

# The Paradox of the Lowly

## Abstract:

The Paradox of the Lowly” grapples with the core of the reality of human life. The article uses the lowly characters in Kenya’s oral literature to explore a theme that is as old as human society: the idea that those members of the society who appear unfortunate and even despicable, those that mainstream society would not put in the frontline decision-making organ are the ones who end up conceiving of the one and only idea that saves the community. In the article, an oral narrative in which a hunchback called Nakhakufu is endowed with wisdom, intelligence, foresight and courage. It is she who spies on the handsome suitors and discovers that they are ogres and not men. Her report to her sister is ignored. It is she who displays courage in a strange land and saves the rest of the girls in the bridal party. In the same story a toad, a lowly character, is endowed with kindness. In addition, the story about the despised scabrous young man who wins the contest for the hand of the king’s daughter is analyzed. The importance of sticking by one’s word no matter what comes after the deal is sealed is emphasized, for while the appalling appearance of the scabrous winner is reason enough to prompt the chief to change his mind and deny the winner his prize, the chief in the story remains true to the terms of the bargains and hands his beloved daughter to the unsightly man. It emerges that we are repulsed by the weak, the ugly and the lowly because they represent the dark side of our very essence which we wince every time we are obliged to confront. When we see these in other people, we avoid the people; we want neither to see them nor talk to them, let alone talk about them. However, the stories exhort us to see them for what they are: human beings with values for life that are true and truly human.