

# Zambia (Lesson 3)—Sister Wives! Talented Authors! Exploring Zambian Society Through Short Stories—An Amazing Journey!

(Level A2-B1-B2)

Whenever I visit a new place, I love exploring its literary landscapes as much as I enjoy discovering its physical aspects. Indeed, rivers, mountains and architecture do define a place and a people, but there is much more to that.

A well-written book about a place will take you one thousand miles ahead as far as understanding and appreciation of that place are concerned.

Hence, when I visited Zambia recently, I made sure to grab a few copies of books whether electronic or printed. I just bought what was available because I had no experience with Zambian literature. I have read number of brilliant Zimbabwean authors but I had no idea what to expect from Zambian writers.

After reading a series of disappointing stories riddled with spelling and grammar mistakes that I bought online, I was very happy to stumble upon ***Sister Wives & Other Short Stories***, at the David Livingstone Museum bookshop.

This anthology is a collection of 20 harrowing and thought-provoking short stories published in 2020 by Myaambo Writers Cooperative in Lusaka. The stories were part of their annual short story competition that mainly explored the themes of Gender Based Violence, Child Marriages and Child Abuse.

***Sister Wives*** is the winning title of this competition, followed by ***The House on Kudu Drive*** and ***Abweranso***. The other 17 short stories equally deserve to be in this anthology as each story sheds a different light on these scourges that affect each and every layer of society.

Reading ***Sister Wives & Other Short Stories*** is an emotional journey that will not leave you unscathed. It is a dive into a world of silence and taboos where traditional roles serve as a deadly trap.

Can the men, women and children escape this nightmare where everything seems to be set in stone?

## Sister Wives & Other Short Stories: A Collection of Unique and Refreshing Voices

Thanks to this anthology, I was able to discover a lot of talented writers on the Zambian literary scene. I was mesmerised by their talent and their ability to take on such a difficult subject matter with a lot of maturity.

Seasoned and award-winning authors such as [Henry Joe Sakala](#) and [Ingrid Nayame](#) mingled with upcoming writers such as Joe Nyirenda and Mwila Mubanga. I got lost in their worlds and marvelled at how they could create such diverse universes based on the same themes.

Though most of the stories were distressing to read, one could find ounces of humour and collective jubilation in ***Abweranso***, in which I also learnt about the Zambian heroic football team: **The Chipolopolo Boys**.

I was taken unawares by [Musenga L. Katongo](#) and his enthralling short story ***Redeeming Chilufya***, a very original take on sugar daddies and their exploitative relationships.

Otensia Kaping'a's astute observations sent me thinking in ***Laughter***. How can one weaponise this every day expression of joy and amusement?

Finally, Chindi Kapembwa's bone-chilling account of a young bride's aspirations in ***The Chief's New Wife*** left me with deep-seated sadness. I thought about possible real-life Lutandas and despair settled in my heart, forgetting that I had been reading a mere work of fiction.

In ***Sister Wives & Other short Stories***, the authors thoroughly explore all forms of abuse and no social stratum is spared. Mental torture is rampant in both women and men, chipping away at the victim's confidence and self-

esteem. What remains is a deep sense of shame as in **Chomba** and **Zathu** where psychological ill treatment is coupled with physical brutality.

Most of the times, the victims keep mum about the abuse and prefer to shoulder all the burden for fear of economic consequences.

*His brutality continued and she suffered in silence. She always thought about what people would say, how they would look at her, and she was scared of being a single mother. Her aunt was a single mother and Zathu was a witness to how much her aunt had suffered raising her two cousins. And she had heard a lot about how single mothers suffered. She did not want her child to grow up without a father. Therefore she decided to stay out of fear and for the sake of her child; but was it worth it? Like before, she told no one about the abuse in her home. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 226)*

Children are equally impacted. As a matter of fact, men become predators of young flesh in countless stories: **The Runners**, **Mandalena**, **Redeeming Chilufya** and **Deafening Silence**. Most of the times, these young girls are preyed on by their guardians, the people who are supposed to take care of them.

What is the root cause of all this?

## Sister Wives & Other Short Stories: An Unflinching View on Modern Zambian Society

Tradition became the main and obvious culprit as I turned the pages of **Sister Wives & Other Short Stories**. How could men, women and children be so well versed in their traditional roles to the extent of being stuck in them?

In this anthology, men are mostly portrayed as irresponsible breadwinners who drink away their hard-earned money. We have many examples of such men: Mr Chibwe in **Cheswa**, Buyangwe in **Zathu**, Mrs Simfukwe's late drunkard husband, Musonda and Hamdudu in **Deafening Silence**, just to mention a few.

The married men are also promiscuous and do not fear consequences. Dennis in **As I See It** is both a 'hopeless womaniser and a drunk'. His wife is patient to a fault and plays the role of the supportive wife as if she was competing to become a saint. She plays her role as the traditional caregiver very well. Thus she cleans him up after his drinking sprees!

This is how she describes her life:

*I never really could put a finger at what was wrong in my life. Since everyone focused on what I had, I tried hard to find comfort in that, but it was not good enough. I thought that I was not good enough. I thought that I was not being good enough to change Dennis. I wanted him to be a better man. I wanted to be the only person he loved, but then I suppose that a man can never be tamed or cured when it comes to the desire for multiple women.*

*I loathed the man he was on Fridays, when he would come home soaked in puke, beer and urine. His drinking mates would always deliver him home seeming as if they cared a lot about him and yet, at the same time mocking and making disparaging remarks about his careless drinking. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 102)*

We encounter a similar unhappy relationship in another short story **When the River Weeps**. The narrator actually describes this marriage as a 'prison'.

*Our marriage may have looked like a paradise from the outside, but deep down underneath fancy cars, beautiful home, adorable children and pretentious kind of love, it was far from what it appeared to be. This certainly was not an ideal marriage. This was prison. The prison comprised a prison warder and an inmate, playing husband and wife roles, respectively. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, pp. 276-277)*

Further on she says:

*When Melvin and I decided to get married, traditional marriage counselors had taught me to 'put water in my mouth' whenever my husband mistreated me. It didn't matter if I discovered that he was having an affair. I was to be faithful and obedient despite the transgressions. I detested these traditional teachings that made women to*

*feel like second class human beings. As a woman I was expected to be quiet and submissive. I felt muted against my will. I was taught to feel less about myself and glorify my husband as my God. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, pp. 277-278)*

Sadly, this story ends tragically like most of the stories. One wonders if something could have been done before it was too late!

The other men in the short stories are no better. They are either coldblooded sexual predators and rapists like Uncle Sholoka and his friends in **Mandalena** or mere opportunists like Katai in **The River Within**.

One constantly fears for the girl child in these short stories. She is the unfortunate victim of traditional beliefs in **The Chief's New Wife**. In **The Runners**, she pays a dear price for issues that do not concern her, really. She is oftentimes an unsuspecting commodity to be traded in arranged marriages as in **Deafening Silence** and **Sister Wives**.

As one reads these tormenting stories, one wonders if there is anything that can be done to put an end to these malpractices. Society seems to have failed these men, women and children. The narrator in **The House on Kudu Drive** rightfully asks this question about an abusive father:

*Well, why didn't anyone at church stop him? Apart from Father Gondwe? (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p 44)*

His father answers:

*A marriage is complicated, son. When it comes to what goes on between a husband and his wife, it's not that easy for other people to get involved. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories p.44)*

Even the police berates men who suffer at the hands of their women. Men's complaints are simply not taken seriously as in **Abweranso** and **The Red Scarf**. Society as a whole scoffs at men who get beaten by their wives. People see this as an unforgivable weakness.

Here is an incredible scene from **The Red Scarf**, when the husband tries to file a report at the police after being physically abused:

*'My wife has been assaulting me,' he managed to say.*

*No sooner had he said this than all three burst into laughter. The man realised that he had been wrong about coming here; just as he had been wrong when he decided to confide in his two friends one evening over a beer. The two men laughed at him just as hard as the trio were laughing now.*

*It's a man who beats the nonsense out of his wife and not the other way round!' said one of his friends, sipping beer from a gourd.*

*'A man beaten by his wife might as well be made pregnant by her!' added the other, prompting loud laughter from the duo. The man quickly decided to force himself to join the laughter, lying that he was only joking just to see their reaction. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 300)*

What can the victims do then if they cannot even seek refuge in religious and law enforcing institutions? Can they escape this hell?

## Sister Wives & Other Short Stories: A Beacon of Hope for Survivors

This anthology also shows us that no single layer of society is spared when it comes to domestic violence. Affluent neighbourhoods such as Woodlands have their own fair share of marital problems and pervading sense of domestic insecurity.

The victims find different ways to put an end to their suffering. Any form of escape is welcome. In **Sister Wives**, death delivers Lweendo and the birth of her child brings a sense of renewal. In **Deafening Silence**, suicide becomes the solution for the mother, even though she leaves her two children behind.

*Being a single unemployed mother of two, clad in poverty and living in a big city, with mounting bills and rentals to settle; she felt trapped as there seemed to be no hope for a breakthrough or help. She decided that, in the end, only death was her way out. (Sister Wives & Other short Stories, p. 250)*

In **The House on Kudu Drive**, sickness and death also put a stop to the abuse for the son, however it seems as if the perpetrators get away with their crimes.

In some cases, after months or years of abuse, the victims die at the hands of their torturers as May's mother in **Aftermath**. The children are helpless witnesses of a vicious cycle they cannot break.

*It had always been like that in her home, the nights always brought screams from her mother, her father's fists hitting against her flesh until the cries quietened into soft cries like the cries of their neighbour's cat. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 67)*

Luckily enough, some of the victims can find solace in non-governmental organisations such as **Give Hope** in **All That Glitters**. This is when they have had enough and they are willing to face the consequences of denouncing their abuser.

Cheswa even takes a step further and helps other victims of abuse:

*It had always been Cheswa's dream to help other children in the community, and even though the damage was done, she gave courage to other girls, taught them to stand up against child marriages and teen pregnancies. She was able to return to school in eighth grade and, using her experience, she became an effective social activist. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 124)*

The victims do find agency in many of these stories. In **Silence**, both niece and aunt take a bold stance to stop Uncle Gundu from wreaking havoc on their existence. They decide to fight back!

*No more, I thought. No more violence followed by silence. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 171)*

*'I decided to report him, even if it meant I would be left alone to feed the children. I told the police about his plans to marry you off to Baba Mtonga.' She took my old lady's hand in her worn hands. 'I told them it was assault instead of a domestic quarrel. soon he will be in jail. I will find a new place for us. We can be free.' (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 173)*

Sadly enough, for some victims, taking the law into their own hands becomes a serious option with tragic consequences like in **Chomba** and **When The River Weeps**. In the latter, murdering the abuser becomes the only plausible solution.

*Was I guilty of taking their father away from them? Yes, I was, and it was a secret that I would go with to my grave including all the bad memories of my marriage. Despite this, I would always remind my children of how good their father had been to them. I did not want them to know anything of the abuse that I had gone through at the hands of their father. Was I sad that he was dead? No. The feeling I had about his death was so intricately beautiful that it gave me something to live for...peace of mind. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, p. 290)*

Finally, **Laughter** is actually one of the rare short stories whereby the abuser changes his ways after feeling some remorse.

*And then I cried for myself.*

*I cried for the boy who had once loved his mother so deeply that he had shared her pain even without words. I cried because, at some point in cruel time, this boy had turned into the very man who had inflicted this pain. If this was what it meant to be a man, I wanted nothing to do with it. The fist still hot in my hand like a smoking gun fell to the floor, turning to dust where it lay. (Sister Wives & Other Short Stories, pp. 153-154)*

This is of course a rare occurrence in the book as most stories end in a tragic way.

Fiction is a treasure trove of valuable insight into society. Through imaginary stories that are often based on reality, one gets a privileged foot into another culture. There is no quicker way to understand the dynamics of a particular society than perusing through its folklore.

I read this book after I had left Zambia. Reading the ***Sister Wives & Short Stories*** during my trip, would definitely have shifted my perception of Zambian families.

Probably, I would have felt an overwhelming urge to protect the girl child and condemn men who drink to excess.

While reading the book, I also could not help but find similarities between Malawi and Zambia. The names, languages and situations made me think of like occurrences in my home country.

Then I realised just how the authors of ***Sister Wives & Other Short Stories*** had been very courageous to explore such taboo topics especially in a society where tradition and religion still play an important role.

I will definitely read more future works from these outstanding writers!

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