

An Analysis of Setswana Folktales from a Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

In Botswana, gender is constructed in many different ways including but not limited to the names given to children, the games children play, through songs and proverbs and through messages presented in *mainane* (folktales). The important role that folktales play in the socialisation process of members of a society is well documented. Like in most societies, *mainane* play many different functions such as being didactic, moralistic, cultural records, therapeutic as well as forms of entertainment. However, this paper focuses on the gendered messages conveyed in Setswana folktales. It discusses how societal expectations of men and women can be understood from Setswana folktales. It further argues that the values transmitted in the folktales have clear ideological goals, and they encourage and perpetuate gender stereotypes between men and women. A few *mainane* will be analysed from a gender perspective to validate the argument of this paper.

Introduction

African oral literature provides a rich source of cultural history and socialisation. It is also a tool that transmits and reinforces people's beliefs, customs, norms, values, philosophy of life and their wisdom. Generally, folktales are a form of entertainment; however they perform other functions as well – they have therapeutic, emotional, and cathartic usefulness as well as didactic functions. They are also a tool of socialisation for the young generation. They teach them what is considered to be socially and culturally acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. Furthermore, they reveal social processes that maintain and govern the conduct and behaviour of individuals in a given community or society. According to Senkoro (2005) the voices of the story characters in a folktale provide the means for us to share moral precepts and principles guiding a people's social interaction. Folktales also shed light in shaping gender roles and expectations.

In Botswana, stories are usually told by grandmothers or older women to the children. The older women tell these stories at night by the fireside. However, older men sometimes tell stories to young boys about hunting and war expeditions. There is a strong belief that these stories should

not be told during the day. It is believed that if one tells a story during the day that person will get lost. The reason for this belief is that daytime should be used for other chores against which storytelling would be a distraction. Obviously this discourages laziness on the part of the children. The audience usually comprises young children although adults may also be part of the session. The main purpose of the storytelling event is to entertain the children so that they go to bed with most of the lessons vividly on their minds (Boateng, 1983: 325). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the storyteller to make the storytelling interesting and entertaining.

This paper examines how women and men are portrayed in Setswana *mainane* (folktales) in relation to gender issues. It discusses how expectations and attitudes concerning roles and behaviour designated to be appropriate for a particular gender can be understood through *mainane*. It focuses on the societal expectations of men and women, how the society perceives of them and what it expects of them due to their gender.

Theoretical Perspective

Gender theory provides a framework for this paper. Gender is a socio-cultural construct of men and women that permeates all levels of society. It is an integral and important determining factor in the organisation of any given society. It is a structure based on the socio-cultural production and is sustained by an ideology. The fact that gender is culturally constructed means that it is neither natural nor is it divine; it has to do with social relationships of women and men, and can be reconstructed and transformed by the society, and since it is culturally constructed it can be socially deconstructed (Dube, 2003:86). Furthermore, how we relate as men and women is always gendered and it is dictated by the society in which we live. Society places certain expectations on men and women. For example, men in the Setswana culture are expected to be brave, strong, fearless and authoritarian. They should never express their feelings of pain and fear in public. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be gentle, timid, weak, and fearful. They are allowed to express pain and fear openly and whenever they feel like.

Closely related to the above characteristics are the sanctioned roles of men and women in Botswana. For women, these include being a wife, mother and daughter in a subordinate position within the household. The Botswana society identifies certain traits like gentleness, kindness, generosity, physical beauty, obedience and resilience with women. The most important role associated with women is motherhood. It is the responsibility of the female to produce offspring

especially sons so that the social order is maintained and the family lineage is continued (Furniss & Gunner, 1995: 155). On the other hand, the sanctioned roles of men in Botswana include being a husband, father, son, seniority and exerting authority over women. Traits associated with men are bravery, fearlessness, toughness, physical strength and authoritativeness. The social organization relies on the power and authority of males. The folktale as the carrier of this cultural message delivers these expectations to children (Weinger, Fonjong, Fonchingong & Allen 2006:17); as they sit and listen to these stories they learn how to behave according to their gender.

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The folktales used in this study are from archival written sources. The first folktale, 'Letlhokwa', is from a book by R.D. Molefe (1995) entitled *A ke je je e Ntatemogolo?* The book is written in Setswana but for purposes of this paper I translated and summarised the folktale into English. The second folktale, 'About A Girl Who Was Born Out Of Fat', is from a book by Susheela Curtis (1975) entitled *Mainane: Tswana Tales*. I summarised the tale because of limitations of space. Below is a summary of the two folktales to be analysed.

'Letlhokwa' (Dry grass stalk)

In the story of 'Letlhokwa', the chief summons all the girls of the village to parade and sing in front of his son, who is ready to get married, in order for the son to choose a wife from amongst the girls. The girls prepare and beautify themselves for the occasion. Amongst them is a girl called Baile who has convinced herself that the chief's son is going to choose her. Instead the chief's son chooses another girl called Letlhokwa and Baile becomes very angry. She runs home and pretends to be sick. Later she tells her parents that she wants to kill Letlhokwa. Her father is against this idea but her mother supports it and consults a traditional doctor who agrees to help them. While Letlhokwa and the other girls go to the forest to fetch firewood, she is bitten by a snake and dies. The other girls are shocked and rush back to the village to inform Letlhokwa's parents. The parents then send a male member of the family to report the matter to the chief's place. He finds the chief and his wife sitting in the courtyard and breaks the sad news to them. They cry bitterly. While crying, the chief's son arrives from the *kgotla* and asks what is going on. His father tells him that the girl he had chosen to marry is dead. He also cries bitterly and uncontrollably and even attempts to commit suicide but the village elders stop him. He stays in a comma for two days and Letlhokwa is buried in his absence.

One day as the chief's son was walking around the village, he meets Baile and tells her that he loves her and would like to marry her. The two agree. When his friends hear that he wants to marry Baile they advise him against it because she is responsible for the death of his wife-to-be Letlhokwa so that he could marry her. He refuses to heed their advice. On the first night of their marriage while asleep, Letlhokwa's ghost appears accusing Baile of killing her so that she could be married to the chief's son. The ghost also attacks the chief's son for marrying her killer. Baile returns to her home and tells her parents that she was chased away by a ghost. The elders also rebuke the chief's son for not taking their advice but are happy that Baile is no longer amongst their midst.

Lemipi (Fatty membrane enveloping the bowels or Peritoneum)

There was a woman called Mosadimoozana who had no children and lived by herself. One day she sprouted some corn for making beer and spread it on the floor to dry. Rrankwidinyane, the dove, flew down and began to eat her corn. She was very angry. The dove asked her to allow it to eat her corn then it would give her children. When the dove had eaten as much as it wanted it told the woman to kill a pure white ox and put its organs in a clay pot for three days. After three days when the woman opened the pot she found seven babies. She took them out, bathed them and put them inside the house. She named them after the organs of the ox, the other two were named after the fat that surrounds the stomach, the small fat Lemipinyana and the large fat, Lemipi.

One day the woman had to go to the fields and told the children not to leave the house while she was away but they did – they went to the well to fetch water. At the well, they met three boys and one of them asked Lemipi for water. Lemipi sent her sisters but the boy refused to drink the water until Lemipi gave him the water. The next day the boys went to Lemipi's house and the boy who asked Lemipi for water told Lemipi's mother that he wanted to marry one of her daughters. The mother made the girls stand in front of the boy so that he could choose the one he wanted to marry. He rejected all of them until Lemipi came out and identified her as the one he wants to marry. Lemipi was very beautiful. After the marriage, Lemipi and her husband, Molope, moved to her husband's home. On the way to their new home Molope stopped to visit a friend and while he was gone a creature covered in rags named Setswamatlhakung came to Lemipi and borrowed her clothes for a short while but later refused to return the clothes and took Lemipi's wifely

position. She pretended to be Molope's wife all the way until they reached his home, when they got there Lemipi was sent to where the other servants lived.

The next morning Lemipi was told to go with the other servants to scare away the birds in the fields. While chasing the birds away Lemipi sang a song saying that she was not Setswamatlhakung but Lemipi. The other servants reported this to Molope. The following day Molope went to the fields at sunrise and hid in the corn and heard Lemipi singing her song. When she finished singing her song, Molope came out of hiding and caught Lemipi with joy. He took Lemipi back to the village on his back, bathed her and kept her in a little hut in his yard. He then ordered men of the village to dig a deep hole and the women to fetch water and boil it in large pots. He asked Setswamatlhakung to go into the hole and dig; she climbed down a ladder into the hole and when she reached the bottom, someone took away the ladder, and they poured hot water on her. She died and was buried there. After this Lemipi gave birth to a baby boy and a melon grew where Setswamatlhakung was buried. The melon always visited Lemipi to see the baby and pinched it until it cried. After this had been going on for a long time, Lemipi told her husband and he chopped the melon into pieces. The melon died, Molope and Lemipi lived happily thereafter with their child.

Analysis of the Tales

Botswana is a patriarchal and patrilineal society and this social structure is revealed through language, particularly songs, proverbs and folktales. Folktales are an important aspect of Setswana culture in which power and authority are not equally distributed between the genders. What follows is an analysis of two *mainane* namely, 'Letlhokwa' and 'Lemipi' from a gendered perspective. The analysis is arranged thematically.

Importance of marriage in the Setswana culture

Marriage is a theme that runs across most Setswana folktales. This is probably due to the fact that marriage is considered a very important institution among Batswana. It not only unites the husband and wife but their families as well. Marriage is very important to girls in a patriarchal society because through marriage a woman's social status is uplifted and she gains respect from the community. In most *mainane* either a boy or a girl is about to get married, or a man and a woman are in a marital relationship and so forth. In the story 'Letlhokwa', the chief's son is ready

to get married so all the girls of the village are called to the *kgotla* (communal meeting place where decisions pertaining to the welfare of the society are taken) to parade and sing in front of him so that he can choose his wife. He chooses Letlhokwa.

In the story Lemipi, the girls go to the well to fetch water and while there, they meet three boys one of them being Molope, the chief's son, who asks Lemipi for water. She sends her other sisters but he refuses to take their water. In the Setswana culture when a boy asks a girl for water, it means, symbolically, he is asking for her hand in marriage. The following morning, Molope goes to Lemipi's house to ask her mother for one of her daughters' hand in marriage. Lemipi's mother makes the girls parade in front of Molope so that he can choose the girl he claims to have seen the previous day and wants to marry. After the other six girls have come out, Lemipi comes out and Molope says she is the one he wants to marry. In the Setswana culture it is the man who chooses a wife not the other way round. "The woman is thus expected to be selected, and her duty is to consent. In other words the man plays the active role of choosing, while the woman plays the passive role of being selected" (Opoku-Agyemang, 1999:123). The woman who behaves contrary to this principle is usually made to suffer one way or the other.

Setswana gender roles

The two narratives also depict Setswana gender roles. For example, it is the responsibility of children, especially girls, to scare away birds at the fields; mother takes care of her children by bathing and feeding them; the mother also goes to work in the fields; the girls fetch water and collect firewood.

Men and women are seen doing different types of work in these folktales. The type of work they do is in accordance with the gender roles prescribed by the society. Women's roles are mostly confined to the home or the domestic realm, such as taking care of the family, cooking, washing clothes, sweeping and fetching water. However, women can also perform tasks outside the home in the Setswana culture, for example, in 'Lemipi', Mosadimoopana is seen working in the fields and the girls in 'Letlhokwa' are seen fetching firewood in the forest. In all that a woman does, she must be a good wife. This adequately summed up by Opoku-Agyemang (1999: 121) who says that "the ideal wife must be a good homemaker, primarily defined by cooking and caring skills, be humble, and provide for the sustenance of the family". If she does not live up to these expectations she is considered a bad wife.

Men, on the other hand, are seen engaged in the skilled professions such as being traditional doctors, hunters, and warriors. For example, the traditional doctor who helped Baile to kill Letlhokwa was a man. The men also dig a deep hole, a job that is considered tough and can only be done by men. They are also decision makers and give orders which have to be followed. For example, Molope orders men to dig a hole and women to fetch water. In both narratives the boys ask for a girl's hand in marriage, they propose and the girls obey/agree. Further, men are portrayed as chiefs, leaders and problem solvers like Rrankwidinyane solved Mosadimoo-pane's problem of barrenness.

Gendered social expectations

Most African folktales portray women as either good or bad. According to Weinger et al (2006:21) good women work hard and submit to their husbands; they are faithful, submissive, selfless and hardworking even while subjected to misery and maltreatment. The dichotomy of good and bad women is evident in the two *mainane* under discussion, Lemipi and Letlhokwa are portrayed as good-hearted, gentle and caring women in contrast with Setswamatlhakung and Baile who are portrayed as jealous, evil-hearted and dangerous. For example, Setswamatlhakung disguises herself by wearing Lemipi's clothes in order to win Molope's affection and Baile kills Letlhokwa in order to be married to the chief's son. In African oral narratives "the good woman gets restored to the position of favoured wife and the bad woman who gets the taste of her own medicine when she gets killed by the husband" (Weinger et al, 2006:21). This is like a warning and precaution for women to fall into the good women camp by staying faithful, nurturing, hardworking, submissive, loving and caring. Again in both narratives, the evil-hearted woman, Setswamatlhakung, is punished by being put to death and the good woman, Lemipi is allowed to live a happy and prosperous life. This is also an indication of the kind of behaviour deemed acceptable or unacceptable by the society; the morals and values that the society expects and condones from women come out explicitly from these tales.

As already mentioned, men are expected to be brave and strong while women are expected to be cowardly and weak. While Letlhokwa is fetching firewood with the other girls she is bitten by a snake and dies. The announcement of her death at the chief's place is done by a male because men are perceived to be brave and can handle tough and painful situations better than women. Interestingly, the narrative 'Letlhokwa' also depicts both men and women as emotionally weak.

At first, the messenger finds it difficult to say what has happened, he almost breaks down. On the other hand, the chief and his wife cry bitterly after hearing the sad news. Furthermore, the chief's son cries bitterly and uncontrollably and even goes to the extent of attempting to commit suicide because of the death of his fiancée. Culturally, these emotions are expected of women and not men because men are socialised to be brave, strong and tough. They are socially constructed not to express their feelings of fear and pain nor show their emotions. Women, on the other hand, are socially constructed to cry, to express their feelings, to be timid and fearful.

Naming system and gender

Another way in which gender is portrayed in *mainane* is through the naming system. The names of the characters in these two stories are gender specific and symbolic in nature. The word “*letlhokwa*” literally means “a dry grass stalk” but in this instance, it means betrothal or engagement. It is symbolic of the fact that the chief's son has chosen to marry her amongst the other girls in the village. In the Setswana culture, men engage women for marriage. On the other hand, the term “*lemipi*” is literally the white fat that surrounds the stomach. Traditionally, the fat was used as veil during a wedding celebration. The veil was worn by women only. The white also symbolises purity, fidelity and beauty. These traits are associated with females hence the most beautiful girl is called Lemipi. Mosadimooopana is a derogatory term used for women who cannot bear children. It is a compound noun made up of *mosadi* (woman) and *moopane* (barren). The name itself is indicative of her inability to give birth however there is no such equivalent term for men who cannot produce children. The dove is called Rrankwidinyane. In Setswana, the prefix “*rra*” denotes maleness, so the dove is a male figure. Finally, Setswamatlhakung which literally means “that which comes from the bush”, is symbolic of the tattered state the creature is in and may also serve as a warning of its ability to cause harm or be dangerous as she did to Lemipi.

Gender and space in Setswana culture

Spaces are gendered in Setswana culture – men and women occupy different spaces in the public and private arena. In ‘Letlhokwa’ the man who is sent to deliver the news about the death of Letlhokwa finds the men at the *kgotla* – a male-dominated area where issues and decisions pertaining to the welfare of the community are discussed and taken. Traditionally, only men could attend the *kgotla*. This meant that women were excluded from the decisions pertaining to their wellbeing as members of the society. The chief's son is found in the company of the village

elders at the *kgotla*; presumably they are teaching and grooming him for leadership because he is in line to inherit the position when his father passes away. Traditionally, chieftainship is hereditary; it is passed from father to son never from father to daughter. The women, on the other hand, are found in the home or working in the courtyard and fields. The space they occupy is less powerful when compared to the one occupied by men.

Gender stereotypes: rivalry and jealousy

In the Setswana culture, girls are socialised from a tender age to take care of themselves; to look beautiful at all times in order to attract men for marriage. It is therefore not surprising that all the girls who parade in front of the chief's son are heavily decorated and look stunning. Because beauty is held in high esteem, the chief's son chooses to marry the most beautiful girl in the village. His choice creates jealousy and rivalry between the girls in the village especially Baile who thought she was going to be chosen. She connives with her mother and the help of a traditional doctor to kill Letlhokwa – the girl chosen by the chief's son as his wife. The same applies in 'Lemipi', where Setswamatlhakung becomes jealous of Lemipi and deceives her by asking that they exchange their clothes for a short while. She is not only jealous but also envious and wants to occupy a position that is not hers. Since marriage is regarded highly, these acts portray women as capable of doing anything to get married. Their actions reinforce the stereotype that women are treacherous, selfish and jealous creatures who fight over useless and trivial things. The folktales under discussion show that women are jealous and envious of each other and can even go to the extent of killing or abusing one another. They also depict the rivalry that exists between women and the fact that women cannot be trusted nor trust each other. A woman's downfall will come from the very woman she least suspected.

These folktales present “women as manipulative and setting men and other women up for these atrocious acts” (Weinger et al, 2006:20). It is interesting to note that the man is absent in all these instances, where is he when women are killing each other, conniving against each other, planning for all these evil acts? Weinger et al (2006:23) rightfully argue that “man's inability to distinguish between a good and bad woman is never attributed to his ignorance and obliviousness but rather only points to just how deceiving, dangerous and tricky women can be”. Molope can be characterised as stupid and uncaring. How could he not recognise that the person sitting next to him on the cart and later sleeping with him is not his wife? This is yet another indication of how

society is biased towards women, portraying them as evil and treacherous without acknowledging the stupidity and weaknesses of men.

Furthermore, Molope is presented as an unsuspecting victim of Setswamatlhakung's plots and schemes. Baile's father is presented as a person with good morals; who refuses to be involved in the plot to kill Letlhokwa. But he is also weak and irresponsible. One would expect him to use his power and authority as head of household to stop his wife and daughter from doing such an atrocious act. However, he fails to convince his wife and daughter not to engage in the hideous act of killing Letlhokwa, instead he just sits and observes. This shows that he is weak and irresponsible contrary to societal expectations. Interestingly, when the truth is unveiled the traditional doctor is not punished for his evil deed; all the blame goes to Baile and her mother. It can be argued that Baile's father is an accomplice in the crime, but like the traditional doctor he is not punished. It is men who pass judgement so judgement will always favour them and be biased against women. These judgements can be viewed as a warning to women not to engage in atrocious acts because otherwise they will have to face the consequences. However, men do not pass such harsh judgements on themselves.

Gender stereotypes: barrenness

The theme of barrenness is common in African oral narratives. The commonality of this subject reinforces the importance of children in society and also defines what successful womanhood is all about. Opoku-Agyemang (1999:126) rightfully states that "the emphasis on parenting is explicated largely as a female's role, with the defining criterion being the biological reproduction of offspring". On the other hand, Charles Fonchingong (2006: 135) argues that "a barren woman is stigmatised, considered a social misfit and invites the wrath of her family and society". As already mentioned the name Mosadimoozana is derogatory, because it means a barren woman. Mosadimoozana is distressed and disgruntled because she cannot have children and because of this social pressure she asks for help from the dove. The dove is a symbol of peace and indeed it brings her peace because she has seven children. In this way she satisfies the social expectation which emphasises the need to have children especially a male child so that he can continue the lineage. After the babies come out of the pot, Mosadimoozana is portrayed as happy and is seen in the company of the children. Setswana culture expects a woman to get married and have children. If she does not, then her life is turned into misery, her in-laws start ill-treating her and

calling her names. In the majority of cases, it is the woman who seeks a cure for infertility, which is what Mosadimoošana did. In most African societies, Botswana in particular, producing and raising male children is a mandated requirement of true womanhood. The fact that the society is always very quick to blame the woman if a couple does not have children within a reasonable time after marriage shows that it is biased against women.

Power and authority in the Setswana culture

In most narratives the chiefs are males and command authority in the villages. As already mentioned, chieftainship is hereditary from father to son. This means men have power and authority over women. They make the decisions and women just follow. It also means power is not distributed equally between males and females. In these stories we see men at the *kgotla* making decisions, for example we see men deciding when and who to marry and Mološe giving orders that Setswamatlhakung should be killed. The women's power is displayed in the home, more especially in their relationship with their daughters. For example, Mosadimoošana takes care of her babies; Baile's mother connives with her to kill Letlhokwa. Generally, women impart skills, knowledge and attitudes to their daughters so that they grow up to be desirable women that men can marry. The roles women play show that women are powerless and command little or no authority in the Setswana cultural context.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the tales, it is evident that men and women are treated differently in the Setswana society. There are roles, attributes and expectations designated for each gender. The folktales reveal women as treacherous and evil people who can do anything to get married or to attract the attention of men. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as decision makers, authoritative and leaders, as well as victims of women's plots. This paper has shown that the values transmitted in the folktales have clear ideological goals, and they encourage and perpetuate gender stereotypes between men and women. Both girls and boys are socialised to perform their expected roles diligently and they learn these from their mothers and fathers. However, it should be noted that both men and women have agency – they choose what is suitable for them. The gender analysis of Setswana *mainane* helps us understand how men and women are perceived in a Setswana society. However, since culture is dynamic, there are significant changes that are taking place in terms of gender roles and expectations in the Botswana society.

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