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## Negotiating female identity in a changing world : a small case study in Malawi

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dr. Linda McLoughlin\*

## NEGOTIATING FEMALE IDENTITY IN A CHANGING WORLD: A SMALL CASE STUDY IN MALAWI

### Abstract

This paper presents a small case study based on the narratives of three women in Malawi to ascertain how they negotiate female identity in a changing world. The socio-historical context is that western discourses relating to women's empowerment and gender equalities are being absorbed in developing countries which can influence people's perceptions of the way they view themselves and their own practices. This may present a conflict between western and traditional expectations and values. In Malawi, new opportunities are starting to open up for women causing them to adapt to new life styles. Close study of the ways in which women of different generations and of different socio economic backgrounds recount their experience of being a woman in Malawi seems to reveal common themes both in the structure and in the content of the narratives which connect what are in fact richly individual and personal stories. In line with Bamberg (2003:222) 'rather than seeing narratives as intrinsically oriented toward coherence and authenticity, and inconsistencies and equivocations as an analytical nuisance', this micro analysis finds the latter aspects to be the most interesting. Therefore, it will aim to unpack how participants orient to, ascribe and negotiate female identity through language. In recent years, narrative analysis has been used to examine real life stories. In this study, an ethnographic approach to data collection is adopted by interviewing women in the home environment. The recordings analysed are stories but they are elicited in the context of an interview which inevitably produces the 'researcher effect'. Further work is needed to assess the value of narrative analysis in gauging the impact of western cultures on gender identity construction.

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### Keywords:

narrative; critical discourse analysis; female identity; globalisation; Malawi



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## Introduction to the study

The United Nations has noted regional patterns in the global trends affecting women's position over the last two decades and the problems they face today. In sub-Saharan Africa there has been very limited progress in reducing gender inequality in most social, economic and political contexts. Despite the limited progress reported, observations based on small-scale data collected from a recent visit to the SOS Children's Village in Lilongwe, Malawi were that on the surface young women's outlook regarding gender equality was extremely positive. With no desire to quell such optimism, preparatory research for the visit documented that strong patriarchal relationships prevail: 'As everywhere, power and wealth are largely in the hands of men, but in Malawi social norms powerfully protect this situation against challenge ...' Overseas Development Institute, Working Paper (2006:18).

This paper is approached from a feminist linguistic perspective. From the outset, it is acknowledged that the interpretation of feminism is rooted in Western discourse. However, one should be mindful of bell hook's (1990) criticism, namely, that academics want to know about the subaltern's experiences but not their own interpretations of those experiences. Therefore, the endeavour is to let the women speak for themselves and try to avoid drawing on the researcher's own cultural and intellectual baggage. Unfortunately, due the timescale, it was not possible for the researcher to learn the women's mother-tongue Chichewa though Spivak (1992:189-90) has a valid point:

Rather than imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue. You will see immediately what the differences are. You will also feel the solidarity every day as you make the attempt to learn the language in which the other woman learnt to recognize reality at her mother's knee. This is preparation for the intimacy of cultural translation.

## The setting, data and methods

According to Sharp (2009:20), in the Western imaginary, sub-Saharan Africa is seen as 'undeveloped and child-like'. The focus of this case study, Malawi, is rated as one of the world's twelve poorest countries and heavily reliant on donor aid. Fanon's (1986) influential text *Black Skin, White Masks* contains a powerful critique of what he refers to as 'the so-called dependency complex'. His psychoanalytic perspec-

tive documents the processes whereby white colonizers alienated black natives causing them to feel inferior and dependent so that they strove to emulate white culture and society. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a critique of colonialism but it is appropriate to consider its continuing legacies.

As a linguist interested in the relationship between language and the construction of gender identity, the apparent misalignment between Western, negative perceptions regarding the status of women in Malawi and the women's own positive subjectivities is found to be intriguing. It was decided to pursue a small scale ethnographic study based on the narratives of Jo, Emma and Lilian (the names are pseudonyms). It should be mentioned that the primary purpose of the researcher's visit to Lilongwe was to provide in-service teacher education. It was during the two weeks spent working at the school, engaging with the teachers that a rapport developed between the researcher and the key informants. Being a mature woman proved invaluable in aligning the researcher with Lilian the deputy head of the school. However, the age difference may have hindered the dynamics of conversations with Jo (Lilian's daughter) and her friend Emma. It was towards the end of the visit that the researcher asked the women if a short interview with each of them could be recorded. It was explained that the researcher was a linguist interested in language and gender and wanted to know more about their experiences of being a woman in Malawi. A casual interview style was chosen yielding three hours of recorded data which when transcribed produced eleven pages of transcription. The interviews took place in the guest accommodation which is familiar territory for the women and similar to their own modest homes.

The qualitative data distinguishes the women along two lines: age and social status. Lilian is a mature woman of 42 whereas Jo and Emma are much younger; 18 and 17 years of age respectively. As deputy head of the school, Lilian by Western standards would be regarded as middle class, as would her daughter Jo, whereas Emma, though technically not an orphan, is reliant on aid provided through the SOS village. In common, the women distinguished themselves geographically, i.e., their regional identity was based on the township Lilongwe rather than the surrounding rural locations from where they originate. Cameron (1998a) refers to an increase within feminist scholarship of the importance of considering the ways gender interacts with other identity categories. The positive positioning of self contained in the women's narratives reveals a complex intersection of gender, class and regional identities and, at times, involves the negative positioning of others.

This study attempts to assess the impact of initiatives such as The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the formation of a government department The Ministry of Gender, Youth and Community Services in the light of claims that changes are beginning to take effect. Reports suggest that although changes are now happening, in traditional rural settings, unequal gender roles are underpinned by mutually-reinforcing teachings delivered in homes, many schools, churches and community gatherings, and during initiation rites. These influences see acceptance of male authority over women as integral to respect for proper hierarchy and dependency in general. In such circumstances, Critical Discourse Analysis is an appropriate method since it allows systematic examination of the relationship between language and power from a number of perspectives: social Fairclough 1995; political vanDijk 1996, 1998 and historical Wodak and Meyer 2001. As the present study is concerned with changes of a transnational nature and the effects of globalisation, Fairclough's focus on discourse and social change would seem apposite. The CDA approach is informed by poststructuralism, a key tenet of which is that gender is socially constitutive and in a constant state of flux. Butler's (1990) notion of performativity is also useful in helping to explain gender as a performative social construct rather than a fixed social category. A CDA analysis of the narratives will seek to reveal how identity categories are invoked, resisted, negotiated and policed. Given the context in which the study takes place, it is pertinent to draw on postcolonial theory, in particular to critique Western representations of the 'Other'. The conclusion suggests that further research is needed to assess the value of such analysis in gauging the impact of western cultures on gender identity construction of women in developing countries.

### **The Data and Analysis**

It was important to begin the interviews by creating a private space where possible conflicts relating to gender may be articulated. There was also an assurance that the informant could simply pass over any topics that she found too controversial.

Following Sawin (1994:634), features crucial to a gender-sensitive analysis were identified at three levels: thematic, formal and behavioural. Thematically, the narratives of all three women conveyed traditional values, for example, women's role is associated with the home and men's with the land (whether or not women also undertook paid work outside the home). Despite the constraints of the interview situ-

ation, in formal terms the narratives include constructed examples to illustrate points sometimes replete with dialogue between characters. In narrative terms, there is a seamless transition between the conversational and story-telling, i.e., the women did not formally introduce their stories with paralinguistic keyings.

In performing their gender identity it must be remembered that the women are working with resources that are made available to them by their culture, in Bordieu's (1991) terms, 'linguistic capital'. It is important to distinguish this from 'symbolic capital' which relates to public forms of speaking as, traditionally, such forms are denied to women. In identifying formal and thematic regularities, it was not the intention to suggest that the women's narratives represent a distinctive form since a more in-depth analysis reveals a number of apparent discrepancies and prevarications. However, in line with Bamberg (2003:222) 'rather than seeing narratives as intrinsically oriented toward coherence and authenticity, and inconsistencies and equivocations as an analytical nuisance', this micro analysis finds the latter aspects to be the most interesting.

The framework for analysis will now be set out. An important aspect of CDA is its 'critical' focus. This entails critiquing 'common-sense' assumptions which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically, and of which people are generally not consciously aware.

A further element of CDA which this study will incorporate is intertextuality. In Bakhtin's (1981:89) terms, this entails recognition that texts contain traces of other's words. For Kristeva (1986:39), it refers to the insertion of history into a text and the insertion of the text into history. As the women's narratives do not take place in a vacuum, instances of intertextual references will be looked for. Furthermore, in analysing the women's narratives it was necessary to draw on texts, for example, working papers, policy documents and news reports which constitutes cross textual intertextuality. It should also be borne in mind that what the women say in their narratives, is against the background of what is unsaid. Fairclough (2003:58) refers to this as 'assumptions' which he claims provide vital links to ideologies. Closely linked to assumptions are presuppositions. Presuppositions are propositions which are taken by the producer of the text as already established or 'given'. In the context of the patriarchal system outlined, an approach which goes beyond mere description to focus attention on the socio historical, cultural and political implications of discourse may help to infer whether globalising tendencies are affecting the traditions and customs of Malawi.

### Jo's narrative

The recording begins with an informal exchange designed to alleviate the 'observer's paradox'. The main issues concerning gender begin to surface with Jo's account of the different experience for boys and girls in Malawi:

#### Extract 1

Jo: because erm a boy is responsible at home maybe when he grows up he needs to be more educated when he grows up he can search for a job and find money and provide for the family so he is the head of the family in Malawi it's regarded like that and the girl who is there just like the bread eater follows what the husband says basically so she is just there to help the family cleaning the place doing the household chores and erm taking care of the children and everything so it's like every work in the house belongs to a lady and the man is there to provide food and find money for the family so the girl has all the responsibility at home.

On the surface, her explanation is based on the differential division of labour. The clause 'in Malawi it's regarded like that' contains an assumption that in other cultures the situation is different. Here the traditional, inequitable view of gender relations is presented which is discordant with Jo's personal view put forward when questioned as to how this accords with her ambition to study economics at university. In the following extract there is a clear sense of a town/country divide in relation to gender awareness which Jo relates to a disparity in educational attainment between people in towns and villages:

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#### Extract 2

Jo: yeah basically it depends somehow here in Malawi in villages they practice that but in towns people are more educated so they learn how gender works that a man can do any work that a woman can do so here in town it is simple because even my parents encourage me to do some work at school so if I have finished some works at the house it's like I am always given the time so that I should do some work at school and that makes me happy because it is possible that they do something like for me and I pass all my examinations but in the village it is difficult because some people say that women are just there to marry and to do some work so they discourage them going to school and they are leaving them like that

Jo's narrative conveys a message of progression; that ideas are changing which again she attributes to raised gender awareness:

**Extract 3**

Jo: yeah things has changed because right now people are getting to know what gender is because even my mum when she was at the village when she was young there were some people who said no she should just marry and you cannot do any work you are just useless cannot do anything but she worked hard she had an ambition that she wanted to be more educated that's why she's educated right now

Linguistically, there are some markers which might suggest a conflict between Jo's apparent raised gender awareness and Malawian traditions. For example, in Extract 1 Jo, in reference to women, uses the indefinite article 'a' and the respectful term 'lady' whereas men are referred to by the definite article 'the' followed by the singular noun 'man'. There is an asymmetry in that an indefinite article narrows down the reference to a single member of a class. By contrast, the definite article specifies that the reference is assumed to be known to the speaker and addressee. In Western cultures, the form lady/ladies has increasingly acquired the features [+PATRONISING], [+CONSERVATIVE] and [+DATED] Holmes (2000:146). Contextually, it seems Jo is being polite and respectful; she cannot be expected to know that 'lady' has acquired negative connotations in Western discourses (and even if she did, it does not necessarily follow that she should be influenced by this). However, the asymmetrical use of articles reflects a subtle, no doubt subconscious, means of reducing females to a class whilst the reverse seems to happen in the case of males; they are specified or essentialised. In extracts 2 and 3 Jo's stance is revealed by her use of the restrictive adverb 'even': 'even my parents encourage me to do some work' and 'even my mum when she was at the village when she was young there were some people who said no she should just marry'. Restrictive adverbs focus attention on a certain element of the clause. Here they serve to emphasize the importance of the proposition by excluding other possibilities, for example, that it is exceptional for a girl to be educated and that Jo's mother, who *has* achieved educationally, was incorrectly subjected to the traditional view that for women, marriage is incompatible with educational ambitions. To further her point, Jo embeds reported speech into the narrative "you cannot do any work you are just useless cannot do anything". Here the reported speech presents an extremely negative view of women. Jo counterpoises this with a gender sensitive explanation as to why her parents encourage her to work hard at school:



**Extract 4**

Jo: [...] they know the importance of being educated because they have some friends that they were playing with when they were young and that friends didn't work hard at school they were some discouraged and they didn't learn so they see in them that they are suffering right now they have many children they don't know the importance of having fewer children so they can be able to raise them so they just know a woman is a child bearing machine so she can bear more children than a man wants so they are somehow ignorant they don't know what gender is [...]

The reported speech is quite revealing of wider social attitudes from which Jo distances herself. This is evident in her use of 'ignorant' to describe other language users who do not understand what 'gender' is. Her choice of phrase 'child bearing machine' does seem to concur with a feminist critique which challenges dominant discourses of women being reduced to their reproductive capabilities. 'she can bear more children than a man wants' alludes to stereotypical discourses of male sexuality. Hollway (1984) refers to this as 'the male sexual drive discourse', namely that they are governed by their genes to procreate but are devoid of nurturing sensibilities. In Jo's narrative, gender does appear to be fluid rather than fixed.

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**Extract 5**

Jo: doctors more doctors are men so it's like more nurses are women and more doctors are men so I don't know just because maybe they don't encourage them as much to be doctors or even men see nursing qualification like it's not important for them it's like they can be something they haven't achieved what they wanted so they work hard to be a doctor so but nowadays it's like they are encouraging but so that more women should also be doctors and other men should also be nurses to be gender balanced.

It is not axiomatic that women are nurses and men are doctors due to biological destiny but because society does not encourage women to be doctors and it regards nursing qualifications, stereotypically associated with females, as less important. Despite claiming that the sexes are treated equally, Jo's use of the modal auxiliary 'should' indicates that in some professions that is not necessarily the case.

In relation to linguistic capital, the national language Chichewa, as Jo explained, like English is sex-preferential rather than sex-exclusive:

**Extract 6**

Jo: [...] the higher percentage women speak respectfully [respectfully] yeah and men just speak whatever

It seems that women's linguistic behaviour is policed and that there is a double bind – men can say whatever they like without risk of recrimination. In the meeting with Emma, she was reluctant to tell the researcher words only men would use despite assurances that no-one else would listen to the recording.

Jo's interview ends on a positive note. As the researcher was aware of the legacy of the 'big man syndrome' in Malawi, Jo was asked whether she thought that the president might one day be a woman.

**Extract 7**

Jo: yeah it's already started because the vice-president here in Malawi is a woman so it's like gender balanced because the president is a man and the vice-president is a woman so it's something like encouraging because in parliament there are more women in parliament so it's encouraging a gender balance.

At points in the interview, Jo demonstrates feminist sensibilities:

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**Extract 8**

Jo: erm I think that the most important thing is the women should be empowered and they should be given the same qualifications as men because initially when a man the children are grown in a certain house a daughter and a son it's like the son is always given some calves to use them the girl is given some chores to help the mother usually to care for the child it's just the foundation the problems's the foundation but if the girl was given some opportunities that she could do in the future then that could be helpful so that the man and the women should be treated equally Malawi should be a gender balanced one.

This is illustrated by her use of the term 'empowerment' and the fact that she sees the need for structural changes to be made. However, it is incompatible with her lack of concern that the woman referred to is vice-president, not president. That is not to suggest that western parliaments are any less sexist, merely that western feminists' concerns regarding gender asymmetries have been raging for longer than in the African context. These points will be explored further in the conclusion.

## Emma's narrative

The narrative begins with Emma describing her family and how she came to the SOS village; her mother passed away and her father could not look after her and her four siblings. Emma goes on to describe her ambitions:

Emma: I want to study a medical [medicine] I want to become a nurse

Emma is questioned on whether she had considered becoming a doctor which she finds quite amusing but answers 'ah if I pass well'. She is asked if the opportunities are the same for girls and boys; although not as ambitious as Jo, she responds in a similar way, that in the past only boys were encouraged to be educated and that girls were told 'they should not go to school because you'll get married'. However, Emma is less positive than Jo on the current position: 'the opportunity is *almost* the same'. The insertion of the adverb serves to soften the claim.

Emma is questioned on how the changes are affecting gender dynamics, whether men are happy that women are now achieving success:

**Extract 9**

Emma: mm at first they were refusing they were thinking that all these women want to get a lot of money and they are going to be rude especially in the marriage but as of now they have [be]come to know the truth that women can also stand do the same as what the women I mean what the men do so they also encourage their wives and other girls that they should take part in working.

She refers to the power men have over women; that they could prevent them from working if they so wished. There seems to be a presupposition that when women gain financial independence, there will be a corresponding decline in their moral behaviour. However, it seems that men recognise the advantages of women bringing in an extra income. That is to say 'extra' because Jo mentioned that women should not ask men for things like 'chemical hair' [hair products] or cosmetics but should buy these from their own income. Jo explained that some women have businesses but they are low status, for example, selling groundnuts. Prah and Adomako Ampofo (forthcoming) report that women workers in the informal sector encountered increased domestic violence since some men felt disempowered by women's financial independence and their enhanced role in decision making.

Interestingly, Emma mentions social concerns regarding women's impoliteness that Jo referred to. She explains women's greater politeness in terms of their child rearing role. Emma is quite emphatic in response to the question of whether women could be just as rude as men:

#### **Extract 10**

Emma: nooo the woman is doing something she is not supposed to be rude she's supposed to respect her husband and er she's supposed to know that there is right so she should I mean she should consider a woman I mean a man that he is also a person so I think when a woman is working or doing something I think she should know her position I am a woman of course but I would have to do this

Despite presenting a view of equality, it seems that so far as symbolic expression is concerned, custom prohibits women using taboo items; they need to know their 'position' which involves being respectful to men. In many western cultures, traditionally, taboo is associated with masculinity and respectability with femininity but these patterns do seem to be changing.

Lilian's narrative

It was explained to Lilian that Jo and Emma had been interviewed to help shape our understanding of what it is like to be a young woman in Malawi and that the perspective of a mature woman would provide a useful complement. In common with Jo, Lilian seems to evoke an urban/rural divide:

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#### **Extract 11**

Lilian: yeah I think in town here people are a bit civilised you are going to see maybe a boy cooking food in town but in the typical villages ah I think it is somehow people think and maybe someone is not thinking proper let's say if he's a man and he's cooking food and washing this ah what type of this man (laughs) so maybe no they would not be ashamed.

Whereas Jo refers to country people as 'ignorant', Lilian uses the term 'civilised' to refer to townspeople, the corollary being that country people are 'uncivilised'. Lilian was asked whether a woman would receive the same criticism if she were to do something that was considered masculine:

**Extract 12**

Lilian: maybe people can just say this woman is very courageous say something like that

yeah she can do some big mens work yeah but here in town now I think people are civilised.

She was asked how things have changed since she was growing up.

Lilian: you won't see a man not a man a woman maybe being an electrician

An engineering an engineer those works putting an overall on a woman it looks awkward somehow but nowadays you will see women wearing overalls

The description 'awkward' does not accord with Lilian's more liberal feminist stance. Lilian was reminded that she had passed women soldiers and police officers (though disproportionate to the number of males) at various check points when on a day trip which supported her claims about how things are changing but that the researcher, during her time in Malawi had also seen some contradictions. For example, there was a woman heavily burdened, also struggling to carry a child with a man walking alongside carrying nothing.

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**Extract 13**

Lilian: oh you see that is really what is happening at the moment you see this woman has waked up in the morning she'd have been around the house maybe cleaning some plates while the man is just sitting (laughs) and you go in the garden and you carry to loads with maybe a child at the back while the man is just watching walking you go in the garden and maybe by eleven o'clock oh let's go home and have our lunch yet then you carry those two loads maybe some firewood with a child at the back and the man is just watching walking you go home the man is sitting you're now preparing food you see (sighs)

Lilian clearly recognises the asymmetrical division of labour. She was asked what would happen if a woman challenged a man, if for example, she were to ask the man to help her:

Lilian: I think it would errors you are a lucky lady why are you asking a man to do this you are not supposed to do this

In view of Lilian's earlier use of the term 'courageous' to describe a woman who stepped out of her stereotypical gender role, she was asked whether women would be in physical danger.

**Extract 14**

Lilian: erm of course for some men some men I need to assist my wife without forcing but forcing somebody to do it could lead maybe to the end of the marriage because they would say I have to go away and find another wife if you are not performing what you are supposed to things like that so just to keep the family going then just think it's OK why is my man sleeping

Mwale (2002:117) claims that western feminism fails to deal with issues that directly affect Africans, for example, some societies are matrilineal; wives have more power and influence than their husbands. Other factors are that the notion of family is non-nuclear but relates to an extended kinship system, for example, Lilian's education was funded by her uncle and, due to the AIDs crisis, she, in turn, is taking care of her sister's child. However, it does seem that wives are expendable 'I have to go away and find another wife if you are not performing what you are supposed to'. As Lilian seemed to effect empathy in the above extracts by inserting the personal pronoun 'you', she was asked about her own domestic arrangements, whether her husband does as much work in the house as she does:

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**Extract 15**

Lilian: of course sometimes he assists sometimes but not usually maybe because now we have older children and these older children help me a lot cooking and cleaning this and that he'll just sit and maybe watch television

Furthermore, Lilian was asked whether her sons do as much work as her daughter

**Extract 16**

Lilian: oh you mean that son my son is so lazy because today I said to him you know we have a lot of panier assist us and he's saying no mammy I'm not carrying this I said no that's because you eat you have to carry this one time you will be alone and he was forced into carrying a bag of wheat going to the mill he's why mother he doesn't cook he doesn't strip he just eats then I said oh my friend you are in danger one day you will cry what will you do you have to depend on yourself you have to know how to cook how to wash up do this I always advise him but somehow but of course I know a slight disadvantage because we have

more girls there are about four girls but the one who is in the college ah that one is the exception because he cooks he cleans the room

It seems that different behaviours are expected of males and females; that it is exceptional for a boy to do household chores especially if the number of girls in the household exceeds boys. Mwale (2002:135) refers to the middle class African marriage as a poor and faint imitation of the western nuclear marriage: 'In this darkly glass-image [...] decisions can be (i) syncretic, i.e. both modernised African spouses reaching open consensus on an issue; or (ii) autocratic, whereby the husband or wife issues decrees. The latter two modes of decision-making may cause tension and lead to ephemeral, delicate and symbolic trial marriages.'

Lilian was told about the researcher's conversations with the younger women which revealed a double standard in language:

#### **Extract 17**

Lilian: sometimes you know because of our culture they think that a man is more bullying than a wife that's why then a man can beat a wife and do everything to a wife but that is cruel otherwise maybe because of my position maybe my husband has some respect I have to say so (.) maybe (.) he says madam madam things like that

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Like Jo, Lilian appears to recognise that cultural practices in Malawi might be different to other cultures. However, she is careful to distance herself from practices such as bullying and wife beating, referring to them as 'cruel'. Lilian's critical deployment of feminist thematics suggests that her feminist subjectivity is perhaps more developed than the younger women's. Such gender consciousness could come from her greater life experience, not necessarily from feminism.

#### **Conclusion**

The limited data provides some glimpses into the complex ways in which the women negotiate female identity in a changing world. There are two levels – what they say in response to questions and how it is said – their actual language use. They show how they constitute themselves as aligned to feminist concerns regarding gender asymmetries but they also show patterns reflecting the influence of the larger society and its patriarchal institutions. The women reflect on past asymmetries but also imagine a possible gender equal future. Some of the issues raised they appear to regard as mundane, for ex-

ample, the double standard in language where others such as violence against women are perceived as uncivilised and cruel. When Jo was asked about whether she had experienced unfairness, if there were times when she felt something would not happen to a boy, she refers to men doing inferior jobs, for example, a man working as a cleaner. She explains that is not fair because 'I'm used to the life that men are more educated than women so when I see a man that is not more educated or that hasn't even gone to school I just feel really sorry ...'. In negotiating their identities, the women position themselves in opposition to the viewpoints of others, for example, the 'ignorant', 'uncivilised' people of the countryside who do not understand what gender is. Such practice corresponds with Foucault's notion of discourse; that it is based around binary pairs. Said's influential text, *Orientalism* refers to a series of discourses that explained the nature of the Orient and Occident. His taxonomy shows the Orient is perceived as different from Europe based on a number of oppositions: the Occident (Europe) is developed, scientific, moral and religious - the Orient is backward, superstitious, immoral, heathen. As Sharp (2009) points out, although decolonisation has occurred with independence it does not mean that other effects of the colonial period have all disappeared.

This paper has considered power relationships in Malawi from a CDA perspective. It would be remiss not to consider whether dominant discourses are challenged, appropriated, or subverted. In order to avoid 'reconstellat[e]ing the text to draw out its use, wrench[ing] it out of its proper context and putting it within an alien argument' Spivak (1998:214), this paper attempts to contextualise the data within its African background. However, as the following citation reveals, western developments have greatly influenced African feminist scholarship. Ardayio-Schandorf (1993:11) refers to 'the wind of change that swept across the globe through the launching of the International Women's Year in 1975 by the United Nations'. This, she claims, led to the momentum in the developed countries, particularly the west giving birth to women's studies a subject which is increasingly being recognised as a separate discipline in African universities. Jessie Kabwila Kapasula of Chancellor College, Zomba, Malawi/Bingham University (New York) in relation to gender politics in Malawi believes:

'We cannot bury our heads in the sand, patriarchy in its indigenous and colonial forms is rife in our country and if we are to talk of women leaders having a hand in addressing this problem that is at the helm of a lot of female oppression, we cannot afford gender neutral or so called national strategies.' Nyasa Times 24.4.2009



She is referring to the negative reaction her response to an article by a male academic had received. She goes on to question whether her article would have received the same views had she not been a radical feminist. In a review of Women's and Gender Studies research in sub-Saharan Africa, Adomako Ampofo, et al (2004) report that there is resentment and resistance toward affirmative action programs and misogynist attitudes toward women as intellectually less capable than men. The larger ideological framework of Malawi's patronage-oriented political system is explained in a working paper produced by the Overseas Development Institute, London:

Colonialism superimposed elements of a modern state on hierarchical but communal societies, generating powerful legacies including an ambiguous moral attitude towards laws and administrative rules requiring honesty and professionalism in public (formal state) service. The nature of traditional society helps to explain why abuses by 'big men' are tolerated even when very few of the benefits filter down to ordinary people. [...] Social relationships are characterised by inequality and a large 'power distance'. Excessive deference stifles innovation, provides rationalisations for dishonesty where important people are involved, and increased the difficulty of empowering women.

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The report goes on to document male dominance and sexual exploitation during the Banda period. In the aggrandisement of the president, women performed praise songs and dances. They wore wraps with the president's face on them (one of the teachers at the school still wears hers). Through the women's league they served as informers for the party and were pressured into providing sexual favours to party leaders and functionaries. It is reported that during the post-Banda period, the exploitation of women was less overt but still widespread. Indeed men 'jokingly' criticise the Bingu wa Mutharika government for not using women since when cash is circulating, brothers and husbands benefit which concurs with Emma's claim that men see the benefits of encouraging wives and other girls to work. Although change is now happening, there were instances in the narratives which reveal a tension, pointing to the acceptance of male authority over women as integral to respect for proper hierarchy. As the women were reluctant to illustrate cultural taboos in language, and from the claims of Jessie Kabwila Kapasula regarding the negative response to her criticisms of the status quo, it seems that self-determination by women is seen as threatening. It is against the backdrop of this complex ideology that the women negotiate their identity in talk. Rather than choosing between the 'either' of tradition and the 'or' of development, they produce hybrid practices which combine elements of each. Bulbeck (1998:21)

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## Streszczenie

Poszukiwanie kobiecej tożsamości w zmieniającym się świecie: niewielkie studium przypadku kobiet w Malawi

Artykuł stanowi niewielkie studium przypadku opartego na opowieściach trzech kobiet żyjących w Malawi. Ma na celu ukazanie ich poszukiwań kobiecej tożsamości w zmieniającym się świecie. W krajach rozwijających się kontekst socjologiczny i historyczny pozostaje pod głębokim wpływem dyskursu toczącego się w krajach zachodnich o równouprawnieniu kobiet i równości płci, co może mieć istotne znaczenie w postrzeganiu samego siebie oraz własnych zachowań. Może to rodzić konflikt pomiędzy kulturą zachodu a przyjętą tradycją i wartościami. W Malawi otwierają się dla kobiet nowe możliwości, które pozwalają im zaadoptować się do nowego stylu życia. Dogłębne studium tego jak kobiety różnych pokoleń oraz z różnych warstw społecznych w Malawi przedstawiają swoje doświadczenia, prowadzi do wysunięcia wspólnych wniosków w odniesieniu zarówno do struktury jak i tematów ich opowieści, które stanowią bogaty obraz osobistych przeżyć. Idąc za Bambergiem, kluczowym punktem zainteresowania analizy jest pogląd, iż opowieść nie jest nieodłącznie spójna i prawdziwa, lecz skłania się ku względnej niezgodności, dwuznaczności jak i złożonej niedogodności. Głównym zamierzeniem jest więc ukazanie jak kobieca tożsamość przejawia się poprzez język. W ostatnich latach analiza narracyjna jest źródłem wielu badań historii życia codziennego. Niniejsze studium oparte jest na podejściu etnograficznym. Bazuje na materiale zgromadzonym podczas rozmów z kobietami przebywającymi w ich środowisku domowym. Źródłem badań są więc opowiedziane historie, przy czym forma wywiadu pozwoliła nadać im wymiar naukowy. Należy podjąć dalszą analizę, która pozwoli ocenić wartość przeprowadzonych badań w zakresie wpływu kultury zachodniej na strukturę tożsamości płci.

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## Słowa kluczowe

narracja, krytyczna analiza dyskursu, kobieca tożsamość, globalizacja, Malawia