Misogyny in African Oral Literature through the Lens of Northern Sotho Proverbs

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Abstract

This study unveils misogynistic stereotypes in oral literature by probing into Northern Sotho proverbs. Oral literature includes riddles, proverbs, folktales, songs, myths, idioms, legends and epic poems, which have emerged as mechanisms to educate, entertain and guide people in their societies. Thus, many cultural systems depend on oral literature to assert gender roles that are often found to be preferential to men and discriminatory to women. Of the forms of oral literature mentioned above, this qualitative study has utilised proverbs from the African, Northern Sotho tribe to unmask the stereotypes that are fostered by oral literature against women. The data used in this study were collected from critical books, theses and journal articles. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the proverbs based on misogynistic elements. Through a textual analytic method, the proverbs were analysed, scrutinised and found to be misogynistic towards women, as they appear to champion menfolk at the expense of womenfolk. To this end, oral literature asserts assumptions that persuade women to be subservient to men, and sometimes trivialises women and advocates against them accessing education, wealth, power, decision-making and leadership positions. Furthermore, this study adds value to the global contest against the discrimination, abuse and appalling killings of women. It uncovers the cultural creeds that are often abused and used to excuse the marginalisation of women. Cultural structures appear to be given inadequate attention when the perpetrators of discrimination against women are confronted. It is recommended that societal initiatives such as public talks be undertaken specifically by men to call for the end of discrimination against women.

Keywords: oral literature; proverbs; Northern Sotho; menfolk; womenfolk

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Introduction

Pre-colonial African societies relied on oral literature among other activities to pass knowledge, wisdom and guidance in life to subsequent generations. Despite the advent of colonialists that moulded the African fashion of education and sharing knowledge, many societies on the continent still lean on the fundamental assumptions of oral literature to inform their identities. Hence, Nwanosike and Onyije (2011, 44) affirm that "the colonisers did not introduce education into Africa; they introduced a new set of formal educational institutions which partly supplemented and partly replaced those which were there before." Oral literature had been a predominating tradition of cultivation in the African societies and its eventual contact with the West resulted in oral literature being controversially rechristened as orature. This is by virtue of the "Eurocentric thinking that literature, strictly speaking, is any written artistic-cum-creative work. And since oral literature is principally verbally narrated (spoken) and not written, it should not be associated with literature" (Emezue 2018, 2). Nevertheless, literature, especially of the oral shape, is a "social product that has its roots in a defined cultural context" (Ikideh 2005, 59). African societies that are deeply embedded in cultural underpinnings seek guidance from the conceptions of oral literature. It is the different forms of oral literature such as proverbs that set standards, identities and roles for both men and women. Peter (2010, 47) notes that "despite the enviable position females have occupied as capable oral artists in the literary world, they have not been given the attention they deserve; male voices have continued to be dominant." Moreover, oral literature seems to reserve a secondary status for women in societies whilst their counterparts, men, are perceived as emperors. To a great extent, oral literature genres such as poetry are considered the preserve of men whereas other genres such as tales are reserved for women (Finnegan 1976). This selection exudes stereotypes against women. Thus, Peter (2010, 60) postulates that traditional oral poetry "is instead meant to be performed by males and is regarded as the most important genre in the African community." This implies that oral traditional poetry is reserved for men due to its value and status in society, whereas the deprecated womenfolk are perceived as not ready for such a primed activity. Thus, women rose to "sing songs about their social problems or to ridicule men and to express their feelings and indicate their understanding of gender discrimination" (Owomoyela 1993, 64).

Theoretical Lens Underpinning the Study

The study adopts feminism as a socio-critical theory that addresses the issues of power, domination, ideology and equality between men and women in a broader socio-economic and historical setting (Harvey 2020). Of the many feminist approaches, African feminism has emerged as a stream of feminism that adds context to the liberation of women, specifically African women. Therefore, African feminism and its branch womanism, which places "the feminist vision within black women's experiences with culture, colonialism, and many other forms of domination and subjugation that impact African women's lives" (Ogunyemi 1985, 65), underpin this study. Nkealah (2016, 65) depicts African feminism as "a type of feminism innovated by African

women that specifically addresses the conditions and needs of continental African women (African women who reside on the African continent)." In the pre-colonial days, African culture was idolised by African men and women to the extent that the gender roles that are perceived as preferential and discriminatory today were not professed as such then. Thus, Ramodibe (1988, 16) states that African culture has always been oppressive to women "as it has a male domineering factor [and] it is a patriarchal system. This oppressive patriarchal system was found in South Africa even before Whites came with their Western capitalistic culture. Capitalistic culture has reinforced the oppressive system, out of which it derives more benefits." For instance, it was seemingly normalised that the man is the head of the family, the provider, whilst the woman's value was depicted in line with domestic chores and the two aimed to excel in their roles. This perception stretched from the pre-colonial period to the colonial and post-colonial era, where it is found to be discriminatory against women. Azodo (1997, 207), on the other hand, notes that "there existed a complementarity of male and female roles in pre-colonial African societies and that it is during and after colonisation that the downfall of the African woman from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming man's helper occurred."

Methodology

This study unmasks discriminatory presumptions against women in oral literature through an exploration of chosen Northern Sotho proverbs. It is qualitative in nature and has selected Northern Sotho proverbs out of the artistic body of oral literature using a purposive sampling technique, which involves "identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Creswell and Clark 2011, 2). The proverbs are extracted from critical books that include Nape'a Motana's *Sepedi (Northern Sotho) Proverbs* (2004) and H.S. Ramaila's *Thalabodiba (Sepedi [Northern Sotho]: Literature)* (1996). The proverbs are sampled by virtue of their misogynistic characteristics that aid the researcher to address the main thrust of the study, which is to divulge the stereotypes nurtured by oral literature to marginalise women. Furthermore, a textual analytic method that aims "to illuminate something about the underlying politics or social context of the cultural object they're investigating" (Caufield 2020) is employed to intently analyse, interpret and discuss the sampled Northern Sotho proverbs, which are:

- *Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo*
- *Monna ke tšhweni o ja ka diatla tše pedi*
- *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*
- *Lebitla la monna le ka thoko ga tsela*
- *Monna ke selepe re ya adimišana*
- *Mosadi ke nku o rekwa mosela*
- *Monna ke nku o llela teng*
- *Mosadi ke kgano o gola ka fase*
- *Monna ke thaka wa naba*

- *Monna ke hlogo ya lapa, mosadi ke molala*
- *Tša etwa ke ya tshadi pele, di wela ka leopeng*

Misogyny in Northern Sotho Proverbs

The selected proverbs above assert both men's and women's identities in society. Many Northern Sotho tribal corps have been and are still predicated on the proverbs sampled for this study and others. The Northern Sotho tribe, also known as the Bapedi or Transvaal Sotho, are Bantu-speaking people who inhabit the Limpopo Province, formerly known as Northern Province, South Africa and their traditional enclave is referred to as Bopedi, situated between the Olifants and Steelpoort rivers (Britannica 2018). The proverbs played a major role in the tribe to give guidance regarding marriage, husbands' and wives' roles, leadership, childhood and adulthood. Mbagu (2017, 1) notes that "proverbs have had a great influence on the lifestyles of many people, mainly through means of religion and culture." Many scholars have claimed that this influence sometimes perpetuates stereotypes against women, as it appears to favour men over women (see Masenya 1996, 2018; Montle 2020a; Ripkin 2017). Therefore, the study probes into misogyny, hatred or prejudice against women in African oral literature through a comparison of Northern Sotho proverbs about women and men based on similar elements.

- *Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo*
- *Monna ke tšhweni o ja ka diatla tše pedi*

The proverbs above, *Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo* (A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten) and *Monna ke tšhweni o ja ka diatla tše pedi* (A man is a baboon, he eats with both hands) both metaphorically use a baboon and hands to assert roles for women and men. The woman is only compared to a baboon by virtue of her obligation to perform domestic duties. Masenya (1996, 76) notes that this proverb means that "the beauty—and charm of a woman is found in her labour (that is in her daily household chores) and in her ability to take care of her husband." To this end, the baboon in the proverb induces women to subscribe to domestic duties. According to Montle (2020a), the proverb champions the Mammy stereotype against black women. Williamson (1998, 66) states that "as the Mammy, the black woman is perceived as fat and dark, with nappy hair and a booming voice, and she is ever-nurturing, though virtually sexless." In addition, Andrews et al. (2017, 190) assert that "the mammy stereotype in its historical and contemporary forms suggests the notion of strength which is linked to a large black female body [and] body size comes to represent the strength to undertake physical manual tasks, to persevere through hardship, to care for the family." Furthermore, the baboon is also compared to a man, but unlike a woman whose hands are identified for domestic work, a man's are exalted for polygamy, if not promiscuity. Masenya (1996, 173) opines that this proverb means that "even if a man is married to a woman, it is acceptable that he can have other women outside the marriage; women who will also satisfy his needs." The proverb seems to destigmatise promiscuity among men as it compares a "man with a baboon [and] justifies how a man can satisfy his sexual desires

anywhere with anybody [and] that will not be a problem" (Masenya 1996, 173). This is not only discriminatory against women, but could also encourage exposure to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) due to engaging in sexual relations with many partners.

- *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*
- *Lebitla la monna le ka thoko ga tsela*

The two proverbs, *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (A woman's grave is at her in-laws) and *Lebitla la monna le ka thoko ga tsela* (A man's grave is beside the road), point out the life journeys of both men and women until death. The proverbs outline identities that men and women should acquire before they die. The first proverb strongly encourages a woman to get married and be buried at her in-laws. It has been found to espouse stereotypes against unmarried women, thus often making it difficult for married women to divorce their abusive husbands. Rakoma (1971, 146) affirms that "even in the case of the death of a husband, a wife should know that she does not have the right to return to her family. She must cling to her in-laws for they are the ones who should console her in her mourning." In Matope et al.'s (2013, 191) study, a participant states, "when I go to my paternal aunt to complain about the beatings I get from Musa, my aunt says there is nothing to do once the cows are paid. Society sanctions violence as the community insist he is right." It is the message drawn from the proverb that persuades the woman to endure the hardships and abuse in the marriage. Moreover, Masenya (1996, 176) avers that "deaths of oppressive husbands could not relieve them from the shackles of their home (*bogadi*) for *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*—the grave of a woman is at her husband's place." For a man, the proverb does not impose oppressive or restrictive measures as it does on a woman; it rather conscientises men about the freedom they should subscribe to and own. The proverb propels men to always be on the road and be acquainted with different incidents around the world. Rakoma (1971, 146) notes that "many men die far away from their homes due to their efforts of getting food and other necessities to care for their families" in lieu of the moral acquired from the proverb.

- *Mosadi ke nku o rekwa mosela*
- *Monna ke nku o llela teng*

These proverbs, *Mosadi ke nku o rekwa mosela* (A woman is a sheep, her tail is bought) and *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a sheep, he cries inwardly), utilise a sheep to set roles for both men and women. A woman is only compared to a sheep because of her backside, which is hallowed by this proverb. The proverb assumes that a real woman exhibits steatopygia, a state of containing high levels of tissue on the buttocks and thighs (DBpedia, n.d.). Moreover, the undertones of this proverb are found to have enkindled the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes against women (Montle 2020b). These stereotypes reinforce one another in perceiving a black woman's body as built for sex and domestic work. Mgadmi (2009, 5) declares that "since slavery rested on the procreative capacities of black female slaves, their bodies, their fecundity and their sexuality were subject to

public discussion [and] even rape and sexual assault by their masters, justified by their inherent promiscuity, were seen as a means of increasing birth rates and the labour force on the plantations." Historically, a black South African woman, Saartjie Baartman, was enslaved, body-shamed, and sexually violated and commodified by colonialists due to her large buttocks. Furthermore, another Northern proverb embracing stereotypes against women is *Mosadi ke kgano o gola ka fase* (A woman is a mongoose; she grows underneath). The proverb measures a woman's maturity in line with her sexual readiness. Hence, most women find this proverb discriminatory, as it seems to dismantle borders brought by age and permits older men to marry, if not have sexual relations with, under-age girls. In the South African context, there is a practice known as *ukuthwala*, which involves the abduction of teenage girls and coercing them into marriage. Most of the abducted girls are as young as eight years old and are forced to fulfil the sexual "duties" of wives to their husbands (Van der Westhuizen 2011). Mandla Mandela, the chief of Mvezo traditional council in 2010 said, "for a girl to be taken as a wife through *ukuthwala*—the process has nothing to do with age—When you are going to discuss culture do not even try to bring in white notions as such an approach will turn things upside down. Firstly, culture has no age. Age is something we learn today because of our Westernisation" (Van der Westhuizen 2011). However, some women (Sepedi Tutoring 2013) express different views on social media:

> *Seema se se na le mathata. Sona ka bosona se nyefola bomme. Ke mohuta wa diema woo o sa šomišwago ke batho ba go rata go tsenela thobalano le bana ba bannyane gomme ba itshwarelela ka sona ba re ke setšo goba ke Sepedi. Kgale, dinakong tšela dingaka di sa lefelwa ka bana ba basetsana ka gore batswadi ba šitilwe ke go lefela ditirelo tša ngaka mosetsana e sa le lesea, ee. Go be go dirwa bjalo. Lehono re na le ditokelo tša botho le tekatekanyo ya bong gape re na le gape le Sexual Offenders Register yeo e hlokometšwego ke Kgoro ya Toka. Yoo a ka fetwago ke mahlale a tsena mapai le ngwana, a re: Mosadi ke kgano o gola ka fase, o tla llelwa ke ditšhipe le bogoboga! Ka boripana seema se ke poelo morago setšhabeng. Se ntša bomme serithi. Se oketša bodiidi le malwetši baneng ba basetsana ao a re bušetšago morago ka mengwagangwaga*.
>
> [This proverb has a problem. It marginalises women. It's used by people who like to have sexual intercourse with young children and they justify themselves as following culture or Sepedi. During the olden days, traditional doctors were paid with young girls as young as infants, when their parents failed to pay money for the consultations they had with the doctors. That is how it was done. Today we have human rights and gender equality forums and Sexual Offenders registered by the justice department. He who engages in sexual relations with a child, says: A woman is a mongoose and grows underneath, they will be imprisoned! In a nutshell, this proverb delays development in societies. It undervalues women and increases poverty and diseases among female children and this delays social progress].

For men, the proverb admires them for their bravery and encourages them to maintain it. Thus, they are compared to sheep that cry inwardly. Therefore, the proverb positions men as the stronger sex and informs them to remain strong during difficulties. However,

Masenya (1996, 176) argues that women are actually the stronger sex as they endure more hardships than men do:

> It is worthy of note that in patriarchal Africa, women are always on the receiving end as we might have gleaned from our look at the above proverbs; they have always encountered difficulties and historically they have shown that they are more tolerant than males. Throughout their youth, they have been counselled (*go laiwa*) in their fathers' homes and at the initiation schools to be tolerant and subordinate to their husbands.

- *Mosadi ke mphodi ga a tshele mafate*
- *Monna ke thaka wa naba*

The proverbs, *Mosadi ke mphodi ga a tshele mafate* (A woman is pumpkin, she does not go beyond the borders of the garden) and *Monna ke thaka wa naba* (A man is a pumpkin seed, he spreads), utilise a plant to assert both men's and women's roles in marriages or intimate relationships. The proverb compares a woman with a pumpkin (wild spinach) in the garden. The proverb denotes that a woman should not engage in extramarital affairs or infidelity, hence *ga a tshele mafate* (she does not go beyond the borders of the garden). Moreover, the pumpkin is also known to spread within the garden. The farmer usually plants one seed that germinates, spreads and fills the whole garden. This quality is afforded a man. The proverb seems to encourage a man to have multiple sexual partners whereas a woman should remain faithful and refrain from infidelity. Masenya (1996, 180) notes that the proverbs mean that "a man can have sexual relations with a number of women for he spreads like a pumpkin plant. (Interestingly, he will never allow other men—who also claim to be pumpkin plants—to spread into his family!)." This proverb has been lent support by many other Northern Sotho proverbs such as *Monna ke selepe re a adimišana* (A man is an axe we borrow each other), *Monna ke kobo ra apolelana* (A man is a blanket we share) and *Monna ke phoka o wa bošego* (A man is a fog, he falls in the middle of the night). These proverbs similarly champion male promiscuity while strongly coaxing women not to have many sexual partners like their counterparts, men, do.

- *Monna ke hlogo ya lapa, mosadi ke molala*
- *Tša etwa pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng*

The proverbs above identify a man as an authoritative figure. The first proverb, *Monna ke hlogo ya lapa, mosadi ke molala* (A man is the head of the family and a woman is the neck), gives a woman secondary status in society while priming a man as the leader. Hence, women are often discouraged from assuming positions of power and leadership. The second proverb complements the former as it states *Tša etwa pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng* (If the herd of cattle is led by a cow, it will fall into a cave). The proverb denounces women as leaders and maintains that if a female takes the lead, the followers or the organisation she is leading will fall apart. Rakoma (1971, 222) states that the proverb means that "[i]f men can be controlled by women they will land in trouble and

experience many unnecessary faults for the one who is ignorant and powerless is the one who is controlling them." The proverb has nurtured stereotypes that still vex women in many different sectors today:

> In the business world, women leaders are still a minority. This statement comes as no surprise to most of us; what is surprising is that men outpace women in leadership roles across every sector in the world: corporate, non-profit, government, education, medicine, military and religion. (Andrews 2016, 36)

The African society and the world at large are vexed by misogyny today. Women are socio-economically and politically excluded if not abused and killed. Some of the pretexts of these misogynistic insolences are found to be culturally motivated. Hence, this study unveils the cultural underpinnings fostering stereotypical outlooks that severely affect women physically, spiritually and psychologically through the prism of Northern Sotho proverbs that serve as guiding principles in the African context. This inquest and its findings add value to the mechanisms that are already set in motion to combat discriminatory attitudes against women today. It strengthens the clarion call for discrimination against women to come to an end by confronting all structures, principles and belief systems such as cultural assumptions that perpetuate misogyny. This African and global problem requires robust intervention, specifically from men and with the aid of governmental organisations, to debunk cultural myths about women asserted by proverbs and many other cultural practices that seem to justify discrimination against women.

Conclusion

This article sought to unearth the pretexts for misogyny in African societies. It has been found that assumptions in oral literature tend to champion stereotypes against women; hence, the scrutinised Northern Sotho proverbs depict men as brave, sexually emancipated and authoritative figures, and women as weak, sexually victimised and needing to remain within the sphere of domestic work. Most societies that are predicated on cultural notions often employ patriarchal structures taught by proverbs that assert both men's and women's identities. In the modern day, Masenya (2018, 6) states that "women appear to be stuck between present-day images of womanhood and traditional images re-inscribed by the discourses of the African renaissance, decoloniality and fundamentalist biblical hermeneutics." This is because most women in modern-day African societies have risen to assume an identity as feminists. The ideals of feminism clash with cultural structures that are relayed through oral literature. For instance, Brunell and Burkett (2021) assert that "feminism is a range of social movements, political movements, and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes." The aforementioned assertion refutes proverbs such as *Monna ke hlogo ya lapa, mosadi ke molala*. Therefore, further research could be undertaken to examine the interface between feminist and cultural structures.

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