A DECONSTRUCTIONIST ANALYSIS OF THE SESOTHO FOLKTALE, *NGWANA YA KGWEDI SEFUBENG*

Rosalia Moroesi Nakin
University of South Africa
nakinrm@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The article is a deconstructionist reading of women oppression as depicted in the Sesotho folktale, *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* ("The Child with the Moon on the Chest"). The article argues that folktales embody some intriguing gender and power dynamics, particularly in settings where polygamy is practiced. The article also highlights the dynamics of power among women in a polygamous set up, as well as the contentious subject of gender oppression. The pre-eminence of binary features of good/evil and strong/weak, observed in *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* justifies the operationalisation of the deconstructionist paradigm. The folktale highlights the struggles and conflicts which women face in their marriages on a daily basis. The selected folktale demonstrates how women oppress each other. In this regard, the folktale not only deconstructs popular and dominant feminist perspectives, but also uses language and orders experiences in a manner that necessitates the use of the deconstructive approach. The selection of this folktale is deliberate. While there are many folktales in this category, *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* provides us with various ways to interrogate, not just society, but theory as well.

Keywords: basotho; deconstruction; evil; good; women

INTRODUCTION

Like language, the story mirrors the culture of Basotho people and gives a reflection of their way of life (Bascon 1965, 284). Basotho, like other nations in Africa, relate their experiences through narratives. These narratives help conserve memory, while at the same time defining and expressing the philosophy of life of the people concerned. According to p'Bitek (1986, 13) philosophy is culture and culture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society. Society, in this case, the Basotho society, invests in their surroundings with memory and meaning, by passing their oral traditions from one generation to the next orally, simply because when these forms of communication began, oral language was the only language that was used, before the advent of written language (Stewig 1980, 161). Almost all Sesotho folktales feature the unique knowledge of the hardships, triumphs, goodwill, evil, jealousy and rivalry among Basotho. Thus, folktales relate the cultural and societal experiences through reminiscences and reflections, among other things. Using the selected folktale, *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* as a case worth studying, the article argues that folktales embody some very intriguing gender and power dynamics. While the oppression of women is largely seen to be perpetuated by men, the selected folktale shows evidence of women who oppress other women. In this regard, the folktale not only deconstructs popular and dominant feminist perspectives, but also uses language and orders experiences in a manner that necessitates the use of a deconstructive approach. The harsh treatment of women by other women provides evidence in the story about the complex nature of gender oppression. The reference to women oppressing other women makes it possible to interrogate kneejerk readings and interpretations of gender and gender oppression. African societies have been described as predominantly patriarchal—with patriarchy constituting one major threat to femininities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Propp (1958), Dundes (1964) and Olrick, as quoted in Dundes (1965) are among the first scholars to analyse folktales. Moephuli (1972) analysed a Sesotho Folktale, *Ntekekwane,* using the theories of Propp (1958) and Dunde (1964)—whose focus is on the structure of folktale—hence they coined the term "structuralism." Propp identified 31 specific story units called narrations or functions, which reflect binary oppositions. These functions were modified by Dunde; who reduced them to eight motifimes. Propp's binary model has therefore, laid the foundation for this article.

This article will use the deconstruction model to expose the hidden motives of the senior wife in the folklore. The deconstruction approach is founded on the "logic" of binary opposition such as mind/body, rational/emotional, with one term always being given a more privileged position than its opposition. The theory of binary oppositions will be used to analyse the text in the folktale *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng*—for example, the opposing concepts of good/evil, as well as   strong/weak, as revealed in all their manifestations in the story. Binary opposition is a concept s where one of the two

terms is excluded and made supplementary (Carusi 1990, 96). Although deconstruction is characterised by eurocentric features, it has been adopted for the analysis of *Ngwana Kgwedi ya Sefubeng,* to showcase the presence of binary oppositions that are found in the story. Deconstruction creates new notions or concepts to mark the difference between the opposite terms.

DEFINITION OF DECONSTRUCTION

The term "deconstruction" is associated with Derrida (1981). Deconstruction is a reading strategy which attempts to show that the term "negated" is the necessary condition for the conceptualisation of the affirmed term (Carusi 1990, 98). The term therefore, always bears the traces of the negated term in order to "be" this means for absence to "be" there, presence must be there. There can be no meaningful entity if the difference between one entity and another were not marked (Carusi 1990, 98). Deconstruction is primarily a strategy because it forces the text (it is reading itself) to say what it did not mean to say. For Crouse (2003) deconstruction is...

> A way of reading a text. It was originally a method of literary criticism and only applied to literary texts. Now, however, deconstruction say all life is a text to be interpreted, whether it is poem, history, family values, a government, religion, science, a corporate charter, or architecture. The emphasis in this form of reading is never to learn the intended meaning of the author, but rather the subjective interpretation of the reader.

The text can either be signs or words whose meaning have no relationship to the author's intentions or to the world outside the text; therefore, the reader has to critically read the text with the aim of exposing the inborn opposition in the "meaning", or the reliability of a text. The sign/word contains not only a positive, but also its opposite

The description of a sign/word according to the deconstruction theory goes beyond one side of the term, hence Burr's (1995, 107) explanation that:

> To give anything an identity, to say what it is, is necessary also to say what it is not. In this sense, presence contains absence. This means that, a quality is present depends upon implying what is absent.

One of the principles of deconstruction suggests that every word/concept contains not only a positive but also an opposite. This approach will be used in this article to look at what is present in the text of *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* as negating what was quoted earlier, that "The emphasis in this form of reading is never to learn the intended meaning of the author, but rather the subjective interpretation of the reader" of the folktale; and also try to expose the hidden meaning in the text of the folktale. Thus, deconstruction emphasises the power of language as a system of signs rather than the constructive work of the individual person. It is concerned with how the human subject becomes constructed through the structures of human language and ideology (Burr 2003, 17).The central concept is the "text": (Denzin 1995, 55 as quoted in Burr 2003, 18).

> A text is any printed, visual, oral or auditory production that is available for reading, viewing or hearing (for example, an article, a film, a painting, a song). Readers create texts as they interpret and interact with them. The meaning of a text is always indeterminate, open-ended and interactional. Deconstruction is the critical analysis of texts

Texts writers construct our experience by drawing from a particular view of the world, and show how they work to present it to us; thus allowing us to challenge it (Burr 2003, 8). All texts must be approached as constructed around elemental oppositions, which all discourse has to articulate if it intends to make any sense whatsoever. Rawlings (1999), quoting Derrida's response when asked to define deconstruction, says:

> I often describe deconstruction as something which happens. It's not purely linguistics, involving text or book. You can deconstruct gestures, choreography. That's why I enlarged the concept of text. "Everything is a text, this is a text."

Text in this abstract is important, but text without context remains lifeless. Rawlings' definition speaks to attempts that are made in trying to get to the actual meaning of the text. It further helps in looking at how a text is constructed to present a particular image of people and their actions. As already quoted by Carusi (1992) Burr (1995, 106) adds that:

> Deconstruction may be something we talk about whether society, minds, freedom, we always implicitly also refer to what these things are not, and also involves reading a piece of text with an eye to showing up how its construction relies upon such unstated absence.

The aim of this approach is to show inherent contradictions and paradoxes in the way that structuralism demonstrates the rules governing the structure of texts, especially its reliance on binary opposition (Crystal 1987, 79). According to Crystal the task of deconstruction begins with isolating a specific structural relationship (e.g. speech vs. writing) and identifying the priorities that give the structure its centre (in structural thinking, speech is considered more fundamental, closer to thought, and expresses the "presence" of the author more directly; while writing is a derived medium, with an independent existence on paper that makes it less able to maintain the author's presence (1987, 79).

It is therefore, evident that a text contains what is present in its description and also contains what is absent; thus it reveals the discourses and systems of opposition operating in the text. To emphasise what we said earlier, the aim of deconstruction is not to refute but to simply show that within all texts there are conflicting forces. This demonstrates the flexibility of our system of language, and also the fact that there is nothing outside of our system of language. Thus, deconstruction shows the hidden and suppressed meanings that inhere in a text, whether it is a literary text or a social institution. The story of *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* is an example of a social institution; which is a family. Therefore, it deconstructs hidden and suppressed meanings in the various actions of the text throughout the story, thereby exposing the establishment, which

stands behind the text. A distinction should be made between text and what it is about. This distinction makes the text appear as though it is transparent to what it is about, which exists as a full ideal presence outside the text. Carusi (1992, 96) points out that binary opposition is the first term which is valorised—the text effaces itself before its referent. The binary opposition is the means whereby one of the two terms is excluded and made supplementary. A text from the story will be presented in Sesotho, with a summarised version of English.

WEAKNESS OF DECONSTRUCTION

The deconstruction approach is not without weakness; for instance, among other things; the text being deconstructed does not synchronise in a hierarchical structure, as illustrated in the theory by Levi Straus, which was applied by Msimang (1986) and Propp (1958) and used by Moepulli. It lacks political commitment, thus rendering it less applicable, something outside language/text than an inner textual approach perspective. For the purposes of this article, the theory will be applied in sociocultural context.

SUMMARY OF STORY

There was a king by the name of Bulane, who had a moon on the chest. Bulane had two wives; the senior wife had children, while the junior wife was barren. The barren wife was ill-treated by both her husband and the senior wife and consequently left the palace. Later, the junior wife fell pregnant and gave birth to a child with the moon on the chest. The senior wife saw that the junior wife had given birth to a child with the moon on the chest and became jealous of her. She planned to destroy and kill the child born of the junior wife. However, the rat overheard as she was plotting and successfully rescued the child. Bulane, the husband, heard about this child and began to investigate the matter. Ultimately, he discovered that the child with the moon on the chest was his own and brought him and his mother back to the palace. The senior wife was chased away from the palace and society, and the child with the moon on the chest was crowned the king and his mother made the queen mother.

DISCUSSIONS AND INTERPRETATION: DECONSTRUCTING THE TEXT

Traditional stories exemplified beliefs regarding facts or phenomena of human experiences, as well as answers on the origin of the world of the people—God, death, love as well as other forces of nature. These stories are the soul and life-blood of the people. Basic commentaries on distinctive series of human nature are inherent in myths; and as such, the Sesotho language is no exception (Guma 1990). The argument in the story is drawn from the surface structure of the presentation of the text and the meaning

behind the various actions as presented in the story. To "deconstruct means charting how key terms, motifs and characters are defined by binary oppositions within a text, how the oppositions are hierarchical (one term is prioritised and the other treated as derivative or subordinate), and to demonstrate that these oppositions are unstable, reversible and mutually dependent on one another" (de Man 1973; cf Phillips n.d). The binary oppositions between the terms "good/evil" as well as "strong/weak"—are reversible and mutually dependent on one another.

The concept of "good/strong" is given priority over the concept of "evil /weak." In reality, there can be no concept of "good/strong" 'if there is no concept' of "evil/weak" to counteract it. "Evil/weak" should be there for "good/strong" to exist. This argument supports the ideology that deconstruction can then be regarded as (Derrida 1981, 6):

> to deconstruct philosophy, thus would be to think- in the most faithful, interior way- the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine-from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy-what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this...motivated repression.

What dominates in the philosophical tradition of the text, which was not mentioned, now provides room and the key for the reader to find the flaws and empty space that domination seeks to hide. Therefore, the role of deconstruction in the story is to uncover contradictions, and show hidden and suppressed meanings that are inherent in a text.

The two forces are always at war with one another, each striving to gain supremacy over the other (Guma 1990, 18). The text in *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* is characterised by the forces of "good/strong" and "evil/weak", whereby the text contains "hidden" internal contradictions that lead to accepting the assumption it contains; as it is usually the norm that beneath a great deal of humour lies a deeper meaning (Burr 1995, 165). A few extracts from the text of *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* will be used to illustrate this point:

> *Jwale ha isa-isa mosadi a se nang bana a emola. Ho fihlela nako ya ho itshihlolla* (Guma 1990, 186).

> ("After a short while, the childless woman conceived. A few months passed and it was time for her to be confined") (Guma 1990, 187).

The "*botho*" philosophy is a unifying vision or worldview, which is enshrined in the expression *motho ke motho ka batho ba bang* ("a person is a person because of other people") (Shutte 1993, 46). This traditional African aphorism articulates a basic respect, reliance and compassion for others. It can be interpreted as both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It describes a human being as "being-with-others", and prescribes what "being-with-others" should entail. To help other people in their time of need demonstrates this philosophy. *Botho/ubuntu* is the seaming line that joins the fragments of African cultures. This is magnificently confirmed by Tutu (1999) in these words, "A person with *botho/ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper

self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole." The philosophy of *botho/ubuntu* gives everyone an assurance that others will always be there for them. No one is more important than the other. No man is complete or is capable of satisfying his life desires without being dependent, in one way or another. All of us in this life were made to complement each other to achieve personal or societal goals. This African communalism, is the seaming line of African identity, where the individual is immersed in the community and derives his personality only from the community. The senior wife showed an element of *"botho"* in helping an inexperienced, junior wife during child labour, which is acceptable and appreciated. However, the very senior wife who assisted her sister-wife to deliver the baby, ended up being consumed by jealousy - that her rival gave birth to a child with the moon on the chest. The good act that this woman did in the outside repressed the evil she had inwardly intended for the other woman. Carusi (1990, 97), in supporting this view, holds that the deconstructive strategy employed leads to the reading of the text in such a way that the dependency of thought on those factors believed to be external to it can easily be noticeable from the text itself:

> *Jwale mmelehisi enwa a mo nka a mo lahlela ka mora dipitsa mohaolwaneng. Jwale mosadi enwa a phakisa a tswa ka pele. Yaba o fumana ntjanyana ka serobeng; yaba o e tlisa ka pela mma ngwana* (Guma 1990, 186).

> ("Now the midwife took it, and threw it behind the pots in the cupboard. She found a puppy in a hen's nest, and quickly returned with it and put it next to the child's mother") (Guma 1990, 187).

Behind every act of goodness that the senior wife performed, was a hidden agenda and repression of the truth. Therefore, when we talk about something; be it society, minds, freedom, or dogs and cats, we are always implicitly also referring to what these things are not, to what is absent from them (Derrida as quoted in Burr 1995, 106). Although the senior wife appears to be succeeding in her evil plot against the junior wife throughout the story, her plan does not materialise. In life there are times when the forces of evil may appear to prevail over good, depicting the former as a tenacious fighter that is not easily overcome, where the flame of goodness is indeed very weak; but is there— and not completely shaded out (Guma 1990, 18–19). As can be seen the sudden and miraculous appearance of the mouse in the story, strengthens the battle and the trickster ends up being exposed.

ELEMENT OF POWER AS DEPICTED IN THE STORY

Power is generally seen as a tool that is used by men to dominate women, but this story shows how women also use power to dominate other women—since some women have more power than others, as is the case with Bulane's senior wife; by virtue of being the senior wife, in accordance with custom. In the story the senior wife of Bulane is

presented as being strong, intelligent, and influential, and has control over Bulane, their husband. These qualities, which depict her as powerful, are characteristic of women of high calibre in society. The senior wife would produce reasoned arguments and rhetoric in the production of argumentative discourse, which in a literal sense is justified and reasonable (Billig as quoted by Burr 1995, 165). In deconstruction we do not only look at what is being said, but also at what is being projected. In this story the senior wife further uses her power to advance her needs. (Burr 1995, 62) points out that:

> power is an extent of a person's access to sought-after resources, such as money, leisure time, attention and the extent to which a person has on the capacity to have some effect on their world, have some input upon other people's lives.

The role of women in the rearing of children affords them (women) the political power, particularly within a society. It is evident that this story outlines a personal and social problem, for which a social solution is needed. The other woman, by virtue of being the senior wife, uses her power to get what she wants. Power in society regulates ways of talking, thinking and acting (Foucault as quoted by Burr 1995). Therefore, the manner in which we talk has specific outcomes and achieves purposes in our interactions with each other. The manner in which the senior wife talks to Bulane explains why she is able to achieve what she wants. She influenced Bulane and won him over, and made him believe everything she said. Bulane could neither argue nor question the behaviour or actions of his wife. The senior wife would present her case in a reasonable and convincing manner by giving justifications for her position and countering objections with criticism, taking advantage of the fact that Bulane loves her, and would therefore, concede to her requests.

Power is referred to as a whole series of particular mechanisms, definable and defined, that seem capable of including behaviour or discourse (Foucault as quoted in Burr 1995, 63). In all instances the senior woman misuses her power and reflects how she uses the opposing elements of "strong/weak" to get what she wants. Power is never absolute; to have access to power is unproblematically a "good thing" (Holloway 1981; 1984 as quoted in Burr 1995, 77). The social setting depicts other people as having more power than others. When power meets power the weaker power has to submit to the stronger power. The junior wife has less power; and therefore, the odds are against her. Being barren, she is in a state that is not accepted in an African society. Barrenness carries a societal stigma, which is in all cases, associated with women. This woman is carrying this stigma; hence she does not enjoy any protection from her husband. Her husband is cold and heartless towards her. It is interesting to note that this particular type of woman is obedient to her husband; even though the husband is not supportive and is unreasonable. The woman in this story is characteristics of other oppressed women, who do not complain when they are being treated badly, but remain obedient in order to keep their marriages. They patiently wait for their husbands to recognise their predicament, and may actually protect their husbands (by remaining submissive) from being seen by

the outside world to be abusive towards their wives; just like the junior wife protects Bulane; who sees his wife as a mere instrument of reproduction (Gaidzanwa 1985, 31).

In the story Bulane discovers that *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng* is his own son. Bulane changed his attitude towards the junior wife and began to recognise her and neglected the senior wife.

This leads to changing of positions. It should be noted that women in a polygamous arrangement are often competing for their husband's affection and attention, and for the benefits of their children. After the birth of her son, the junior wife becomes the queen, while the senior wife is chased away.

The wheels of goodness grind exceedingly fine (Guma 1990, 19) [Bulane's blind eyes] are ultimately opened. He starts to regret the bad treatment he has given to his child and wife.

INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY

Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng demonstrates how customs can serve to validate the abuse or neglect of exceptionally vulnerable individuals. In this case, it is the wife who is neglected for supposed barrenness, but later proves to be capable of giving birth to a son of matchless beauty. Thus, the story elucidates the present and marks the unknowable future (Bascon 1965, 285). Again, the story justifies the important but often overlooked requirement to maintain conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour in family life. The element of individualism and specialisation is absent in traditional African societies (Wiredu 1995, 76), where conflicts are handled and resolved by the community. As Wiredu puts it, "let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interest of others. (76)". Although folktales are narrated by individuals from one generation to the next to preserve knowledge, the personal experience in them change and become absorbed into the general wealth of the community. Gauvin (2012, 46) attests to p'Bitek's (1986) ideology of relationality and social collectivism in the following manner:

> Man is not born free. He cannot be free. He is incapable of being free. For only by being in chains can he be and remain "human." What constitutes these chains? Man has a bundle of duties which are expected from him by society, as well as a bundle of rights and privileges that the society owes him (Gauvin 2012, 46).

The personal identity is relational, and the process of socialisation from which the relationship is created is embedded in folktales. Generally, Sesotho folktales are communal rather than individualistic, and elastic rather than fixed. Mbiti supports the idea and states that the individual has little latitude for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. Quoting him verbatim, this is what he says (Mbiti 1969, 109):

> Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.' The individual can only say "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am." This is the cardinal point of understanding of the African view of man.

Thus, in a communal society the individual has a strong attachment to other members; hence they have more fundamental duties and responsibilities to fulfil. The content and form change according to time, narrator and audience. A glimpse into the lifestyle of that particular past is revealed in the story. The story displays how human wickedness can lead to the extremes of them killing a person. The conflict between good and evil/strong and weak and the outcomes of such conflicts prescribe to the listener the behaviour that is acceptable in a particular society. The senior wife's major aim is to construct herself and her actions as morally justified; while she has a contradictory and conflicting motive. As the senior wife she is entrusted with the responsibility of caring for the junior wife—as African culture requires of her—as elderly women, who are regarded as experienced, are supposed to care for younger women. The senior wife however, does the opposite. The story also cautions young women about accepting help from other people. The junior wife is robbed of her child and given a puppy; while the senior wife leaves evidence that points to all what she has done. Fortunately the mouse, who would overhear her scheming rescues the child— from the planned death.

The senior wife offers to assist the junior wife but it is discovered that she has ulterior motives. She betrays the trust of the junior wife, who regards her as her mentor. This scenario contrasts with what is found in contemporary, written literature, where the audience is often left in suspense. The junior wife had a happy ending that was comforting, with a bright future ahead. Throughout all the clashes of wit as wily, the junior wife outsmarts the senior wife. In the end, the senior wife is expelled, and we see wrongdoing, trickery and unfaithfulness being punished. It is the very essence of this match that gives the story its powerful narrative edge over the reader and the listener. The morale of this story is that living a life of pretence does not pay, and that honesty is the best virtue for mankind. This folktale illustrates how the Basotho community enforces peace in the institution of marriage, that will result in orderly, stable and harmonious communities. Through deconstructing the text, opposition between appearances and what is real, or the truth, is marked in the story. Deconstruction also shows how the secondary term, which is contained in the existence of the first term, is fundamental.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the deconstruction approach and has successfully adapted and applied it in the analysis of the folktale *Ngwana ya Kgwedi Sefubeng*. It is evident from the story that the deconstruction strategy has exposed these hidden elements of the senior wife in this particular folktale. In this story Guma (1990) managed to demonstrate that evil can never prevail against goodness—although it may take long to expose a wicked

person who is well placed in society. But the wheels of goodness grind exceedingly fine (Guma 1990, 1819). The folktale also reveals the dynamics of the lives of women in polygamous arrangements; as shown in the hidden motives of the senior woman. The article also shows how other women are being oppressed by others. Furthermore, the story shows how human wickedness may lead some people to the extremes. The junior wife has been a victim of circumstances, thus attesting to the fact that folktales serve as a vehicle for social protest and charter for belief and models for actions in societies. It is evident that binary oppositions can be used to analyse Sesotho folktales. Therefore,   the concept of "good /strong" cannot exist without the concept of "evil /weak" to counteract it. At the end, the truth will always prevail, as is evident in this story, where the senior wife is exposed as a trickster. Moreover, the folktale speaks on various levels, and can in fact, be interpreted from several other theoretical paradigms.

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