

## Exploring The Influence Of VirginitY Testing On The Lives Of Female Characters In Zakes Mda's Our Lady Of Benoni

Develda Seanego<sup>1</sup>, Mphoto Mogoboya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> University of Limpopo (South Africa)

E-mail: mphoto.mogoboya@ul.ac.za

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### Abstract

VirginitY testing is an African practice that has stimulated much discussion among people from different walks of life. It has started many years ago and is still taking place in some African communities. Its purpose is to ensure purity among young brides to their parents and future in-laws (Singer, 2003). Madlala (2002) confirms that this cultural practice also serves as a way of reaching consensus on the amount of bride price (lobola) to be transferred by the groom's family to the bride's family. Conversely, virginitY testing is a gender-based violation of women's rights because it discriminates on the basis of gender in that only girls and not boys, are subjected to this kind of practice. This usually has a traumatic effect on the dignity, self-esteem and well-being of the girl-child, especially if she fails to pass the test. This study, therefore, aims to explore the influence of virginitY testing in the lives of female characters in Mda's Our Lady of Benoni (2012). It is a qualitative study which is grounded on the Feminist theory. Mda's Our Lady of Benoni was purposively sampled for this study from other plays by him because of it resonates with the title of this article. It is, furthermore, textually analysed. Arguments on virginitY testing are cultural while those against it are human-rights related. This study highlights the need for an interface between these two diametrically opposed arguments to be forged in order for humanity to prosper.

**Keywords:** virginitY testing, cultural, purity, violation, gender, dignity

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### Introduction

VirginitY testing is one of the issues that Mda problematizes in his play, Our Lady of Benoni (2012). Girls and young women have to go through this process before they get married in order to test their feminine purity. Many African communities still practice this cultural passage rite from girlhood to womanhood. In South Africa, the practice is prevalent in the Nguni culture. Mda dichotomizes two diametrically opposed perspectives about this practice through the depiction of two female characters in the play; Ma-Dlomo and Thabisile. The one perspective, which is held by Ma-Dlomo, is that virginitY testing is a sublime cultural practice that encourages women to abstain from indulging in intimate relationships before they reach marriageable age. Ncambane (2006:19) declares that "When their virginitY is tested, it somehow influences the behaviour of women to learn to respect their bodies and abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage". Mda portrays Ma-Dlomo as a very complex, feisty and independent, but determinedly anti-feminist, with her commitment to virginitY testing. She, however, controversially supports the alleged rapist in the play. The other view, which is reflected by Thabisile, is protestant and Feministic in that it regards virginitY testing as a violation of the rights of vulnerable girls. Thabisile, like Ma-Dlomo, is also feisty but different from her

because of her independence. She comes from the same village as Ma-Dlomo but she is uprooted from her traditional roots by modernity. Feminists contend that this practice is stereotypical and discriminatory in terms of gender because boys are conveniently excluded from it (Daniel, 2005). To them, Mda's *Our Lady of Benoni* explores the difficulties and the sad situations of women and children ruled and controlled patriarchally by men, and giving power and importance only to men in the play (Roberts, 2012: 2). This study, therefore, aims to explore the influence of virginity testing in the lives of female characters in Mda's *Our Lady of Benoni* (2012).

### **Perceptions on Virginity**

In the last two decades, virginity testing has emerged as an important traditional cultural practice although its roots go back much further. Historically, virginity testing was used to determine the suitability of women for marriage but it also reflected societal stress on abstinence from sexual activity on the part of girls and young women (Karambo, 2004). Singer, (2003) avers that virginity testing is seen by the presence of the hymen in the girls' vagina; its absence means non-virginity. Traditionally, the girl's mother or someone from the community does the testing. As time went by, the practice of virginity testing gradually lost its significance because of Western civilisation, with its concomitant primacy of gender equality, human and children's rights, and the call for social justice (Singer, 2002).

Rumsey (2012:12) defines virginity testing "as the practice of examining a girl or young woman to determine whether or not she has been sexually active". Most testers (abahloli) look primarily for the presence or absence of the hymen.

The Western educational construct of letter grades used to mark tests in schools (A, B, and C), have also been incorporated into some virginity testing practices. To achieve an "A", a girl has to meet a combination of criteria and most important are features of the genitalia. In addition, a girl's eyes should reflect virginity in that "they look innocent" (Karambo, 2004:70). Her breasts and abdomen should be firm and taut and muscles behind her knees should be tight and straight. A "B" grade virgin is said to be someone who may have had intercourse once or twice, or alternatively may have been abused. A "C" grade is essentially a failure (Kinoti, 2005:131). A girl who has been abused repeatedly is likely to get a "C" grade. Most virginity testers say that it is useless to do anything further for these girls as it is too late and nothing will change them (Grinker, Stephen, Lubkemann & Steiner 2010:415). All these are regarded as perceptions because they have not been scientifically and clinically proven.

Generally, virginity testing tends to emphasise abstinence before marriage for girls, which underplays the importance of sex education for girls. This poses a serious challenge in the sense that it sends wrong signals that virginity testing will always guarantee abstinence from sex before marriage. The truth, however, is that unless girls are taught about the importance of sex education, they are unlikely to take control of their bodies and make informed decisions about their sexual behaviour. Moreover, there have been allegations of corruption and improper conduct among the testers. For instance, there have been situations where girls who were certified as virgins but gave birth a few months after, thus, casting doubt on the integrity of the system and reinforcing the fact that the practice is not free from manipulation or corruption (George, 2008).

Hunter (1936) argues that virginity testing is done in order to ensure that girls who are virgins have a much broader significance in the community. Virgins are seen as morally pure and more important because they are able to maintain their virginity until marriage. Engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage is not acceptable in such African communities.

Virginity testing discriminates on the grounds of gender and impairs the dignity and well-being of the girl child. This occurs due to the fact that only girls, not boys, are subject to virginity testing and therefore, they are more likely to suffer emotional trauma if they fail to pass the test. There is a double standard that exists in society, which disadvantages girls. Girls are often encouraged to remain virgins up until marriage while boys are encouraged to demonstrate their patriarchal masculinity.

Virginity testing is also associated with self-respect, modesty, and pride. A girl child is expected to be proud that she is a virgin and the society should respect her. If she is no longer a virgin, she does not deserve social respect and her peers will discriminate against her. According to Zungu (2000:24), "the parents of a girl who has been found to be a virgin will be respected and honoured for they have brought up the girl child in a culturally acceptable manner". Girls in the study conducted by Zungu normally agreed that they heard about virginity testing from their mothers or other maternal figure in their lives but stated in uncertain terms that they wanted to participate and they were not coerced to go for testing. This is contrary to the argument posed by opponents of virginity testing that the girls are coerced by their parents to participate. Zungu (2000) shows that sexual debut starts at an early age and the whole point of virginity testing is to delay sexual debut. Some African communities hold a different view about the age at first sexual intercourse. The girl should make the decision. The decision should not be influenced by others in the community. The decision to engage in sexual intercourse should be made by the girl herself and the girl should have sexual intercourse when she feels ready for the act. The link with the play is that Thabisile took part in the practice of virginity testing as a free-will decision and she enjoyed that. This is evidence that the play revolves around how women really feel about virginity testing. They are not obliged to; it is a matter of choice. Our Lady of Benoni reveals that virginity testing is a cultural practice that occurs in, mainly, the Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, and Swati) community in Southern Africa.

According to Billy and Udry (2005), virginity testing should be a free-will practice. In other words, it is a voluntary exercise in which young women are encouraged to participate in it in order to prove their purity and dignity to the community and show that they contained themselves to be pure until marriage takes place. The impact of virginity testing on young women is that it raises Feminist issues, which ensure that people understand that it is not about gender of being raised with power over another, but it is the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

This study is underpinned by the Feminist theoretical assumptions. Feminism supports the notion that women are treated unequally in modern society. Geralide (2009:23) defines Feminism as "the advocacy for women's rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes. It refers to the belief that all people are entitled to the same civil rights and liberties, and can be intellectual equals regardless of gender". It is a theoretical structure that opposes gender imbalances by seeking to empower women worldwide (Wood, 2012). Feminism further proposes techniques of how society can disabuse itself from this gender disparity and scourge. Feminists suggest that women empowerment and socio-economic equality among people will lead to a better life for everyone (Rampton, 2008). This study is qualitative and it is guided by the exploratory research design. According to Pope and Mays (2000), qualitative method is a textual description of how people behave and what they believe in. Our Lady of Benoni was purposively sampled for this study from other plays written by Mda because of it resonates with the title of this article. Textual analysis was employed as a data analysis technique in this study. Arguments on virginity testing are cultural while those against it are human-rights related.

### **Synopsis of Mda's Our Lady of Benoni**

The play revolves around five characters. Three of the characters live their own lives in an unnamed public park in Johannesburg. Professor Lord Stewart and the Seller of Laughter spend their days in the unnamed park. Lord Stewart and the Seller of Laughter are beggars at the traffic lights of Johannesburg.

The character of the Seller of Laughter is portrayed as a man who makes a living with his lame jokes. He is a black street boy in his mid-teens who tries very hard to be true to his name. He somehow believes that his jokes will make him money and he mocks Lord Stewart for being a beggar, as he is a white man. He also keeps on insisting that Lord Stewart should be his slave man of jokes.

Lord Stewart wanted nothing more than to find the Virgin known as Our Lady of Benoni, who can help him find Danielle. Danni was a virgin who was not engaged to Lord Stewart, but they were together for three years. He is always mourning for his virginal companion and he regrets why he did not try a little harder to change her state, and is, therefore, in need of closure. Lord Stewart slept with prostitutes to satisfy his needs and did not put pressure on Danni. This was because he believed that virgins are magical beings. He believes in virgins in a supernatural way, rather than a cultural way.

Professor is always hanging around the Seller of Laughter and Lord Stewart at the park, but he is not a beggar nor a real Professor. He gets disability money from the government even though he is not disabled. He used the saliva of a man from his village who had tuberculosis (TB) so that he could also be diagnosed with the disease for the government to pay him monthly. He always carries books around and reads, that is why he is called the Professor.

Ma-Dlomo was cleaning the park when she saw Professor. They know each other from way back because they come from the same village called Kwa-Vimba in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Ma-Dlomo asks Professor why he has not been home for almost ten years, and she asks, "Is it because you live a lavish life with the white people?" (Mda, 2012:20) referring to Lord Stewart. Professor wants to leave Johannesburg as a result of seeing Ma-Dlomo who is from the same village as he is. He tells Lord Stewart that he does not want Ma-Dlomo to gossip about him in the village or know about what is happening in his life. This was just a feeling of being threatened by Ma-Dlomo's presence because in the end Professor decided to stay in Johannesburg.

The reasons why Professor left his village was because he had a wife whose name was Thabisile. The problem is that his wife was not welcomed by his family as they thought Thabisile was not a virgin. Professor and Thabisile started dating in primary school without having sex.

On the night of their traditional marriage, they spent the night together and in the morning the grandmother went to their bed to check for blood on their sheet or bedding, and when they did not find any blood. They (Professor's family) then humiliated Thabisile for bringing shame in their family. Thabisile was banished from the village because she was the laughing stock in the community. Professor regrets that he did not fight enough for Thabisile. He kept quiet as a way of respecting culture and tradition. He did not stand up for his wife in reverence of culture though he knew the truth that she was still a virgin.

Ma-Dlomo, being the village virginity tester, blames Professor for marrying Thabisile even though she knew that Thabisile used to pass all her virginity tests. Ma-Dlomo was a leading and respected virginity tester in the entire village of Thousand Hills which is led by the Right Reverend Chief Comrade or Priest. The Priest stands accused of raping a woman in the very same village. Notwithstanding all these allegations, Ma-Dlomo supports him (the Priest). She strongly believes that he did not commit rape against any woman. Ma-Dlomo states: "The Right Reverend Chief Comrade my leader cannot rape. We are going to sing and dance outside that courtroom until the judges find him not guilty" (Mda, 2012: 22).

When Ma-Dlomo realises that Professor is still in love with Thabisile, she brings Thabisile to the park to talk things out with Professor. Thabisile is now a professional teacher, she managed to make something of herself, regardless of what she went through.

The play continues to reveal more secrets; Lord Stewart was blind when he came back from the Virgin, Our Lady of Benoni, who told him to look to the sun for his miracle of finding his lost virgin Danni. His blindness finally made him agree to be the slave of jokes to the Seller of Laughter's lame jokes.

Professor comes clean to Ma-Dlomo that he was the one who set her house on fire in order to protect his brother who raped Ma-Dlomo's daughter to cure himself from the AIDS disease.

### **The Influence of Virginit**

According to Leclerc- Madlala (2001), rural women in the South African countryside see virginity testing as the only way to reinstate what they view as the lost cultural values of respect and pride before marriage. For them virginity testing is important, as they think that it prevents teenage pregnancy.

Looking at issues such as HIV/ AIDS, the process of virginity testing that takes place in the play affects the lives of the characters. Research shows that for some women, marriage increases the risk of HIV infection (International Women's Coalition, 2008:1). Some women who are living with HIV /AIDS were virgins when they got married and remained faithful to their husbands, but still got the disease.

The issue of HIV is also seen in the play when Ma-Dlomo's daughter was raped at an early age and was infected with HIV. Ma-Dlomo, being the village virginity tester, is emotionally affected by this rape incident. Her daughter, Bonggi, was just three months old when she was violated. This has adversely affected Ma-Dlomo because her daughter was a victim who lost her virginity which symbolises her pride, purity and womanhood. The saddest and harrowing part is that there is nothing that Ma-Dlomo could do to stand up for her child.

The issue of virginity testing will also affect Bonggi as she grows up. It will also torment her knowing she lost the self-respect of her womanhood to some drunken man who wanted to cure his disease by sleeping with a virgin. Some men still have the misguided belief that intimacy with a virgin can cleanse a man's virginity (George, 2007).

Some men attend virginity testing ceremonies mainly to identify which girls they can run after. They are also able to know their targets for marriage by attending such ceremonies. Another reason why men attend these ceremonies is, unfortunately, to know whom they can rape to cure their HIV disease, which is exactly what happened to Ma-Dlomo's baby daughter.

The effects of virginity testing may have long-lasting negative impact on young girls in that some women who undergo virginity testing become ashamed if they fail the test (Shaulbroub-Kervokian, 2004). This is because the results diminish their self-esteem to such a point that suicide seems to be the only option. This is also revealed in Our Lady of Benoni where Thabisile lost confidence in herself after she was not believed to have been a virgin on the first night of her marriage with Professor. Fortunately, she did not have suicidal thoughts. Thabisile was badly affected by this whole incident to the point of running away from home because she was tired of being the laughing stock and the talk of her village. This indicates that the process of virginity testing may damage women mentally and emotionally as they feel ashamed and bring disappointment to their families who still value the culture.

Another negative impact that influences the women in the play is that a woman's sexuality is perceived as something that must be controlled by society and state. For instance, in the play, there is a scene where Thabisile had no privacy with her husband, Professor. Professor's grandmother violated Thabisile's rights by checking the bedding or sheets on which she was sleeping with her husband; the grandmother was looking

for stains of blood as evidence that Thabisile was still a virgin. This can be taken as invasion of privacy because Thabisile's personal life was not respected or kept confidential.

Virginity testing is also associated with payment of lobola and marriage. Women are adversely affected by this arrangement because if you, as a woman, do not manage to find someone who can pay lobola for you, you must remain a virgin. It is believed that a virgin should bleed on the night of her marriage. According to this cultural practice, elders are the only ones who are allowed to remove the sheet after the couple has been together for the first time after marriage. The sheet with blood stains on it is kept as proof that the girl was a virgin. If not found to be a virgin, then the girl's father has to pay a cow to the village chief as a token of apology that his daughter has not conducted herself in a culturally acceptable manner (Gupta, 2000).

Thabisile felt helpless when she was humiliated for not being a virgin. All women are influenced by virginity testing, either positively or negatively. Many women who are against the banning of virginity testing do so because they claim to be cultural activists. In *Our Lady of Benoni*, Ma-Dlomo believes that virginity testing should not be banned because it identifies and distinguishes them as Zulus, and that it is important to their culture. Some young women go to great length practise alternative sexual behaviours such as anal sex in order to preserve their virginity and please their cultural communities. The positive part of virginity testing is that if a woman is found to be pure, she is respected and she has a good chance of being married and do her parents proud. Being a virgin gives villagers a good definition of who they are. The negative part of virginity testing is walking in shame and embarrassment if one a non-virgin and being labelled as cheap. However, the Zulu culture provides an alternative for the women who fail the virginity test, which is the cleansing process ceremony. The cleansing involves non-virgins contributing coin money as a result of paying the damage of failing to sustain the virginity and giving half of the money (silver coins) to girls who are virgins. Half of the money is being thrown away. The remaining money will be used to buy items such as towels, and soap that will be used in the river for cleansing by non-virgins.

Another strategy that is used to preserve virginity is that girls who are older and not yet married, are being taught how to engage in a non-penetrative form of sex called "thigh sex" or ukusoma. The girls should not allow a boy to penetrate her vagina, instead the boy must place his penis on her thighs and when he wants to ejaculate the girl should fold her thighs close to each other (Katongo:1996). This is an indication of the way culture and tradition can make allowances of maintaining virginity as a woman.

*Our Lady of Benoni* portrays Thabisile and Professor as lovers since primary school, but they never engaged in sexual relation. They would rather kiss, cuddle or do other romantic activities. This is because they highly valued virginity and their culture and they wanted to wait till they got married. Lord Stewart also respected virginity. He slept around with prostitutes to fulfil and satisfy his needs as a man because he did not want to force Danni, whom he loved, into something she was not yet ready for. Lord Stewart waited and supported the virgin woman in his life as he realised that remaining a virgin meant a lot to Danni.

Pamela (2007) argues that women's sexuality is nobody's business but her own, and it is up to them if they decide to maintain or lose their virginity. It should be a decision of free-will and not fear of societal norms. Win (2004) states that to maintain one's virginity should be a matter of individual choice. Brown (2006:10) corroborates:

Telling a young woman to maintain her virginity is not giving her the autonomy to decide and feel good about herself. Women need to be empowered, but in order for them to be empowered it is important to eradicate particular myths about women's sexuality, reproduction and culture.

In the play, people like Ma-Dlomo have no right to intervene in the personal affairs of Thabisile. If Professor, as the husband, had no problem with Thabisile not bleeding on their first encounter, then no one should meddle.

Many women are so bound by culture that they still adhere to it even though it appears to be against them. Ma-Dlomo is badly affected by the rape of her baby, and virginity, but she is still loyal and faithful to supporting the man who is accused of raping her child. She is fighting for virginity testing to continue in her village for fear of losing her cultural identity. The other reason why Ma-Dlomo is supporting the priest he (the priest) came out in support of virginity testing when the other leaders in the community were denouncing it.

Contemporary virginity testing proponents lobby for counselling to be offered to females who were abused or raped and not someone who lost their virginity by choice. It is considered that someone who has been raped is still considered a virgin, because she did not lose her virginity by choice. These women even continue to participate in traditional ceremonies and they are taught how to prevent further sexual intercourse. These exponents further mobilise for virginity testing to be funded in order to build private and secure places where it could be safely conducted, rather than being held in public places like sports grounds or in the royal residence where everyone is allowed to watch. All these attest to the fact that virginity testing is still part of African cultural identity and therefore, influences the lives of women, both in a negative and positive way. In *Our Lady of Benoni*, Thabisile and Danni are able to conduct themselves in a sophisticated manner; they have self-control over their bodies because of the influence of virginity testing. They were both relationships, and they proved that they could still love their partners and each enjoy their partner's company without any intimacy.

In Thabisile's case, the negative influence of virginity testing was that the waiting for her first sexual experience was just in vain, because she was not believed to be a virgin in that she did not bleed in her first sexual encounter with her husband. However, her life turned out for the better because she studied to be a teacher. The day she met her ex-husband Professor, she told him that she was a professional teacher. After the trauma of being ridiculed and banished from her village for not being a virgin, she improved herself by studying. However, seeing Professor after so many years brought memories of how they separated. This further makes her realise that she is not healed from the pain she went through. Moreover, the fact that Professor did not defend or stand up for her in front of his family still makes her bitter and angry. All she wanted was for the Professor to protect her and fight for her, because he knew the truth that his ex-wife Thabisile was still a virgin.

Professor is also adversely affected by virginity testing in that it jeopardised his marriage. He was so obsessed with virginity that he always carried tons of books around to read about it and find its significance. Both Thabisile and Professor still had strong feelings for each other, one could tell from their conversations. It is such a huge sadness that virginity could ruin so much happiness.

Danni is an interesting minor character as she does not actually ever appear in the play, but she is important for the insights she provides. She was in love with Lord Stewart for a long time and they never engaged in sexual intercourse. One day Danni just ran off with strangers in a car and never came back to Lord Stewart. The reason she left is unknown and Lord Stewart is left all alone, broken and full of questions about where his lover might have gone to. One might think Danni was not even a virgin; she lied to Lord Stewart knowing he would respect her decision. Lord Stewart was still heart-broken, and has not yet found closure with his mystery lover, Danni the virgin.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored the influence of virginity testing in the lives of female characters of the play *Our Lady of Benoni*. It has found out that female characters in the play have been impacted by the practice of virginity testing. Virginity testing has negatively influenced Ma-Dlomo's life in that when her baby daughter was raped, she suffered the trauma of seeing her child in distress. She would never get a chance to test the virginity of her own daughter. Thabisile's negative influence was being accused of being a non-virgin on the night of her marriage. The positive influence of virginity is that young girls and women learn to keep their womanhood pure until marriage. It is believed that virginity testing is likely to lead to a happy marriage. If a girl preserves her virginity until after the wedding, her in-laws and her husband will treat her with respect, and as a result, the woman will encounter joy. For this purpose, women should conduct themselves in an honourable.

*Our Lady of Benoni* further reveals that participants in virginity testing show a clear understanding of the origin of this practice and the context in which it is practised. Ma-Dlomo is one of the female characters in the play who supports virginity. This has influenced her life because she perceives virginity testing practice as a necessary traditional norm in her community. According to Scorgie (2002) virginity testing denotes purity, self-control, honour, pride, modesty and chastity before marriage. It is the amount of the bride price that is exchanged that demonstrates the importance placed on a girl's virginity at marriage. Women in the play are, furthermore, portrayed as people who unquestioningly respect their culture, who are voicelessly submissive in following cultural norms, procedures and rites that are practised in their community. However, Feminists and other human rights activists consider virginity testing as a violation of the dignity of the girl child. This study, therefore, proposes that an interface between these two diametrically opposed arguments be forged in order for humanity to prosper.

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