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SHWELE BAWO!

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Type of work: Play
Type of plot: Family Drama/Social Criticism
Time of plot: Post-apartheid South Africa
Locale: South Africa
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PRINCIPAL CHARACTER

Dikeledi, still very attractive in her 30s had met Solly her husband at 16, got pregnant for him at 17 and officially wedded him at 19. She has three children for Solly: Bontle, an early teen daughter, Lesego and Kgotso her junior brothers. Dikeledi's celebrated marriage of the century, courtesy of Solly's questionable riches, however, is short-lived in fulfillment. Solly is engaged in wanton "axe-lending and axe-borrowing" - an expression used in the play for outlandish promiscuity, the types that are performed in Dikeledi's presence and that on her matrimonial bed. While tradition permits and accommodates Solly's excesses, Dikeledi's slightest attempt at complaining is rewarded with beastly battering. But the climax of her ordeal is not only when Solly rapes and murders

some babies; it is the repeated rape sessions of their daughter Bontle that gets Dikeledi to intolerable heights. She begins to nurse murder plans for Solly, but by coincidence he gets killed during a barroom brawl. Dikeledi is the prime suspect in her husband's death and she gets a life-sentence, as well as denial of her appeal. By the time the drama starts, she is already two years in jail but bubbling with undeterred ambition to circumvent South Africa's justice system and come out to enjoy her freedom at last. In a typical South African style, she is about the only character in *Shwele Bawo!* translated "Grave Injustice", who gets in and out of several roles in re-enacting the nightmarish long flashback that chronicles her marital woes.

THE PLAY

Shwele Bawo! opens in the prison cell. Dikeledi is pushed in and the door is banged before her judgment or sentence is heard pronounced. The cell is to remain the sole setting of the play. The play is a review or reflection of Dikeledi's life from when she met Solly at 16 to her imprisonment on the charges of Solly's murder.

The following constitutes the dramatized episodes in the play:

- ▶ Her youthful exuberance or infatuation in throwing caution to the wind on one hand; and Solly's activation of stupendous wealth to spoil her on another, dramatize her inescapable entrapment in a regrettable marriage. Tradition—still holding sway in a new South Africa, bequeaths unparallel privileges to men and seeks to overprotect them even against odious and contemptible deeds of character, but requires women to be 'silent' before men irrespective of their tale-telling subjugation and hurts.
- ▶ Soul-searching scrutiny for her woes pits her against her parents who couldn't find a better name for her but Dikeledi, meaning "tears", which prophetically reconfigures her destiny in cyclic baths of tears. From her bedeviled experience, she is unsparing of other African parents who name their children *Matlakala* (rubbish), *Mosela-ntja* (dog's tail) for example, for the inextricable extension of the allegory of these horrible names in these persons.
- ▶ The play showcases sensationalism in journalism as against investigative and objective reporting, and indexically recommends "truth" as the lens through which reports should be editorialized.

- ▶ Relations come under her reprimand. Rakgadi (Solly's Aunt), Dikeledi's mother-in-law and her own grandmother, all receive no little thanks for skewed judgment from their patriarchal and matriarchal traditional prejudices in support of Solly against her. Their apparent deliberate hoarding of vital information from her, in marital orientation concludes on them as weird and conspiratorial in orchestrated sadism.
- ▶ One of "her dear sisters" a trusted family member whom Dikeledi might have shared her bitterness towards Solly's misdemeanor with turns around to give evidence to the police on Solly's murder and helped implicate Dikeledi and sealed pressed charges against her as the prime suspect. This colours her perception of nuclear relations with charcoal crookedness and poisonous venom.
- ▶ The retinue of Solly's women, (blacks, whites and coloured alike), their specialization or expertise in husband-snatching, fellow women's home-breaking, brandished and floundered beastliness in philandering, are detestably, brazenly and infamously accoutered in nauseating abhorrence. They are reminded that if Solly went cheaply in a barroom brawl, then their fate is similarly sealed by providence.
- ▶ The South African police who tend to cast blind eyes upon a rich man who is involved in criminal activities; or the society which will celebrate men with questionable riches and reward them with titles; and the justice system that functions with partiality between the haves and have not, rich and poor, popular and unpopular etc; receive rather serialized episodic enactments to the intent that positive change be re-negotiated in the true sense of South Africa's nascent democratic ideals.

ANALYSIS/CRITICAL CONTENT

Shwele Bawo! presents three major issues of South African concern particularly, then African and the world. They are **injustice**, **patriarchy** and **paradigm shift**.

The play glaringly dramatizes "a grave injustice" done to Dikeledi. She is not the murderer of Solly, her husband. She might have been pushed to the crescendo of harbouring murderous thoughts over a so-called father who was a notorious criminal who himself had killed many innocent persons including baby-victims of his bizarre rapes, was involved in a bar brawl that took his life: Dikeledi is

unjustly charged for a crime she did not commit. The grave injustice is sequenced in two perspectives. One, the law lacks or seems to lack tested jury in deciphering truth from error. Worse still, the justice system subverts its canons. For, whereas the South African justice system has provision for redress to be sought by the aggrieved up to the Supreme Court, in Dikeledi's case, even appeal is denied her. She is pushed into her cell and the door banged before her sentence is *pronounced*. This showcases a *pre-determined, pre-hearing or no-hearing sentence* and at quick glance, establishes injustice.

Modern as the society is and democratic as the new South Africa claims to be with a constitution, yet tradition is still wielding its whims especially against women in a segregated patriarchal abandon. Tradition glosses over moral aptitude, circumvents the constitution and the law, and that, in a democracy. How can tradition be so permissive of a man's reckless adultery, a man's murder of children after raping them, a man's incestuous affairs with his own daughter via rapes, yet custodians of tradition, namely, older women and chiefs, feign approval to unblameable dimensions towards Solly? He is given "reputable" titles for his monstrosities of atrocities? This greatly bothers the author of *Shwele Bawo!* Why does tradition seek to re-incarnate or re-invent apartheid via tradition against women this time?

There is also great concern about the next generation. The play solicits for quick and radical response to the challenges of crime, such as rape, murder waywardness, promiscuity, favouritism, injustice etc. *"Tell me ladies and gentlemen, if we protect the Sollys of this world, what kind of mothers are the Bontles going to be. What kind of fathers are the Lesegos and Kgotos going to be?"* By this poser, the play *Shwele Bawo!* wants the society to apply all the arsenal at its disposal to stem the tides of behaviour represented by the Sollys – the get rich quickly by any means, including murderous means, so that sanity, justice, moral aptness, Godly fear, might have been imbibed by the Bontles, Lesegos and Kgotos as a good foundation for future successful society. Other than that, there remains a bleak and uncertain future with an endless latitude and propensity for doom.

Journalistic practice without a regulating body to enforce gate-keeping tenets has allowed for abuses in the name of sensationalism. The fourth estate of the realm function of journalism now seems bastardized, and the people who were to be defended by the press are now "terrorized" by the press. *Shwele Bawo!* calls journalism to order, namely, investigative journalism. Objectivity and truth are advanced by the play-text as ideal observances in the practice of good journalism.

The play adopts creative devices which add to the effervescence of the script. The whole play acts like a long flashback of Dikeledi's pre-sentence life, and that, done in episodic sequences. This acts as a proof to all her claims or the evidence(s) that demand a verdict in the needed detour of South African society to sanity. The symbolism of the cell, (an entrapment) connotes the siege inherent in the system even after the bigger apartheid siege had been dealt with. The persistent voicing of the certainty of freedom by Dikeledi is reminiscent of Nelson Mandela's prison posture and his ultimate release into freedom. The fast-pace and sporadic rhythms of the dramatic enactment, the action-packed sequences occasioned by the metamorphosis of in and out flows from roles, all add to the very entertaining experience *Shwele Bawo!* engenders.

While *Shwele Bawo!* challenges the actress in its very demanding malleability in creative pundits, the philosophy behind the search for justice, relevance and reckoning, equips the play as a powerful feminist tool for social engineering and women empowerment.

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