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Through the Eyes of Laughter : Fulata Lusungu Moyo's Theology

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7 | Through the Eyes of Laughter: Fulata Lusungu Moyo's Theology

Thandi Soko-de Jong

*My mission in life is not merely to survive but to thrive
and to do so with some passion, some compassion,
some humour, and some style.*

(Maya Angelou)

Abstract

Fulata Lusungu Moyo is a Malawian systematics and feminist theologian, as well as one of the founding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Her work spans over three decades and has raised great awareness — through storytelling that embodies interpretations and theologies of liberation — against issues that dehumanise women. She is a proponent of religious and cultural hermeneutics that engage with women's experiences, as her work predominantly addresses religious and cultural influences on gender construction and women's sexuality. In addition to her academic contributions, she is also an advocate for gender justice. She is accredited with encouraging churches worldwide to adopt the 'Thursdays in Black' campaign against rape and violence during her tenure as Program Executive for Women in Church and Society at the World Council of Churches (2007 – 2019). Against this background, this chapter — as the title suggests — is about Moyo's theology, particularly her mission to help co-empower others and be a leading voice in discourse on justice, women and the church. My aim is to focus on how her contribution to theology inspires others, particularly young theologians and gender justice advocates. Through theologies of liberation by means of storytelling and humour, I will explore her contribution using the conceptual framework of storytelling. Storytelling is essential in the theological reflections of women of the Circle. Through storytelling, theological reflection proceeds "from the narrating of the story to analysing it to show how the various actors in the story see themselves, how they interact with others, and how they view their own agency in life

as a whole”.¹ This enables theological reflection from the perspective of faith through “a conscious implementation of biblical and cultural hermeneutics”.² Thus, in terms of methodology, this chapter will focus on exploring the ways Moyo’s has used humour and storytelling to aid in the promotion of gender justice. Ultimately, this chapter forwards Moyo’s unique contribution as a Ngoni-Tumbuka theologian who uses her experiences and knowledge to advocate for liberative theologies of gender justice. Furthermore, I argue that from a theology of liberation, her contributions critically respond to contextual issues of religion, gender and notions of African sexuality. In this way, the discussion below relates to two objectives of the volume that are (a) *discussing the specific features and uniqueness of the theology of a particular Matriarch* and (b) *discussing the purpose of the Matriarch’s generated theological thinking*.

Keywords: Fulata L. Moyo; Women’s Theology; Co-empower; Scholar-activist; Activist-theology; Gender, Gender-based Violence; Kyriarchy; Laughter; Ngoni-Tumbuka

Introduction

Fulata Lusungu Moyo has positioned herself as a critical voice of authority in women’s theology by integrating systematics and feminist theologies with activism and advocacy. Among the various cross-cutting themes found in Moyo’s work is the ability to draw insights from her Ngoni-Tumbuka cultural background (one that I share) in bringing a unique perspective to the topics she takes on. Her way of doing so has been described by those who know her well as theology “through the eyes of laughter.” This is because Moyo, as a scholar-activist, employs humour as a social justice tool. She regularly draws from her heritage, including her Christian spirituality, to face down social-justice adversities affecting her society and challenging them – using humour, storytelling, and other creative methods that will be discussed in this chapter.

¹ Oduyoye, M. A. 2001. *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 16.

² Ibid.

In this chapter, I focus my review on the parts of Moyo's work that highlight her unique Ngoni-Tumbuka perspective in order to better understand its contribution to the Circle's quest, especially as one generating a "theology that embraces and empowers all members of the Earth Community." I approach this task as one of the Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians who have been directly impacted and co-empowered³ by Moyo. I aim to show how her life experiences (as chronicled in her earlier works), as well as her theological approach and praxis, teaching, advocacy, and activism, offer the Circle community insights, reflection, and wisdom that speak to the Circle's general concerns, and more specifically to issues of kyriarchy⁴, (neo)colonialism, violence, and sexuality. After analysing her work from this approach, I then offer a positive argument for the recognition, within the Circle and beyond, of Moyo's key achievement of bringing to life a Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians' liberation perspective.

Brief Biography of Fulata Lusungu Moyo

Fulata Lusungu Moyo is a humorous storyteller. Besides being a systematic and feminist theologian and part of the generation of the founding mothers of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Fulata calls herself a church her-storyian and feminist ethicist of *ubuntu*, and an

³ She uses the term 'co-empower' (compower) so as to emphasise the reality that each person being 'empowered' is not a 'tabula rasa' but has agency from within that the empowering elements activate.

⁴ Kyriarchy is a term that was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza from the ancient Greek word for 'lord/master' *κύριος* (*kyrios*). Kyriarchy is a term that extends patriarchy to encompass and connect to other structures of oppression and privilege, such as racism, ableism, homophobia, capitalism, and other social markers, in recognition of the intersectionality of oppression into overlapping, transversing and complicated power dynamics. See Schüssler Fiorenza E. (1992) *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. On the intersectionality of injustice, see Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. "On Intersectionality: Essential Writings." (2017). *Faculty Books*. 255.

<https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/255> and Walker, Alice. (1983). *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

ongoing Franklian Logotherapy⁵ student. Her work, study, and academic background as a holder of a PhD in Human Sciences with a focus on gender, religio-culture, and ethics influence her social involvement. Most notably, she founded *Thimlela-STREAM*, “a holistic response to survivors of sex trafficking in northern Malawi that focuses on trauma resilience and healing accompaniment.”⁶

She is also a vice-president of the *Afriaus iLEAC* (Africa Australia Inspire, Lead, Educate and Advocate for Change)⁷ and a former World Council of Churches (WCC) staff. As WCC program executive for Women in Church and Society then and later a Just Community of Women and Men (from 2013), she pioneered and facilitated several processes, including those that led to the development of the gender justice principles,⁸ the globalization of Thursdays in Black campaign,⁹ the annual ecumenical gender advocacy training using peace and security instruments like the UNSCR1325 and the human rights instruments including the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Universal Periodical Review (UPR) that co-empowered people of faith to effectively hold governments accountable in delivering for gender

⁵ Briefly, Viktor Frankl developed Logotherapy to aid clients in transcending trauma and other psychological issues. Frankl developed some of his ideas while surviving Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. See Bushkin Hanan, Roelf van Niekerk and Louise Stroud. “Searching for Meaning in Chaos: Viktor Frankl’s Story.” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 17 No. 3 (2021): 233-242. Doi: 10.5964/ejop.5439.

⁶ See *Profiling women Malawi, 2022*, “Gender and Human Rights.” Available online: <https://profilingwomenmw.org/>

⁷ AfriAus iLEAC Inc, “About Us.” August 2, 2021. <https://afriausileac.org/about-us/> (Accessed 5 June, 2022).

⁸ *World Council Churches, 2022*. “Gender Justice Principles with Code of Conduct.” World Council of Churches. Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/gender-justice-principles-with-code-of-conduct> (Accessed 1 April, 2022).

⁹ *World Council of Churches*, no date. “Thursdays in Black.” Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/thursdays-in-black>

justice;¹⁰ and developed the Healing Together¹¹ for community-based trauma healing.”¹²

In this chapter, I aim to invite the reader to interact with Fulata Lusungu Moyo (hereafter referred to by her first unique name, Fulata¹³). This hu-

¹⁰ In 2014, the World Council of Churches, in collaboration with Kroc Institute, Notre Dame University, and TPO Foundation Sarajevo, brought 30 women from WCC member churches and regional ecumenical organisations for the first ecumenical gender advocacy training that focused on women, peace, and security using the UNSCR1325. From 2015 these trainings became a joint venture of several ecumenical organisations, including the Finn Church Aid–ACT Alliance, the World YWCA, and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Our focus also widened to include human rights instruments like CEDAW and UPR. The aim remained the equipping of those working for gender justice in faith-based civil society organisations so as be able to monitor, review and write civil society reports (often referred to as Shadow reports). Such reports help in the process of cross-examination by the Treaty Bodies and other stakeholders of the reports by the reporting states. *Anglican Communion News Service*, 2015. “WCC Co-rganises Ecumenical Training on Women’s Rights Advocacy.” Available online: <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/07/wcc-co-organises-ecumenical-training-on-womens-rights-advocacy.aspx> (accessed 02/08/2022).

¹¹ Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2019. “Healing Together.” World Council of Churches. Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/healing-together> (Accessed 21 June, 2022).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fulata Lusungu Moyo prefers to be referred to by her first name for two major reasoned arguments: firstly, she will not tire to remind you that her name Fulata is the most significant to her identity as an expression of how she was born: as feet-first breech birth that was also a preemie at 25/26 weeks only; and secondly, while Moyo is the name of one of the patriarchs in her life, Fulata is the only name that is truly hers, and also defines her gifts and vocation among her community. Since she survived the breech and premature birth, her community raised her up to be attentive to dreams and visions as her calling and embrace teaching and healing as her gifts for the welfare of her community. So, to honour this, in this chapter when I am not using her preferred pronouns of she/her, I use “Fulata” instead of the accepted academic formalities of referring to the second name. See the details of her story in Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2017. “‘Ukugqiba inkaba’—Burying the Umbilical Cord: An African Indigenous Ecofeminist Perspective on Incarnation.” In Kim,

mourous storyteller uses both humour and storytelling as her epistemological tools for social justice. Let us set the structure of this chapter as firstly, I locate Fulata as a feminist ethicist of ubuntu and what that means. Then I begin with my story about my first encounter with Fulata. Secondly, I will build on my encounters with Fulata by delving into four sections shaped around her stories. The first section starts with her humour around her own sexuality as a woman widowed at the age of 37 years but never remarried. This section helps us to have a conversation with Fulata about the need to break the silence around human sexuality so as to distinguish human sexuality as a gift from God and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as an aberration of this gift and, therefore, a blasphemy against the Creator of humanity and human sexuality. The second section deals with Fulata's unpacking the story of John 8:1-11 which she refers to as "a story of a woman caught masturbating." This section focuses on why Fulata prefers to read the bible using the contextual bible study methodologies so that the biblical narrative becomes a tool for advocacy as such stories become embodied by stories of women that are vulnerable to gender-based violence. The third section addresses Fulata's embodied activism as a university lecturer that had to wear a very tight hip-star so as to evoke a conversation that led to advocacy for transformative masculinities and femininities regarding the "what" and "why" of women's dressing. And finally, the last section tackles Fulata's dark humour about her widowhood in an attempt to break the silence about suffering to explore ways of meaningful accompaniment towards trauma resilience and healing. The chapter concludes with an overview of her spirituality in light of some of the themes highlighted in her work.

Beading Motif: African Women's Expression of Individual and Collective Narratives

As a theologian, Fulata has been shaped by the research and writings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as 'The Circle'). She was introduced to it by her mentor Professor Isabel Apawo Phiri in 1989 when she taught her at University of Malawi then Chancellor College. She has since recently renamed her theoretical framing as feminist ethics of *ubuntu* after a long, explorative journey into

Grace Ji-Sun & Hilda P. Koster (Eds.), *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 179-192.

her isiNgoni beading traditions. Fulata once described building a theory based on beading, a women's practice richly rooted in her isiNgoni¹⁴ ethnic roots.¹⁵ She then described her theory as a beading motif – an African women's expression of their individual and collective *narrative*. The emphasis of such a motif focuses on how the African women tell their stories and narrate their experiences as they bead, using each bead of unique colours. The pattern of beading itself is significantly enabled by strategic threading as an embodiment of the stories told. Both the telling and choice of the bead's color and pattern in each bead finds its place in is inspired by the ambiance, context, and safety of the space in which such beading is taking place.

Her arrival at naming her theoretical framing as a feminist ethics of *ubuntu* was based on her decision to use the communitarian ethos as the pattern that defines who she is as an isiNgoni woman. To this she adds a political preoccupation with a feminist ethical agenda represented by the *beading* motif as a “detergent” that helps remove possible stains of patriarchy in the conception of *ubuntu*.¹⁶ She agrees with Ramathate Dolamo's argument that the notion of *ubuntu* promotes communal relations and interactions between individuals and their respective communities as an expression of their being interconnected and interdependent.¹⁷ Like Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, a Circle member from the isiNdebele context, Fulata argues that she grew up in a context where a person embodies

¹⁴ Ngoni's are an offshoot of the Zulu kingdom of the nineteenth century. See Soko, Boston, J. “The Vestiges of Ngoni Oral Literature,” *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 7, no. 1 (1996): https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/AJA10168427_10, 59-67. For Moyo's discussion about her heritage, see for example, Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, “‘Traffic Violations’: Hospitality, Foreignness, and Exploitation: A Contextual Biblical Study of Ruth.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 83–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.07> (Accessed 16 July, 2022).

¹⁵ Berkley Center for Religion, 2022. A Discussion with Fulata L. Moyo, World Council of Churches. [online] berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu. Available online: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-fulata-l-moyo-world-council-of-churches> (Accessed 3 July, 2022).

¹⁶ D. Hall, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit, “Feminist ethics of care and Ubuntu”, February 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290952148_Feminist_ethics_of_care_and_Ubuntu, (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

¹⁷ Dolamo, Ramathate, “Botho/Ubuntu: The Heart of African Ethics”, *Scriptura* 112 (2013), 1.

ubuntu (humanness) when she or he is welcoming to strangers, respectful of the dignity of others, compassionate, empathetic and caring.¹⁸ As such, her bringing in *ubuntu* in her theoretical framing is in order to reiterate that *ubuntu* (in its very essence) should promote equality and justice and enhance the women's stories as an important piece to the fabric of their society. Women have a personhood as moral agents and dignity as *imago Dei*.

Building on all these positive components of being human, Fulata has used the arguments by David Hall, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit in their articulation of "feminist ethics of ubuntu and care."¹⁹ Still, she strongly refuses to add 'and care' because to her, to have 'ubuntu and care,' or/and 'feminist ethics and care' is an unnecessary redundancy and, therefore, very tautological. She argues that the indigenous concept of 'ubuntu' itself, as already defined above, has an embedded implication into relational care ethics. The *ubuntu* declaration that 'my well-being is connected to your well-being' is to acknowledge that we have a relationship of consideration, and, therefore, we care about each other's welfare because each person's welfare in the community impacts the other community members.

Fulata also agrees with Laura D'Olimpio in her "Ethics Explainer: Ethics of care" that ethics of care is actually a *feminist* approach to ethics. Therefore, she makes the same argument against "feminist ethics of care" as equally tautological. Hall, Louw, and Du Toit argue for the need for a 'feminist ethics of *ubuntu* and care' as scientifically and socially necessary within the African context for the establishment of relevance and meaning. So, because of their meaningful attempt to cleanse *ubuntu* and use "feminist ethics" to de-patriarch *ubuntu*, Fulata chooses to use their understanding. This ethics helps to critically address and help to correct what Fulata calls the kyriarchal²⁰ biases that often privilege the male and

¹⁸ Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, "Politics of the body, fear and ubuntu: Proposing an African women's theology of disability", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76 no.3 (2020): 2.

¹⁹ See Hall, David, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit, "Feminist ethics of care and Ubuntu." 23 (2013): 29-33. Available online: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ogf/article/view/88907> (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

²⁰ Kyriarchy is a term that Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza coined from the ancient Greek word for 'lord/master' *kyrios*. It is part of the conversation around intersectional feminism (Kimberlé Crenshaw). As a social system, it extends patriarchy to keep all intersecting oppressions in place. It encompasses and

Western supremacist approaches since this ethics emphasises relationship, community and experienced story over individualism and abstract theorizing.

Since Fulata is a strong advocate for the power of storytelling to unleash activism for dignity and justice, I wish to draw on that element of narrative by starting with a story of my own about Fulata to enter into this chapter that is written in her honour and in celebration of her ongoing role as a Circle theologian.

Fulata Lusungu Moyo: The Ngoni-Tumbuka Woman I First Met

As a Malawian, Ngoni-Tumbuka myself, I have the same ethnic background as Fulata Moyo. I first heard of her when I was a teenager and was pondering questions of faith. Seeing the many existential questions I had, a cousin advised me to join a new Bible study in town (Zomba, Malawi). She pointed out to me that it was a unique and novel offering where I would surely find answers. “A *couple* is leading the Bible study. Can you believe it? Both of them together! Not just the husband. I hear the wife is a theologian, and she has guts! They just returned from Sweden!” She was right. This was new to her and I.

We did not know of any women theologians. We thought theology was only for individuals, mostly men, who were preparing for ordination and serving in the church. Fulata’s role as a woman theologian was therefore of interest to me, an opportunity to hear insights from a female perspective at a time in my life when I was pre-occupied with questions about belief/non-belief and the impact of faith on how we express ourselves in

connects structures of oppression and privilege, such as racism, gender inequality, injustice and binary, language preference, religious hegemony, classism, ableism, homophobia, capitalism, ethnicism, and other social markers that become frontiers of oppression, in recognition of the intersectionality of oppression into overlapping, transversing and complicated power dynamics. See Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth 2013. *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 7; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 2015. “Intersectional Feminisms Discussion.” Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROwquxC_Gxc (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

society. Fulata set people like me on the theological path with the understanding that theology can be transformative and holistic and that there is a space for Malawian women of all cultural backgrounds.

Both Ngoni and Tumbuka traditions are patriarchal and patrilineal in a society where more ethnic groups are matrilineal and historically accord women high status in religion. For example, the Chewas, Malawi's largest²¹ ethnic group, have long recognized the special cultural and spiritual status of *Makewana* (literally translated as "mother of children," but intended to convey, "the mother of all people"²²). *Makewana* is a title for female priestesses and rainmakers that dates to around the 15th century. The original *Makewana* (born Mangadzi Banda) was among the most powerful spiritual leaders in central Africa;²³ she "presided over a rain/shrine complex that spread across much of central Malawi" and was "seen as having direct access to God; without her, it was believed that there would be no rain and women would be barren."²⁴

Yusuf M. Juwayeyi describes the woman-centred role of the *Makewana* by adding that women in this role were independent (celibate, with a male ritual consort) and assisted in their tasks by a "group of specially selected women of any age who lived a permanently celibate life."²⁵ In the Ngoni and Tumbuka cultures, there are no such celebrated roles for female spiritual leaders. Given that the mission-initiated Christian tradition in northern Malawi (where the two ethnic groups are found) also initially did not recognize female leadership in the churches, figures like

²¹ Malawi's ethnic composition comprises a "conglomeration of 15 different ethnic groups, with the Maravi complex (Chewa and Mang'anja) as the most dominant group." *Encyclopedia.com*, 2022. "Chewa." Available online: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chewa> (Accessed 19 June, 2022). The Chewa language is also spoken in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Tanzania, in some of these societies Chewa is also known as Nyanja or Chinyanja.

²² Smith, Benjamin W. 2005. "Makewana the Rainmaker (central Malawi) + Mbiriwiri." In: Taylor, B.R. (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature: 1028-1030*. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 1028.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Rangely, W.H. 1952 in Yusuf M. Juwayeyi, 2020. *Archeaology and Oral Tradition in Malawi: Origins and Early History of the Chewa*. Rochester NY: James Currey, 45.

Fulata have had a major impact on how women from this area are re-claiming their silenced role. Fulata underscores this in the following quote from a letter²⁶ she wrote from her mother's perspective/based on her mother's recollections:

Being born in the early 1920s and being molded by the cultural expectations of that time makes even writing this letter difficult. Yet, knowing you, my last-born daughter, and your daring to evoke conversation on "taboo" issues, it is better that I write rather than suffer the embarrassment of trying to have a face-to-face conversation with you.

I remember that in 2005, you asked me some culturally difficult questions as part of your research concerning girls' socialization into gender and sexuality roles through the rites of passage. I am still trying to wrap these concepts around my head. After getting over my shock at some of your questions, I realized that if I did not share my experiences with you, then those missing parts of my story would obliterate some crucial pieces of what has shaped me as your mother. So, this letter is my attempt to answer those questions that I avoided at that time.²⁷

Against this backdrop of her contribution and positionality, this chapter focuses on Fulata as a Circle theologian that has been consistent and intentional. Storytelling and humour underpin and are a recurring feature in Fulata's theological contribution. Let us, therefore, examine some examples.

"Let's Talk about Sex: I have SARS"

Humour

The use of humour has long been used as a way to protest and interrogate injustices and inequalities. According to Corliss Outley et. al., in the United States, for example, the development of Black culture in bondage "gave rise to humour as a coping mechanism against the oppressive state

²⁶ See Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, "Child Marriage, the Untold Story of my Mother and the Church in Africa - A Feminist Ethics of *Ubuntu*," Deanna Ferree Womack & Raimundo Barreto, eds., *Alterity and the Evasion of Justice*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023 (Forthcoming), 125-129.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 125-126.

[Africans] found themselves in.”²⁸ Humour “became a way to protest their conditions by creating various humorous styles that infused social political commentary on oppression as a sign of defiance, while also providing hope for the hopeless.”²⁹ Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele describe such uses of humour as part of Black societies’ “oral communication strategies to resist subjugation and oppression by dominant groups.”³⁰

Fulata Moyo believes in the life-changing power of humour in social (gender) justice activism.³¹ In her essay written in honour of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, entitled “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Justice” (forthcoming), Fulata cites Nancy Goldman to show how humour works in social critique:

Humour is a social corrective...it can validate experience, help us think more flexibly and reframe situations, illuminate the ways in which we live in the world politically, and be used to critique social injustice. Humor can diffuse tensions around controversial topics. [...] Some can use their sense of humor and their body to confront society while making a safe space for people to be open and absorb information.³²

She adds that for Goldman, social critique conveyed through the medium of humour often has more power to sink into the listeners’ psyche and effect behavioural change “than polished moral essays or stern words of

²⁸ Outley, Corliss, Shamaya Bowen & Harrison Pinckney, “Laughing While Black: Resistance, Coping and the Use of Humor as a Pandemic Pastime among Blacks,” *Leisure Sciences* 43, no. 1-2 (2021): 305.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Lu, Jessica H and Catherine Knight Steele, “‘Joy is Resistance’: Cross-platform Resilience and (Re)invention of Black Oral Culture Online.” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019), 823.

³¹ Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Social Justice.” Sarojini Nadar, Tinyiko Maluleke, Dietrich Werner, Vicentia Kgabe, Rudolf Hinz eds., *Ecomenical Encounters with Desmond Mpilo Tutu: Visions for Justice, Dignity and Peace*, Oxford: Regnum Books International & Cape Town: UWC Press, 139. <https://www.google.co.il/search?tbm=bks&hl=en&q=Ecumenical+Encounters+with+Desmond+Mpilo+Tutu> (Accessed 25 February, 2023).

³² Goldman, Nancy, 2013. “Comedy and Democracy: The Role of Humor in Social Justice.” A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change. Available online: <https://animatingdemocracy.org/resource/comedy-and-democracy-role-humor-social-justice>. (Accessed 5 July 2022).

rebuke.”³³ Fulata relates an anecdote from a situation where she used humour to spark a conversation that helped others understand her widowhood struggles better. She relates how one morning she responded to friends’ greetings at church with the following humorous response: “I am suffering from SARS.”³⁴ After which, she would immediately unpack SARS as ‘Severe Absence of Romance and Sex’. She adds that some people, regretting ever having asked her how she was, uttered an embarrassed sigh or a sheepish laugh “while urging their feet to take them away from me at very fast speed. But some would laugh, and in a more relaxed mood, they would engage in a conversation to make sense of my widowhood struggles.”³⁵ From this illustration, we see how Moyo, in line with Nancy Goldman uses humour as a catalyst for exploring discourses at a deeper level.

Elsewhere in her work, however, she shows that using humour in this way need not always be lighthearted; one can also use “dark” humour. “Dark humour” is understood here as humour that “makes light of subject matter that is generally considered taboo, particularly subjects that are normally considered serious or painful to discuss.”³⁶ To this end, Moyo argues that:

words of rebuke or moral essays that border on being judgmental or accusatory in approach tend to either create guilt, fear or shame (for the guilty) or a deceptive feeling of perfection (for those with a sense of righteousness). Both do not have an embedded motivation to inspire lasting transformation. Humour, however, whatever form it takes, has the power to strip us naked of all our self-protective layers that lead to the practice of keeping up appearances.³⁷

³³ Moyo, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Social Justice.”

³⁴ One of the times when Fulata used ‘SARS’ in response to the question about her well-being is when she was attending a Council of World Mission-World Council of Churches’ joint meeting in Malaysia in 2006. SARS medically stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and therefore, her audience wondered if she had received medical care, but she humorously used it to stand for Severe Absence of Romance and Sex.

³⁵ Fulata Lusungu Moyo interviewed by the author, 4 July 2022.

³⁶ *Wikipedia*, 2022. “Black Comedy.” Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_comedy (Accessed 6 July 2022).

³⁷ Moyo, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Justice,” Forthcoming.

Thus, in another example of how she humorously applies this approach, in her article entitled “Child Marriage, the Untold Story of My Mother and the Church in Africa - A Feminist Ethics of *Ubuntu*,”³⁸ she discusses the biblical narrative found in John 8:1-11 - where the woman is accused and exposed while the male perpetrator is protected and made invisible. She states that:

I often wonder what the scribes and Pharisees that brought this woman for Jesus to judge meant when they argued: “Teacher, this woman was caught in *the very act of committing adultery...*” - but they brought *only* the woman and not the lover? Were they referring to adultery or masturbation? If it were masturbation, it would be understandable to argue that she was caught in the *very act*, but if it was adultery then where was, most likely, the man that she was ‘adulterating’ with?³⁹

Her use of humour in this way to interrogate this passage works. It disarms the reader and forces us to look more critically at the issue of moral leaders blaming the woman (sexism) while protecting her male lover (*kyriarchy*). In this way she uses humour as a liberative theological tool by employing it to protest and defy sexism and *kyriarchy* and at the same time provide a preferential option for the oppressed (accused woman) in the passage. On a less humorous note, we now turn to her use of story-telling as a method for her theological contribution.

Storytelling

A scholarly perspective to story-telling is offered by scholars like Brené Brown, who states that “stories are data with a soul” to argue for qualitative research that takes seriously the task of developing “theories based on people’s lived experiences.”⁴⁰ Circle Theologian Sarojini Nadar affirms this position in describing ‘narrative knowing’ as a distinctive feature in African feminist epistemology and research values” (in her article

³⁸ Moyo, “Child Marriage, the Untold Story of My Mother and the Church in Africa.” Forthcoming.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Brown, Brené. “Research.”, October 30, 2021. <https://brenbrown.com/the-research/#:~:text=Stories%20are%20data%20with%20a,proving%20or%20disproving%20existing%20theories>

entitled “Stories are Data with Soul’: Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology”) ⁴¹

Fulata used storytelling in her personal life as well as in her writing. She shares this in, for example, her parenting workshop book, “Parenting, a Journey of Love.” ⁴² In the book, she describes her personal use of the medium in the past as follows:

My own three sons have experienced family life with both their parents and also with me, as their lone parent, since their father died in 1999, when they were aged 4, 8 and 13. Solomon was a good, available father, with special responsibility for the disciplining of the children. I was the less available mother. I tried to compensate for my absences from home by emphasising family bonding times around the fire in the evenings, enriched by story-telling. ⁴³

To demonstrate her affinity to storytelling, Fulata included in the workbook cited above six stories (“Re-Telling the Jairus Story,” ⁴⁴ “The Singing Fish,” ⁴⁵ “Nambewe and Namilanzi Talk,” ⁴⁶ “Linda and her Parents,” ⁴⁷ “Siyani’s Story,” ⁴⁸ “Where do Babies Come From?”). ⁴⁹ The stories were included to aid readers and/or workshop participants to reflect on key themes under discussion; ⁵⁰ to facilitate engagement through two-way (responsive) exercises; ⁵¹ as well as to facilitate deeper discussion.

These aims seem to strengthen the position held by both Brené Brown and Sarojini Nadar that argue for treating stories seriously as part of theory and narrative knowing (the use of the knowledge transmitted through

⁴¹ Nadar, Sarojini, “Stories are data with Soul” – lessons from black feminist epistemology, *Agenda* 28 no. 1 (2014), 18-28.

DOI:10.1080/10130950.2014.871838

⁴² Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2015. “Parenting: A Journey of Love.” *Called to Care*, no. 10. Oxford: Strategies for Hope Trust.

⁴³ Moyo, “Parenting”, 7.

⁴⁴ Moyo, “Parenting”, 26.

⁴⁵ Moyo, “Parenting”, 28.

⁴⁶ Moyo, “Parenting”, 30.

⁴⁷ Moyo, “Parenting”, 32.

⁴⁸ Moyo, “Parenting”, 48.

⁴⁹ Moyo, “Parenting”, 50.

⁵⁰ Moyo, “Parenting”, 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

story-telling that “provide a critique to the limitations of conventional academic ways of knowing.”)⁵² Storytelling not only provides a critique of conventional abstract ways of knowing, but it also affirms other pedagogical ways of knowing that focus on relationship and experience. These include the concept of the *Imago Dei*, which affirms that “all persons are created in the image of God and therefore possess inherent human dignity, freedom to commune with others and God and are subsequently capable of knowing themselves.”⁵³

Another motif is the preferential option for the poor, excluded, and marginalized. Liberation theologians assert that “God is not a neutral God but a thoroughly biased God who was (*and is still*) always taking the side of the oppressed, of the weak, and of the exploited, of the hungry, homeless and of the scum of society.”⁵⁴ Thus, storytelling enables the co-empowerment of the marginalized to challenge oppressive norms, pursue justice, and express themselves, affirming the dignity of all God’s image-bearers and privileging their voices and contributions. Having made these conceptual considerations, we now turn to discern how through these mediums, among others, Fulata’s spirituality is shaped by her theological (methods), cultural and gender position.

A Woman Singularly Blamed and Judged for Adultery? Where is the Man?

Fulata tells of a story of her joint session with her friend Professor Sarojini Nadar at one of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community and Social Activism (PACSA) gender training sessions in 2006 for the PACSA stakeholders, most of whom were male clergy. Nadar and Fulata chose to use the John 8:1-11 story so as to raise these leaders’ awareness around

⁵² Nadar, “Stories are data with Soul”, 18.

⁵³ See Phiri, Lilly, 2013. “Born This Way” - A Gendered Perspective on the Intersectionality Between Same-sex Orientation and the *Imago Dei*: A Case Study of Men Who Love Other Men in Lusaka – Zambia.” Master’s thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal, 18.

⁵⁴ Maimela, Simon, 1998 (118) in Buffel, Olehile, “Preferential Option for the Poor in the Current Context of Poverty in South Africa: Doing Liberation Theology in the Footsteps of Simon Maimela,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010), 100.

gender injustice regarding leadership, participation, and church discipline. They chose to retell this story in their own words in a conversation between the two of them. When Nadar asked Fulata to start this narrative, to the shock of both Nadar and the participants, Fulata started by saying the following: “One morning, as Jesus was still trying to recover after a previous day’s hot draining encounter with the chief priests and Pharisees, the Sadducees and Pharisees brought to Him a woman that was caught in the very act of masturbating...” This alludes to the discussion above (3.1) where she interrogates readings of John 8:1-11. Thus, after using the Contextual Bible Study Methodology to unpack this story, the following discussion would not have unearthed as much of the examples of gender injustice as this one did. Contextualised within the South African context, the story of the HIV & Aids activist Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo who accused Former President Jacob Zuma of rape⁵⁵, embodied the discussion. It brought out the following critical issues that were later developed into advocacy for gender justice:

- How do abusive men decipher a woman’s body language?
- How is consensus in sexuality achieved and communicated?
- Women’s dressing and the language of sexuality.
- De-socialisation of toxic masculinities and femininities for gender justice.⁵⁶

“Swinging My Bottom in Hip-star Jeans”: Women’s Dressing, Masculinities, and Femininities

Besides humour and storytelling, Fulata encourages spiritual reflection on themes that include: justice, dignity, care, hope, joy, love, and sexuality using imagery. In her years as a faculty member of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College, she drew on the trendy fashion of *hip-star* trousers to provoke

⁵⁵ See Thamm, Marianne, 2016. “‘Khwezi’, the Woman who Accused Jacob Zuma of Rape, Dies.” The Guardian. [online]. Available online: <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/10/khwezi-woman-accused-jacob-zuma-south-african-president-aids-activist-fezekile-ntsukela-kuzwayo> (Accessed 24 August 2022).

⁵⁶ Moyo, Fulata Lusungu 2022. Personal correspondence with the author.

among her students a conversation about women's dressing, masculinities, and femininities.⁵⁷ She dressed herself in one of these for her third-year theology class after overhearing her theology students arguing on the previous day that "women's provocative dressing is aimed at wooing men for sex".⁵⁸ She used her power to influence one culturally and religiously difficult conversation: the misconception that women's dressings and bodies are aimed at attracting men for sex.⁵⁹ Dressed in her *hip-star*, she asked the class: "Of all the male students, faculty members, administrators, cooks, and cleaners, who am I inviting by my wearing this hip-star? Would it not be easier and safer for me to just approach that particular Prince Charming that makes my heart skip a beat?"⁶⁰ The discussion that followed became part of the public theological engagement that critiqued the objectification (and commodification)⁶¹ of women's and girls' bodies which so often leads to gender-based violence and abuse.⁶²

The objectification of women and children by men also harms men by entrenching in perpetrators harmful masculinities that rely on dominance and control; that is, it establishes in them the attributes that dehumanise men by reducing them to their base instincts as if they had no human dignity as *imago Dei*. Meanwhile, women and children are dehumanised through violence, manipulation, and exploitation. From a spiritual perspective, the dehumanisation of women, children, and men through sexual objectification is unjust and therefore sinful as this attacks their dignity as God's image bearers.

Furthermore, from a theological perspective, she explains that gender-based violence is based on a broader misconception of the role of women and girls. The misconception is sustained by interpreting texts such as Ephesians 5: 22-26⁶³ through the lens of power and domination based on

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ For Fulata Moyo's views on the commodification of women, see, for example, *The Carter Center: Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope*. No date. "Human Rights Defender: Fulata Moyo." https://www.cartercenter.org/peace/human_rights/defenders/defenders/fulata-moyo.html

⁶² Moyo, Fulata Lusungu 2022. Personal correspondence with the author.

⁶³ "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of

an understanding of God as “an imperialist patriarch and enslaver. A god who commanded total submission of wives to husbands, and commanded husbands to love their wives like an enslaver loves his human property.”⁶⁴ In contrast to this misconception, her response is the centering of *transformative masculinities and femininities* theologies that advocate for understanding human sexuality as a gift from God based on mutuality that can enrich consenting adults’ lives holistically. As such, her views can be summed up in the following quote taken from her poem entitled, “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” She states that,

*Yes, sexual and gender-based violence is an injustice!
The seed to HIV, an incubator for AIDS
It is about the abuse of power, not so much about sex.
Sex is about mutuality and being-at-one-moment,
a beautiful gift from God.*⁶⁵

What Do You Call a Woman Who 24-7 Knows Where Her Husband Is? A Widow

Finally, returning to the theme of widowhood and its impact on Fulata’s spirituality and theology, her view is to call on church communities to acknowledge the impact on widows of the patriarchal norms in societies like the Ngoni-Tumbuka society highlighted above. Fulata tells a story of turning her own struggle by making sense of her early widowhood and turning it to be part of her advocacy for the meaningful accompaniment of those grieving their losses. Many women and men had lost their

which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.” (NRSV)

⁶⁴ Moyo, Fulata L. “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” In *That All May Live! Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge*, BiAS 30, Era 7, 55.

⁶⁵ Moyo, Fulata L. “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” In *That All May Live! Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge*, BiAS 30, Era 7, 47.

spouses to death through different causes. She used every possible platform to help accompany others as an important part of her own healing. So, when she was invited to share a word of encouragement by the Zomba Baptist Church in 2000, she started with a joke: “What do you call a woman who 24-7 knows where her husband is?” Different responses came from the congregants, including ‘a stalker; an investigator; a detective...’ With a humorous smile, she answered: “a widow, she knows 24-7 where the remains of her husband are. If she is a Christian, then she also knows where her husband is eternally!” Then she shared about her own struggles as a widow, raising the questions of people with good intentions that instead of spending time to listen to what the bereaved are struggling with, assume that they know what is needed. Therefore, they end up bringing words of encouragement that often lack relevance and present an image of God that is less loving and compassionate – thus hurting the already bereaved member even more.⁶⁶ In the article “Widowhood and Desperation for Food: Retelling Ruth in the Context of Human Trafficking!” she highlights this point by stating that:

For many women, especially in the global south, widowhood is not just the death of a spouse but also the degeneration to desperation. The realities of unjust global economic systems deprive the majority while unjustly rewarding the privileged few.⁶⁷

Furthermore, it is not uncommon among the Ngoni in Malawi to encounter a widow that will mourn at a funeral for both the (a) loss of a beloved husband and (b) the grief at “the utter desperation for survival that this departure entails for her, her children and other dependents.”⁶⁸ Her response to this situation (and others like it) is a call for the church and church members to revisit and reflect on the book of Ruth which

⁶⁶ See Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2006. “Navigating Experiences of Healing: A Narrative Theology of Eschatological Hope as Healing.” In Isabel Phiri & Sarojini Nadar (Eds.), *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 243-257.

⁶⁷ Moyo, Fulata L. 2010. “Widowhood and Desperation for Food: Retelling Ruth in the Context of Human Trafficking!” A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches. http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/images/women_campaign/Bible%2520Study%2520on%2520Ruth%25203.pdf (Accessed 25 February, 2023). <http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources-dov/campaigns/40-days-to-end-violence-against-women.html>; <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>, (Accessed 22 July, 2022).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

addresses widowhood desperation. For instance, the book describes Naomi and Ruth as “two desperate, dispossessed widows who had to glean for food.”⁶⁹ And as “sonless widows, they had no means of reclaiming ‘their’ land. They have each other, but without a man, this solidarity is not enough for their survival.” For Ruth and Naomi, their solution befitting their context was Ruth’s marriage to Boaz. Fulata suggests, therefore, that today’s Christian readers can reflect on their contextual realities to address contextual challenges impacting widows with questions like:

- How do we challenge the transformation of social systems that have unjustly subjected widows to desperation where sometimes the commoditization of their bodies for food is the only viable option?
- How can we prophetically challenge socio-economic systems that keep on making widows vulnerable?
- As a community of women and men, how can we ensure that we have kind-hearted and un-abusive Boaz’s that will work for gender and socio-economic justice for all?⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described and discussed Fulata Lusungu Moyo’s contribution to theology and advocacy of gender justice. Fulata’s role as part of the generation of the founding mothers of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and her contribution as a feminist ethicist of ubuntu has impacted gender justice advocacy for over three decades. She has positioned herself as a critical voice of authority in women’s African theologies by integrating systematics and feminist theologies with activism and advocacy. Her unique perspective weaves together themes and insights from her Christian spirituality and the Ngoni-Tumbuka cultural heritage, both of which inform her use of humour and storytelling as social justice tools. Through describing and analysing her work, this chapter has aimed to offer a positive argument for the recognition, within the Circle and beyond, of Fulata’s key achievement of bringing to life a Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians’ liberation perspective.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 1-2.

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