

# “Itai Amen Satani Abhoikane”<sup>1</sup>: Killjoy Feminism in the Church

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## SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

On a typical Sunday afternoon, while roaming around the streets of TikTok, a social media application, my eyes landed on a video in which a female preacher was dancing vigorously on the pulpit. The comment section was filled with both words of admiration and notes of displeasure. It was clear in that moment that her theological pedagogy was unsettling for most. Yet, I found it intriguing. It is also on TikTok that I encountered the tagline, “*itai amen satani abhoekane*” [say amen and make satan bored]. I was sold on her disruptive use of language, the singing of secular music in church, and dancing with abandon on the pulpit. Her name is Chaplain Christabel Phiri, a woman who in my view is reshaping theological discourse in Zimbabwe. Beyond that, she redefines what it means to be Christian and troubles the dichotomy that exists around Christianity and feminisms. Drawing on Chaplain Christine Phiri as my case study, I reveal, in this paper, the possibilities of feminist praxis within the church space. I offer an analysis of five of her sermons, referred to here as theological performances, as well as other performance elements such as costume, gestures, conduct, and props, including language.

## KEYWORDS

Chaplain Phiri; African feminisms; Decoloniality; Popular Participatory Performance; African feminist theology; Killjoy feminism.

*kana dai papasina vakadzi vakaona kuti paneerror, vakadzi vangadai vasingaparidzi...panedzimwe protocol dzichatitadzisa kubudirira tichiti mukadzi ndewekungobereka nekunhingirika* [if there were no women who realised that there was an error, women would not be preaching today...certain protocol will deter us from succeeding, especially that women should just bear children and do things]. -Chaplain Phiri (2020).

## Feminism is for Everybody, God is for us All!

Christianity as a religion occupies a controversial, yet significant, space in Africa. Largely, it has been constructed as a religion, an institution, arguably even, a lifestyle founded on sanctity, purity, and holiness. Meanwhile, our

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1 Say Amen and make Satan bored.

foremost encounter with it as Africans was a choking one. As Isabel Phiri<sup>2</sup> notes, “to a large extent, Africans experienced the gospel as a tool of colonialism, classism and exclusionism”. Even now, I argue, Christianity largely postures as an exclusionary religion. The Church, both as a spatial site of Christianity and an institution, holds the codes of conduct that specify which kind of bodies are eligible to inhabit and worship in it. For this reason, queer people, who are largely considered *ihlazo*<sup>3</sup> [shameful] find it hard to belong. Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy<sup>4</sup> explore this exclusion in *Aliens in the Household of God*. Amanda Hodgson,<sup>5</sup> in her essay, *Can Queers Believe in God?*, ushers us into an autobiographical account of their push and pulls with their intersecting identities as Christian, feminist, and queer. Similarly, Koleka Putuma<sup>6</sup> in her poem, adapted into a play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers* engages with the ideas around navigating the complexities of queerness, the church and home.

Fundamentally, Christian doctrines as with other religions, overtly specify codes of conduct that detail how one should behave, dress, speak, and conduct themselves. Most of these rules and regulations control and regulate women as well as queer people. Specific Bible verses, such as Ephesians 5:22–24, are co-opted for the subjugation of women and queer people: “wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour”. Solomon Ademiluka<sup>7</sup> acknowledges that, in literal terms, this verse “resonates with African patriarchal marital relationships in which authority is wielded by the husband”. Within this framing, the designations are clear; women have no authority and queer people are non-existent.

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2 Isabel Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium," *Agenda* 18, no. 61 (2004). 16

3 Zethu Matebeni, "Ihlazo: Pride and the politics of race and space in Johannesburg and Cape Town," *Critical African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2018).

4 Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (New Africa Books, 1997).

5 Amanda Hodgson, "Can black queer feminists believe in God?," *Routledge Handbook of queer African studies* (2019).

6 Koleka Putuma, *Collective amnesia* (Uhlanga, 2017).

7 Solomon O Ademiluka, "Patriarchy and marital disharmony amongst Nigerian Christians: Ephesians 5: 22–33 as a response," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021). 1

The Book of Genesis, itself, which marks the beginning of humanity according to Christian teachings, sets the precedence by constructing Eve as a product of Adam's flesh and his second other (Genesis 2:20–23). Furthermore, in Chapter 3, Eve goes on to lead Adam into sin and that narrative is often reiterated to emphasise the sinfulness and unreliability of women. Even though verses are subject to interpretation, the dominant view in Zimbabwe is that a real woman serves and occupies the position of the second other and that men can only be with women and vice-versa. Such biblical texts are used to substantiate women's position as inferior and that of queer people as unnatural, hence, the penchant for constant policing and checking. In other words, women are blamed for bringing wrath upon humanity via Eve and queer people blamed for societal ills and misfortune.<sup>8</sup> This would explain why most churches are led by men, as they are considered the "trusted heads". It is a well-established fact that some churches (in Zimbabwe) do not afford women space to preach or take up positions in the Church.<sup>9</sup> This also includes the so - called good woman who is cisgender, heterosexual, reserved, and polite. Moreso, the "problematic queer body."

In Zimbabwe, the church scene is prescriptive of how people of God should dress and behave. The regulations target women more.<sup>10</sup> There is, therefore, a legitimated form of patriarchal supremacy that reigns in the Church. Moreover, its sustenance sometimes involves notions of violence, whereby women who dare challenge notions of submission or scripts of being, for example, are punished. Sandra Ndebele, a Zimbabwean Afro-pop artist was censured from the Seventh day Adventist church on the premise that her artistic endeavours were not in line with the doctrine.<sup>11</sup> I, too, as an Adventist, am aware that the way I look, dress, and behave is not consistent with Adventist ideals. Although the Church has not censured me, society censors me and, by extension, my family. My father discouraged me from

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8 Pauline Mateveke, "Zimbabwean Popular Cultural Expressions of Alternative Sexual Identities," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2022).

9 Terence Mupangwa and Sophia Chirongoma, "The challenges of being a female pastor: A case of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020).

10 Rekopantswe Mate, "Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe," *Africa* 72, no. 4 (2002).

11 Retracted for peer review

joining the traditional dance club because it was believed to be demonic. My mother constantly reminded me that pants were unacceptable and that my *bhibho* [box cut hairstyle] was inappropriate. The query, "What will the church elders think?" similarly had me indulging in forms of self-censorship. From a place of love, I refrained from the things that would embarrass or compromise my parents' dignity. However, over the years, I have had to find myself and become home to her in her fullness; I did traditional dance in University and wear my *bhibho* and pants proudly. This coming home to myself has also meant me changing churches to ones that are unbothered by or, at least, do not preach about my *bhibho*. Meanwhile Adventism remains a part of me, it is tied to my identity.

These are not isolated examples. There are several instances where women have been punished or ostracised for behaving outside the prescribed ways of being. Sylvia Tamale<sup>12</sup> reminds us that when the hen crows, the cocks become anxious, hence, the surveillance. Surveillance is, in itself, a form of violence.<sup>13</sup>

For these, and other reasons, the Christian religion has often been implicated in sexism and upholding patriarchal dominance. In spite of this violence, women make up the majority of Christians in the world,<sup>14</sup> more so in Africa where there is "papa frenzy".<sup>15</sup> The *Papa* phenomenon characterises the fast-growing Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa, "initiated by young, predominantly male charismatic leaders".<sup>16</sup> Manyonganise<sup>17</sup> attributes women's large followership to the numerous social, economic, religious, and political challenges they face in a patriarchal world. It then follows that the gospel of prosperity, joy, liberation, and

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12 Sylvia Tamale, *When hens begin to crow: Gender and parliamentary politics in Uganda* (Routledge, 2018).

13 Michel Foucault, "panopticism" from "discipline & punish: The birth of the prison," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (2008).

14 Tony Walter, "Why are most churchgoers women," *Vox Evangelica* 20, no. 1 (1990).

15 Molly Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy," *The Bible and Violence in Africa*. Edited by Johannes Hunter and Joachim Kügler. Bamberg: University of Bamberg. (2016).

16 Ezra Chitando and Kudzai Biri, "Walter Magaya's Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries and Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe: a preliminary study with particular reference to ecumenism," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42, no. 2 (2016). 73

17 Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy."

emancipation is appealing to them. Yet, in reality, this space that is constructed as a place of perennial joy and freedom, unfortunately, incubates violence for women as well. Cases of sexual exploitation, including child marriages, is rampant in some Christian denominations.<sup>18</sup>

It is apparent, here, that women (African women in particular) have a complex relationship with Christianity. On one hand, it is their place of refuge, on the other, a site of oppression. The foregoing places Christianity at odds with feminist thinking and practice. According to Pinkie Mekgwe,<sup>19</sup> "Feminism, both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas, underlines the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life". Working towards this goal in a society that benefits from women's subordinate status is, nevertheless, not a neat process. It attracts backlash, shaming and more abuse. A number of African feminists who have dared to speak against cis-heteropatriarchal status quo in our socio-political fabric, the Church included, are labelled as wayward, problematic, unruly women, among other terms. One such feminist is Stella Nyanzi. Like Sissie, who through her squint, critiques Africa's relationship with Europe in her everyday encounters in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*,<sup>20</sup> questions women who are considered "sister killjoys". The notion of the killjoys, the unfearful, problematic women who do not fit neatly within the packages of socio-political categories and norms is often ascribed to feminists.

In *The Promise of Happiness*,<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed extends Aidoo's cues in her conceptualisation of killjoy feminism:

Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising...Feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others;

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18 Cornelius Dudzai, Kwashirai Zvokuomba, and Tarisai Gracious Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. (2023).

19 Pinkie Mekgwe, "Theorizing African feminism (s)," *African feminisms* 11 (2008).

20 Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy, or, Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*. (Longman, 1977).

21 Sara Ahmed, "Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness," *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (2010): 65

she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, to meet over happiness.

In the context of this paper, happiness refers to the ideals of the promised land and everlasting joy. Those who disobey the Christian order and submissive principles of being God's children disturb the concept of happiness, joy, and peace that is espoused by Christianity. They are "undutiful daughters".<sup>22</sup> Given this, feminisms and Christianity have often been juxtaposed. Some feminists have abandoned the Church altogether because it is a space and site that not only excludes them but shames them. Likewise, some Christian women denounce feminism or dissociate themselves from the movement either because it is *too much*, or they are considered not feminist enough. But feminism is for everybody<sup>23</sup> and God is for us all.

As has been established through research, most women affiliate to Christianity<sup>24</sup> and this makes the Church a fertile ground for both feminist inquiry and intervention. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie proffers, "it is impossible to have a conversation about gender in Sub Saharan Africa without engaging with religion".<sup>25</sup> As a radical feminist whose scholarly interests are in the study of the taboo and embraces Christianity as a significant part of me, I argue that there is space for feminism and Christianity to co-exist. This argument is not new. It is the argument that makes up the crux of African women's theology, a movement that focuses on the liberative potential of Christianity in an African context and read from a woman's perspective.<sup>26</sup> In other words, African women theologians are committed to offering an alternative reading of Christianity and its relationship with women. In this way feminisms and Christianity become a co-existing possibility. In this paper, I demonstrate how this possibility is embodied by Christine Phiri, a Zimbabwean chaplain whose

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22 Danai S Mupotsa, "Being/becoming an undutiful daughter: Thinking as a practice of freedom," in *Transforming teaching and learning in higher education: Towards a socially just pedagogy in a global context* (Springer, 2017).

23 Bell Hooks, *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics* (Pluto Press, 2000).

24 Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy."

25 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Not A Christian but an Agnostic." [https://youtu.be/f\\_P8an8Ekv8?si=F5ASZUgep5fOdxsl](https://youtu.be/f_P8an8Ekv8?si=F5ASZUgep5fOdxsl). 2018. Accessed on 13 October, 2023.

26 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

interdenominational ministry has become popular in Zimbabwe and the region.

## Conceptual and Methodological Choices

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ponders, in the same interview referred to in the earlier sections, how we can begin to craft a feminism that is situated in progressive Christianity. This paper draws on killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies to reveal the ways in which Chaplain Phiri has already begun that work. African feminist theologies belong within the broader ambit of African liberation theologies that seek to push back against western theology that disparaged African ways of knowing and relating to their God.<sup>27</sup> However, its tangent from other African liberation theologies is predicated on how the latter perpetuates problematic trajectories of patriarchal oppression by centring the Black African man while overlooking the Black African woman.<sup>28</sup> The theological frame is attributed to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989 to facilitate research, writing, and publication by a network of women interested in exploring the impact of religion and culture on women.

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As a political project, African feminist theologies "are committed to exposing the ideological base of Christianity that maintains and justifies the oppression of women".<sup>30</sup> Some theologians refuse to identify as feminist, hence the rise of another brand of theology on African women called African women's theologies. This mirrors the feminist /womanist debates in which some Black women dissociate themselves from the term "feminist" because of its associations with the West. For the purposes of this paper, I use the two interchangeably as I am most interested in using them as a frame or

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27 Vincent Pascal Gucha, "Oduyoye, Amba Mercy. African Women's Theologies, Spirituality, and Healing: Theological Perspectives from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Transform: A Journal of Biblical, Theological and Practical Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition* 1, no. 1 (2022).

28 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Masiwa Ragies Gunda, "Black Theology and Insights from African Women's Theologies," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022).

29 Teresia M Hinga, "African feminist theologies, the global village, and the imperative of solidarity across borders: The case of the circle of concerned African women theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002).

30 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium." 21

lens, of which they more or less share ideological objectives.<sup>31</sup> One of the core tenets of African feminist theologies is the inclusion of men in the vision of dismantling patriarchy as evil.<sup>32</sup>

Another key feature of African feminist theologies of relevance to this paper is the use of stories in theological teachings. According to Nadar, “story or narrative theology as a feature of African feminist theology situates storytelling as a legitimate method and source of theology”.<sup>33</sup> These stories include sharing personal experiences and that of others to drive the message home. Indeed, Isabel Phiri<sup>34</sup> concurs that most of African women’s theology has not been written down, it is oral. This speaks to the other tenet of being context-specific: “African feminist theologies have sought to specify their localities and hence their theological methods based on their specific locations”.<sup>35</sup>

I gravitate towards African feminist theologies because it “scrutinises existing truths”<sup>36</sup> and calls the church to account.<sup>37</sup> Thus, there is room for critique in the ways in which women are represented in the Bible versus how they are perceived and treated in the Church and community at large. In highlighting killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies, I am attempting to locate a formidable base upon which to launch a conversation about Chaplain Phiri’s feminism in the church. As will be demonstrated in the paper, her theology is negotiated, accommodating, and radical, based on subjective experiences of being African, black, and woman. In doing so, she subjects the status quo to scrutiny and engages with storytelling as a medium.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a critical qualitative research methodology. According to Norman Denzin,<sup>38</sup> a critical qualitative enquiry is

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31 Sarojini Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions* (2012).

32 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

33 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 276

34 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

35 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 276

36 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 277

37 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Christianity and African culture," *International Review of Mission* 84, no. 332-333 (1995).

38 Norman K Denzin, "Critical qualitative inquiry," *Qualitative inquiry* 23, no. 1 (2017).



one committed to exposing and critiquing the forms of inequality and discrimination that operate in daily life. I draw on a textual analysis of five YouTube texts in the form of sermons. Chaplain Phiri's content is mostly distributed and shared on TikTok, Facebook, and other social media spaces. The digital archive is quite critical in that the work transcends geographical and spatial boundaries. That, in itself, is a disruptive form. Data was gathered from the content, the ways in which these sermons are delivered, and the costume and props that she uses. The following sermons were sampled: *KuCorrector Error*,<sup>39</sup> *One Ari Ega*,<sup>40</sup> *Sunga Jombo Tiende*,<sup>41</sup> *Industrial Women [Women of Steel]*,<sup>42</sup> and *What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men)*.<sup>43</sup> A thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data.

## Here is To Killing Joy: Findings and Analysis

It has been noted that theology is a male dominated space.<sup>44</sup> This presents a myriad of challenges for women who want to pursue theology, among them being the frustrations of not being ordained or how long it took to be placed.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, women usually play, or are assigned, supporting roles such as praise and worship and ushering, among other things. This is discouraging and frustrating for those who are keen on exploring their spiritual gifts as pastors, prophets, or elders. In Zimbabwe, for example, there are few women theologians leading ministries. Most of those that assume the position of pastor or apostle usually do so through marriage. By virtue of being a Pastor's wife, one also becomes a pastor or apostle. This, however,

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- 39 Christine Phiri, "kuCorrector Error " (13 December 2020, YouTube: Cross Before Crown TV, 18 September 2023), Sermon. <https://youtu.be/3o6Jgl9ssOg?si=rGhHwC896R7q8ARH>.
- 40 Christine Phiri, "One Ari Ega " (14 July 2020, YouTube: Laycluse Creations, 03 September 2023), Sermon. <https://youtu.be/3kgfWZFvVXc?si=7u5bRiVV1jEraYwM>.
- 41 Christine Phiri, "Sunga Jombo Tiende," (16 July 2020, YouTube: Laycluse Creations, 18 September 2023), Sermon. [https://youtu.be/l3\\_Ufw36Fvk?si=EZNHLGvo\\_DJIKIDG](https://youtu.be/l3_Ufw36Fvk?si=EZNHLGvo_DJIKIDG).
- 42 Christine Phiri, "Industrial Women (Women of Steel)," (26 July 2023, YouTube: Chaplain Phiri, 27 September 2023), Sermon. <https://youtu.be/PDIXme7ukgE?si=yKIUylTPO1sMMV05>.
- 43 Christine Phiri, "What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men)," (25 August 2023, YouTube: Chaplain Phiri, 25 September 2023), Sermon. <https://youtu.be/g9vJd8Ev1Z0?si=qKo9wyYyHN2D-uZO>.
- 44 Hinga, "African feminist theologies, the global village, and the imperative of solidarity across borders: The case of the circle of concerned African women theologians."
- 45 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

is always a supportive role, where a woman's credibility is only recognized when she is the other. Using AFM as a case study, Mupangwa and Chirongoma<sup>46</sup> document how female pastors in the church often noted that pastors' wives exercised power over ordained female pastors because of their proximity to male figures. In cases where both the wife and husband are pastors, the woman is expected to step down and allow the husband to lead the ministry.

The dearth of women in the Zimbabwean theological space also means that the gospel remains mostly male-centred. Moreover, the few women that thrive in those circumstances are those who live according to heteropatriarchal scripts. Respect is given to women theologians who promote domesticity, wifehood, and motherhood.<sup>47</sup> Christine Phiri defies these odds in many respects. Although she never referred to herself as a feminist, I position her as a killjoy feminist due to her embodiment of feminism in her theological practice. A biographical analysis, therefore, is an appropriate place to begin this discussion.

Phiri's feminism is a lived reality; it does not begin on the pulpit and end there. A Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services Chaplain, Phiri's life story is one punctuated by "carrying six mountains on the back".<sup>48</sup> The concept of six mountains on the back is coined by Leslie Ogundipe to refer to the multiple forms of oppression that weigh heavily on African women. Chaplain Phiri was an orphan, a widow, and a sex worker, suffered a mild stroke and survived a brain tumour.<sup>49</sup> Her life story is a recurring motif in her sermons, as she draws on her personal life to profile her arduous journey and how she persevered. Instead of portraying herself as a sacrosanct entity, Phiri brings her "dirty linen" or "sins" onto the pulpit. Indeed, Nadar<sup>50</sup> considers the use of personal accounts and lived experiences as a distinct feature of African feminist theologians. The intersectedness of Phiri's struggles, as a Black African woman and her encounters with God, reveal

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46 Mupangwa and Chirongoma, "The challenges of being a female pastor: A case of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe."

47 Mate, "Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe."

48 M Ogundipe-Leslie, "Recreating ourselves: Gender issues for African women today," *School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 8 (1996).

49 Phiri, "One Ari Ega".

50 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa."

how significant it is to localise experiences and theologise African women's experiences from situated knowledges. That Phiri was a sex worker before quitting to pursue a career with the Zimbabwe Prison Services (ZPS) can be read in various ways. However, her decision to quit, and I use the term *decision* deliberately to emphasise that it was a conscious decision on her part to leave sex work because she had only resorted to it as a short-term survival strategy, is feminist agency. That agency limns feminist consciousness in the context of the dreams that she had for herself and the life she wanted to live. Yet again, Phiri does not neatly fit into the dichotomous framing of sex work as bad or good. Even though she left sex work, and often speaks against it, Phiri uses some of the performative aspects of the trade, such as song and dance, to enhance her sermons. This will be unpacked fully in the forthcoming sections.

It was while she was serving as a prison official that Phiri enrolled at the school of theology. For a former sex worker, to get into the theology school and become one of the prominent theologians in Zimbabwe is quite a feat. Phiri often recounts in her sermons that people, especially those who knew her from before, refused to take her seriously after she was born again. In a sermon, she reveals that the person who made her video viral did so with the intention of disparaging her for her decorum and demeanour on the pulpit. She, however, uses the story to show off God's grace and love for all.

Although she is now popular and gets invited across denominations in the region, she says she, nevertheless, gets a fair share of insults on social media and most are hurled by fellow pastors, males in particular. "*Manje ini ndiriChihera Handikendenge*," [Because I am a Chihera I do not care] she says. *Chihera* is the name for a woman of the *Mhofu* (Eland) clan. They are known to be confident, assertive, commanding and controversial.<sup>51</sup> This qualifies Phiri as a feminist killjoy. Sometimes, "one is positioned as the killjoy by others due to presumed political beliefs or through being 'out of place' in the whiteness, the middle-classness, and the cissexist-ableist patriarchy of the academy".<sup>52</sup> Phiri kills the joy of the men who, for so long,

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51 Ezra Chitando, Sophia Chirongoma, and Munyaradzi Nyakudya, "Introducing a Radical African Indigenous Feminist Principle: Chihera in Zimbabwe," in *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle* (Springer, 2023). 1

52 Órla Meadhbh Murray, "Feel the fear and killjoy anyway: Being a challenging feminist presence in precarious academia," *Feeling academic in the neoliberal university: Feminist flights, fights and failures* (2018).

have monopolised the theological space by grabbing a seat at their table and, while at it, disrupting theirs and carving her own theological etiquette.

In the following sections, I reveal in detail how Chaplain Phiri's theology mirrors/is killjoy feminism.

## Embodying Killjoy Feminism in Church: Findings on Form

In reading and analysing Phiri's sermons on YouTube, oratory prowess, role play, music, dance, and language emerge as key features of her theological pedagogy. As an applied theatre practitioner, I am intrigued by the way she delivers her sermons. Particularly as it follows the trajectory of Popular Participatory Theatre (PPT), a form that is centred on the people, it promotes dialogue and makes use of popular modes of expression that are relatable to a given people.<sup>53</sup> Phiri's use of popular participatory methods on the pulpit makes her theology a distinct kind of killjoy feminist praxis.

A trademark feature of Phiri's theology is role-play. With role-play, as the term suggests, one plays the role of someone other than themselves. Phiri uses role-play as both an entertainment function and pedagogical approach. The pedagogical value of role-play as an active, playful and social activity is well recognised in various disciplines, including formal educational settings.<sup>54</sup> When Phiri tells stories on the pulpit it is similar to a one-woman show where she embodies various characters. In all the sermons under study there is an element of role-play of some sort. Either she imitates someone she interacted with to stress a point or reimagines biblical accounts through role-play. In *kuCorrector Error*, she reimagines Mary's interactions with the Roman soldiers who were guarding Jesus' tomb: "When Mary asks *kuti mamuisepi* [where have you taken him], *vakati* [they said], 'listen Mary, it was uhm something that happened at midnight uhm there was darkness and then uhm...'" Based on the biblical passage in John 20:1–18, she gives it character and repackages it into an everyday story. This makes her sermons fun and relatable, akin to PPT where role-play and humour allow

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53 Miranda Young-Jahangeer, "'Less than a dog': interrogating theatre for debate in Westville Female Correctional Centre, Durban South Africa," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 18, no. 2 (2013).

54 JD Adams and MS Mabusela, "Employing role-play in teaching and learning: A case of higher education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 27, no. 3 (2013).

for people to tackle and discuss very complex issues in a more palatable way.<sup>55</sup> Phiri uses the techniques to engage congregants and localise the gospel in relation to their everyday realities. Hence, a popular participatory theology.

Another defining feature of Phiri's theology is her oratorship. She has a deep voice that she uses as to knit together and tell stories that capture the imagination of her followers. The idea of using stories, both personal and otherwise, to preach is a common trait among African women theologians.<sup>56</sup> While there are concerns that African women's theology is mostly oral and not documented, I argue that storytelling and oral narratives are legitimate archives that form a significant part of African ways of being and communicating. Phiri's storytelling, however, is laced with other mediums that make it distinct and appealing. Language is one of them.

*Itai ameni satani abhowekane* translates to "say amen and make satan bored". This can be considered Phiri's tagline as it is repeated multiple times in her sermons. In the world of poetry, this would be called a refrain, that is, a word or phrase that gets repeated at specific intervals in a poem. Her tagline is an unlikely statement for a preacher. Often the language employed in church is very formal while Phiri uses slang, "a linguistic style that occupies an extreme position on the spectrum of formality... and is socially less acceptable".<sup>57</sup> Examples include terms like *bho here*, *mboko*, *ndiitirei mushe*, *mafesi angu*, phrases that form part of the "ghetto youths lingo". Ghetto youths is a popular term that refers to young people who live in the high-density suburbs referred to as the ghetto and are often "stereotyped and associated with idling at street corners and bridges and illicit behaviours such as smoking *mbanje* (marijuana)".<sup>58</sup>

Phiri even refers to some biblical figures as *mdara* Judah and *Mukoma* Balak. *Mudhara* and *mukoma* are colloquial shona terms often used by boys and men in reference to each other. Moreover, the title *One Ari Ega* (one

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55 Young-Jahangeer, "'Less than a dog': interrogating theatre for debate in Westville Female Correctional Centre, Durban South Africa."

56 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

57 Aquilina Mawadza, "Harare Shona slang: A linguistic study," *Zambezia* 27, no. 1 (2000). 93

58 Doreen Rumbidzai Tivenga, "Contemporary Zimbabwean popular music in the context of adversities," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 55, no. 1 (2018). 135

who is alone) is street lingo derived from *mahwindi* (touts), who use the line to attract commuters who are rushing to their destinations. *Mahwindi* are generally considered people without a moral grounding. The language that she uses and its apparent associations with a group of people who would be considered “sinners” make Phiri’s theological pedagogy a distinct yet inclusive one. It is for the people. She even refers to herself as “chappy”, short for Chaplain, or Kiri, short for Christine. This reference disrupts the hierarchies often associated with pastors.

Song and dance are also a distinct characteristic of Phiri’s theological pedagogy. With most preachers, song and dance is usually designated for the praise and worship team, Phiri, in contrast, is the protagonist. In the video referred to earlier, which brought her attention, Phiri was singing and dancing to a dancehall song, “*kanjiva*”. An elderly woman singing to that song in the Zimbabwean context would generally raise the ire of many, let alone having an elderly woman preacher for singing and imitating the dance moves on a pulpit, which would have been considered abominable. It unsettled many, especially male pastors. But that is the kind of music she gravitates towards. I argue further that secular music is the trademark of her theological pedagogy and makes her teachings inclusive, context specific, relevant, and powerful. She sings a number of Zimdancehall songs and mimics the dancing style of ghetto youths. She volunteers that she perfected the art of dancing as part of her sex work exploits in beerhalls and clubs. Other secular songs she sings include those of Jah Prayzah and Alick Macheso, household names in Zimbabwe.

The choice of music Phiri sings and dances to is untypical of a preacher and would ordinarily be considered unholy and undignified, yet Chaplain uses it to win souls and render the gospel in a language that people can relate to. This is the aesthetic that makes her popular among Zimbabweans but also positions her an undisciplined woman among other preachers. She avers in the sermon, *Sunga Jombo Tiende* that:

*Ndine mumwe mabati akanditi kana murimu Chipinda musasvetukasvetuka, kana murimuChipinda dzikamai, ndikati [breaks into song] “ini handikendenge kuti kuneChipinda, ini handikendenge”. Mwari varikuti Mwera utsvene urikuti fambai, ndikanzi isu muchurch meduhamuparidzwi muchifambafamba dzikamai semunhu waMwari. Ndikati ndauya kuzokoromora [One*

Pastor told me that while you are here at *Chipinda* you do not jump around, you need to be reserved and I said [in song] "I do not care that there is *Chipinda*". God the Holy Spirit is saying I need to move around and someone says in this church you do not fidget around while preaching, conduct yourself like God's person. I said, I am here to undo].

Phiri underscores her refusal to be policed and regulated by constructed doctrines. Performing all over the stage and extending to the auditorium remains a trademark of her theological pedagogy. Through this, she manages to break the fourth wall, a concept where the divide between audience and actors on stage is blurred/disrupted.<sup>59</sup> Typically, preachers use the banking method of teaching or preaching,<sup>60</sup> whereas Phiri affords space for interaction with the congregants. Sometimes the interactions take the form of call and response. For example, "*itai ameni satani abhoekane*" to which the people will respond, "amen". If the response is not resounding, she will make comments such as, "*ini vanhu vasina viba ndowanzodisconnector navo*" [I tend to disconnect with people who do not have a vibe]. Call and response is a critical aspect of storytelling practices in most parts of Africa. When Phiri breaks the fourth wall and sings and dances to secular songs that are associated mostly with *ghetto youths* onto the pulpit, she disrupts rigidity, gatekeeping, monopolisation, and exclusionary practices within the church space. She engages in a killjoy feminist praxis that unsettles the sacredness of the pulpit.

Phiri is also very deliberate about what she wears and the objects she uses while on the pulpit. In the sermon, *Industrial Women (Women of Steel)*, she can be seen wearing a worksuit, gumboots, and a helmet. This regalia is often worn by male labourers, specifically men who work in mines, farms, factories, and other related spaces. She in this instance uses the costume as a visual aid that frames her message on the need for women to take up space. The props in this case give the sermon profundity. Beyond that, her choice of costume and props exemplify her untypical pedagogy and how she transcends gender binaries that characterize Christian spaces.

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59 Augusto Boal and Charles A McBride, "Theatre of the Oppressed," in *The improvisation studies reader* (Routledge, 2014).

60 Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)," *New York: Continuum* 356 (1996).

## Speaking Killjoy Feminism in Church; Findings on Content

Apart from the form, a critical analysis of Phiri's sermons reveals how her content is etched in feminism. The feminist impulses of her theology can be seen in the titles of her sermons, themes, and sites in which she preaches. For example, *Industrial Women (Women of Steel)*, and *What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men)* both speak to a political project around agency and women. Women's amelioration from the woes of patriarchy in their various manifestations emerges as a central theme in the sermons under study, if not all of her sermons.

Phiri's major areas of focus are economic empowerment and socio-political agency. Phiri's content differs vastly from the orthodox Christian preaching that emphasises and promises prosperity and joy in heaven. What this kind of gospel does is to detach and distract African people from their realities of being stripped of their land, humanity, and dignity and have them focus on the promises of heaven. In contrast, her teachings focus on how people can be earthly relevant and prosperous emotionally, psychologically, and economically while preparing for heaven's blessings. *Industrial Women*, in particular, urges women to find their footing, self-identify and emancipate themselves in spite of their circumstances:

*"worama uchiti urinherera kusvika wane65? Wakarambwa so what, wakadadirwa so what. Rise up and work" [you still want to refer to yourself as an orphan at 65? You got dumped/divorced so what? You got shamed so what? Rise up and work].*

In the sermon *Simudza Jombo Tiende*, Phiri reiterates agency by stating that:

*kana takurwa hondo hakudi chiroora kana kudzikama, mazambia haasi ekuhondo...kuhondo hakudzikamwe dzikamwe zvenhema..kuhondo hakupfekwe gogo kunopfekwa jomb. [when we are at war, there is no space for playing reserved bride, wrapping cloths are not for war. At war there are no fake reservations, at war we do not wear high heeled shoes, we wear gumboots].*

The English language does not bring out the potency of the words she uses here, so I will attempt to unpack. *Chiroora* is a ritual/ceremony of celebrating a new bride. But moreover, the ceremony serves as an orientation to a



system that designates how a married woman should dress, behave, and conduct themselves in the family they marry into. In terms of demeanour, a good bride is reserved, dresses 'decently', speaks with deep respect and calmness, but is also expected to be active with domestic chores. The script determines when you ought to exhibit calmness and when you need to be active. *Chiroora*, I argue, is an institution aimed at sustaining the patriarchal domination, hence, punctuated with such control and policing. In the context of this knowledge, Phiri's call to women to not play *chiroora* in the war trenches is one of defiance. The war trenches in the sermon may have been in reference to spiritual warfare at the hands of devil but it can also extend to the various wars that women face every day.

*KuCorrector Error* is another example where Phiri speaks of agency. As the title suggests, the sermon calls upon the congregants to correct errors. Using the example of Zelophehad's daughters, she reiterates in the sermon in question that women ought to follow the cues and resist, challenge, and rewrite traditions, rules, and norms that are used as instruments of oppression. She states in the sermon that:

*Tinoda vasikana vakaita semadaughters of Zelophehad vanoti chokwadi vakadzi havasi vagari venhaka but Moses tauya takatofembekana, tauya takadhiniwa* [we want girls/women like the daughters of Zelophehad who say, yet it is true that women do not inherit estates but Moses we have come here, fed up, we are done!]

*we want to inherit the land of our fathers. Kunyangwe zvisina kuitwa mumashure.* [even though it has never happened before, the daughters of Zelophehad realised there was an error.]]

Phiri, here, invokes Freire's transformative pedagogy that offers "men [women] the confidence and the strength to confront those dangers instead of surrendering their sense of self through submission to the decisions of others".<sup>61</sup>

Phiri is also bold and unapologetic towards men of cloth who use their influence and power to harass women. In her article, "He Told Me that My

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61 Freire, "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)." 33

Waist and Private Parts Have Been Ravaged by Demons': Sexual Exploitation for female Church Members by 'Prophets' in Nigeria", Chima Agazue<sup>62</sup> captures this pandemic quite aptly. When "men of God" package exploitation as prophecy, it becomes difficult for people to call it out or name it what it is. As a result, pastors can abuse people without consequences. Phiri is courageous, however. She names and shames them. In *One Ari Ega*, she unequivocally states that, "*Mkoma Gumbura vakashandisa theology dzavo kuwomaniser vanhu. Dai Mwari vakubetserai mukashandisa influence yenyu for the Kingdom of God*" [Brother Gumbura used his theology to womanise (sic) people. May God bless you so you use your influence for the Kingdom of God]. Gumbura is the founder of Robert Martin Gumbura (RMG) Independent End Time Message Church in Zimbabwe who was convicted of raping four women from his church.<sup>63</sup>

## Women as Protagonists

I argued in the previous sections that Phiri's theology is a form of popular, participatory performance. In her performance(s), women are the protagonists. This is untypical in a religious space where patriarchal theology reigns. Men like Abraham, Solomon, Moses, and Paul have always been the major proponents of the Christian religion. Even Jesus Christ experiences the world in human form as a male. Phiri, however, refers often to Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, Mary, Esther, and ten virgins among other women in the Bible in most of her sermons, including herself and the women she has encountered in her life journey. Phiri's references to her story and that of female biblical characters is the kind of feminist reading of the Bible that African feminist theology aspires to.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, while Phiri's gospel appeals to many, women form part of her target audience. She has an apparent bias towards women, especially single mothers and widows, perhaps because she is one and understands the unique challenges that they face. Indeed, she is often invited to women's conferences, kitchen parties, and other fora that are

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62 Chima Agazue, "'He Told Me that My Waist and Private Parts Have Been Ravaged by Demons:' Sexual Exploitation of Female Church Members by 'Prophets' in Nigeria," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 1, no. 1 (2016).

63 Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro, "Discoursing women, Christianity and security: The framing of women in the Gumbura case in Zimbabwean media," *Agenda* 30, no. 3 (2016).

inhabited by women. However, even in instances where Phiri preaches in a church where everyone convenes, women remain her priority.

## An Inclusive Theology

That Chaplain Phiri centres women in her theology does not mean she is anti-men. She advocates for healthy marriages and partnerships between men and women in line with African feminist theologies. A good case in point is the sermon *What Women Want* (Advice to Men). The main thrust of her sermon is to educate men about what women expect from them. I recall Audre Lorde's<sup>64</sup> compelling critique on how the oppressed are often given the labour of educating those who oppress them. But Phiri's theology has also prompted me to rethink and question, whose duty is it then to educate?

In the sermon, Phiri draws on Ephesians 5:25–29 as her theoretical frame to emphasize how men should love and respect their women, be romantic, and participate in childcare among other themes:

*Kiss iyaya vanoidawo chero vachembera. Kungopotawo uchimuhviringa vhiringa uchimuconfuser. Ari pachoto ipapo ingoti mcwaa wonzi imi itai semurume mukuru asi anenge atofara ka. Haikona kuti vaonero rudo mumatv [these kisses they also want them even if they are married, get used to confusing your person with romance, while she is cooking just go mcwaaa and you will hear her say behave but she would have liked it].*

What she does through humour is to engage in a deep political project that presents an alternative perspective to the "what women should do to please their husbands" rhetoric. Additionally, she speaks openly about romance, specifically kissing, which is part of a broader topic that is shrouded in secrecy or demonised in Zimbabwean society, generally,<sup>65</sup> and church spaces, in particular. In that same sermon, Phiri symbolically brings the group of men and women into conversation by disrupting the Church's spatial protocol. The Zion set up divides between men and women; the two

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64 Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (Crossing Press, 2012).

65 Molly Manyonganise, "HIV-Positive Women Virgins: The Complexities of Discourse on Issues of Sex and Sexuality in Zimbabwe," *Research on Gender and Sexuality in Africa* (2017).

never sit together. Yet, while preaching, she negotiates the boundary crossing by saying, “*nditendereiwo muranda waMwari ndiswedere kuvarume*” [allow me servant of God to draw closer to the men] (which she does before they grant her permission anyway). Phiri, again, plays the Chihera archetype who, “while radical, does not intend to create a society independent of men”.<sup>66</sup>

## **A Disobedient Theology: Closing Remarks.**

A couple of questions and curiosities informed this paper. If religious spaces like the Church are the repository of heteropatriarchal scripts of being, should they not be the very fertile spaces for feminist inquiry and intervention? If so, how can feminism breathe, live, and manifest in religious spaces that are often constructed as unbreathable for women? I drew on Chaplain Christine Phiri’s theological practice to answer some of these questions. What emerges from the discussion above is that Phiri is a disruptor whose theological practice lends itself to the vast and heterogenous African Christianity movement. By an African Christian movement, I am referring to a Christianity whose practice is premised on our own experiences and unique encounters with God.

The form of her theological practice mirrors our everyday aesthetic and cultural expressions such as singing, dancing, and role play. Most importantly, she taps into the digital landscape, making the gospel more accessible beyond the geographical divide. In that way, the fourth wall/divide that often exists between the preachers and congregants is disrupted. It becomes a collaborative theology that is inclusive of everyone.

The content of her sermons, too, which I analysed in the paper, challenges us to think/rethink, learn, unlearn, and “correct errors” that continue to oppress African women. Isabel Phiri emphasizes that, “a way forward for theologies of Southern Africa is to take the current context into theological reflection”.<sup>67</sup> Chaplain Christine Phiri’s gospel seems to be on course with this vision that Isabel Phiri laid in 2004. Her gospel focuses on the socio-

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66 Excellent Chireshe, “The Chihera Mystique in Selected Writings by African Women Theologians,” in *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle* (Springer, 2023), 287

67 Phiri, “African women’s theologies in the new millennium.”

political issues affecting people in present day Zimbabwe, and southern Africa by extension. Such issues include gender-based violence, poverty, and unemployment, among others. It is a context-specific gospel that also speaks to the needs of those that occupy the margins. This is witnessed in her song choices and dance moves that are culturally relevant and popular among the ghetto youths, widows, and prison inmates, among others.

As I conclude this paper, I am convinced that if African women continue to be exposed to the gospel from the perspective of African women like Chaplain Phiri then the feminist goal of acknowledging women's full humanity is possible (inevitable, even). Her theology as demonstrated throughout the paper is popular, participatory and troublesome. I would add, it is disobedient and decolonial.<sup>68</sup> At the risk of being overambitious, I believe that in the same ways the *Papa* phenomenon has captured African women, a *mama* phenomenon has potential to influence healthier patterns of being in the Church and Phiri is an exemplar of this possibility. She shapes discourse around African theology by challenging us to complexify our understandings about it and its nuances. Moreover, she redirects us to the potential that the pulpit has in fighting patriarchy. Perhaps then, the pulpit may just be a fertile site that sets alight an alternative feminist agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa that is lethal enough to dismantle patriarchy.

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68 Walter D Mignolo, "Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom," *Theory, culture & society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009).

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