

**Journal of African Languages and Literary Studies
(JoALLS)**

ISSN 2633-2108 (Print) ISSN 2633-2116 (Online)

Accredited by DHET (the South African regulator of Higher Education) and is indexed by SCOPUS, IBSS, COPERNICUS, EBSCO and Sabinet

Volume 7, Number 1, March, 2026

Pp 27-51

**Exploring the Construction of Professional Identity
through Acts of Resistance: A Literary Analysis of J.M.
Magaisa's *A-E-I-O-U* Poem**

DOI <https://doi.org/10.31920/2633-2116/2026/v7n1a2>

Ndzalama Maluleke

University of Limpopo

School of Languages and Communication Studies

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0177-6576>

ndzalama.maluleke@ul.ac.za

&

Respect Mlambo

North-West University

South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0348-6726>

respect.mlambo@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

This study explores how professional identity is constructed through acts of resistance using Magaisa's poem *A-E-I-O-U*. Magaisa, a prominent Xitsonga poet, uses poetry to challenge dominant narratives and highlight the struggles of professionals under oppressive systems. Grounded in literary criticism, this study

employs a qualitative literary and textual analysis methodology to explore how Magaisa utilises literary devices to construct the central theme of resistance. Findings show that in Magaisa's A-E-I-O-U, professional identity is actively shaped through resistance. The teacher rejects political pressure, asserting moral agency and professional ethics, using silence, repetition, and metaphor to defend education as a principled pursuit. Political rhetoric, framed by religious and ideological symbols, attempts to sway professionals, but the teacher's refusal becomes a powerful act of self-definition. This study contributes to the burgeoning field of professional identity within African contexts by demonstrating how Xitsonga literature encapsulates complex ideological struggles, illustrating the resolute defence of professional integrity amidst intense socio-political pressure.

Keywords: *Professional Identity, Resistance, J.M. Magaisa, Poem, Literary Criticism*

Introduction

Language functions both as a medium and repository of meaning, playing a crucial role in the literary construction of identity. In poetry, this role becomes even more pronounced due to the genre's reliance on linguistic precision, conciseness, and its capacity to generate layered meanings (Nofal, 2011). Poetic language enables writers to articulate deeply personal experiences while simultaneously challenging, reshaping, or resisting dominant cultural and ideological discourses (Arcilla Jr., 2024). In this sense, poets do not simply use language for expression; they employ it as a critical instrument to interrogate power, dismantle normative frameworks, and conceive of alternative subjectivities and worldviews (Baldwin, 2017). This function acquires further depth when poetry addresses issues of identity in professional contexts, spaces where individual agency is often constrained by institutional expectations and systemic hierarchies. Professional identity refers to the self-perception individuals cultivate in relation to their occupational roles, shaped by internalised norms, values, and experiences of professional socialisation (Toubassi et al., 2023; Reissner & Armitage-Chan, 2024). Resistance, conversely, is understood as the conscious or unconscious opposition to dominant institutional discourses or power relations (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018). This resistance can manifest in multiple forms, covert or overt, symbolic or performative. Within this interplay, language functions as a dynamic arena where the tensions between conformity and dissent, or

personal ethics and institutional politics, are critically negotiated and expressed.

Poetry, with its distinctive stylistic features such as metaphor, symbolism, ambiguity, rhythm, personification, simile, oxymoron, hyperbole, and compressed expression, is particularly well suited to the articulation of complex and layered human experiences (Mwamburi, 2020). These literary devices enable poets to capture not only overt realities but also the silences, contradictions, and emotional undercurrents that often remain unspoken in conventional discourse (Arcilla Jr., 2024). In the context of professional identity, poetry offers a unique mode of expression through which individuals can grapple with internal conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and systemic constraints encountered within hierarchical or morally compromised professional spaces (Wald, 2011). The poetic act thus becomes a vehicle for self-reclamation and resistance, enabling marginalised or silenced voices to reassert their political and personal agency within structures designed to suppress dissent.

Within the African literary tradition, poetry has historically functioned as a vehicle for political resistance, cultural preservation, and social critique (Nkwinika, 2022). It has served as a repository for indigenous knowledge systems, communal values, and historical memory, while simultaneously challenging colonial domination and resisting cultural erasure (Mukherjee & Satpathy, 2024). This tradition recognises that language is never neutral; it is imbued with historical and ideological significance across its indigenous, colonial, and hybrid manifestations. Consequently, it is often harnessed as a site of discursive intervention, intended to subvert hegemonic narratives and reassert cultural agency (McKinney, 2016). J.M. Magaisa, a distinguished Xitsonga poet and author, exemplifies this literary tradition through his poetic works. His poem *A-E-I-O-U*, from the 1987 collection *Xikolokolo Nguvu ya Pitori*, stands out as a critical text that employs poetic language to question institutional authority and reflect the struggles of professionals navigating morally compromised environments.

Despite increasing recognition of the role that personal narratives and creative forms such as poetry play in articulating and negotiating professional identity, there remains a notable gap in both literary scholarship and professional identity discourse regarding the role of poetic resistance within Xitsonga literature. In recent years, Xitsonga poetry has garnered scholarly attention for its exploration of socio-political issues, as evidenced in the works of Nkwinika (2022), Maluleke (2024), and Shirindzi and Maluleke (2025). These studies have primarily addressed themes such as the unequal distribution of wealth as a mechanism for political control,

the representation of women and constructions of womanhood, and the exposure of corruption through linguistic expression. While these thematic inquiries offer valuable contributions to our understanding of socio-political commentary in Xitsonga poetry, they tend to neglect the subtler, yet equally important, ways in which poetry engages with professional identity. The use of poetic form as a nexus for emotional resistance, ethical reflection, and political critique within professional environments remains insufficiently theorised and under-explored. This omission is significant, given the increasingly complex moral landscapes that professionals in African societies must navigate. Poetry, with its capacity to capture internal conflict, moral ambiguity, and suppressed voices, presents a powerful medium for articulating the lived experiences of professionals whose identities are often shaped and at times fractured by institutional demands and systemic dysfunction. Addressing this gap is essential for a more holistic understanding of Xitsonga poetry's socio-political and cultural relevance.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how professional identity is constructed and contested through acts of resistance as represented in J.M. Magaisa's *A-E-I-O-U* poem. This study is guided by the following objectives: (1) to examine how Magaisa employs language, symbolism, literary devices, and poetic form to critique dominant professional norms and institutional oppression; (2) to investigate how acts of resistance are depicted in the poem and how they contribute to the redefinition and reclamation of professional identity; and (3) to situate the poem within a wider socio-political and literary context, demonstrating its relevance to the African professional experience. Through a close literary analysis, this study examines how resistance is encoded in the poetic language, thereby contributing to broader discourses on ethical agency, identity formation, and professional dignity in African contexts.

Literature Review

Kasperuniene and Zydziunaite (2019) conducted a systematic literature review to examine the influence of social media on professional identity construction across various disciplines. Their analysis included 17 full-text empirical studies, from which they identified two predominant conceptualisations of professional identity: as a cognitive structure and as a socially constructed phenomenon. The cognitive perspective gained greater prominence in fields such as education, medicine, and medical tourism, where professional identity was conceptualised as an internalised

mental framework that shapes perception and decision-making. In contrast, studies within management, organisational studies, neuroscience, and medical tourism more frequently adopted a social constructionist view, portraying identity as shaped through interaction, discourse, and social context. Kasperuniene and Zydziunaite's (2019) review revealed that professional identity construction via social media was multifaceted, involving processes such as the blurring of professional stereotypes, fostering a sense of belonging, ongoing reconstruction of multiple professional selves, and the merging of public and private identities.

Mangen and Brivot (2020) offered an in-depth investigation into how professional identity threats can trigger resistance to organisational change, particularly in professional service firms. Their longitudinal case study, conducted at a corporate law firm between 1999 and 2011, examined the interaction of competing institutional logics such as professional, commercial, and bureaucratic and their effects on identity and power dynamics within the organisation. Using qualitative data from archival records, meeting minutes, and interviews, the authors analysed how the implementation of a knowledge management system (KMS) introduced a bureaucratic logic that disrupted established identity hierarchies. Initially, the KMS elevated technical experts by prioritising standardised knowledge outputs, thereby marginalising relationship experts whose professional identities centred on trust-based client service. As the latter group experienced a loss of influence and discursive power, they resisted the system by emphasising its inefficiencies and administrative burdens. Paradoxically, technical experts subsequently resisted the KMS upon recognising that it commodified their expertise; by rendering their specialised knowledge broadly accessible, the system effectively eroded their professional distinctiveness. Mangen and Brivot (2020) presented a theoretical model illustrating how organisational logic shifts can restructure power and provoke identity-based resistance. Those whose status was enhanced initially supported the change, while those threatened by it actively opposed it. Ultimately, both groups contributed to the KMS's failure, suggesting that identity preservation may override organisational goals.

Toubassi et al. (2023) provided a timely and insightful examination of the relationship between professional identity formation (PIF) and well-being within the context of medical education. They argued that PIF traditionally understood as the process by which trainees internalise the norms, values, and characteristics of a profession, served as a means of fostering a sense of meaning among medical trainees, thereby enhancing

their psychological resilience and overall wellness. To support their argument, Toubassi et al. (2023) employed the tri-partite model of meaning, comprising coherence, purpose, and significance. Coherence refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their experiences and professional roles as internally consistent and logically integrated within their broader life narrative. The authors illustrated how PIF allowed students to frame fragmented or even traumatic clinical encounters into a coherent narrative, thus protecting them from emotional distress and moral injury. Purpose was defined as the belief that one's actions contributed to broader professional goals, while significance involved the perception that one's work was meaningful and valued. In particular, significance was linked to a sense of relationality and connectedness, which the authors regarded as crucial for emotional well-being. This was especially vital during transitional and vulnerable phases of medical training. The authors proposed several strategies to enhance the positive influence of PIF on well-being, including curricular interventions and the intentional engagement of communities of practice, educators, and formative experiences. These approaches aimed to empower trainees as active agents in shaping their professional identities, thereby anchoring them in the meaningfulness of their roles and supporting both their immediate and long-term psychological well-being.

Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024) conducted an integrative review of 77 empirical studies on PIF, and inductively developed a four-fold typology of professional identity work (PIW). Their review addressed a notable gap in the literature by exploring the practical manifestations of PIF and offering both theoretical and pedagogical insights. The authors found that a robust professional identity serves as a foundational schema for meaningful self-understanding, streamlining the transition into professional practice and acting as a critical determinant of career longevity and resilience. Reissner and Armitage-Chan's (2024) typology articulated the interpretive processes underpinning PIF and highlighted how formal and informal educational activities could support students' identity development through phases such as 'becoming', 'aligning', and 'exploring'. However, Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024) also raised concerns about the limitations of mainstream PIF interventions, noting that many are shaped by dominant white or Western-centric perspectives and may not adequately support underrepresented student groups. They emphasised the need for educators to critically assess the assumptions embedded in their approaches to fostering PIF. In particular, Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024) suggested that misalignments between intended

outcomes and students' identity expectations could hinder identity development. As such, reflective practices, accessible role models, and context-sensitive support structures were recommended to make PIF processes more inclusive and effective.

Zhang and Kim (2024) employed a poststructuralist framework to examine the complex processes of PIF among three English instructors, of whom two were non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and one a native English-speaking teacher (NEST) at a Korean university. Through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the study explored how institutional structures and sociocultural discourses, including native speakerism and tenure hierarchies, shaped the instructors' evolving professional identities. The authors highlighted identity as a dynamic, negotiated process influenced by both ideological forces and personal experiences. Zhang and Kim (2024) challenged essentialist notions of professional identity by portraying it as a site of struggle shaped through internal reflection and external pressures. For instance, one Korean NNEST reframed her own experiences of linguistic insecurity in the United States as a strength, encouraging students with the phrase, "Don't worry about English", and fostering an empathetic teaching identity. Similarly, the Canadian NEST reflected on the contradictions of holding linguistic privilege while being marginalised institutionally due to his non-tenured status, noting, "I don't see myself as less capable", despite lacking equivalent academic credentials. Zhang and Kim's (2024) findings contributed significantly to critiques of native-speakerism and the simplistic binaries between NESTs and NNESTs.

Rasheed, Atta, and Sohail (2024) conducted a quantitative study investigating employees' behavioural responses, specifically compliance and resistance during organisational change, and examined how these behaviours were associated with their professional quality of life (ProQOL). Grounded in the conservation of resources theory, the authors conceptualised ProQOL through three dimensions: compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. Their findings suggested that while compliance was typically regarded as a favourable response to change, it did not necessarily reflect genuine internalisation or psychological well-being. Conversely, resistance was closely correlated with emotional distress and perceived threats to critical resources, specifically autonomy, stability, and support. The study confirmed that burnout and secondary traumatic stress significantly predicted resistance, whereas compassion satisfaction positively predicted compliance. These

results reinforced existing literature suggesting that employee well-being plays a critical role in shaping their responses to organisational transformation. By highlighting the psychological underpinnings of compliance and resistance, Rasheed et al. (2024) demonstrated that successful organisational change relies not only on structural or strategic planning but also on fostering a work environment that promotes emotional resilience and professional fulfilment.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts literary criticism as its theoretical framework to guide the interpretation of how texts like J.M. Magaisa's *A-E-I-O-U* employ language, symbolism, and rhetorical devices to construct themes of professional identity and resistance. Literary criticism offers a diverse set of analytical tools for engaging with literature through various lenses, uncovering the social, ethical, and formal meanings embedded within texts (Abrams & Harpham, 2008). This framework provides a robust methodology for examining the dual utility of the text; it demonstrates how artistic expression is inextricably linked to socio-political critique, transforming the poem into a site of active discourse. Within this framework, formalist and moral criticism are especially relevant to the study's aim. Formalist criticism prioritises the internal mechanics of a text, its structure, style, and use of literary devices, allowing a close reading of how Magaisa deliberately crafts meaning through figurative expressions such as repetition, metaphor, and symbolism (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022). In the case of *A-E-I-O-U*, such devices are not merely aesthetic choices but tools that symbolically represent the protagonist's negotiation of identity in the face of external political pressures. Moral criticism, on the other hand, investigates the ethical dimensions of literature, focusing on how characters reflect or resist dominant moral and ideological codes (Zhenzhao & Biwu, 2015). Therefore, formalistic criticism helps us understand how the poem's structure and language create meaning, while moral criticism helps us see the ethical message behind those choices. Beyond uncovering the poem's structural mechanics, these theoretical frameworks highlight its didactic function, demonstrating how the narrative serves to articulate and reinforce fundamental moral lessons. This perspective is instrumental in this study's analysis of how the teacher in the poem asserts moral agency by rejecting co-optation into political structures that compromise educational integrity. The poem becomes a site of ethical resistance, where professional identity is defined not through

conformity but through principled dissent. Thus, literary criticism not only enhances our appreciation of the poem's aesthetic qualities but also its socio-ethical commentary on vocation and integrity.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis to explore how Magaisa's poem *A-E-I-O-U* constructs professional identity through the teacher's subtle yet deliberate resistance to political recruitment. As noted by Given (2008), qualitative literary analysis involves a close reading of texts to uncover how language, symbolism, and cultural references reflect deeper socio-political meanings. The primary data source is the poem *A-E-I-O-U*, drawn from Magaisa's 1987 poetry collection *Xikolokolo Ngunu ya Pitori*. The study applies textual analysis, a method commonly employed in literary and discourse studies, to examine textual features such as structure, rhetorical strategies, and thematic patterns (Rockson, Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, 2023; Shirindzi & Maluleke, 2025). This approach is particularly suitable for uncovering the nuanced ways in which language in the poem *A-E-I-O-U* conveys resistance and identity, enabling a culturally informed interpretation that reflects the socio-political dynamics embedded in Xitsonga poetic expression. Additionally, as native speakers of Xitsonga, the researchers bring an insider's linguistic and cultural perspective that enhances the depth of interpretation. Their familiarity with the idiomatic nuances, figurative expressions, and contextual meanings embedded in the poem enables a more accurate and culturally grounded analysis. This positionality not only enriches the textual interpretation but also supports the aim of the study to reveal how resistance is embedded in language practices that may be opaque to non-native speakers. By leveraging their lived experience and cultural literacy, the researchers offer unique insights into how the poem encodes professional identity through a Xitsonga lens, revealing nuanced layers of meaning that reflect the complex socio-political landscape of the time.

Discussion and Analysis of Magaisa's Poem *A-E-I-O-U*

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses how they address the central aim and objectives. The study set out to explore how professional identity is constructed and contested through acts of resistance in J.M. Magaisa's poem *A-E-I-O-U*. Through a close literary analysis, the discussion examines the poet's use of language, symbolism,

and poetic form to critique dominant professional norms and expose institutional oppression. It also interrogates how resistance is portrayed and how it serves as a means of redefining and reclaiming professional identity.

Part 1: Recruitment

In J.M. Magaisa's *A-E-I-O-U*, the construction of professional identity is vividly depicted through the teacher's resistance to political persuasion. This resistance is framed not just as a personal choice but as a conscious assertion of professional integrity against external pressures. The persuasive strategies used by the political recruiter in the poem reveal the societal expectations that often lure professionals into political arenas. Consider the following lines:

*U yimele yini u kbondla mavoko?
A wu va voni van'wana va bvuun'wala?
Tiboxe u tiboxa bya ntlambya.
Bvuun'wala ya ba pfindlukile,
Ka ha ku hundza ntsuni sweswi.*

What are you waiting for and fold your hands?
Can't you see others are jumping into the water?
Jump in like a frog.
Jump in while the water is still dirty.
The angel just passed now.
(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)

From a literary criticism perspective, this stanza functions as a critical tool to expose the rhetorical strategies of coercion and enticement employed to sway individuals in influential roles, such as teachers. The poem utilises rhetorical questions *U yimele yini u kbondla mavoko?* (What are you waiting for and folding your hands?) and *A wu va voni van'wana va bvuun'wala?* (Can't you see others are jumping into the water?) to provoke guilt and self-doubt in the hesitant teacher. The idiom *ku kbondla mavoko* (to fold one's hands) carries connotations of passivity and missed opportunity, positioning the teacher as stagnant in contrast to those who seize political prospects. However, the teacher counters this framing by reasserting his commitment to education.

The recruiter's use of the simile *Tiboxe u tiboxa bya ntlambya* (Jump in like a frog) trivialises the decision to enter politics, likening it to a frog's indiscriminate leap into any body of water, whether clean or dirty, thus

symbolising opportunism devoid of ethical reflection. Such imagery serves as a stark antithesis to the teacher's professional stoicism, heightening the thematic conflict between the short-termism of political opportunism and the enduring nature of vocational integrity. Lines such as *Brun'wala ya ha pfindlukile* (Jump in while the water is still dirty) and *Ka ha ku hundza nsumi sweswi* (The angel just passed now) further reinforce this tension. The former metaphorically suggests politics as inherently corrupt yet urgently inviting, while the latter evokes a spiritual image to rationalise moral compromise.

Through symbolic language, idioms, and metaphor, Magaisa's poem dramatises the ethical dilemmas confronting professionals in African contexts. It conceptualises the classroom as a theatre of ideological conflict, asserting that the teacher's moral autonomy must be safeguarded against the coercive and seductive pull of political power. The poem proceeds to elaborate further, offering additional layers of meaning and reinforcing its central themes. In the subsequent stanza, the poet advances the narrative and enriches the reader's comprehension of the central themes by employing vivid language, striking imagery, and carefully crafted rhetorical devices, as illustrated below:

*Brun'wala u blantsweka nblokonbo,
Mati ya ta khuvula munyama,
Ya ta ku sula malanga u sala u basile,
U nga hetu nkarhi, tiboxe,
Vurbongo byi nga na yini handle ka vusveti?
Jump in and cleanse the leprosy,
Water will baptise your darkness,
It will wipe the stains off you, and you will be left clean,
Don't waste time, throw yourself in,
What does sleep have instead of poverty?
(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)*

The recruiter employed biblical allusions, specifically *blantsweka nblokonbo* (leprosy cleansing) and *khuvula* (baptism), to portray political participation as a form of spiritual purification. The metaphor *blantsweka nblokonbo* evokes the biblical act of healing leprosy, implying that remaining solely in the teaching profession is comparable to being afflicted, impure, or socially marginalised. In the same vein, *khuvula munyama* (baptising your darkness) frames political engagement as a redemptive act capable of transforming one's obscurity into public recognition. This calculated use of religious imagery reconfigures spiritual metaphors to legitimise political ambition

and material gain, an ironic manoeuvre that Magaisa critiques to underscore the manipulation of sacred discourse for self-serving ends.

The line *Ya ta keu sula malanga u sala u basile* (It will wipe the stains off you, and you will be left clean) metaphorically associates political involvement with moral and social purification, suggesting that without engagement in politics, the teacher's life remains tainted or unfulfilled. This portrayal reinforces the narrative of politics as a transformative catalyst, one capable of radically elevating an individual's social and existential status. The tension between material advancement and professional ethics is further highlighted through the recruiter's use of the proverb *Vurbongo byi nga na yini handle ka vusweti?* (What does sleep have besides poverty?), which functions as a rhetorical rebuke. Here, "sleep" symbolises inactivity or hesitation, and the proverb implies that such passivity inevitably leads to poverty. This reflects a broader societal attitude that marginalises non-political vocations such as teaching as lacking ambition or economic viability.

Through a literary critical lens, particularly within moral and formalist criticism, Magaisa's use of symbolism, biblical allusions, proverbs, and metaphor functions as a deliberate critique of the commodification of professions and the tendency to conflate social value with political participation. The poem's structured irony exposes how persuasive language rich in religious and proverbial references is deployed manipulatively by the recruiter, ultimately revealing the social pressures that undermine the intrinsic worth of ethical, non-political professions such as teaching. The poem continues by portraying the recruiter's effort to frame political engagement as a morally elevated and spiritually sanctioned pursuit, as exemplified below:

*Nkarhi wa tintsumi wu hundzile,
U ta yima ri ko ri xa loko u rindzela Gabriele,
Wena a wu ri twanga Rito?
'Tanani ka mina lava nga ni torba?'*
Pfumelela mati lawa ya khulela ndlela ya wena.
The time of angels has passed,
You will wait until sunrise waiting for Gabriel,
You haven't heard the Word?
'Come unto me, ye that thirst?'
Let this water flow your way.
(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)

Through the lens of literary criticism, particularly intertextual and symbolic analysis, this stanza reveals the recruiter's strategic appropriation of religious discourse to manipulate the teacher's decision-making. The invocation of angels and the archangel Gabriel—a central figure in Christian theology known as God's messenger—suggests that a moment of divine intervention has already occurred, imbuing the scene with providential significance. By declaring *Nkarbi wa tintsumi wu bundzile* (The time of angels has passed), the recruiter implies that the teacher is on the verge of missing a divinely sanctioned opportunity, employing urgency and fear of lost destiny as psychological tools of persuasion.

The rhetorical question *Wena a wu ri twanga Rito?* (Have you not heard the Word?) alludes to the biblical "Word of God", suggesting that the call to political engagement is imbued with spiritual authority, framing recruitment as a divine vocation. This notion is further reinforced by the intertextual reference *Tanani ka mina lava nga ni torha?* (Come unto me, ye that thirst?), echoing John 7:37, in which Jesus invites the spiritually thirsty to receive fulfilment. Within the recruiter's discourse, politics is metaphorically equated with life-giving water, an image expanded in the line *Pfumelela mati lava ya khulela ndlela ya wena* (Let this water flow your way). In this context, water symbolises more than mere sustenance; it represents renewal, upward mobility, and personal transformation. The implication is that political participation offers the teacher a chance to wash away professional 'stagnation' and achieve societal significance. Such symbolic layering effectively sacralises the political realm; by positioning it as a redemptive force, the recruiter suggests that political alignment offers a path to existential elevation and a reconstituted identity.

From a moral critical standpoint, this rhetoric is deeply ironic and ethically ambiguous. Magaisa intentionally deploys these religious allusions to critique the instrumentalisation of sacred discourse for political gain. Furthermore, the poem interrogates the politics of professional identity. The teacher, who embodies vocational integrity and service to society, is depicted as being pressured to abandon his ethical commitment in favour of political power cloaked in spiritual symbolism. The teacher's refusal transcends a simple rebuff of political enlistment; it serves as a reclamation of professional identity, predicated upon a fundamental sense of moral and vocational duty. The first three stanzas of Magaisa's poem underscore the recruiter's urgency, portraying the teacher's hesitation as wasted potential, yet the teacher's resistance highlights a broader critique of how professions like teaching are devalued in societies where political engagement is seen as the ultimate path to recognition and influence.

Part 2: Resistance

After a series of persuasive and spiritually charged arguments by the recruiter, the teacher responds with a tone of indifference and self-assurance. This shift in tone marks a pivotal juncture in the poem; it is the moment where the teacher successfully reclaims his agency and reasserts the primacy of his professional identity. Despite being subjected to rhetorical pressure, spiritual metaphors, and moralised appeals that equate political engagement with divine purpose and social elevation, the teacher's composed response reveals a profound sense of self-awareness and commitment to his vocation, captured in the following stanza:

I nkarbi muni kasi?
Mina a ndzi ku ri xile,
Se u ndzi pfluxela yini?
Ndzi tshike ndzi byi faya,
Byi lo ku helela kumbe wa ha tirba?
What time is it though?
I thought the sun has risen,
Then why do you wake me up?
Let me sleep,
Are you out of sleep or are you still working?
(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)

Within the framework of literary criticism, particularly through the analysis of tone, rhetorical questioning, and symbolism, this stanza marks a defining moment in the teacher's articulation of professional identity through an act of resistance. The teacher's question was *I nkarbi muni kasi?* (What time is it though?) followed by *Mina a ndzi ku ri xile* (I thought the sun has risen) carries rich symbolic weight. The image of the sun, often associated with enlightenment, awakening, and new beginnings, is here redefined by the teacher to assert that he is already 'awake' not in the political sense proposed by the recruiter, but in terms of self-awareness, purpose, and fulfilment in his chosen profession. His professional identity, therefore, is not dormant or awaiting 'activation' through political engagement; rather, it is already active, meaningful, and complete.

The rhetorical question *Se u ndzi pfluxela yini?* (Then why do you wake me up?) serves both as a literal query and a metaphorical challenge. It critiques the underlying assumption that those who are not politically involved are somehow asleep, ignorant, or passive. This assertion

constitutes a powerful discursive counter-strategy; it deconstructs the simplistic equation of political involvement with enlightenment, revealing the ideological fallacies inherent in the recruiter's rhetoric. The teacher's firm response *Ndzì tshike ndzì byi faya* (Let me sleep), further solidifies this resistance. Symbolically, 'sleep' is not a sign of disengagement but a metaphor for self-preservation, moral clarity, and vocational pride. It reflects his refusal to be drawn into a system he perceives as corrupt, opportunistic, and misaligned with his values. The concluding line is *Byi lo ku helela kumbe wa ha tirha?* (Are you out of sleep, or are you still working?) subtly reverses the dynamic, shifting the scrutiny back onto the recruiter. The tone becomes ironic, suggesting that the recruiter's efforts are either futile or performative, raising doubts about the substance of his political work. This shift challenges the idea that political activity inherently equates to productivity or moral superiority.

From the perspective of professional identity, the teacher's resistance becomes a formative act. Rather than accepting externally imposed definitions of success or purpose, he constructs his professional self through deliberate refusal, moral autonomy, and unwavering commitment to education. In this sense, his identity is not merely preserved through resistance; it is actively shaped by it. Magaisa uses this moment to valorise teaching as a vocation founded on ethical clarity, service, and intellectual independence, resisting the societal narrative that elevates political participation as the only path to relevance. The teacher's final statement becomes a powerful declaration of professional dignity, situating education not as a fallback career, but as a site of principled engagement and personal fulfilment. In the following stanza, this assertion of professional identity deepens, as the teacher not only defends his vocation but also reclaims his voice repositioning himself as an active moral agent whose resistance becomes a testament to the enduring value of education in the face of political seduction, as demonstrated below:

U nga ndzì vutisi tipolitiki mani wena.
Ndzì thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana,
Wa mina ntirho i wun'we,
Ku vulavula ri xa ri ya pela ri xa,
Ndzì ku A-E-I-O-U!
Don't ask me politics hey you.
I am a teacher, a teacher of children,
My job is one,
To speak until sunrise, sunset, and sunrise,
And say A-E-I-O-U!

(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)

The emphatic opening line, *U nga ndzi vutisi tipolitiki mani wena* (Do not ask me about politics, hey you), employs direct address and a dismissive tone that conveys the teacher's growing exasperation with the recruiter's persistent overtures. The declaration serves as a site of vocational resistance, demarcating a clear boundary between the state's demands and the teacher's unyielding professional integrity. The repeated declaration *Ndzi thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana* (I am a teacher, a teacher of children) functions as a rhetorical device that reinforces and reclaims his professional identity. This repetition not only asserts pride in his vocation but also reaffirms his singular purpose: the intellectual and moral development of children.

The line *Wa mina ntirho i wun'we* (My job is one) further conveys the indivisibility of his professional focus, highlighting that his role as an educator is not to be diluted or distracted by political ambition. This assertion suggests a clear boundary between civic duty and personal vocation. The line *Ku vulavula ri xa ri ya pela ri xa* (To speak from sunrise to sunset and again to sunrise) evokes the rhythm and relentlessness of teaching, portraying it as a continuous, cyclical, and self-renewing form of labour dedicated to the shaping of future generations. The final invocation of *A-E-I-O-U* carries symbolic weight, functioning as a metonym for the educational foundation he upholds. These basic vowels, simple yet essential, signify the formative building blocks of literacy and learning. Through this closing emphasis, the teacher frames education as a transcendent social good; in doing so, he exposes the transience of political promises when measured against the permanent intellectual and moral value of his vocation. Through this closing gesture, the teacher affirms that his professional identity is rooted in service, knowledge transmission, and ethical clarity, values that remain unshaken in the face of ideological pressure.

The next stanza of the poem can be interpreted as a clear and assertive defense by the teacher of his professional vocation in the face of ideological coercion. It represents a culmination of his resistance, where he reaffirms his commitment to teaching and rejects attempts to redefine his purpose through political narratives, captured in the following manner:

*Ndzi tshike ndzi timiyelela,
U nga ndzi xavi ta le non'weni wa swi twa?
U ndzi vutisela yini 'Democracy' na 'Communism'?*

Wa mina ntirho i wun'we.
Ndzi thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana.
Leave me alone with my silence,
Don't buy me words of mouth you hear me?
Why are you asking me 'Democracy' and 'Communism'?
My job is one.
I am a teacher, a teacher of children.
(Magaisa, 1987, p.16)

This stanza serves as a powerful articulation of professional identity constructed through acts of resistance. The teacher's statement *Ndzi tshike ndzi timiyelela* (Leave me alone with my silence), functions not as a retreat but as a conscious act of defiance against ideological co-optation. In this context, silence symbolises moral clarity, introspection, and an intentional disengagement from discourses that threaten the autonomy of his professional identity. Rather than implying submission or apathy, silence becomes a space of ethical self-definition, a refusal to let political rhetoric intrude upon the sanctity of his vocation. The metaphorical expression *U nga ndzi xavi ta le non'weni wa swi twa?* (Don't buy me with words of the mouth, do you hear me?) intensifies this resistance. It critiques political persuasion as transactional and hollow, reducing political language to a tool of manipulation. Through this rejection, the teacher affirms that his ethical framework remains non-negotiable; he refuses to allow his professional identity to be commodified or subsumed into a project of ideological appropriation. This resistance becomes a form of professional boundary-setting, where identity is forged not in compliance with but in ethical distinction from external pressures.

Additionally, the rhetorical question *U ndzi vutisela yini 'Democracy' na 'Communism'?* (Why are you asking me about 'Democracy' and 'Communism?') dismisses these ideological dichotomies as irrelevant to the teacher's lived reality and purpose. Here, the teacher elevates his professional role above partisan conflicts, insisting that his contribution to society, educating children, is grounded in universality and moral obligation rather than political allegiance. The repetition of *Wa mina ntirho i wun'we* (My job is one) and *Ndzi thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana* (I am a teacher, a teacher of children) is not merely declarative but performative. It reinforces a professional identity rooted in purpose, constancy, and service. Through this deliberate repetition, the teacher claims a stable selfhood in a fluctuating political environment, demonstrating that professional identity can be constructed through the repeated rejection of roles that undermine one's ethical orientation.

The symbolic contrast between the teacher's silence and the recruiter's verbosity illustrates two competing discourses: one advocating for liberatory transformation through education, and the other seeking hegemonic control through political persuasion. In literary terms, this juxtaposition reflects Magaisa's critique of political opportunism and his celebration of teaching as a site of resistance. Silence, therefore, becomes a metaphor for intellectual and moral independence, a quiet but resolute stance that affirms the teacher's self-fashioned identity. Through these acts of resistance, the teacher not only defends his profession but also reclaims it as a dignified, non-negotiable calling.

Part 3: Deepening professional identity

In the aftermath of a compelling and spiritually charged plea from the recruiter, one that sought to sway the teacher's sense of purpose and allegiance, the teacher's steadfast resistance marked a profound turning point in *A-E-I-O-U*, J.M. Magaisa's evocative poem. Rather than yielding, the teacher turns inward, embarking on a journey to deepen his professional identity. This inward turn reflects a deliberate reclaiming of his vocation, not as a mere job, but as a sacred calling rooted in service, integrity, and the power of transformative education, captured in the following stanza:

A-E-I-O-U,
Ndzj vutise A-E-I-O-U.
U ndzj vutisa nambu lowukulu wa misava.
Kumbe Napoleon, Hitler and Churchill: tibosi,
Ndzj ta ku A-E-I-O-U.
A-E-I-O-U,
Ask me A-E-I-O-U.
You ask me, the great river of the earth.
Maybe Napoleon, Hitler, and Churchill: kings,
I will say A-E-I-O-U.
Magaisa (1987, p.17)

This stanza functions as a profound articulation of the teacher's deepening professional identity, forged through acts of poetic resistance. The repetition of *A-E-I-O-U* transcends its surface as a linguistic element; it becomes a symbolic retreat into the ethical core of the teaching vocation. In this context, repetition operates as a deliberate poetic strategy of defiance, rejecting the ideological narratives embedded in the names of

historical figures such as Napoleon, Hitler, and Churchill. Rather than participating in the glorification of political power, the teacher reclaims authority by reaffirming his commitment to the foundational tools of education. Through the repetition of vowels, the text elevates the mundane to a position of structural resistance; this linguistic simplicity becomes a vehicle for asserting professional agency against ideological imposition. From a literary critical perspective, this repetition becomes a performative act, a ritualised reaffirmation of vocation that challenges and resists systems of coercion through simplicity and symbolic resonance. Magaisa's use of minimalism is not accidental; it functions as a mode of resistance, presenting a vision of professionalism that is rooted in ethical conviction rather than political alignment. Moreover, the teacher's strategic silence and redirection away from politicised discourse work to unsettle the expectation of ideological conformity. In doing so, Magaisa constructs a professional identity that is introspective, principled, and purpose-driven. The teacher does not merely occupy a role within society; he actively defines that role through conscious resistance and the reaffirmation of pedagogical values.

Applying literary criticism, this moment reflects a conscious refusal to let dominant historical narratives dictate personal purpose. The line *U ndzi vutisa nambu lowukulu wa misava* (You ask me the great river of the earth), followed by *Kumbe Napoleon, Hitler na Churchill: tibosi* (Napoleon, Hitler, and Churchill: kings), situates the teacher within a global legacy of conquest and domination. Yet, his response deliberately shifts away from these grandiose symbols of power, opting instead for a return to pedagogical simplicity. The repetition of vowels becomes a symbolic act, an ideological filter that blocks out the noise of political ambition while preserving the sanctity of his vocation. This form of resistance is not overt but deeply layered, poetic, and intentional. Magaisa crafts the teacher's identity through symbolic disengagement, revealing how professional integrity can flourish beyond the confines of state-imposed ideologies. The vowels thus emerge as emblems of ethical clarity and vocational dedication, sharply contrasting with the coercive rhetoric of political manipulation. By refusing to align himself with historical figures of dominance, the teacher asserts the dignity of his profession. His voice becomes a site of resistance where meaning, identity, and purpose converge through poetic form. The poem continues:

*Suka ka mina wena Judas!
Vo lo ku rhuma u nga ali?*

Kasi u lava yini?

A-E-I-O-U.

Ndzi thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana.

Get away from me, Judas!

They just sent you and you didn't refuse?

But what do you want?

A-E-I-O-U.

I am a teacher, a teacher of children.

Magaisa (1987, p.17)

This stanza presents a direct and charged confrontation between the teacher and a figure emblematic of betrayal, invoked through the name “Judas”. The reference serves as a powerful biblical metaphor; by weaving religious intertextuality into the narrative, it amplifies the ethical significance of the confrontation, framing it as a moment of profound moral consequence. From a literary critical perspective, this metaphor casts the interlocutor as morally compromised, thereby framing the teacher as a principled figure who steadfastly resists ideological contamination. The accusatory question, *Vo lo ku rhuma u nga ali?* (They just sent you, and you didn't refuse?) challenges the addressee's passive complicity and redefines refusal as an act of moral fortitude and vocational integrity. By establishing these rigid professional boundaries, the teacher effectively rejects external intrusion, thereby insulating his moral conscience from the reach of political appropriation.

The repetition of A-E-I-O-U serves as a symbolic refrain, a phonetic anchor reinforcing the teacher's unwavering dedication to education. Through this minimalist invocation, Magaisa transforms the vowels into a mantra of resistance, effectively filtering out ideological noise while reaffirming the teacher's pedagogical purpose. The stanza's rhetorical structure, marked by direct address and emphatic repetition, builds dramatic tension while delineating the teacher's selfhood. His refusal to engage in ideological conversion, articulated through the vowels, becomes a ritualised act of purification, resisting political intrusion through symbolic economy. The final line, *Ndzi thicara, mudyondzisi wa vana* (I am a teacher, a teacher of children), is delivered with deliberate emphasis. It transcends mere occupational identification, becoming an act of self-assertion and ethical defiance. Through the strategic use of intertextual metaphor, repetition, and performative language, Magaisa constructs resistance not as a momentary gesture, but as an ongoing, embodied practice, one that affirms professional identity and preserves personal agency in the face of coercion. The poem continues:

Ndz̄i tsakela ku twa ngulumelo wa rito ra mina.

A va ta tsaka...?

Ku ndz̄i twa ndz̄i kolola,

Ndz̄i vindlavindleka bya magandlati,

Ndz̄i ku: A-E-I-O-U.

I like to hear the sound of my voice.

Would they be happy...?

To hear me cry,

And move around like ocean waves,

I say: A-E-I-O-U.

Magaisa (1987, p.17)

As a closing expression of deepening professional identity, this stanza encapsulates the teacher's deliberate affirmation of self through the performative power of voice. The opening line, *Ndz̄i tsakela ku twa ngulumelo wa rito ra mina* (I like to hear the sound of my voice), foregrounds speech not as mere expression, but as a profound act of self-possession and resistance. The teacher asserts his agency against silencing forces, embracing voice as both a symbol of autonomy and a mechanism of defiance. The metaphor of crying and moving "like ocean waves" evokes a rhythmic emotionality, simultaneously suggesting vulnerability and inner strength, capturing the cyclical, regenerative nature of resistance. From a literary critical perspective, this imagery elevates emotional experience into a metaphor for resilience; here, the inherent fluidity of the ocean serves as a potent emblem of sustained and dynamic opposition. The continued repetition of *A-E-I-O-U* functions as a stabilising refrain, anchoring the teacher's identity amidst emotional turbulence. Far from being a passive response, the refrain disrupts expected ideological discourse and re-centres the teacher's vocational purpose with clarity and conviction.

The rhetorical question is *A va ta tsaka...?* (Would they be happy...?) introduces a subtle interrogation of those who seek to erode the teacher's integrity, exposing the moral contradictions underlying their expectations. Rather than capitulating to despair, the teacher's controlled emotional expression becomes a strategic refusal to yield, measured, poetic, and purposeful. The ocean wave metaphor, with its continuous motion, signifies an enduring and cyclical resistance that renews itself through repetition and reflection. Ultimately, Magaisa's poem demonstrates how metaphor, repetition, and silence serve as literary devices that do more than evoke emotion; they construct and protect a resilient professional self. The teacher's identity is shaped not by conformity to political ideologies, but through a poetic commitment to the ethical and

transformative power of education. In this way, resistance becomes both a personal and pedagogical act, grounded in a deep sense of vocation and the sanctity of teaching.

Conclusion

This study explored how professional identity is constructed and contested through acts of resistance in J.M. Magaisa's poem *A-E-I-O-U*. Through a close literary analysis grounded in moral, formalist, and intertextual criticism, the study has shown how the teacher's professional identity is actively forged in opposition to political coercion. Magaisa uses rich figurative language, including symbolism, metaphor, biblical allusion, and rhetorical questioning, to dramatise the ideological pressure placed on individuals, particularly teachers, to abandon their vocational commitments in pursuit of political power and material gain. The findings reveal that the recruiter's attempts to entice the teacher into politics reflect broader societal narratives that equate political engagement with moral superiority, social relevance, and economic success. However, the teacher's unwavering resistance to this invitation represents a powerful counter-narrative. Through a combination of silence, rhetorical defiance, and the consistent affirmation of his professional role, the teacher reconstructs his identity—transitioning from a passive bystander to an active moral agent. His deliberate choice to remain in the teaching profession, despite promises of spiritual and material elevation, highlights the ethical clarity, intellectual independence, and social commitment that underpin his professional self-conception. Magaisa's poem *A-E-I-O-U* serves not only as a poetic critique of political opportunism but also as a literary valorisation of teaching as a vocation. The poem affirms that professional identity is not a fixed construct imposed from above, but rather something formed and continually negotiated through principled decisions and moral resistance. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship at the intersection of literary studies and PIF by demonstrating how African poetry can serve as a lens for examining ethical resistance in professional life. It extends the discourse on teacher identity by highlighting how Xitsonga literature captures the socio-political pressures educators face and how they navigate those pressures to maintain vocational integrity. It is recommended that future studies examine how other Xitsonga poems use literary devices to show resistance and shape professional identity in different social or political situations. Researchers could also explore how formalist and moral criticism can be

applied to compare the moral choices of professionals across various African literary texts.

References

- Abrams, M. H. & Harpham, G. G. (2008). *A glossary of literary terms* (9th ed.). United States: Cengage Learning Inc.
- Arcilla Jr, F. E. (2024). Poetic devices, thematic significance and social realities in poetry: A critical literature review. *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal*, 5(1), 70-85. <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v5i1.935>
- Baldwin, M. (2017). *This is where the poetry comes out: Examining the Peterborough poetry slam as resistant space-making*. Doctoral dissertation, Trent University.
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Görmez, A. & Beyoğlu, S. G. (2022). The basis of formalism and its limitations. *Kafkas Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 30, 443-456. <https://doi.org/10.56597/kausbed.1148797>
- Kasperuniene, J. & Zydziunaite, V. (2019). A systematic literature review on professional identity construction in social media. *Sage Open* 9(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019828847>
- Lilja, M. & Vinthagen, S. (2018). Dispersed resistance: Unpacking the spectrum and properties of glaring and everyday resistance. *Journal of Political Power*, 11(2), 211-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2018.1478642>
- Magaisa, J. M. (1987). *Xikolokolo Nguvu ya Pitori*. Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.
- Maluleke, N. (2024). (De)scribing women and womanhood in some Xitsonga poems. *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development*, 13(2), 185-199. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2024/v13n2a9>
- Mangen, C. & Brivot, M. (2020). Threats to professional identities can lead to resistance to organisational change. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/05/05/threats-to-professional-identities-can-lead-to-resistance-to-organisational-change/> (Accessed on 15 July 2025).
- McKinney, C. (2016). *Language and power in post-colonial schooling: Ideologies in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Mukherjee, T.T. & Satpathy, S.P. (2024). I wish to sing one last song for my land: Anuj Lugun's poetics of resistance and reclamation. *Rupkatha*

- Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 16(3), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n3.01g>
- Mwamburi, A. W. (2020). *Manifestations of hyperbole in the imagined voice of selected African youths' poetry*. Masters dissertation, University of Nairobi.
- Nkwinika, C. (2022). Uneven distribution of wealth through political manipulation as expressed in JM Magaisa's poetry: A moral-philosophical perspective on the politics of the new era. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 32(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6697/10387>
- Nofal, K. H. (2011). Syntactic aspects of poetry: A pragmatic perspective. *The Buckingham Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 4, 91-121. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v1n2p37>
- Rasheed, A., Atta, N., & Sohail, T. (2024). Employees' behaviours as compliance, resistance, and their relationship with the professional quality of life while facing organisational change. *International Journal of Studies in Psychology*, 4(2), 16-21. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijpspsy.v4i2.1162>
- Reissner, S. & Armitage-Chan, E. (2024). Manifestations of professional identity work: An integrative review of research in professional identity formation. *Studies in Higher Education* 49(12), 2707–2722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2322093>
- Rockson, K., Adade-Yeboah, A. & Owusu, E. (2023). A textual analysis of President Akufo-Addo's 12th COVID-19 address. *Journal of English Teaching* 9(2): 252-268. <https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v9i2.4765>
- Shirindzi, L.S. & Maluleke, N. (2025). The prevalence of corruption in society as depicted in selected Xitsonga poems: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Literary Studies* 41, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/18952>
- Toubassi, D., Schenker, C., Roberts, M. & Forte, M. 2023. Professional identity formation: Linking meaning to well-being. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 28(1), 305-318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-022-10146-2>
- Wald, H. S. (2011). Insights into professional identity formation in medicine: Memoirs and poetry. *The European Legacy* 16(3): 377-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2011.575600>
- Zhang, Y. & Kim, J. (2024). Exploring the complexities of professional identity formation among English teachers at a Korean university. *SAGE Open* 14(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241253569>

Zhenzhao, N. & Biwu, S. (2015). Ethical literary criticism: East and West. *Arcadia* 50(1), 4-8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2015-0002>