ma' carries a feminine meaning, and this explains the reason to change Mhlengi as a name. Mhlengi had to be changed to Mahlengi so that Mahlengi could be addressed as a female just by looking at her name.

Even though a name change may be positive, affirmative, and empowering to the one who has transitioned to another gender, it can be jarring and confusing to adjust to a new name to those who have known them by their birth name for a long time (Schroth and Jacobs, 2017: 31). This is seen in *Bengithi Lizokuna* when Ngidi is confused after finding his transitioned 'son' and tries to introduce himself and the

ones he is with to Xolani: “Mina nginguNgidi, uyise kaMhlengi... kaMahlengi. Lona nguNontobeko owayethandana noMhlengi, ...” (Sibiya, 2006: 137) (I am Ngidi, the father of Mhlengi... Mahlengi. This is Nontobeko, Mhlengi’s former girlfriend, ...).

The way Ngidi addresses his ‘son,’ shows that he is not only confused but also grieving his son’s pre-transition gender and the name associated with it and now he has to suddenly deal with his child who has now become a ‘daughter’ with a new name that she gave herself. Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 31) further elaborate that this situation requires patience and that the affected transgender needs to understand that families are gradually transitioning as well. It is also possible that the name, Mhlengi, meant a lot to Ngidi and the wishes he had through that name, but now he has to make peace with parting with his child’s old identity for a new one.

Another challenge regarding name change, and not to leave out gender marker change, faced by transgender people is doing it legally through the Department of Home Affairs where Identity Documents are obtained. Name and gender marker change can be a lengthy (between three and twelve months) and daunting process, especially if the applicant is less privileged and sometimes serviced by an insensitive official when it comes to gender issues (Mahlatse, 2020). For Mahlengi, it was different because she came from a well-off family, she was able to bypass the time-consuming process of applying for a name and gender marker change by bribing one of the Home Affairs Officials. The bribe that Mahlengi had to offer in order to speed up the process of being finally identified as a woman, highlights the state of corruption done by some South African government’s employees in the departments, which has become worse in the writing of this thesis. Below, is a narration on how Mahlengi got her new Identity Document:

Yebo, imali kayiluthezi olumanzi. Nakuyena kwakube njalo, ikakhulu ngenkathi sekufanele abe nepasi elisha nezinye izinto eziningi ezisemthethweni. Wavele wakhipha imali eshisiwe, wamthola umabhalane kwaHome Affairs owamlungisela konke. Okunye-ke kwaba wubala nje ukukwenza, owayedinga ukugwazelwa wayenikwa imali avale umlomo, kuphele ngetswayi.
(Sibiya, 2006: 15)

(Yes, money makes things happen. It was the same with her, especially when she had to have a new Identity Document and many other legal documents. She took out a hefty sum of money and found a Home Affairs clerk who arranged everything for her. Other related items were simple to do, officials who needed to be bribed were given money to keep quiet, and things went smoothly.)

Even though it was not detailed in *Bengithi Lizokuna*, after Mahlengi got her new identity documents, there are definitely several other changes that she had to make and explain herself to people about her new identity. Amongst others, this may have included changing academic qualifications, bank accounts, insurance policies and other important documents. This may have taken a lot of emotional toll on her as she may have had to frequently correct those who knew her as a male to now address her as a female.

Changing your name and gender marker is only a part of being transgender and usually comes at the end, the most important stage is the gender-affirming surgery and hormonal therapy. The process of being transgender does not only require funds for the surgical procedure but one should be also emotionally, mentally, and physically strong. The patient should have patience to wait for a long time before the surgery and hormonal therapy can finally take place. The following narration explains what Mhlengi had to go through before she could become Mahlengi:

Okwakuyinkinga yikho nje ukuthi kufanele kulindwe isikhashana ngaphambi kokuba kuqinisekwe ngokuthi konke obekuzanywa kuphumelele... Konke lokhu kudinga isineke, ukubekezela nokuzimisela ukulinda izinyangana ezithile ngaphambi kokuba kubonakale ngempela ukuthi konke kuhambe ngendlela enemiphumela efanele nebilindelwe... Kayisho lutho le mali enkulu kangaka okufanele ayikhokhe, aseyiqongqobezele kanzima isikhathi eside kangaka, enza

isiqinisekiso esikhulu sokuthi akasabenzisi imali kayise... Yebo usazokhandleka emoyeni, engqondweni nasemzibeni. Kodwa kakusho lutho kuyena konke lokhu kukhandleka asazokwedlula kukho ngaphambi kokuwela enkululekweni.

(The only problem is that they (Mhlengi and the surgeon) have to wait for a while to make sure that all attempts that were going to be made are going to be successful... All of that requires patience, perseverance, and determination to wait for certain months before they can actually see that everything goes well with the expected results ... The hefty sum of money that he has to pay means nothing to him, which he has struggled to gather for a long time, he made sure that he does not use his father's money... Yes he will be drained emotionally, mentally, and physically. But all this draining that he will go through means nothing to him if he will attain his freedom.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 2)

The narration above shows that Mhlengi wanted to be proud that he did not bother his father to assist him financially in order to be able to finance the gender reassignment surgery. He wanted to do it all by himself so that he could be a confident transgender who was not indebted to anyone to finally living his dream of being a transgender woman. Even though transitioning to a transgender was a smooth process for Mhlengi because he had all the resources, it is actually an incredibly challenging process for an ordinary individual living in South Africa. Jeranji (2021), reports that gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy can cost hundreds of thousands of Rands in the private health sector (as it was with Mhlengi) versus the public health sector, which is normally free, but requires a sacrifice of up to 25 years waiting period that has no guarantee of a successful surgery.

Jeranji (2021), further explicates that most people who would like to transition to another gender cannot afford expensive private health costs and relying on the public health means that they have to spend about a lifetime living in a body they do not want to be in. This highlights the huge gap we have in South Africa between the rich and the poor. It also shows that transgender people cannot fully enjoy their gender rights unless if they have money for surgery and maintaining their transitioned bodies. The long waiting period for those who cannot afford private health may make them feel like being transgender is only for the wealthy and the government is not showing full support for their gender rights, hence the long waiting periods.

Mahlengi's transitioning seemed to have had less complications involved but there were some levels of uncertainty. The narrator described it as follows:

Babonana nodokotela ababezomhlinza... Kwakuzolandela i-plastic surgery eyayizosiza ekuguquleni ikhala, izihlathi, isilevu, njalo njalo, kubukeke njengomuntu wesifazane. Kwakufanele asebenzise nama-hormones athile ukuze kumile amabele nezinye izibucu zomzimba ezivame kwabesifazane. Ekugcineni wayezohlinzwa-ke kugulwe isitho sobulili sesilisa senziwe esesifazane, kokunye kuhlinzwe negilo ukuze iphimbo lakhe kube ngelomuntu wesifazane ngempela. Eyi, kwakukuningi nje okwakufanele kwenziwe, okuningi kungekho siqiniseko ngempela ukuthi kuyophumelela...

(Sibiya, 2006: 14)

(He had an appointment with the surgeon... It would be followed by plastic surgery that would help to alter the nose, cheeks, chin, and so on, to look like a woman. He also had to use certain hormones to grow breasts and other body parts that are common with women. Eventually, he had to undergo surgery to change male genitals into female genitals, and in some cases, undergo surgery to make his voice more feminine. There was just so much to do, without being sure about its success...)

The above description shows that gender-affirming surgery is not a painless process, it is a high-risk procedure that can have adverse side effects if not life threatening, but luckily for Mhlengi everything

went well. Mhlengi also had to fly from Durban to Cape Town for his gender-affirming surgery (Sibiya, 2006: 14). This meant that Mhlengi wanted to establish a new life in an unfamiliar environment far away from the people who knew him in order to avoid being cast-off and backlashed by his society for his chosen identity. It is also possible that Mhlengi chose to do the surgery in Cape Town because, after Johannesburg, Cape Town is the second largest city known for celebrating gay pride marches and this would have influenced Mhlengi's decision. Liam (2020), reports that in 1993, Cape Town celebrated its first gay pride march where about 200 non-heteronormative individuals and non-homophobic supporters marched in the streets of Cape Town. Liam (2020) adds that the purpose of the event was to demonstrate pride in gay and lesbian identity, and to decriminalise homosexuality in South African law. Today gay pride march events take place all over South African major cities.

Having events such as gay pride marches take place in urban areas, instead of rural areas, also shows that a place of residency matters to gender-nonconforming people when it comes to expressing their gender. In relation to Mhlengi, whose birth home is in Southbroom (mentioned in Sibiya, 2006: 8), a coastal village in KwaZulu-Natal, being in a city like Cape Town meant that he could be gender liberated. Mamba's (2020: 70) research, undertaken in one of the villages in KwaZulu-Natal, reveals the following about non-heterosexuals people in rural areas:

...non-heterosexual people in rural communities undergo severe abuse, are called by offensive names, physically and sexually assaulted, disowned by their families, gang raped and isolated. The consequences of the ill treatment being that non-heterosexuals in rural areas remain in the closet to avoid being judged and discriminated. They also hide their same sex partners and some relocate to cities where homosexual people are accepted.

The above extract shows that a culturally conservative community, that strongly follows their traditions and customs, would do anything to protect their way of life from any 'presumed' threats such as having non-heterosexuals in their area. Mhlengi's true gender expression would have suffered in such an environment and would have been attacked for not conforming to the traditional gender binary (falling into the category of male or female but not both or other).

Ngidi's Heteronormativity

In this section we look at what Ngidi's expectation of his son, Mhlengi, are as a man who was raised in a heterosexually dominated society. Warner (1991), who coined the term heteronormativity, describes it is a system of norms that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior than other expressions of sexuality. Devor and Haefele-Thomas (2019: 56-57) sum the heteronormative belief system as follows:

- Sex is an intrinsic biological characteristic. There are two and only two sexes: male and female. Everyone is either one sex or the other. Normally, no one can be neither; no one can be both.
- Genders are the social manifestations of sexes. There are two and only two genders: men and women (boys and girls). All males are supposed to be either boys or men. All females are supposed to be either girls or women. Everyone is supposed to be one gender or the other. Normally, no one can be neither; no one can be both.
- Gender role styles are culturally defined expressions of sex and gender. There are two main gender role styles: masculinity and femininity. Normally, males are heterosexual and masculine men, and females are heterosexual and feminine women.
- Any variation from these patterns is caused by biological or mental pathology.

The above beliefs show that being queer in a predominant heterosexual society comes with its own challenges whether you have disclosed your sexual orientation and gender identity or not, and that being queer is seen as some form of abnormality. Just before Mhlengi came out, his father thought that he was a straight man who was expected to get married and have children, once he reached a certain age in

adulthood. This is what Ngidi had done in his entire life and was socialised to think that every man should get married someday to a woman. This is seen in the novel when Ngidi is excited to show the farm that he had bought for his son and expresses his wishes as follows, “*Usukhulile manje, sekufanele uganwe. Kokunye umkakho uyothanda yena ukuba ngumlimi.*” (You have grown now, you should get married. On the other hand, your wife may enjoy being a farmer) (Sibiya, 2006: 11).

As Mhlengi has been gifted a whole farm by his father, he becomes distressed and wonders how he will disclose to his father that he is gay. Before Mhlengi could come out to his father, these were Ngidi’s pre-conceived thoughts about what his son is about to tell him “*Uzwa enethenjana nje lokuthi mhalwumbe indodana ifuna ukumtshela ukuthi isifuna ukuganwa*” (He has little hope that maybe his son wants to tell him that he wants to get married) (Sibiya, 2006: 12). This shows that Ngidi had been long wondering if his son was dating because Mhlengi had never introduced him to his girlfriend and thought the time had come for his son to break the news. The narrator further expresses Ngidi’s thoughts as follows:

Kungenzeka yini ukuthi lo mfana emncane kangaka usenze amacala? Angambulala nya. Kodwa hhayi, udlala ngomfana wakhe, usekhulakhulile. Empeleni ukuba kusekuqala nje ngabe ushadile manje. Usuke engasemncane umuntu oseqede ethekhnikhoni, oseneminyaka emibili esebenza.

(Could it be that this young man has done something wrong (impregnated a lady)? He (Ngidi) would kill him (Mhlengi). No, he is just kidding about his son, he is grown up a little. In fact, if it were back in the days, he would be married by now. You are no longer regarded as young when you have graduated from technikon (today known as a university of technology), and already working for two years.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 30)

The above excerpt shows that in a heterosexual society, it is common to expect a man to start his own family and Ngidi shares similar desires of seeing his son transition from a boy to a man. Mhlengi can only be regarded as a ‘real’ man once he is married and has children of his own according to traditional isiZulu culture.

On another occasion, when Ngidi meets Mhlengi’s former girlfriend, Nontobeko, who he had never met before, he strangely addresses her as his daughter-in-law even after learning that she was no longer with his son. This behaviour continues to demonstrate the obsession and desperation Ngidi has of seeing his son married and it is shown in following dialogue:

“...Ngisafuna ukushayela ekhaya ngizwe ukuthi kuhamba kanjani emsebenzini, ngikwazi nokuhleba ngomakoti wakwami.” Esho ehleka eyibuka intokazi eyayilokhu iyinhle nanxa yayisenezimpawu zokukhathala.

(“... I want to go outside to call home and hear how things are going at work, and be able to gossip about my daughter-in-law.” He laughed and looked at the young woman whose beauty kept glowing even though she had signs of fatigue.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 86)

It remained a challenge for Ngidi to accept that his son did not identify as a heterosexual. That brought him shame and embarrassment because, in *Bengithi Lizokuna*, Ngidi could not even tell Nontobeko that the real reason for his conflict with Mhlengi was that he came out as gay. Ngidi felt that he would lose respect and dignity from the society for raising a man who turned out to be the opposite of him – being a gender nonconformist (of a person not adhering to society’s expected masculine of feminine gender norms).

Mhlengi's Gender Performativity

Gender performativity is a term that was coined by Judith Butler in the book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which was originally published in 1990. On the *Big Think* show on Youtube, Butler explains gender performativity in simple terms as follows:

“It's one thing to say that gender is performed and that is a little different from saying gender is performative. When we say gender is performed we usually mean that we've taken on a role or we're acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world. To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.”

(Big Think, 2011)

The explanation above gives the idea that gender is socially constructed and that one learns how to become the gender that relates to their sex as taught by the society. For example, males are raised by the society to become boys/men and will learn masculine gender roles until it is internalised. For females, they are raised to be a girls/women and will learn feminine gender roles until it is internalised as well. At the same time, it does not mean that all males and females will internally identify themselves as men and women as they grow; on the contrary, they will discover that the sex they were born with does not match the gender that the society assigned to them.

In *Bengithi Lizokuna*, it is shown that heteronormativity can lead to gender performativity. As Mhlengi was born in a society that only recognises a relationship between a man and a woman, he practised gender performative and gave the impression that he was a straight man as he was born male, and he engaged in a relationship with Nontobeko. Mhlengi suppressed his romantic feelings of being attracted to the same sex as him so to please the societal expectation of seeing him with an opposite sex and be regarded as a 'masculine man.' If Mhlengi had initially done the opposite on the onset, being in a relationship with the same sex and showing feminine characteristics as a man, he would have risked being rejected by the society, labelled as mentally ill and morally wrong.

As discussed in Chapter 2 and shown above, the main argument on gender performativity is that your gender is determined by one's behaviour in relation to the sex they were born with according to the standards set by the society, which may be the opposite of how an individual sees themselves (Butler, 1999: 173). Butler (1999: 173), continues to say that gender is a performance made to satisfy societal expectations and not the true representation of an individual's gender identity. Just because Mhlengi was born male, it does mean that his sex automatically determines him to have masculine behaviour, that is merely what the society has constructed, and he learnt to conduct himself according to that construction and not how he felt internally.

Mhlengi's relationship with Nontobeko did not last because he could not live for too long without being true to himself. Mhlengi had to be honest to the gender he identified with so that he could start living his true life, even though it hurt Nontobeko as she thought that he was a straight man. Taken and adapted from Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 22), it is also possible that Mhlengi decided to transition because that would have made him “normal” and ensure that traditional gender binary and heteronormative social roles were maintained, which he had a challenge with before transitioning.

Mhlengi could now be a transgender woman instead of pretending to be a cisgender heterosexual (having a gender that corresponds to the sex assigned to at birth) man attracted to women and he could now be able to be in a relationship with another man without being frowned upon by the heterosexual society. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Mhlengi's reasons to become a transgender were not only for engaging in sexual relationships, but he became transgender in order to align his gender

with the sex he felt comfortable with. In the following extract, the narrator elaborates on Mhlengi's decision to finally become a transgender woman.

Wayesesithathile isinqumo uMhlengi Ngidi. Empeleni wayekade asithatha, eminyakeni eminingi edlule. Umehluko nje namuhla ngukuthi wayesenqume ukwenza okuthile okuphathekayo mayelana nesinqumo sakhe. Kwakumcacele ngempela ukuthi kwakungasekho ukuphindela emuva. Nanxa ayengawungabazi umqansa owawumgqolozele emehlweni, wayezizwa ekhululekile ngaphakathi. Ekugcineni ayesezofezeka amaphupho akhe eminyaka. Ekugcineni wayesezokhululeka, aphile impilo okwase kuyiminyaka ayilangazelela.

(Mhlengi Ngidi had already made the decision. He had long taken it, many years ago. The only difference today is that he decided to do something tangible about his decision. It was noticeably clear to him that there was no going back. Although he had no doubt about the challenge that was staring at him in the eyes, he felt at peace from within. His dreams of many years were about to come true. He was finally free, and could live the life he had longed for.)
(Sibiya, 2006: 1)

The narration above shows that Mhlengi went through gender dysphoria, which Hakeem (2018: 20) explains as “a sense of dissatisfaction or unhappiness with one’s gender”. Mhlengi was unhappy that he was born male and did not identify with the masculine gender that was assigned to him at birth. He wanted to change from being a man to a woman so that he could have eternal peace and have a feminine gender that always felt right to him.

3.3.4 Mhlengi Comes Out

One of the toughest decisions that queer people have to take is to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity to family and friends. The disclosure can free the queer person to start being who they are but are uncertain as to how those who will be confessed to will react. The reaction may affect the confessor in either a positive or negative way. In their analysis of coming out as transgender, Brumbaugh-Johnson, and Hull (2019: 1) reveal that:

...coming out as transgender requires navigating others’ gender expectations, others’ reactions, and the threat of violence. The results indicate that transgender individuals do not simply decide to “come out of the closet” and then stay out. Rather, they make strategic decisions regarding the enactment of gender and gender identity disclosure based on specific social contexts. Coming out as transgender is best conceptualized as an ongoing, socially embedded, skilled management of one’s gender identity.

The above quotation relates to how Mhlengi had to choose carefully who they wanted to come out to and had to protect himself from the unexpected and unknown reaction. Mhlengi was faced with the challenge of having to come out to everyone he had a close relationship with. Keenan (2019: 2), says that coming out can be risky as those being disclosed to can react negatively, such as being hostile, bullying, harassing, discriminating or even causing physical harm. Mhlengi had been thinking about his gender identity for an exceptionally long time and had always wanted to transition from male to female and the time had come for him to make it known to his father that he identified as gay. When Ngidi finally heard the news, these were some of his responses:

“Yini lena ongihlolela yona?”

(What kind of omen is this?)

...

“Phuma uphele lapha emzini wami.”

(Get out of my house and never come back.)

...

“...ngizokhipha isibhamu ngikusakaze ubucopho...”

(I will take out my gun and blow off your brain.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 13)

The above verbal attacks from Ngidi clearly show that he was unprepared for what his son was about to tell him and did not react appropriately. This reaction was due to being overwhelmed by feelings of anger and confusion. Coleman (2010: 06), makes us understand that at the ‘coming out stage’, acknowledgement from a parent, let alone acceptance, can take a long time as the parent will have to go through the grieve of losing the wishes they had had for their child. This is the same grieve that Ngidi would have had to go through before he could make peace with his son’s new gender identity. Ngidi had to come to terms with accepting life-changing moments such as that his son would never be married to a woman, he would not have grandchildren and that the Ngidi surname would not grow. If Ngidi had reacted positively, Mhlengi could have continued to also disclose that he also felt he was born in the wrong body and was planning to transition to a body he was content with.

Mhlengi was not only faced with coming-out as gay but was also challenged with coming out as a transgender woman (Mahlengi), which the present researcher has termed as ‘double coming-out.’ It was the first time when Mhlengi came-out indirectly to his former girlfriend, Nontobeko, and the current boyfriend, Xolani, who knew him after transitioning, but it was the second time that Mhlengi had come-out to his father now as a transgender. Disclosing the gender that you identify with and the sex you find attractive to those close to you is straining as it comes with a lot of mental and emotional distress if it is not well received. The following illustrate some of the reactions of Nontobeko and Xolani when they found out that Mahlengi had become a transgender woman:

“Yeka ukukuthanda kwami Mhlengi wami,” kubalisa uNontobeko.

“Mahlengi, yini lena ongenza yona? Awu, yeka ukukutha...” Abihlike naye uXolani, kudlange izinyembezi, lubuye lonke usizi lwakhe, akucabange konke okungamathemba namaphupho ekusasa eliqhakazile abezitshela ukuthi libalindele noMahlengi wakhe.”

(“I regret loving you, my Mhlengi,” said Nontobeko.

“Mahlengi, what are you doing to me? Well, I regret loving...” Xolani also burst into tears, tears welling up in his eyes, thinking of all the hopes and dreams of a brighter future he had in store for himself and his Mahlengi.”)

(Sibiya, 2006: 137)

Nontobeko and Xolani’s disappointment on the revelation of Mhlengi’s/Mahlengi’s gender identity demonstrates that much of the sexual attraction they had for Mhlengi/Mahlengi was based on his/hers’ gender and felt betrayed once they learnt that Mhlengi’s/Mahlengi’s gender identity was the opposite of the one that was presented to them. Nontobeko had no idea that Mhlengi identified with the female identity even though he was assigned male at birth and Xolani had no idea that Mahlengi was born male and later had his male sex altered to a female sex. Both Nontobeko’s and Xolani’s attraction towards Mhlengi/Mahlengi was based more on the gender identity that was portrayed to them other than being attracted to his/her inner being that is detached from his/her sexual orientation and gender identity. If Mhlengi/Mahlengi was unconditionally loved, and not loved for what he is, his/her sexual orientation and gender identity would not have mattered as that would have not changed who he/she was as a human being.

The narrator further describes Mahlengi's state of mind and emotions after her loved ones found out about who she actually was:

“Waphuma ebhocobele, kuqhaq hazela amadolo, kumnyama amehlo, engangabazi nakancane ukuthi lolu sizi abhekene nalo manje luzomgubuzela, lumgwinye, lumminzise ...”

(He came out lethargic, his knees trembling, his eyes darkened, and he had no doubt that the grief he was now experiencing would overwhelm him, engulf him, drown him ...).
(Sibiya, 2006: 137)

What happened to Mahlengi, as described in the above narration, are symptoms of mental illness that the queer community sometimes goes through, and which often leads to suicidal ideation. Harmer et al (2021) clarify suicidal ideation as “a broad term used to describe a range of contemplations, wishes, and preoccupations with death and suicide. This may have been the beginning of Mahlengi's suicidal thoughts, and it would have been interesting to see how she would have handled her mental distress moving forward. Ong *et al.* (2021: 8), note that “sexual minorities are more prone to chronic stressors related to their gender identity; in other words, the internalisation of negative social attitudes compromises the mental health and well-being” of queer people and this relates to Mahlengi's life when the novel ends. It is interesting to note that Mahlengi's mental distress did not begin at the end of *Bengithi Lizokuna*, it was also exposed in the beginning of the novel when she was still Mhlengi. In the following passage, the narrator describes Mhlengi's anxiety before he came out to his girlfriend:

Nebala wabuka iwashi esihlakaleni, waqonda esibukweni, wathi ukuzibuka. Ubuso bakhe babubhalwe ukukhathazeka, bungachachambile njengasemihleni. Amehlo lana ayethe ukushona phakathi, ebomvu, kubonakala nje ukuthi umuntu lona akasabazi ubuthongo obanele. Nasemzimbeni wayeshayekile, ehwabhekile, kwazise ukuthi ukudla kwakungavumi neze kulezi zinsukwana ezedlule. Konke lokhu kwakubangwa yixhala nokuthatha ebeka, elwa namasu okubhekana nezinseselelo ezazimqolozele phambi kwakhe, zinjengezintaba okwakuzoba umqansa ukuziqombula.

(Indeed he looked at his watch on his wrist, went straight to the mirror, and looked at himself. His face was marked with anxiety, not as bright as usual. His eyes were sunken, red, and it seemed that he was not getting enough sleep. He had also lost weight, emaciated, not to mention that his diet had not improved in recent days. All of this was due to anxiety and frustration, looking for strategies to deal with the challenges that lay before him, like mountains that would be difficult to climb.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 2-3)

Mhlengi's anxiety of coming out to Nontobeko was caused by not knowing how she would have responded to such devastating news. Mhlengi felt that he betrayed his girlfriend's trust by making her fall for him whilst knowing that he was not what she thought he was – a straight man. Nonetheless, it is better that Mhlengi did not take too long to disclose to Nontobeko, their relationship only lasted for two months (see Sibiya, 2006: 61), because he would have robbed her of the time, she invested in their relationship which she could have used with a man who was attracted to women.

Did Mahlengi Trick Her Partners?

Transgender people are often seen as deceptive because they may take time to disclose their gender identity to their partners and at times may choose to even remain silent about it. It does not mean that they do not want it to be known that they are transgender, but need a safe space and people they can trust to share such sensitive information. The title of this section, *Did Mahlengi Trick His Partners?* is not meant to be a direct question that will have a direct answer but rather a rhetorical question used to establish a discourse on the coming out of transgender people who are in a relationship with reference to Mahlengi. In *Bengithi Lizokuna*, Mahlengi did not disclose her gender identity to her boyfriends,

Ndumiso and Xolani, she did however, show interest in disclosing to Xolani. The following is Mahlengi's thoughts on the questions she had on how Xolani would react after finding out that he was actually dating a transgender woman:

Umbuzo onzima nokho ngowokuthi njengoba esesangene kanjena nje, uXolani angathini nje uma engase ezwe indaba yokuthi ekuqaleni wayengumuntu wesilisa, wahlinzwa, wagcina eseshintshile esewumuntu wesifazane omuhle osanganisa abantu bancamele ukushiya amakhosikazi.

(The most puzzling question is how Xolani will react since he is so madly in love, what will he say when he discovers that Mahlengi was initially a man, underwent surgery, and then turned into a beautiful woman that makes men fall for her and leave their wives.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 123)

The above question that Mahlengi asked herself does not only concern her partner's realisation of her gender identity but shows the fear she has of losing a loving partner such as Xolani. It is common for the unknowing partner to dissolve the relationship with a transgender person after they disclose their gender identity. Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 49), note that finding out someone is transgender can cause an inability to prevent oneself from killing them, which they term as 'trans panic' or 'gay panic'. Looking at Mahlengi's other boyfriend, Ndumiso, and judging from his violent behaviour³, it is possible that he may have physically harmed Mahlengi if she had come out of the closet to him and thus resulting to a crime of passion. Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 51), also explain the lack of a positive response from a straight man once he learns about the gender their partner actually identifies with:

When a heterosexual cisgender man is angry about a transgender woman not disclosing her history, it is because the man fears what it would mean to admit that he was attracted to her. Because the man fears social judgment from his peers and the implication that he might be gay, and because transgender people's identities are often not honoured, cisgender men can suffer shame and ridicule for the possibility that they could be attracted to someone who currently has or ever had [male genitals]. It only remains an attack on someone's masculinity to be attracted to someone with [male genitals] if being gay is stigmatized.

The above quotation shows that heteronormativity is learned and society has conditioned humans to only accept a relationship involving a cisgender heterosexual couple. Other relationships that do not include a straight man and a straight woman are stigmatised. Had it not been for that stigma, it is possible that a relationship that involves a transgender person and cisgender heterosexual would continue even after the disclosure because it would have been based on unconditional love that looks beyond the physical attributes of a person.

Another tricky part about being transgender is not knowing when the perfect time is to come out to your partner as it comes with the fear of jeopardising the relationship, as previously discussed. Erickson-Schroth and Jacobs (2017: 50), expound that disclosing too soon may not give someone ample time to know you holistically and at the same time, waiting for too long may lead to feelings of duplicity. Given that timeframe is not given in the novel, *Bengithi Lizokuna*, it is challenging to figure out how long Mahlengi had been with her boyfriends, but it can be determined by looking at the stages of her relationship with Ndumiso and Xolani. Before the police apprehended Ndumiso, he was preparing to gather funds to pay lobola for Mahlengi, which may indicate that they had been dating for a while, but

³ There are several incidents in the novel that portray Ndumiso as a violent man such as speaking and acting towards Mahlengi aggressively when he was asking *them* why they seemed absent minded in their interaction (Sibiya, 2006: 43), beating up Xolani when he found out that he was seeing his partner, Mahlengi (Sibiya, 2006: 70). He was also the perpetrator of the house robbery that happened in Ngidi's that cost the life of his groundsman (Sibiya, 2006: 109-113).

Mahlengi had not yet revealed that she is a transgender woman. It is possible that Mahlengi was uncomfortable and still navigating her way around coming out of the closet.

Looking at Mahlengi and Xolani's relationship, one can tell that it was still in the courtship phase as they were still getting to know each other and going out on dates. Even though their relationship had just begun, Mahlengi had found the courage to come out as she felt more safer with Xolani, and she had more chemistry with him compared to Ndumiso. Mahlengi could not find the appropriate time to disclose as Xolani was too excited on the day of their last date and she did not want to burst his bubble.

Coming out as a transgender is a daily struggle and makes transgender's lives difficult because they continue to fight for being who they are in a world where they are most likely to be rejected once their gender identity is exposed. There is never a right or wrong time for those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned to at birth to come out, it is entirely up to them to let others know once they feel comfortable and they should not be labelled as deceptive and seen to be tricking their partners for not sharing their past.

Some Myths and Facts about Mhlengi as a Queer Person

In this section, we debunk certain myths with facts regarding how queer people are perceived in society with reference to Mhlengi. Myth in this section refers to "something that people wrongly believe to be true" (Rundell, 2002: 937) and should not be confused with the other myth that refers to "an ancient traditional story about gods, heroes, and magic" (Rundell, 2002: 937).

Being Gay is a Lifestyle Choice

It is common for those who are narrow minded about sexuality to think that if one is non-heterosexual, it is because that is a choice they have made. Batavia and Iniguez (2021), debunk the myth that one chooses to be gay as follows:

Sexuality is not a choice, that is how the person is born. Like we do not choose to be heterosexual, people do not choose to be homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual. No one chooses to be gay, as much as no one chooses to be straight. Similarly, counselling or therapy cannot change someone's sexuality. This sort of counselling, generally referred to as "conversion therapy", increases the likelihood of depression, anxiety, drug use and suicide...

In *Bengithi Lizokuna*, when Ngidi and Nontobeko were in search of Mhlengi, they bumped into one of his former friends, Mandla, who told them that his friendship with Mhlengi ended because of the new 'lifestyle' that Mhlengi had chosen. In the following extracted dialogue, Mandla responds to Ngidi when asked if he was still friends with Mhlengi:

"Ngizokhuluma iqiniso nje baba. Sase singasebona [abangani], nanxa ngingeke ngithande ukusisho isizathu esasixabanisa, ngaphandle kokuthi ngisho ukuthi the lifestyle that he had chosen esikhaleni nje, yayingazwani nami," esho ebipha kubonakala ukuthi uyayenyanya namanje le lifestyle akhuluma ngayo.

("I will just tell the truth sir. We were no longer [friends], although I would not like to say why we were arguing, except to say that the lifestyle that he had chosen unexpectedly, I did not condone it," he said with sorrow, it was clear that he hated the lifestyle he was talking about.) (Sibiya, 2006: 82)

In the dialogue above, Mandla describes Mhlengi's queerness as a lifestyle, which is inaccurate and inappropriate, and the way Mandla was so disgusted, he could not even mention the word 'friends' because discovering that Mhlengi was gay became a deal breaker for their friendship. As Batavia and Iniguez have contended (2021), just like straight people; one does not choose to be queer but is born that

way and there is multiple gender identity and sexual orientation. This multiplicity opposes the traditional binary of gender identity and sexual orientation that states that there are only two genders (male and female) and one gender attracts one another.

Mandla continued to tell Ngidi and Nontobeko that Mhlengi's disclosure hurt him so much that he had to cancel him from his life. This is shown in the following dialogue:

"Engingakusho nje ukuthi I was hurt kakhulu ngoba ngangimkhonzile umngani wakho. Kwahlupha khona uma esekhetha ukuba yisi..." azibambe, anikine ikhanda, eneke izandla.

(All I can say is that I was very hurt because I really liked your friend. It bothered me when he chose to be a... " holding himself back, shaking his head, spreading his hands.)

(Sibiya, 2006: 83)

The above response from Mandla, shows that he was homophobic towards Mhlengi as he almost uttered an isiZulu derogatory term for a homosexual known as *isitabane*, but he contained himself. Mandla's reply also indicates that some people that were once close to a queer person pre-coming-out often turn their backs on them post-coming-out, and want nothing to do with the relationship they had. Disclosing the gender you actually identify with should not make people think that you have changed your inner being and humanity. Human beings should be appreciated for who they are and not what they are. Mhlengi may have also felt hurt and disappointed because of the rejection he got from someone whom he thought was his friend and had his back.

Gays are Mentally Disturbed

Another myth about queer people, in the context of gays, which also applies to lesbians, is that they must be mentally disturbed to be romantically attracted to the same sex. An American scientific research done by Kinney (2015) debunks this myth and proves that homosexuality is a normal form of sexual orientation:

The American Psychiatric Association... provide[d]... scientific evidence that homosexuality is a normal variant of human sexual orientation. The APA noted that homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social and vocational capabilities. Further, the APA urges all mental health professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations.

The above evidence relates to Mhlengi because the way he was portrayed in the novel there was no incident of him having an impaired judgement or lacking any general social capabilities. Mhlengi could carry out daily activities like any other mentally stable human being such as being a business owner of a Bed and Breakfast Establishment (see Sibiya, 2006: 18). Unfortunately, people close to him as portrayed in the novel did not understand Mhlengi. Just like in the research shown above, Mhlengi's father followed the stigma that homosexuality is associated with mental illness. After Mhlengi came-out to his father as a gay person, Ngidi thought that he was insane for not finding women attractive. This is how the narrator expresses Ngidi's astonishment:

Nakho-ke lo mfana esekhuluma umsangano angakaze awuzwe ngisho nasemlandweni wokhokho bakhe. Ukhona kodwa umuntu ophila kahle ekhanda ongathi akazifuni izintombi ezinhle kangaka ezizalwa imihla namalanga, kunalokho ukhetha ukuthandana nenye insizwa enjengaye?

(This boy is now talking nonsense that he (Ngidi) has never heard of even in the history of his ancestors. There is no sane man who would say that they do not want beautiful girls, which are born each and every day, instead of that, he chooses to be attracted to the same sex as him?)

(Sibiya, 2006: 31)

The above narration also shows that Ngidi thinks his child could be ‘cured’ from being gay by introducing him to beautiful girls, or to think that being reunited with Nontobeko, would make him ‘correct’ his sexual orientation by showing him how much Nontobeko loves him (as shown in Sibiya, 2006: 62). It is clear that Ngidi is delusional and has not been previously exposed to diverse sexualities as the narrator mentions that even with his ancestors, homosexuality was something unheard of. Ngidi is also in denial of his child’s gender identity and thinks that it is just phase that will pass once he comes to his senses (Sibiya, 2006: 101). This is another myth about queer people that once they are done being queer, they will be straight again. In fact, Singh (2018: 24) mentions that LGBTQ people have existed around the world across time and they can explore their sexual orientation and gender identities over their lifetimes.

Mhlengi Portrayed as a Curse for Being Queer

This section will comment on how queerness has been portrayed as a curse in *Bengithi Lizokuna* using three connected scenarios. As mentioned earlier in the study, queer people are often portrayed negatively in literature written in indigenous African languages and that is not different with *Bengithi Lizokuna*. All events taking place in *Bengithi Lizokuna* are centered and connected to the main character, Mhlengi/Mahlengi, who is shown to have negatively affected other characters by disclosing or showing his/her true gender identity to them.

The first example of the curse is when Mhlengi broke up with Nontobeko, who later met with Nkululeko and became his fiancée. Nontobeko and Nkululeko’s relationship was short lived, as Nontobeko had not gotten over Mhlengi. This led to Nkululeko’s death as he committed suicide because of being heartbroken. With this storyline, it is insinuated that had Mhlengi not broken up with Nontobeko, Nontobeko would not have met with Nkululeko and he would have still been alive. Mhlengi is portrayed as being indirectly responsible for Nkululeko’s death.

In the second example, Ndumiso, Mhlengi’s main boyfriend, was apprehended by the police for the house robbery he committed at Ngidi’s place without knowing that he was actually the father of his girlfriend. Ndumiso robbed Ngidi off his money because he wanted to pay lobola for Mhlengi. Another insinuation we find in this sub-plot is that the Mhlengi is blamed for Ndumiso’s actions. Had Mhlengi continued to be in a relationship with Nontobeko, she would have not met with Ndumiso, and he would have not committed the crime.

The third example involves Xolani, who had an affair with Mhlengi. Xolani lost his children to a house fire when he left them unattended to see Mhlengi. In this incident, Mhlengi is also blamed indirectly for Xolani’s negligence that cost him his marriage and family. It is implied that had Mhlengi not transitioned to a woman, Xolani would have never met her, and he would have still been with his family.

Having observed the above-mentioned examples, queerness in *Bengithi Lizokuna* has not been portrayed in a positive manner. According to the world of the novel, which also depicts the real world, queer people are seen as a group that should be not accepted in by society as they are seen as an abomination and a threat to human life, which is not true. Any human being, regardless of their gender identification, can be a threat to another human’s life. It was in very few instances, if there was any, where Mhlengi/Mahlengi was portrayed positively as a queer person in the novel, and this could show that society still needs to be sensitised and educated to accept diverse sexual identities.

Conclusion

This chapter gave a queer reading of *Bengithi Lizokuna* and challenged notions of heteronormativity imposed on Mhlengi/Mahlengi. Mhlengi’s homosexuality and Mhlengi’s transgenderism were portrayed from a heterosexist point of view and the novel showed that being queer is

a gender identity that is unwelcomed, taboo and received with hatred amongst heterosexual African people. This could be a resultant of having queerness as a niche in isiZulu literature and it shows that there is a desperate need to portray queer people positively so that the queer community can feel safe and not be afraid to be who they are in societies they live in. Queer people would be preferred to tell queer peoples' lived experiences and this applies to isiZulu literary works about queerness.

The other characters' reaction on Mahlengi's gender identity in the chapter has shown that education about gender and sexuality needs to be introduced from an early age in schools so that families, friends, and the community at large can be sensitized and open to sexual diversity. More research on creative works has to be done in Africa regarding queerness, transgenderism in particular, and it must be accessible on various kinds of platforms. It must be understood that not all individuals are born in a body that matches their gender identity, as shown with Mhlengi, and that they have to be given a right to seek medical intervention to alter their sex, should the need arise, so that it matches the gender they identify with.

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