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Negotiating Love, Culture and Patriarchy: Women's Perspectives on Polygamy in Uthando Nes'thembu Season 1

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Article

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Abstract

Polygamy, and more specifically polygyny, remains one of the most contested forms of marriage in contemporary South Africa. While considerable scholarly and public attention has been directed towards the cultural legitimacy, legality and patriarchal character of polygamous marriage, less attention has been given to how women themselves negotiate, interpret and make meaning of their positions within such unions. This article critically examines the women's perspectives on polygamy as represented in Season 1 of the South African reality television programme Uthando Nes'thembu. The programme follows the life of the businessman Musa Mseleku and his four wives, MaCele, MaYeni, MaKhumalo, and MaNgwabe. It provides an unusually intimate mediated representation of a contemporary Zulu polygamous household. Informed by qualitative textual and thematic analysis of the eight episodes of Season 1, the article examines women's perspectives through the following interconnected themes: acceptance and negotiation of polygamy; jealousy, competition and sisterhood; reproductive expectations and childlessness; economic agency and dependence; and women's negotiation of patriarchal authority. Media framing theory and feminist perspectives on gender and power provide the analytical framework. The article argues that the women's perspectives in *Uthando Nes'thembu* are neither uniformly submissive nor straightforwardly emancipatory. Instead, they reveal complex forms of accommodation, resistance, negotiation and agency.

1. Introduction

Polygamy is described as the culture of marrying more than one spouse. This could be practised by men (polygyny) which is common in some cultures, and women (polyandry) which is rare but exist some cultures like Mormons (Diffin, 2010; Mbatha, 2011; Moosa, 2009; Mswela, 2009; Mtambo, 2019). Polygamy in Africa is an ancient tradition or culture for the people of the land that has existed long before the arrival of white missionaries or colonisation, which preached the gospel of Christianity with monogamy central to their beliefs (Mann, 1994:169). Those who chose Christianity and devoted themselves to this religion had no choice but to divorce all their other wives and remain with only one (Diffin, 2010). Nwoye (2007:384) argues that denouncing polygamy was one of the approaches used by colonisers to force Africans to dump their rule of custom and adopt the rule of European law as enforced in colonies – from polytheism to monotheism and from polygamy to monogamy. However, it is worth noting that polygamy was more of a 'privilege and not a norm', and therefore dependent on the status of a husband (Moller & Welch, 1985). As the days have gone by, the practice has diminished in many countries regardless of religious convictions. On this paper, we follow the life of the polygamist, Musa Mseleku, who lay bare his life with his family on television. Therefore, when Uthando Nes'thembu premiered in 2017 there were divided opinions about polygamy, with some defending the lifestyle of Musa Mseleku and others bemoaning the depression and psychological burden that comes with this ancient practice, especially when it comes to the wives and children. The purpose of the study is to examine the women's perspectives on polygamy as represented in Season 1 of the South African reality television programme *Uthando Nes'thembu*. Scholars such as Zungu (2019a; Zungu (2019b) had focussed on the commodification of women and violence, whereas Baloyi (2013) focussed on polygamy

and Christianity. Little attention has been given in investigating how women themselves negotiate, interpret and make meaning of their positions within such unions as depicted in a television programme. This is where culture and polygamy meets – and this show was the first of its kind in South Africa which left indelible experiences to many people who were not familiar with polygamy. Among many things, the paper aims at answering the following questions:

- How are Mseleku's wives framed on the show and their contribution to the family?
- How do the wives navigate the polygamous setting and culture and having voice in marriage?
- How are women portrayed in relation to the competition and jealousy, childlessness, emotional support to the husband?
- What's wives' response or stance when it comes to polygamy and patriarchy?

2. Polygamy and the South African Context

According to Zwane and Gumede (2026) Africans pride themselves for remain true to their values and traditions although some have been diluted by the western influences. Some of these influences could be attributed to the colonisation and popular culture as a result of television and social media. In South Africa Christianity is a dominant religion and its influence is huge, and therefore cultural practices like polygamy have been denounced (Zwane & Gumede, 2026; Baloyi, 2013). In essence, the dominant religion promoted 'a one-man, one-wife' policy for those who converted into Christianity encouraging monogamy. This was not an easy solution as it resulted in dismemberment of families after the converted had to abandon some of their wives and children to remain true to the religion. Despite of all the transition in relation to the religion and cultural beliefs, there are now television programmes that showcase the life of polygamy – which garnered less publicity in the past. Gumede (2022) wrote that the emergence of television shows like Sister Wives in America (United States) may have been a precursor to South African shows like Uthando Nes'thembu, The Gumbis, Isencane Lengane, Izingane Zes'thembu, and Mnakwethu. This may be as a result of cultural imperialism and the influence that Western programmes have on African content.

However, prior to these shows in South Africa, the debate about polygamy and its relevance peaked a bit when Jacob Zuma ascended to the Presidential office in 2009, creating a new phenomenon of four first ladies (Davies-Laubscher, 2014; Geertsema-Sligh, 2015). According to Geertsema-Sligh (2015), Zuma's polygamy and promiscuity gained media attention, and this created different viewpoints, as some people supported him saying it was his culture, while others stated that it was an obsolete custom and not fit for a president of a country. Gender activists, Geertsema-Sligh continues, were more critical of his polygamous relationships, as during his rape trial he admitted that he had unprotected sex with his rape accuser, Fezekile 'Khwezi' Kuzwayo. He went on to have children with his other wife Nompumelelo Ntuli and a 'love child' (i.e. out of wedlock) with Sonono Khoza.

Getting back to the discussion about polygamy and television, Zwane and Gumede (2026:2) argue that these television shows have had a huge impact in reviving the topic of polygamy. The framing of the

shows begs the questions about the representation of women, treatment and whether they have a voice on the family setup. For example, this paper investigates how the wives of Mseleku are represented when they are childless, accepting polygamy, sisterhood, economic participation, competition among each other etc.

Polygamy is a cultural practice is forever under scrutiny; and those who practise it are quizzed on how they strike a balance between love and emphasizing gender equality. As polygamy is practised by a man in the context of Uthando Nes'thembu, the question about how much autonomy do the wives have to make their decisions on whether to accept another wife or take any of the decisions that are commonly a researve for the husband.

3. Women and Power in Polygynous Relationships

Polygamy as a cultural practice has been widely viewed as a tool of patriarchy that keep women (wives) subjugated under the heavy-handed laws of their husband. However, others have debated and proposed that there may be instances where women in polygamy have power. As early as the 1970s, Schlegel (1977) had argued that polygynous women do have power in their relationships. As cited in Lundeen (1996:73), Schlegel contends that, "From my point of view, the status of men and women within the dimension of power derives from their ability to control their own persons and activities and the person and activities of others." Schlegel continued to argue that even in stratified societies, male dominance was somehow regulated and that permitted women to gain some measure of autonomy. In some rare instances, the senior wife may suggest to the husband to marry another wife to assist her with the house chores (especially if she is older). In some instances, sororate polygamy happens where the wife proposes to her husband to marry her sister to avoid a situation where a stranger is brought to her life if the husband marries someone else (Boonzaaier & Hartman, 1988; Ngidi, 2012). However, some would still regard this as an oppression because it would still benefit the man somehow, as the husband decide whether he wants to take another wife or not.

To a certain extent, polygamy may be a solution in combining resources as a household to come up with a formidable skills set, talent and support. As Gumede (2022) note that, two of Mseleku's wives and some of the kids are involved in the running of the hospitality business (BnB). This proves that marriage may not only be about personal relationships but also an economic institution. Women may gain access to economic support, farmland, housing, and social protection that might otherwise be unavailable to them. Research on African family structures notes that polygamous households have historically functioned as units of economic cooperation, with wives contributing to and benefiting from shared household production (Diffin, 2010). As Gumede (2022) noted, Mseleku has ensured that his wives have houses, but still give them autonomy for interior designing of their houses – and he pays. So, to a certain extent, financial security of many women is guaranteed as long the husband continues to provide. This is despite them having income based on their occupation.

Although not all women in the polygamous marriage setup may enjoy the respect that their husband has, but usually the senior wife (first) in many communities would enjoy this respect. Madhavan (2002) as cited by Bove and Valeggia (2009: 21) argued that

Women's ability to negotiate social relationships within this framework and vis-a` -vis their co-wives is therefore crucial to their well-being and to that of their children. First wives, in principle, enjoy social respect, agency as 'household manager,' as well as a measure of freedom from a husband who may display preferential attention to more junior co-wives

According to Solanke et al (2018:175) on their study about polygamy and resources for empowerment in west Africa, found that the access to resources and empowerment was minimal as women and children from polygamous marriages still scramble for resources. Access to these resources, Solanke et al (2018) would mean elevation of women's socio-economic opportunities, widens their world views and economic motivations. This in turn, would help women make meaningful contributions to the economy and their families (McCauley, Robey, Blanc, & Geller 1994; Pong 1995; Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton & Bird 2009).

Mbatha (2011) in her study found that women experience polygamy differently and therefore different cultures, religions and households may present various experiences for them. In some instances, they become victims of cultural, religious or family settings. The women studied by Mbatha (2011) responded differently to their situations; some chose to stay in relationships, but other walked out. Hendricks (2004) on her dissertation recorded those Muslim women who partook in her study highlighted power as a central issue in polygamous marriage. Women reported feelings associated with rejection, jealousy, loss of intimacy, diminished security and emotional pain. Although Hendricks's participants were Muslim women, the findings provide a nuanced framework for understanding how women may interpret the arrival of another wife as a transformation of the marital relationship.

The question of agency or exercise free will linger in many minds, especially feminists when it comes to polygamy that is commonly viewed as oppressive to women. Uthando Nes'thembu presents a dynamic opportunity to problematise this cultural practice which is 'usually' practised by illiterate men and women.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Media Framing Theory

This study is foregrounded on the Media Framing Theory. As conceptualised by Erving Goffman (1974), the theory is premised on the fact that the media has a propensity to carefully choose how something is presented to the audiences – these may be the viewers (for television), listeners and readers for print media. According to Van Gorp (2007) media framing is a way in which media practitioners shape news content within a particular frame of reference, with audiences adopting these frames and viewing the world in the way media practitioners do. Scholars of the framing theory postulate that the way content is

presented to the audience influences the choices that people make and how they process that information (Arowolo 2017; Van Gorp 2007). For example, the way polygamy is portrayed in shows such as Mnakwethu and Uthando Nes'thembu is dependent on how the producers of the show frame it, and on what messages they are emphasising to paint a bigger picture of what they are trying to communicate. In as much the show is classified as a reality television, but it is a known secret that such shows have guidelines to show certain aspects of that life not everything. Some behaviours or lifestyles are omitted, whereas others are added "for good taste". The programme is presented and framed through the daily activities of the Mseleku households. Among other things, houses, family meetings, children, romantic relationships, disagreements, holidays, businesses and other common interactions in a household.

4.2 Feminist Theory

Feminism is described as a movement that advocates for gender equality, as the effects of patriarchy and sexism remain dominant in the world (Goredema, 2010; Ossome, 2011). Scholars of feminism all agree that there are many waves of feminism over the years in different corners of the world – which is informed by the challenges that trouble women of that country or region (Barret, 1992; Goredema, 2010). For example, the scales of power are never equal in relationships or marriages owing to the patriarchal nature of societies. This is not only the case in the so-called third world countries, but first world countries experience similar patterns too. Gender is not simply a biological distinction but a social system through which expectations, roles, and authority are organised.

According to Ossome (2011:22), the media has so much power in relation to the representation of women or gender in general. Ossome argues that the media has the power to marginalise and liberate dependening on how they frame gender representations. As early as 1990s, Barret (1992) had written about how the media had been a conduit of stereotypical representation, and feminist scholars had started to analyse words and texts as opposed to just analysing things. Bosch (2011) contends that the media constitutes and constructs social realities, meaning, and power all over the world, especially in the developing states – and the media platforms become sites for political struggle.

Unlike elsewhere in the world, for African women, feminism is predicated on different eras of struggles; these are pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. However, these are not the same as freedom was realised in different times in many of these countries – and therefore, even within the continent the progress in achieving gender equality through feminism is not the same (Goredema, 2010:35). Furthermore, culture plays a huge role in the success or failure of implementing gender equality. Hooks (1994) advocated for feminists to acquaint themselves with people's cultures to devise better strategies to educate people about feminism. Goredema (2010) notes that in contrast to the popular believe, African culture has not always been oppressive to women. She acknowledged that there are a few ways where women were elevated to higher statuses. For examples, there are rituals that could only be performed by women like rain making by the Balobedu Rain Queen Modjadji. However, questions remain prevalent about the role of women and their treatment in marriages. Feminism theory is relevant in the context as we try to understand the agency of women in polygamous marriages. In relation to the show,

we follow the actions and behaviours of Mseleku's wives in their polygamous setup in relation to their liberty, agency, decision making, acceptance of polygamy, treatment of each other as sister wives, childlessness among other things.

5. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative interpretive research design based on textual analysis of Season 1 of Uthando Nes'thembu. The programme's first season consists of eight episodes. The season introduces Musa Mseleku and his four wives and provides viewers with an account of their domestic, economic and relational lives. The analysis focuses specifically on the representation of the four wives: MaCele, MaYeni, MaKhumalo and MaNgwabe. Rather than treating the women as a homogeneous group, the analysis examines their individual and collective positions. The study uses purposive textual sampling, with particular attention to scenes involving; discussions about polygamy; interactions between the wives; negotiations between the wives and Musa; reproductive expectations; discussions about children; economic activities; expressions of jealousy; family gatherings; decisions concerning social activities; representations of affection and sisterhood; and discussions concerning possible future wives. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring meanings and patterns. The approach is consistent with the understanding of qualitative content analysis as a systematic process through which textual material is coded and interpreted to identify meanings and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach enables the researcher to carefully analyse the episodes with a focus on the chosen themes. The analysis also draws on the author's earlier study of the programme, which analysed all eight episodes of Season 1 through qualitative content analysis and identified gender bias, economic participation, jealousy, societal expectations, promiscuity, relationships between wives, hardships and cultural framing as major themes (Gumede, 2022).

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1 Women's Acceptance of Polygamy

Women's acceptance of polygamy is not black and white because of complications that polygamous marriages present. Some accept it because are desperate for marriage, others because of societal expectations or family pressure, whereas others saw the need for their husband to have another wife – to also regulate promiscuity. Geertsema-Sligh (2015) wrote in her research paper that feminists are greatly concerned about gender equality or the lack thereof in a polygamous setup, whereby men can do as they please such as having more wives and more babies in the name of their culture, yet the wives are expected to remain faithful to just one man and do as he tells them. In line with this, and in penning Jacob Zuma's biography, Gordin (2008:27) wrote, 'Zuma likes women a great deal and he likes making babies; he is the proverbial family man. He is also an unabashed polygamist'. So, some women would reluctantly agree that their husband marry another one – even those who married into it usually do not like it if a husband takes another one. In episode 1, Mseleku admits that he met MaYeni first who did not initially agree to marry him when he articulated his desire to marry other women. MaYeni's family did not

approve of this, until he married MaCele, and eventually joined as a second wife (probably because love conquered despite her reservations about polygamy)

In the series, Mseleku's wives are quoted as saying:

MaNgwabe, 4th wife: "I love this guy, he is my king. I do not see myself living without him."

MaKhumalo, 3rd wife: "When he introduced us to each other, it was like we'd known each other for years. We became great friends with other sister wives, while I was still dating him."

Despite professing their love for Mseleku and being junior wives who joined in in the polygamous marriage, they had indicated that they would leave if Mseleku were to take other wives. One then imagined how MaCele, the first wife, must have felt when Mseleku introduced the other three wives who came after her.

MaYeni, 2nd wife is quoted as saying, 'Being in a polygamous marriage is not easy, but you have to get used to the fact that there are other people.' This statement indicates a compromise that the first wives or senior wives made to allow the husband to bring other wives who will take some of the resources and time that would ordinarily be theirs and end up sharing.

6.2 Politics of Childlessness

Mseleku on this season had professed his desire to have over 20 children of which is double what he currently has. He goes further to say, if the current wives fail to bear him 20 children he intends to marry more wives. According to Mbiti (1969:132), in Africa, people marry primarily for the purposes of having children. Mbiti states that in Africa, 'the supreme purpose of marriage is to bear children to build a family [hence] if there is not yet a child in the marriage people do not consider it to be a marriage'. Based on this understanding, children seem to complete a marriage. For those wives who are unable to bear children for various reasons would feel the pain. Sometimes the in-laws would hurl insults like barren or useless or someone who only knows how to eat. Bangajena (2023) found that the programme's representation of MaKhumalo constructs childlessness through emotional struggle and social stigma, while also showing how reality television can reproduce existing stereotypes about childless women. Season 1 of the programme shows us the pain that MaKhumalo is going through as she has not had any child despite medical intervention they have tried with Mseleku. MaKhumalo enunciate how much she wants to have her own child in the conversation she had with Mseleku:

It's easy for you to say that because you have children. I don't have a child. It's not easy because I keep asking myself, what am I living and working for. I also want to wake up and work for my children.

Although Mseleku is portrayed as a supportive towards MaKhumalo as they navigate the journey of trying to get a child, but the pain of not having her own child cuts deeper. Despite all this, MaKhumalo is raising Mpilwenhle (Mpilo) who is Mseleku's love child. Culturally, there is a custom of "ukufakwa esiswini" common in the Nguni tribes. This custom happens whereby the father would take a child he got

out of wedlock and give it to one of the wives or will take a child from one of the wives who may have more kids – and give the child to the wife with no kids (there are rituals and customs that are performed before this is done. Zwane (2024) argues that there are many cultural customs that have been carried from one generation to another, but some have faded. Some are misrepresented in the media for various reasons like expediency or lack of appreciation for it. Like the aforesaid is not as common as a practice, probably to the new dimensions and family structures.

6.3 Jealousy and Competition

Sabalele (2010) and Mavhina (2010) postulate that in polygamous marriages there is bound to be jealousy and pretence among the wives and children. This could be due to discrepancies in the properties they own, for example, or because the husband spends more time with one wife and not the other(s). the husband would then be expected to strike balance in the provision of resources, and time spent among other things to quash any possible jealous and envy. In episode four, Mseleku arranges for a family outing with his wives and children, which is something that could assist to strengthen the relationship between the wives. However, not everyone is on board, as MaYeni has a small baby and is reluctant to go on this family trip, but her husband who has booked everything will not take no for an answer. Mseleku saw the outing or the teambuilding exercise as an important tool to strengthen relations between wives.

However, from this outing is not clear whether Mseleku managed to achieve the goal of uniting them as diary chats and side conversations proves that some are irritated by each other's behaviours. Also, seemingly some would rather have time with their husband and kids instead of the "united nation".

'She is getting on my nerves. We might be waiting for Mbali (MaNgwabe) and she might be getting her extra things for herself while we think that she is getting the milk' – MaKhumalo. During the family vacation, MaNgwabe is filmed alone on her phone and not participating with other family members, and the following conversation is noted: 'When my phone rings, they stare at me, and I even struggle to continue with the conversation.' – MaNgwabe. It can therefore be concluded that although there may be differences between the wives as recorded above, jealous and competition in the Mseleku's household are not as hectic as it would be expected in a polygamous marriage.

6.4 Sisterhood as Agency

Despite the negligible differences between the wives emerging from competing for affections and other things but there shows unity in some respects and collaboration. Madhavan (2002) records that polygamous marriages may present a contrast of competition and collaboration among wives. In the show, wittingly or unwittingly the wives that work at the lodge collaborates in managing the family business for the survival and the growth of the family business. To a certain extent there is a spirit of reverence among them, referring each other as sisters as opposed to first names. In one of the episodes, the three wives had planned and executed a party for MaCele as Mseleku's senior wife – this demonstrates sisterhood and collegiality amongst the wives without the husband's lead.

In the same episode, MaCele says, ‘the arrival of the other wives did not change anything between my husband and I.’ This may be echoing the sisterhood that exist between the wives and how much collaboration could go a long way. Mseleku went on to say, ‘MaCele is lucky that she is celebrated while she’s still alive. What my wives have done will speak for us in the generations to come and it will always be remembered.’ According to Mavhina (2010), competition and opposition are common traits in polygamy, as all the wives want to be a favourite of their husband. They often become enemies and speak ill of their sister wives therefore, and this may cause anxiety for the husband who would likely be hoping for a united front. But on season 1 of the show, the differences seem moderate or negligible – but also having their own houses and other resources remote from each other may be a contributing factor. Often keeping the sister wives in the same vicinity may be irritating and cause unnecessary friction.

6.5 Economic Participation and Women's Independence

Wives are central to economic viability of families in traditional culture because they often do a great deal of the work, and they bear children who also contribute to a family’s pool’ (Altman & Ginat, 1996: 90). In episode one of Uthando Nes’thembu this point is emphasised, as the Mseleku wives not only wait for the support from their husband, but also work to supplement their income and stimulate the economy of the household. The four wives play different roles and contribute to the flourishing of the household economy through working. Two of the wives (MaCele and MaKhumalo) work in the family businesses and the other two (MaNgwabe and MaYeni) work in various organisations. From the episode, one of the wives is a health worker, a nurse and seldom shown at work. Two of the wives are involved in the administrative duties at Umdlalo Lodge, the family business, which may vary from making the bookings to organising events that are held at the lodge. They share the office space, which also leads them to be closer to each other. When defining their roles in the family business, Mseleku states that these two play a crucial role in growing the family business and the family’s household income. They do not just work for themselves but help grow this business which benefits everyone – including the wives who work elsewhere. For the other two who are not involved in the family business, they also play an important role through working for other entities, and thereby also contributing to the family’s financial affairs. In addition to their daily work, the wives have to take care of their homes, children and cook for their husband (depending on whose turn it is to have the husband on that day).

6.6 Patriarchal Authority and Women's Negotiation of Permission

Critics of polygamy bemoan that patriarchy perpetuates polygyny and male dominance, where women remain inferior (Zondi, 2007; Zungu, 2019a; Zungu, 2019b). Some of the incidents in the programme may suggest there is patriarchal authority. Although there is lot of modernity in the show – from women wearing pants, allowed to work among other things, but there is still issues whereby the husband dictates that the wives attend certain events and not others. On this programme, we see one of the wives denied attending a baby shower of her friend. In essence, women in many marriages – especially polygamous ones – they need a husband’s approval to do certain things whereas a man needs no

permission. MaNgwabe informed Mseleku that she needed to attend a friend's baby shower, and her request was followed by a question:

'A baby shower, for what? What will be happening there?' – Mseleku.

'We bring gifts for the mother-to-be like they did for me with Mawande and Zenande. It is a baby shower; we bring gifts for the expectant mother' – MaNgwabe.

'When is it?' – Mseleku.

'On the twenty-second' – MaNgwabe.

'You know what the problem is?' – Mseleku.

'No' – MaNgwabe.

'It will be at night?' – Mseleku.

'No, it is during the day' – MaNgwabe.

'Will alcohol be served there?' – Mseleku.

'Whoever chooses to drink, buys their own alcohol' – MaNgwabe.

This dialogue between Mseleku and MaNgwabe may be interpreted in various ways. Some may interpret this as Mseleku being a 'control freak', whereas others may interpret as a way of protection for the husband – you cannot protect what you cannot control. Some my say this was an honest party and MaNgwabe was informing Mseleku as courtesy not to seek permission.

6.7 Polygamy as cultural identity

Usually, for cultural marriages like polygamy, a woman would be expected to be a housewife – staying at home and raising children while the man goes out to fend for the family. The programme presents polygyny as an African cultural practice that can be maintained in a modern environment. The wives dress in contemporary clothing, work, participate in businesses and use modern technologies while maintaining a culturally recognisable marital structure. This challenges the assumption that polygamy necessarily represents an absence of modernity. Opponents of polygamy argue that patriarchy perpetuates polygamy and male dominance, where women remain inferior. They decry the reprehensible culture as men would usually hide behind it to marry many wives (Zondi, 2007; Zungu, 2019a; Geertsema-Sligh, 2015). The show demonstrates that regardless of educational statuses, polygamy could still be practised as part of the cultural identity. However, the question of how much voice women have in decision-making - including being agreeable to a polygamous marriage in these marriages remain a complex issue and a bitter pill for feminists.

6.8 Polygamy as negotiated companionship

Uthando Nes’thembu presents the wives as women who have developed relationships, emotional attachments and forms of solidarity within the marriage. The women are not simply forced into passive roles. They actively participate in making the family function through their involvement in the family business or being employed – not solely dependent on the husband. These three dimensions cannot easily be separated. The programme's significance lies precisely in this contradiction. This also shows that marriage or precisely polygamous marriage is complex – or not black and white.

6.9 Reality Television and the Construction of the Wife's Perspective

The scholars of framing theory like Entman (1993), Goffman (1974) or Stuart Hall (1997) all agree that the portrayal or the end product of television productions is not raw depiction of reality. Reality television like Uthando Nes’thembu, creates impressions that what audiences see on the screens is reality yet relying of selection, editing, sequencing, camera placement and narrative construction. In Uthando Nes’thembu, the wives' perspectives are therefore significant not only because of what they say, but also because of how the programme positions them. Hall (1997) contends that representation is dependent on what the producers want to convey, and how they want to convey it. In essence, the programme presents the wives’ perspectives on the way they had agreed to portray them – in a moderated way. Mseleku as the husband seem to lead the family. He is the one who introduce the wives – which positions him as the voice of authority although they also get a chance to articulate their perspectives through diary recording and recorded interaction. The programme's representation of the wives can therefore be interpreted as polyphonic: different women articulate different experiences of the same institution.

7. Conclusion

The article focussed on the examination of women’s perspective of season 1 of Uthando Nes’thembu. In essence, the programme (season 1) showcases a complex women perspective and sometimes contradictory. Usually from a feminist perspective, polygamy is as oppressive as they come, but the portrayal of women roles here and the interaction with the husband, their sister wives and carrying of certain duties presents a complex picture that shows that polygamy cannot be understood as either straightforward expression of African culture or an uncomplicated form of women oppression. MaCele as the first wife seem to have fully accepted polygamy unlike MaNgwabe and MaKhumalo who demonstrate that although they joined a polygamous family but are not content with Mseleku marrying other women after them – of which must have been what MaCele and MaYeni felt. Therefore, the women perspective on Uthando Nes’thembu should be understood from the concept of negotiated agency – the wives are neither powerless victims nor completely autonomous subjects. Mseleku’s desire to have 20 kids may exact pressure to the wives as career women, but more so for MaKhumalo who is struggling to conceive. The article shifted the focus from focusing on the men as polygamists but rather analyse the women perspective as portrayed on this television programme. This in essence present a complex navigation of the polygamy as a lifestyle and a cultural practice. It also shows that how polygamy is

experienced as whether oppressive or liberating is dependent on those involved (man and women), but also the personal circumstances of those involved matter. For example, financial means from Mseleku helps to alleviate a potential stress that could come from financial need. The programme also shows that there are certain decisions that be taken by women in the family, but some decisions need the approval of the man – which complicates the question of women autonomy or as partners in a marriage. This is very clear that there is no partnership here, but the man has the final say as much as women could have a final say how on the house décor or what will be eaten. This confirms the inequality in this marriage setup. Also, the senior wife (first wife) has a prominent voice more than other three wives. Basically, inequality is not only between a man and a woman, but among wives as well. For example, MaCele as the first wife has authority to allow Mseleku to marry another wife (5th) culturally regardless of whether others disapproval. Therefore, the program showcased a holistic picture of what is like to be in a polygamous relationship – at least from the Mseleku household.

Declarations

Ethics Declaration

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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Data Availability

The data is derived from the eight episodes of Uthando Nes'thembu, season 1. This is a Mzansi Magic production that could be streamed on DStv. https://dstv.stream/#/catchup/program/1048413

Author Contribution

Only Sandile Gumede (my self) wrote this article.

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