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## How Mockery Silences Voices: A Diagnostic Exploration of a Selected isiXhosa Short Story “Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka” (“There Is No Pride in Another Person’s Wound”) (2011)

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### Abstract

In this article, I diagnostically explore the influence of mockery and ridicule on personal and communal relationships, using “Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka” (“There Is No Pride in Another Person’s Wound”) (Magqashela, Ntwana and Nyuka 2011) as a literary piece of textual evidence through reader-response theory. The aim is to unearth the socio-cultural and psychological implications of celebrating another person’s vulnerability. By definition, reader-response theory underlines that the meaning of a literary text emerges from the interaction between the text and the reader’s experiences. Two key findings emerge. Firstly, I underscore that readers’ socio-cultural backgrounds may significantly influence their understanding of mockery, unmasking its ability to fracture community bonds and corrode individual self-worth. Secondly, I underline readers’ emotional resonance towards characters subjected to ridicule, intensifying their consciousness of the overarching social implications of such behaviour. These findings bring to the fore the participatory nature of reading modern isiXhosa literature and the imperative of cultural and psychological factors in literary interpretation. I then conclude by advocating for literary interpretation that embraces diverse philosophies, which not only solidify the discernment of literary texts but also cement empathy and solidarity in addressing the destructive impact of mockery in isiXhosa literature and beyond.

**Keywords:** mockery, isiXhosa short story, reader-response theory, textual meaning, vulnerability

## Introduction

The act of celebrating another person's vulnerability is like planting seeds of discord in the garden of human relationships—a greatly entrenched behaviour that spans cultures and societies (Park 2006, p. 316). Whether driven by envy, rivalry, or a fleeting sense of vindication, this tendency to find joy in another person's misfortune is both ethically corrosive and socially toxic. In particular, revelling in the downfall of another woman, as reflected in "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka" ("There Is No Pride in Another Person's Wound")

(Magqashela, Ntwana, and Nyuka 2011), becomes a double-edged sword that cuts into the collective transformation of women. It solidifies a culture of competition, comparison, and division, much like building walls within what should be a shared fortress of solidarity. This implies that by actively engaging in such behaviour, women risk dismantling the scaffolding of gender justice and mutual transformation that they have meticulously constructed over time (Joseph 1985, p.7). This mockery of another person's downfall fractures the foundation of community-based empowerment and undermines the critical significance of mutual support and advancement.

Even more insidious, celebrating a woman's downfall strengthens societal stereotypes and outdated expectations that women should constantly vie against each other for validation and success (Brem, Romero, Garner, Grigorian, and Stuart 2021). This behaviour not only cements the mythology of rivalry but also solidifies a hostile environment where women are encouraged to see each other as competitors rather than allies—a cycle that stifles unity and delays transformation. Therefore, if celebrating another person's defenselessness plants seeds of discord and entrenches cultural toxicity, should societies that fuel these behaviours truly claim progress in cultivating ethical relationships and communal solidarity, or are they merely harvesting the fruits of a division they have sown? At the same time, while women are urged to dismantle male-centric structures, does the act of revelling in another woman's downfall not paradoxically reconstruct these very boundaries, strengthening societal mythologies of rivalry and stagnating the collective transformation they seek to achieve?

With these views in mind, I contend that this behaviour fragments the unity that is the cornerstone of gender fairness, creating a ripple effect of insecurity and self-doubt among women. As Muberekwa and Nkomo (2016) put forward, when women undermine each other, they unwittingly fortify the very chains of marginalisation and oppression they seek to demystify. It is like fueling a fire they have been striving to extinguish. As a matter of reality, celebrating another person's vulnerability sows the seeds of destruction and discord, nurturing a damaging mentality steeped in toxicity. This mindset feeds on the downfalls of others, corroding the pillars of solidarity and empathy that underpin a thriving and equitable society. Instead of cementing a fertile ground for advancement, where mistakes are regarded as stepping stones to progress, this practice cultivates a barren culture of apprehension, stifling boldness and innovation. Considering these assertions, I argue that in a country like South Africa, where historical disparities and gender-based oppression remain pervasive, this behaviour compounds existing societal fractures, deterring the collective

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pursuit of gender fairness and transformation, hence the demand to critically explore African or isiXhosa literature in a bid to address this challenge.

By the same token, celebrating another person's helplessness is building a house of mirrors that reflects others' flaws while obscuring one's own. This elusive behaviour underlines an absence of self-reflection and personal growth (Brownhill 2022, p. 281). It diverts attention from one's imperfections, casting the spotlight on the failures of others as a means of avoiding introspection. As Mukorera (2020) proffers, this fixation on the setbacks of others blinds people to the mirrors of their own weaknesses, robbing them of valuable opportunities for development and self-improvement. This act of insensibility disregards the intricate tapestry of human experiences, reducing individuals to their shortcomings and denying them the opportunity for redemption and transformation.

Ubuntu (humanity to others), with its emphasis on interconnectedness and collective humanity, reminds one that "I am because we are," advocating for compassion and cohesion even in the face of others' struggles. To the same extent, Christianity echoes this ethos, teaching that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, New International Version 2011), underlining the universality of human fallibility and the redemptive power of grace. Therefore, it is my view that to celebrate another person's downfall, as evident in "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka", is to reject the intrinsic value of empathy, a cornerstone of both Ubuntu (humanity to others) and Christian doctrines. It propagates a cycle of judgement and exclusion, like a river flowing endlessly without offering its waters for renewal. Rather, embracing vulnerability—both ours and others'—advances mutual understanding and paves the way for collective healing and growth, a phenomenon in Africans' hearts.

Building on this background, this article seeks to navigate the intricate terrain of the psychological, social, and ethical repercussions of celebrating another's vulnerability, akin to sowing seeds of destruction in a field meant for unity. In this scholarly pursuit, by unmasking the corrosive effects of these actions on individuals and society, the aim is to ignite a critical interrogation of affinity, compassion, and the transformative power of

nurturing a culture that uplifts rather than delights in others' wounds. To anchor my argument, the isiXhosa short story, "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka", literally translated as "There is no pride in another person's wound" from the anthology *Ubomi Ngumzamo* (Life is a Struggle) (Magqashela et al. 2011), serves as a pivotal viewpoint through which the earlier-mentioned themes are explored.

This short story—"Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka"—resonates vastly within an Africanist and Afrocentric framework, drawing attention to community-based values such as *Ubuntu* (humanity to others)—the belief in concerted humanity and interconnectedness. It underscores the moral obligation to reject behaviours that intensify a culture of viciousness, emotional damage, and empathy distortion. Of note, when vulnerabilities are mocked and ridiculed, as observable in the selected isiXhosa short story, it is akin to uprooting the roots of trust, fragmenting the cohesive links that fortify societies, and casting shadows over the dignity and security of individuals. These actions, established in a departure from Afrocentric principles of solidarity and mutual respect, obstruct the path towards a compassionate, supportive society. Owing to these indications, by uncovering "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka" (Magqashela et al. 2011), I contribute to the reimagining of a cultural ethos that aligns with African philosophies of interdependence and collective upliftment, cultivating a harvest of compassion and unity rather than division and harm. In any case, it is prudent to bear in mind that there are remarkable scholarly debates that pertain to isiXhosa short stories, hence the next section.

### **Literature Review: An Overview of IsiXhosa Short Stories**

This literature review includes two key subsections that provide a comprehensive foundation for discerning this scholarly discourse. The first subsection explores the definition, scope, and evolution of isiXhosa short stories within the broader context of African literature, drawing attention to their cultural, linguistic, and thematic significance. The second subsection delves into the unique narrative techniques, stylistic elements, and structural patterns that distinguish isiXhosa short stories, which highlights their role in preserving oral traditions and reflecting socio-cultural

realities. Together, these two subsections offer a multifaceted discernment of the genre, setting the stage for greater critical interaction.

### Conceptualising IsiXhosa Short Stories

IsiXhosa short stories are the heartbeat of the amaXhosa people, pulsing with the rhythms of their culture, morality, and communal wisdom (Diko 2023, pp.278-281). Emerging from the fertile soil of the oral tradition, these literary narratives are concise yet profound, offering a moral compass, transmitting cultural values, and painting vivid portraits of daily life within the amaXhosa lifeline. While these short stories are now primarily inscribed on the canvas of written text, their origins in oral storytelling remain profoundly cemented, like the sturdy roots of an ancient tree that continue to nourish its modern branches. Traditionally, these stories were carried on the winds of spoken words, passed from generation to generation (Botha 1984, p.107; Sonkosi 1999, p.83). However, the arrival of modernity and globalisation has introduced the written form, which allows these stories to cross-temporal and spatial boundaries. Yet, it must be emphasised that the written word does not entirely erase the oral features of isiXhosa storytelling. Rather, these stories act as basins, preserving the echoes of oral traditions while accommodating new forms of expression. The written medium provides a stage for storytellers to weave their unique stylistics and interpretations, demonstrating the flexibility and enduring vitality of this genre.

Nevertheless, this evolution raises critical questions about the potential dilution of oral narrative essence in the written form. For example, some may argue that transcription risks homogenising the diverse voices and stylistics inherent in oral storytelling. However, I argue that written isiXhosa short stories do not merely record but also reimagine the oral tradition, much like a potter reshaping clay while honouring its original essence. Beyond their artistic merit, isiXhosa short stories serve as cultural reservoirs, safeguarding the legacy of amaXhosa. They pass down not only moral lessons and cultural values but also an impactful sense of individualism, binding the community together like threads in a rich tapestry (Sonkosi 1999, p.87). While some may question whether modern adaptations risk losing the “authenticity” of the original oral tradition, it

must be acknowledged that these stories continue to inspire pride, intensify connection, and celebrate the fertile legacy of amaXhosa traditions.

In addition to these declarations, isiXhosa written short stories are like a mosaic, each piece representing a fragment of creativity and ingenuity drawn from the diverse landscapes, histories, and cultures of amaXhosa. While the sheer breadth of cultural and linguistic variety within these stories defies easy generalisation, certain thematic and stylistic currents run through them, binding the mosaic into a cohesive whole. These literary narratives continually serve as mirrors reflecting the intricate socio-political needlepoint of identity, post-colonial struggles, and cultural heritage (Zotwana 1993, p.44). They serve as chronicles of the aftermath of colonial rule, mapping the scars of oppression, the labour of decolonisation, and the interplay of cultural hybridity. This implies that by illuminating the varied experiences of amaXhosa and the overarching South African milieu, these short stories challenge monolithic accounts of history, offering counter-narratives that are as intricate and dynamic as the beadwork of traditional amaXhosa artistry. They invite readers into a dialogue with both the past and the present, providing textured philosophies into the human condition influenced by historical upheavals and contemporary realities (Tisani 2001; Mvanyashe 2024). On account of these submissions or views, I contend that the rich tapestry of isiXhosa short stories embarrasses colonial mentalities by recovering narrative authority and showcasing the ingenuity of amaXhosa cultural expression, thus defying misguided colonial efforts to marginalise isiXhosa literature.

At the same time, isiXhosa short stories serve as literary rivers, flowing from the fertile springs of oral storytelling traditions that have nourished African cultures for centuries (Moropa 2004, p.180; Dilayi and Madolo 2025, p.3). These stories draw sustenance from the rich soil of oral traditions, interweaving vibrant dialogue, vivid imagery, and rhythmic cadences that echo the communal fireside narratives of old. Like a master weaver, the oral storytelling heritage threads itself into the fabric of contemporary isiXhosa literary narratives, allowing for dynamic plots, multifaceted narrators, and the braiding of folklore, proverbs, idioms, and symbolism. However, this connection to orality is

not without its complexities. Some argue that the shift from oral to written mediums risks distorting the immediacy and communal essence that oral storytelling inherently embodies (Montle 2021; Akingbe 2023; Daikh 2024).

Even more notable, isiXhosa short stories straddle two worlds, merging the grounded realism of everyday life with the delicate elements of magical realism and folklore (Pato 2023; Mvanyashe 2024). This literary narrative alchemy dissolves the boundaries between *reality* and the *supernatural*, crafting a literary domain where the visible and the invisible coexist. This blending, like a kaleidoscope of philosophies, illuminates spiritual dimensions, challenges the rigidity of linear time and space, and offers readers new windows through which to interpret human existence (Wali 1963; Chukwuemeka 2025). Nonetheless, I must caution that an overreliance on magical realism risks overshadowing the socio-political realities these short stories aim to address, potentially diverting attention from pressing contemporary concerns. Having said this, by navigating these literary narrative waters, isiXhosa writers revalidate the enduring vitality of oral traditions while charting innovative paths in the literary scenery. Their literary works invite readers to traverse worlds both familiar and fantastical, underscoring the profound interconnectedness of past, present, and future.

In the same vein, isiXhosa short stories are akin to intricately woven tapestries, their threads rich with dramatic imagery that captivates the senses and stirs the soul. They frequently employ metaphorical language, vibrant descriptive details, and powerful symbolic elements, drawing the reader into a vivid mental panorama that links imagination and reality (Pasco 1991, p.413). This masterful use of imagery not only transforms storytelling into an immersive experience but also serves as a prism through which intricate cultural nuances, emotional profundity, and philosophical ideas are refracted. These literary narratives channel the essence of amaXhosa heritage, linking past and present while unveiling the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of their philosophy. On the grounds of these claims, I argue that colonialism, in its arrogant dismissal of African literature, revealed an intellectual deprivation that failed to grasp the profound artistry embedded in indigenous narratives. In contrast to its reductionist tendencies, isiXhosa short stories

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emerge as dynamic reservoirs of cultural intensity, weaving dramatic imagery and metaphorical brilliance that far surpass the stifling confines of colonial literary frameworks. These short stories effortlessly embody a heritage too vast, complex, and spiritually profound for colonialism's limited ability to comprehend.

Furthermore, isiXhosa short stories function as cultural mirrors, reflecting societal norms and offering sharp social critiques. In other words, by addressing pressing challenges such as moral dilemmas, communal values, and systemic injustices, they become a stage upon which the amaXhosa community's traditions and challenges are performed. These stories are, in essence, both lanterns that represent societal truths and hammers that shatter outdated norms. Nevertheless, this focus on social commentary does not solely represent the community's flaws. Counter-narratives within these stories celebrate determination, unity, and progress, highlighting the triumphs of individuals and communities in the face of adversity. In addition to this assertion, these short stories serve as didactic tools, akin to guiding stars for their audiences. Through protagonists who grapple with moral intricacies and navigate turbulent waters, they impart wisdom, teach ethical lessons, and inspire thoughtful reflection. The audience, much like travellers drawing from a wellspring of knowledge, gains philosophy and

moral clarity from these literary texts. Yet, it is fundamental to recognise that not all isiXhosa short stories adhere to didactic intentions. This is based on the premise that some may challenge the notion of definitive moral resolutions, instead offering open-ended narratives that provoke dialogue and invite diverse interpretations, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of amaXhosa life.

### Structural Characteristics of IsiXhosa Short Stories

Besides the conceptualisation of isiXhosa short stories in the previous subsection, it is equally significant to observe that these short stories follow a certain structure, or are constructed and assembled in a particular way or method. This way or method of constructing and assembling isiXhosa short stories is characterised by the following features:

1. Concise length: IsiXhosa short stories are like snapshots in a photo album, capturing dramatic moments of life with precision and brevity. These literary narratives continually focus on a single event, character, or theme, and are designed to deliver a complete and impactful story within a confined frame, much like a well-crafted poem compared to a sprawling epic. They are shorter than novels or extended creative works, offering readers an instant yet meaningful immersion (Opland 2004). In comparison to essays, short stories resemble vibrant paintings, rich in imagery and emotion, whereas essays function more like detailed maps, guiding readers through analytical scenery.
2. Narrative focus: IsiXhosa short stories are well-crafted textiles, intricately woven around a central thread—a lone protagonist or a close-knit group of characters whose lives form the warp and weft of the narrative. These stories unfold with a deliberate rhythm, adhering to a familiar pattern: the foundation of exposition, the mounting tension of rising action, the dramatic crest of a climax, and the soothing resolution that ties loose threads. However, not all isiXhosa short stories walk this linear path. Some defy the conventional loom, crafting fragmented or cyclical narratives that resemble mosaic art, where the short story's essence emerges from the interface of scattered yet interdependent fragments.
3. Limited scope: Due to their brevity, isiXhosa short stories serve as tightly woven tapestries, capturing a single thread of life—a specific incident, fleeting moment, or singular theme. Much like a photograph freezes time, these narratives distil a character's principle or a central event, offering a striking snapshot rather than the sweeping panorama afforded by longer literary works. This conciseness need not be regarded as a limitation. Rather, it should be viewed as a keyhole, through which readers glimpse a world rich with unspoken depth and broader possibilities. What some may interpret as a restricted focus could, in fact, be an intentional artistic choice, evoking mystery and encouraging readers to imagine the untold stories that extend far beyond the frame (Kaschula 2003).
4. Character development: Although isiXhosa short stories may be brief in length, they possess the power to cultivate rich, multifaceted characters. Like a sculptor chiselling away at marble, literary authors use techniques such as dialogue, internal monologue, and vivid descriptions to unmask the intricate layers of their characters' inner worlds—exposing their ideologies, emotions, and motivations. These literary tools allow characters to bloom within the confines of limited space, which offers readers a picture of a larger, unfolding human experience. This being the case, one may argue that the conciseness of short stories sometimes leaves little room for the complexity of character arcs to comprehensively develop, potentially resulting in characters who feel more like sketches than fully realised individuals. Despite this reality, I need to underline that the concentrated intensity of a short story's narrative evokes a sense of profundity that is no less impactful than that found in longer literary works.
5. Theme and symbolism: In isiXhosa short stories, authors weave intricate layers of symbolism and themes to illuminate vaster truths, to reveal the richness of a landscape. Through meticulously selected objects, settings, or events, these writers engage in a silent dialogue with the reader, inviting them to explore broader societal challenges or reflect on universal human experiences. The themes that emerge from these short stories are as diverse as the hues of a rainbow, spanning love, loss, morality,

and social justice. However, while some may celebrate the ideal of social justice or reflect on the sanctity of love, others may offer a counter-narrative that challenges these very ideals—questioning societal structures or presenting the disillusionment that follows idealistic pursuits. These contrasting ideologies affirm that the stories do not simply echo dominant societal values but also confront and critique them, opening the door for profound reflection and the possibility of transformation.

6. **The economy of language:** In the constrained space of isiXhosa short stories, authors craft their narratives like skilled gardeners, planting seeds of meaning with precision. Every word is carefully chosen, which allows the story to bloom in the reader's mind with maximum impact despite its brevity. The use of proverbial, idiomatic, and metaphorical expressions functions as a pruning tool, trimming excess and perfecting the essence of the story, while evoking profound emotions with minimal words. Having said this, this economy of language sometimes leads to the underrepresentation of nuanced contexts or layered voices, where a longer narrative may allow for more intricate exploration of themes. Given this reality, while the brevity serves to perfect focus, it also limits the fullness of certain stories, leaving some emotions and subplots in the margins, like unfinished strokes on an artist's canvas.
7. **Open-mindedness:** IsiXhosa short stories frequently unfold like rivers that meander through landscapes of uncertainty, their conclusions open-ended or ambiguous, inviting the reader to step into the current and navigate their own interpretations. This narrative fluidity beckons reflection, discussion, and a rich multiplicity of philosophies, as readers become explorers in a terrain where the meaning or resolution is not fixed but rather driven by individual experience and insight. While this is the case, some may contend that such openness leaves the reader stranded in a sea of ambiguity, devoid of the closure that may anchor the story's thematic core, potentially dismissing its impact. Yet, even this uncertainty serves as fertile ground for vaster interaction, as it challenges the reader to actively participate in the story's unfolding, adding layers of meaning that a more definite

conclusion may not allow.

In a nutshell, isiXhosa short stories provide a platform both for adherence to tradition and for audacious experimentation. While these short stories continue to showcase recurring characteristics tied to cultural identity, their form is not bound by unyielding rules. Literary authors wield their creative independence like sculptors, reshaping the raw material of language and literature to construct narratives that align with their unique visions. This artistic elasticity grants for the weaving of unconventional narrative threads, the forging of intricate, unpredictable plots, and the infusion of linguistic innovation that challenges the boundaries of tradition. Accordingly, this freedom is not without its tensions. Just as experimentation solidifies the genre, it also provokes debates about the distortion of traditional storytelling principles. Under these circumstances, critics may contend that too much deviation risks diluting the essence of isiXhosa literary heritage. However, the counterpoint is compelling: by bending the rules, literary authors breathe new life into the genre, ensuring its relevance in an evolving literary landscape. It is within this tension—between tradition and transformation—that isiXhosa short stories achieve their greatest triumph, captivating readers and keeping the genre vibrantly alive. Earlier in the genesis, it was stated that this article seeks to navigate the intricate terrain of the psychological, social, and ethical ramifications of celebrating another person's vulnerability, since it is clear that isiXhosa short stories convey messages. To achieve this aim, this scholarly discourse applies reader-response theory, hence the next section.

### **Reader-Response Theory**

This article applies reader-response theory as a perspective to delve into the intricate tapestry of "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka" (Magqashela et al. 2011). Reader-response theory, much like a link between literary text and reader, underscores the dynamic chemistry where meaning is not merely unearthed but collaboratively forged. It shifts the focus from the author's solitary pen to the hands of the reader, who serves as both an interpreter and co-creator. According to Tselenti, Cardoso, and Carvalho (2023, p.7), the essence of a literary text emerges as a shared melody, harmonised through the dialogue between the reader's philosophy

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and the literary text. This theory acknowledges that readers, carrying the unique cargo of their experiences, belief systems, and predispositions, serve as viewpoints that refract and reshape the light of the literary text, sculpting diverse and profound personal interpretations (Gopal and Lee 2023, p.550). The appropriateness of this theory lies in its boundless applicability, allowing each reader’s unique philosophy to breathe new life into the literary text, making it a living, evolving dialogue.

In the scholarly scrutiny of isiXhosa short stories, reader-response theory serves as a vibrant dance between the text and the reader’s imagination. This dynamic technique celebrates the multiplicity of interpretations and reactions that different readers bring to the same story, acknowledging that no two individuals will see the story’s hues in exactly the same way. For this reason, I put forward that this theory invites readers to dive into the emotional currents of the narrative, forge connections with its characters, and weave meaning through the threads of their personal experiences, cultural legacy, and emotional landscapes. Like a co-creator, the reader breathes new life into the story, filling its silences, bridging its gaps, and layering it with their own philosophies. This direction, as Mqwebu (2024, p.27) explains, transforms the reading experience into an exhilarating exploration—an intellectual journey enriched by emotional resonance and the boundless creativity of the imagination. It is not

just reading; it is crafting, shaping, and dancing with the literary text in a uniquely personal way.

Over and above these scholarly views, engaging in a reader-response journey is like embarking on a trip through the scenery of a story, where each reader’s philosophy acts as a unique compass guiding their interpretation. This theoretical technique invites readers to pause and reflect on the emotional echoes, intellectual sparks, and intuitive reactions they experience while navigating the short story. It beckons them to interrogate their own prejudices, much like probing the window through which they view the world, and to delve into the undercurrents of meaning that influence their interpretations (Bagheri and Zare 2023). At the same time, it encourages readers to imagine how the literary text’s waves ripple differently across various audiences, sparking rich dialogues that resemble a vibrant tapestry woven with diverse threads of thought (Moitra 2023; Mqwebu 2024). Therefore, by applying reader-response theory to isiXhosa short stories, such as “Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka” (2011), readers uncover hidden chambers of meaning within the literary text, peeling back layers to reveal its intricate profundity. It becomes a dynamic interaction between the reader and the story, where individual experiences, whether direct or indirect, reveal the narrative in unexpected and exciting ways. This theory, therefore, celebrates the kaleidoscope of human perspectives, solidifying inclusivity and honouring the myriad voices that contribute to the interpretation of a literary masterpiece. Given that the theory of interpretation and discussion has now been explained, the next section concentrates on the thrust of this article.

### Interpretation and Discussion

This short story’s central narrative opens with Nomzwakhe posing a probing question to her friend Noamen: Why, at her advanced age, is she caring for or looking after her grandchild? This interaction, seemingly innocent, unravels layers of social and cultural tensions within their community. Nomzwakhe and Noamen, both elderly women and long-time residents of the same neighbourhood, are bound by community-based experiences yet separated by differing ideologies of grandparenting. Nomzwakhe’s question, however, reveals a notable challenge—a lack of empathy and understanding of the intricate

web of circumstances that compel some elders to step into the role of primary caregivers. Like the roots of an ancient tree intertwined with unseen networks beneath the soil, these reasons—whether poverty, parental loss, or family dynamics—are invisible to outsiders yet profoundly valid to those enmeshed in them. In any event, one may proffer that Nomzwakhe’s inquisitiveness, though insensitive, stems from a valid frustration shared by some community members. To her, the burden of grandparenting seems like a generational imbalance, an unnatural reversal of roles.

Therefore, critical questions must be asked: Is Nomzwakhe’s question a genuine inquiry into Noamen’s circumstances, or does it reflect an overarching societal tendency to judge without understanding? How ironic is it that Nomzwakhe, herself part of a community relying on collective care, criticises the very practices that sustain it? The answer to these questions lies in the paradox of human judgement: Nomzwakhe’s probing reflects not just ignorance but the internalised frustrations of a community grappling with systemic failures. Her critique, while seemingly directed at Noamen, exposes the broader irony of societal structures that burden the elderly with caregiving responsibilities while simultaneously distorting compassion for their struggles. This scenario underscores the fragile balance between collective care as a celebrated ideal and its harsh realities, where disproportionate pressure falls on the most vulnerable members.

This view, though flawed, raises a counterargument: Should society re-examine its structures to guarantee younger generations take full responsibility for their offspring, sparing the elderly this crushing weight? Even so, Nomzwakhe’s failure to dig deeper into Noamen’s reality, much like dismissing the intricate workings of a clock by focusing only on its face, renders her question less about genuine concern and more a reflection of her own ignorance or prejudice. In failing to seek understanding, Nomzwakhe overlooks a fundamental reality: caregiving, regardless of age, is not simply an act of duty but one of love, resilience, and necessity, driven by circumstances far beyond one’s control.

Through reader-response theory, I contend that Noamen emerges not as a victim of societal

imbalance but as a symbol of enduring strength, nurturing her grandchild in the face of life’s relentless demands. From a reader-response point of view, I further argue “Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka” (2011) illustrates that an expanded discernment of individuals’ choices necessitates examining the underlying socio-economic and familial dynamic forces that influence their decisions, rather than relying on shallow judgements. Thus, I argue that caregiving by elders, recurrently driven by systemic challenges and personal determination, should be recognised as an adaptive response to societal imbalances rather than a deviation from generational norms. These declarations are observable in the following piece of textual evidence:

Wathi akubona uNomzwakhe ukuba ayizimisele ukumxelela nto loo mazi, wancokola ndaba zimbi. Waqala ngokubuza ukuba uphi na unina womntwana sel'exakeke ngolo hlobo ngumntwana nje. ElikaNoamen ukuphendula loo mbuzo yaba lelithi, akakayazi na okanye ayikamveleli na yena into yokunyengezelwa umntwana engangoba engako nje?

(Magqashela et al. 2011, p.21).

*When Nomzwakhe saw that the woman did not intend to tell her anything, the conversation was redirected. She started by asking where the child's mother was when Noamen was so occupied with a child. Noamen's answer to that question was, does she not know or has not encountered the reality of being dumped with a child?*  
(Translation mine).

Therefore, it is my view that Nomzwakhe’s ideology contradicts African values and belief systems, which emphasise community-based responsibility and the intergenerational care of children as a shared duty originated in Ubuntu (humanity to others)—recognising that “a person is a person through other people.” Nomzwakhe’s dismissive stance reflects an individualistic and shallow worldview, antithetical to the depth of African community-based ethos, as though she has forgotten the very roots that once nurtured her. Through the perspective of reader-response theory, the reasons compelling grandparents to assume the role of primary caregivers for their grandchildren unfold like a mosaic, inviting interpretations modelled

by individual ideologies and personal experiences. For some readers, this scenario may resemble a weighty inheritance, laden with challenges that strain the ageing shoulders of grandparents (Mtshali 2015; Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2018). They may perceive it as symptomatic of broader societal fractures—absent parents, a collapse in familial support structures, or the grinding gears of economic hardship.

Such an interpretation may evoke concerns about the fairness of the situation, painting it as a double-edged sword that risks wounding both the grandparents and grandchildren. Given these circumstances, I am of the view that if Nomzwakhe's ideology dismisses Ubuntu (humanity to others), is she advocating for a "me first" principle in a continent built on a "we" principle? Could her stance, ironically framed as progressive, be the very antithesis of the communal values that sustain African resilience? Once more, the answer to these questions lies in recognising how Nomzwakhe's ideology embodies a paradox: while seemingly modern, it distorts the intergenerational solidarity foundational to African communities. This implies that by undermining these African principles, it risks alienating those whose sacrifices anchor communal survival, exposing the fragility of the very progress she may claim to champion.

Yet, a counterview emerges when one considers the determination inherent in these familial dynamic forces. To others, this caregiving arrangement is a testament to intergenerational solidarity, a traditional thread of progress weaving a protective tapestry against life's tempests. Far from a burden, it symbolises the enduring strength of familial ties, where the grandparents' nurturing hands provide stability and optimism in the face of adversity. Accordingly, "Inxeba Lendoda Alihlekw" (2011) becomes less about impartiality and more about the resilience and adaptability of human connections, remodelling what initially appears as a disadvantage into an act of profound love and responsibility. As this subject develops, the following excerpt becomes observable:

Ndizele kaloku mfazi. Andazi nokuba awunamntwana na wena. Mhlawumbi ke abakho benza into ethandwa nguwe. Abam ke benza ethandwa ngabo, abasandiboneli ntweni mna. Ubunokuthini wena xa uvuka

kukhala umntwana yedwa emandlalweni engavuki ndawo unina?' wayibuza yamininzi yanjalo imibuzo lo mfazi  
(Magqashela et al. 2011, p.23).

*I gave birth. I do not even know if you have a child. Maybe they do not do what you like. Mine are doing what they like, they do not see me anymore. What would you say when you wake up to a child crying alone in bed without their mother?' She asked the woman so many questions  
(Translation mine).*

Applying the reader-response theory to this excerpt unveils two significant layers of meaning, each deserving thoughtful consideration. Firstly, some readers may step into the shoes of the old woman, Noamen, empathetically navigating the rocky terrain of her newly assumed responsibilities. In this consideration, readers may feel a tug of concern for both the child's welfare and the mounting burden placed upon her as the grandmother. This emotional response mirrors a great consciousness of the adversities that lie ahead, focusing on the fragile demands of the child and the profound ripple effects on the grandmother's life. Here, the child's welfare serves as the anchor in this short story, while the old woman's age emerges as a key factor, highlighting the delicate balance she must strike. Secondly, some readers may cast a critical eye on the daughter's actions, questioning her parental responsibilities and the potential long-term consequences of her neglect. In this context, the interpretation should probe the underlying factors for the daughter's decision to leave the child behind, seeking to unmask the chain of events and the far-reaching impact on both the child and the grandmother. I, therefore, submit that grandparenting underscores the burden placed on older family members in caregiving roles, particularly in the context of children's welfare, and highlights the detrimental consequences of neglectful parenting. This situation calls attention to the chemistry between familial responsibilities and the long-term implications for both the child's security and the caregiver's physical and emotional capacity. In the main, it becomes clear that the grandchild was left negligently by his mother:

*Olu sana uVuyo yayingunyana wentombi encinci kaNoamen, egama linguDaniswa.*

*Wayeluzimele walushiya lulele emandlalweni wemka nenye imoto kwezo wayehamba nazo.*

*(Magqashela et al. 2011, p.21).*

*This baby, Vuyo, was the son of Noamen's youngest daughter, whose name is Daniswa. She fled and left it lying on the bed, and left with the other car she was regularly travelling with (Translation mine).*

Through a reader-response theory, one potential peril is the immediate threat of physical harm a child may encounter when left unsupervised. Like a ship adrift without a captain, children and infants, unanchored by maturity or the necessary skills to ensure their safety, are adrift in a sea of potential dangers. This vulnerability exposes them to accidents, injuries, or hazardous situations, such as falls, ingestion of toxic substances, or encounters with harmful objects. In this context, I respond to these dangers, raising the alarm for the child's security and emphasising the urgent need to cultivate an environment that serves as a protective fortress. However, beyond the physical threats, the emotional and psychological toll of neglect or abandonment is equally devastating. A child left to their own devices potentially feels like a plant deprived of sunlight, withering in fear, anxiety, and insecurity. These emotional scars, as Aubel (2024, p.27) suggests, leave lasting imprints on a child's development, eroding their self-esteem and stunting their ability to form trusting relationships.

By the same token, I argue that in "Inxeba Lendoda Alihlelwa" (2011), the character of Noamen serves as a symbol of mockery—a representation of the village's shame for her so-called "problematic" children, whose presence seems to amplify the fractures in the community's social fabric. Yet, one may question whether Noamen's situation is merely a reflection of an unjust social hierarchy, where the true danger lies not only in neglect, but in the collective judgement that further isolates and diminishes those already vulnerable. Is it not possible, therefore, that the village's condemnation of Noamen, much like a blade that wounds both the handler and the held, could be contributing to the very emotional and psychological consequences they so readily denounce? As the short story progresses, the next piece of textual evidence becomes notable for scholarly scrutiny:

*Intombi enkulu, umafungwashe, wayebeleke usana lwayo olunyanga mbini yaya apho kwazi yona. Unyana omkhulu welo khaya uMvuyisi wayeminyaka mibini ethothoza kwesimyama isisele, etsala isigwebo sokubetha de abulale umhlobokazi wakhe, kanti ithunjana lona, umninawa wakhe, onguZola, wayelele ngandletyananye esibhedlele, egcuma zizivubeko, echizisa amanxeba emvubu. Wayebethwe ngabahlali baloo lokishi yaseNgangelizwe eMthatha ngenxa yokudlwengula imveku eminyaka mithandathu. Wayesisigculelelo sokuhlekisa uNoamen kuyo yonke loo Ngangelizwe. Zazisithi ezinye iimazi abantwana bakhe benjalo nje kukuba ubafekethisa kakhulu. Akukho nenye mini ayikhumbulayo efekethisa abantwana bakhe uNoamen. Wayebangathi uyabakhuthaza ekwenzeni izinto ezingatshongo khona kubahlali. Yayilala ilihlwili imihla nezolo intliziyo yaloo ntombi yasemaTolweni. Babemgxeka kwangaloo nto yokugcinela iintombi zakhe ezihamba esithubeni abantwana. Babesithi uyazikhuthaza ngokwenjenjalo ukuba mazizale zizise abantwana ekhaya*

*(Magqashela et al. 2011, p.22-23).*

*The eldest daughter of Noamen, had given birth to a two-month-old baby, and disappeared. The eldest son of this family, Mvuyisi, was imprisoned in a dark cell for two years, serving a sentence of beating and killing his friend, while the youngest, his brother, Zola, was lying on his arm in the hospital, suffering from bruises and bleeding wounds. He was beaten by the residents of Ngangelizwe township in Mthatha for raping a six-year-old child. She (Noamen) was the laughing stock throughout the village. Others said that she knows her children are just like that because she embroiders them a lot. Noamen remembers not a single day embroidering her children. She was seen as if she was encouraging them to do things that were not expected by the residents. Her heart was in pain and sorrow, day and night. They (village people) were criticising*

*her for keeping children for his daughters who were roaming the streets. They said that she encourages them to give birth and bring children home (Translation mine).*

Drawing from this excerpt, it is clear that problematic and unruly behaviour in children exerts a heavy toll on parents, akin to a relentless storm battering a fragile shore. The crushing weight of constant stress, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy engulf parents (Mtshali 2015, p.77), leaving them emotionally drained and overwhelmed. The daily battle to manage challenging behaviours results in diminished parental well-being and emotional exhaustion, as proffered by Mohangi (2023, p.238). By the same token, the social stigma and judgement from others act like sharp thorns, solidifying the distress and sense of isolation that parents may already feel. In “Inxeba Lendoda Alihlekwá” (2011), Noamen’s plight is compounded by the ridicule of the community, who mock her struggles, deepening her feelings of shame and helplessness. This mockery becomes a harsh echo that intensifies her sense of isolation, creating an environment where support is scarce and comfort even more elusive. For these reasons, I put forward that external judgement feeds into a cycle of stress and disconnection, ultimately worsening the parent-child relationship and potentially accelerating the child’s problematic behaviour.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge a counter-argument that suggests not all community reactions are destructive. In some cases, community involvement and support serve as a lifeline for struggling parents, offering empathy and concerted wisdom. Rather than isolating the parent, a supportive community could—and should—become a cushion against the crushing realities of parenting challenges, advancing a sense of collective responsibility and shared determination. In such contexts, the emotional burden could be lessened as parents find strength in knowing they are not alone in their struggles. This alternative philosophy underscores the potential for communal networks to cement welfare and augment the coping mechanisms of parents, helping to curb the negative spiral of stress and isolation.

With these arguments in mind, I further submit that driving mockery of parents who care for their grandchildren is not only unproductive

but also undermines the fundamental African principles of Ubuntu (humanity to others), which draw attention to collective responsibility and community-based support. This mockery betrays the vastly ingrained cultural values of respect for elders and intergenerational care, which are core to maintaining social harmony and familial cohesion in African communities. This means that by belittling the efforts of these parents, society propagates an environment of neglect, effectively eroding the very foundation of communal solidarity that sustains African societies.

As the short story unfolds, a striking irony begins to emerge through the actions of MamNtshilibe, a neighbour of Noamen. Initially, MamNtshilibe takes pleasure in mocking and humiliating Noamen’s struggles, seemingly oblivious to the complexities of human vulnerability. Nevertheless, the plot takes a turn when MamNtshilibe’s own daughter, Thuliswa, becomes entangled in the perilous world of drug dealing. This turn of events underlines a crucial inconsistency in MamNtshilibe’s behaviour—a disconnect between her harsh judgement of Noamen’s situation and the turmoil now brewing within her own family. In this moment, the short story weaves a metaphorical tapestry of how one’s own vulnerabilities, when overlooked or ridiculed by others, return like a shadow, revealing the profound truths of the human condition. In other words, by ridiculing Noamen’s defenselessness, MamNtshilibe fails to see the mirrors reflecting her own struggles, especially those tied to the unpredictable nature of parenting. This dramatic irony intensifies as MamNtshilibe must now face the crushing weight of her own unspoken struggles. Yet, this irony is not just a cruel twist of fate—it should be interpreted as a mirror, inviting a sober reflection on the ways in which humanity frequently amplifies the defenselessness of others while concealing their own.

The counter-narrative here denotes that MamNtshilibe’s mockery, rooted in societal judgement, is not only a reaction to Noamen’s perceived weakness but also an unconscious attempt to distance herself from her own fears and insecurities, which have now manifested in her daughter’s actions. On the grounds of these reasons, critical questions should be asked: How often do individuals, like MamNtshilibe, mock

others as a shield to mask their own weaknesses, only to later confront those very frailties within themselves? Is it not profoundly ironic that the same societal judgements MamNtshilibe wields against Noamen ultimately reflect her own unexamined fears, now embodied in her daughter's struggles? Again, the answer to these questions lies in the short story's depiction of irony as a tool for exposing the cyclical nature of judgement and vulnerability. Within this framework, MamNtshilibe's ridicule of Noamen is a projection of her own insecurities, which resurfaces as a poignant reminder that no one is immune to the unpredictability of human fragility.

Given these scholarly observations, I contend that this experience underlines the discord between criticising someone's struggles while grappling with similar challenges themselves, highlighting a dissonance between their actions and personal experiences. It mirrors a failure to empathise with the complex realities of parenting—the turbulent seas of guiding children through their own emotional storms. This lack of empathy appears as both insensitive and hypocritical, as it mocks a situation they too are navigating, like a captain mocking the storm while sailing through it. Ironically, this behaviour not only expands the pain of the person being ridiculed but also contributes to a toxic environment, one that discourages others from seeking refuge or support in their own times of desperation. Instead of offering a lifeline of understanding, this humiliation intensifies vulnerability, cementing a negative cycle that stifles growth. A counter-argument to this ought to encourage an environment where vulnerability is met with compassion, turning humiliation into understanding. In “Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka” (2011), recognising the irony of this behaviour becomes essential for advancing a culture of kindness and support in both parenting and broader community interactions. It calls for reflection on personal conduct and urges individuals to extend compassion, understanding that everyone's journey—especially through the turbulent waters of parenting—carries its own challenges and liabilities, deserving of solidarity rather than ridicule.

“

Close friends or relations,  
much like sculptors  
modelling clay, wield a  
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individuals' self-perception  
and self-esteem  
(Montle 2021).

”

In contrast to these scholarly debates, I contend that it is crucial to accept that the behaviour of ridiculing others in this short story emerges from individuals who are within close proximity, as Magqashela et al. (2011, p.23) note. This scenario highlights how ridicule and humiliation from those closest to us strike a much greater emotional chord. Close relationships, akin to delicate threads woven with trust and weakness, carry an inherent promise of emotional safety. When these threads are torn by ridicule or belittlement, the betrayal of trust feels like a harsh storm disrupting what was once a calm, supportive refuge. The emotional aftermath of such a breach is not only one of disappointment and betrayal but also breeds feelings of confusion and sorrow, as the bond that is believed to be unshakeable now feels fragile and fractured.

Beyond this assertion, those in our inner circles are acutely aware of our personal insecurities and vulnerabilities, which are recurrently used as weapons in moments of mockery. This intimate knowledge makes their actions particularly damaging, for it feels as though they are attacking the very core of who we are. The sting is sharper because we expect these individuals—who know us best—to protect, not wound. However, it is also important to acknowledge the possibility of a counter-narrative: that close relationships are sometimes a site of growth, where ridicule may

not always signal harm. In certain contexts, teasing among friends or loved ones, when grounded in mutual respect and understanding, serves as a means of challenging each other and fostering resistance. While it does not excuse outright humiliation, this alternative philosophy suggests that some instances of mockery are not attacks, but opportunities for strengthening the bond if *and, only if*, handled with care and empathy.

Close friends or relations, much like sculptors modelling clay, wield a profound influence on individuals' self-perception and self-esteem (Montle 2021). Their opinions and judgements serve as chisels that either refine and enhance a person's sense of self-worth or create cracks that expose weaknesses. When friends or close relations actively engage in humiliation, especially towards those they hold dear, they risk becoming unwitting architects of self-doubt, chiselling away at confidence and cementing the fissures of existing insecurities. This internalisation of negative remarks or actions blooms into emotional distress, manifesting as self-doubt, shame, or a diminished sense of identity like a sculpture left unfinished and fragmented.

In any event, the same sculptor may also create a masterpiece of support and validation. Encouraging words and genuine validation from close friends or relatives may act as a restorative touch, filling the cracks with gold, much like the Japanese art of kintsugi (gold seams). This then highlights the transformative power of human relations built on mutual respect and kindness, proving that close relationships should become sanctuaries of healing rather than sources of harm. Therefore, uncomfortable questions must be asked: How can those entrusted with nurturing self-worth become the very agents of its destruction? Is it not ironic that the same hands capable of mending cracks with kindness recurrently deepen them with ridicule? The answer to these questions lies in the duality of human relationships, where the same sculptor who chisels away at insecurities with ridicule may also restore dignity with affirmations, underscoring the necessity for relationships to serve as sanctuaries of healing rather than arenas of harm. Nonetheless, with these scholarly debates, the next final section presents some concluding remarks.

## Concluding Remarks

The diagnostic exploration of "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka" (2011) uncovers the profound implications of mockery and ridicule on both individuals and communities. This means that by focusing on the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of celebrating another person's vulnerability, the scholarly analysis herein proves that ridicule is more than an act of humiliation—it is a corrosive force that undermines solidarity and mutual respect. The emotional resonance readers experience when engaging with characters subjected to mockery underscores the cyclical nature of judgement and vulnerability, urging society to reconsider the ethical underpinnings of interpersonal interactions. Mockery, as depicted in the selected short story, not only fragments community cohesion but also propagates systemic disparities by intensifying distorted stereotypes and widening individual insecurities. Even more notable, this article underscores the imperative of African philosophies such as Ubuntu (humanity to others), which advocate for interconnectedness and collective upliftment. The rejection of these principles through acts of ridicule disrupts the moral fabric essential for societal progress. In other words, by robustly interacting with literary texts such as "Inxeba Lendoda Alihleleka" (2011) through reader-response theory, readers are invited to critically reflect on their own behaviours and their impact on communal harmony. Ultimately, cementing empathy and compassion in interpersonal relations is essential to counter the destructive effects of mockery, transforming African communities into sanctuaries of healing and resilience.

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