

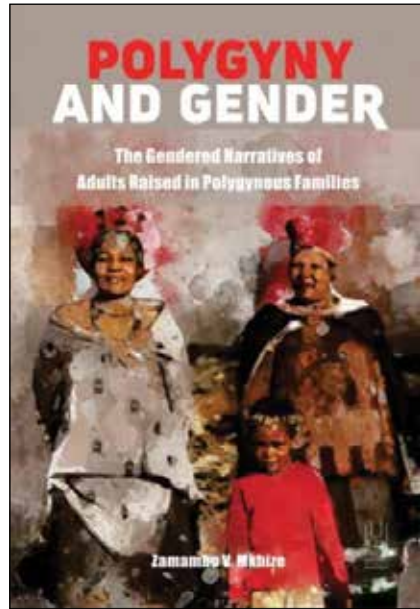
POLYGyny AND GENDER: THE GENDERED NARRATIVES OF ADULTS RAISED IN POLYGYNous FAMILIES

by ZAMAMBO V. MKHIZE

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WITH research focused on modern polygyny, Zulu culture and African feminism, Zamambo Mkhize is a lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town. Her book examines how gender identities of adults are formed while being raised in Zulu polygynous families in the Hammarsdale area of KwaZulu-Natal. To be exact, the book offers a lucid picture of how gender identity interlaces with other socio-political and cultural discourses such as various forms of freedom as well as customs and traditions.

The book sets out to address the lack of research on polygyny from gender and socio-cultural perspectives, especially in studying the experiences of adults raised in polygynous families. Mkhize consciously departs from Western theorisation of gender identity formed in nuclear families and seeks a novel framework to understand the formation of gendered narratives of both men and women. Through interviews some key questions discussed include how polygyny shapes gender identity and relations as well as the significance of the dynamic relationship among parents, co-parents, siblings and half-siblings. Mkhize looks at the life histories of nine women aged between 19 and 45 as well as eight men aged between 18 and 56 and asks how names could be weaponised in polygynous families, how gendered identities are formed while negotiating with individualism and patriarchal values, how adults redefine their identities as well as



the significance of religious discourse and emotional relations in polygynous families.

Importantly, rather than adopting quantitative research methods, which are often celebrated as a way to offer empirical and objective data, Mkhize opts for qualitative methodologies. In the introduction to the book, Mkhize confronts the criticisms of qualitative methodologies for ‘failing to produce adequately rational or unbiased knowledge’ and maintains that qualitative methods suit her research more because she focuses on capturing the ‘life experiences, held beliefs, feelings and world views’ of her participants (7).

While crediting Mkhize’s bravery in confronting the often-hierarchical understanding of quantitative and qualitative methods, what is more ground breaking about her book is a

high sense of self-reflexivity. Mkhize is aware of the significance of reflexive approaches in interviewing participants in academia. But to readers who are not familiar with the field, Mkhize employs clear language to outline the significance to them. Being a young, single, Zulu, Christian woman raised in a nuclear family, Mkhize is aware of her technical and emotional limitations in conducting interviews and narrating the life histories of the participants. Apart from employing an older research assistant to conduct the interviews, she is also aware that

I had to question whether my identity as a young, educated, feminist, Zulu, Christian woman would render me biased in any way and thus I returned to the data numerous times for further interrogation. My sincere perception is that my self-awareness, achieved through scrutiny of my multidimensional identity positionality, has aided me in producing work that has a high degree of integrity (9).

She is indeed very right as the book presents itself as a product of dialogic discussion of the interviewees and the interviewers rather than one-way observation and purely empirical research.

Importantly, it is with this methodology that Mkhize offers a precise and concise picture of understanding the unique landscape of feminism in South Africa in order to contextualise the narratives offered by the participants. She notes that ‘the different cultures in South Africa have impacted on women in different ways, and the right to practise one’s culture and the right to equality in direct conflict’ (55–6).

She specifically draws readers’ attention to the complexity of feminism in South Africa: ‘A truly South African feminism would offer a framework for understanding the unique cultural circumstances and realities that contribute to the construction of gender identity in polygynous families’ (56).

Complexity characterises the findings discussed in Mkhize’s book. Among them, the significance of religion in constructing gender roles is perhaps the most intriguing one. After interviewing participants on the importance of religion and its impact on current or future partners, Mkhize finds that

some of the women found comfort in their religion while others found confirmation of what it means to be a good Christian woman. Both men and women stated that their current or prospective partners must follow some sort of religion, even if it is not entirely like theirs, but their future partners could not be atheist (163).

She concludes that ‘religion and culture seemed to blend well in affirming traditional Zulu gender roles’ (163).

Mkhize’s book is a timely piece for a global audience. Its timeliness lies not only in offering detailed discussion and analysis of an often-stigmatised topic in a reflective manner but also proving the significance of employing qualitative methodologies. Rather than offering data that could sometimes overwhelm readers, Mkhize speaks to the heart of her readers with multidimensional and multifaceted life histories.

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