

Folklore and the Dynamics of Gender Differentiation: A Feminist Approach

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Abstract

Culture dictates how people should live, and how they should interact with each other as men and women. A plethora of literature displays that in most African cultures women and men perform different tasks by virtue of their biological make-up. The division of labour between men and women can be traced from the patriarchal system, which is culturally determined. In most African cultures gender differentiation shaped the behaviours of indigenous societies in that it was believed that women are weak and even inferior to men. From an early age, children develop beliefs that are gender-based; this quite often results in different gender roles established for people of different genders. This article aims at critiquing how folklore, through expressions, proverbs, and cultural songs, shapes gender differentiation in the balance of power, as well as the distribution of roles in indigenous communities. The article also seeks to answer the following questions: How does folklore impact on the socialisation of boys and girls? To what extent does folklore impact on gender relations? What role do stories and storytelling play in the maintenance and the transformation of stereotypic gender role behaviour? This article is grounded on a survey of some selected Sesotho sa Leboa literature, both written and oral, amongst others folksongs, proverbs and also language expressions, which to some extent play a role in the division of labour between men and women. In analysing the folksongs, linguistic expressions and proverbial expressions, the article shows how women were portrayed in the context of patriarchal culture.

Keywords: Sesotho sa Leboa; folktales; proverbs; feminist approach; gender



Introduction

The word “gender” refers to the socially constructed roles and relations between men and women, while the word “sex” refers to biological characteristics that define humans as either female or male (McLeod 2014). Gender roles are different roles defined on the basis of the differentiation of sex by the society. These roles differ from culture to culture; they exist in all spheres of life and are deeply rooted in sex division. Gender differences are supported by the sociocultural layout of a particular society. This often leads to a gender division of labour within and outside the family. Accordingly, Greenglass (1982) argues that gender roles include the prescribed behaviours, attitudes, and characteristics associated with gender status. Greenglass (1982) further attests that gender role “identity” is the acceptance of oneself as feminine, masculine or androgynous. The extent to which traditional family dynamics continue to prevail in many societies is extremely striking. Despite the significant improvement of women’s status in many spheres, women and men continue to follow traditional gender roles at home. Mala and Weldon’s (2018) survey revealed that women are much more likely than men to be responsible for the majority of household work and childcare. Family duties can limit men’s political careers too, but this is an occasional obstacle, while women’s domestic responsibilities are regular and long-lasting (Jackson and Peters 2019).

According to Brunvand (1978, 20), folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of the people. Thobejane and Flora (2014) corroborate this view by pronouncing that it was passed from generation to generation by word of mouth; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples from one generation to the other. Dorson (1972, 2–4) categorises themes covering folklore as oral literature, material culture, social customs and performing folk arts. However, in African culture, folksongs, proverbial and linguistic expressions that have been used to create a positive insinuation (Hanzen 2007) in the societal relations fall within the class of the oral tradition.

The patriarchal societal setup an African child is exposed to from early childhood could be viewed as a contributory factor to this state of affairs. Aina (1998) opines that “patriarchy as a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, puts men at an advantageous position while at the same time placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of the females.” For Johnson (2005), patriarchy does not mean that all men are in the position alluded to above, but that most powerful roles are held mostly by men who are in positions of authority because of their ability to exert control through violence or the threat of violence, and that personal attributes and social activities closely tied to men are more highly regarded in society. Obododimma (1998) supports Aina’s affirmation by asserting that females, because of their subordinate

position in the society, suffer from linguistic disparagement in the hands of their male counterparts who possess power. He further alludes that in the Igbo culture as well as in other African cultures, patriarchal systems are oppressive forces that generate meanings that belittle women (Obododimma 1998). Muthuki (cited in Zondi 2015, 46) contends that the subjugation of women results in inequality in the sharing of power and decision-making within families. Renzetti, Curran, and Maier (2014) refer to this inequality as part of linguistic sexism wherein women are viewed as subordinate to men rather than as their equals. As a result, linguistic expressions reflect the social dominance of men and the weakness of women (Aghayeva 2010).

For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on particular forms of oral literature, namely, folksongs, proverbs and linguistic expressions that have a derogatory semantic connotation regarding women in the society. Okpewho (cited in Masuku 2005) defines oral literature as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression. Sexist language involves defining women's place in society unequally and also ignores women. Renzetti, Curran, and Maier (2014) assert that words associated with men have very different connotations than those associated with women, and the latter are uniformly negative and demeaning. They further purport that words used by males connote power, authority or a positive and valued status, while most of the words associated with females have sexual connotations. The Sesotho sa Leboa word *kgeke* originally did not have a derogatory connotation as it only referred to a girl; however, it is currently used to refer to a woman with multiple sexual relations. The word does not have an equivalent for male counterparts. Women and men are citizens of different subcultures; they act in certain ways. Linguistically speaking, females and males learn through socialisation how to behave as girls and boys from their childhood, that is, how to be feminine and masculine.

Further, Prah (1995, 12) asserts that language is an essential underlying matrix and facilitator in the development and growth of culture as a process. Aghayeva (2010) affirms Prah's view by stating that culture is demonstrated through the language that people speak. It is through language that we express our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and describe our world, as well as evaluate people surrounding us. Obododimma (1998) argues that proverbs are one of the linguistic aspects that have been crafted by men who uphold themselves as the custodians as well as producers of knowledge, which women are thought to be incapable of.

Furthermore, there are many gendered ways that people use to express themselves within a family, amongst them songs and proverbs. The meaning behind cultural songs, proverbs and expressions differs from one ethnic grouping to another and between different family clans. Examples to support this argument are drawn from Sesotho sa Leboa. The songs and proverbs alluded to in this article are seen as acts that are demoralising and disempowering women in relation to men. Most of these practices affect women emotionally and physically.

Gender Differentiation and Stereotyping

A number of feminists view gender roles as unnatural gender attributes that account for the inequalities that exist between males and females (Greenglass 1982; Okpewho cited in Masuku 2005; Renzetti, Curran, and Maier 2014). It is believed that these roles are perpetuated by the family at an early developmental stage of both girl and boy children through socialisation. Lahtinen and Wilson (1994) affirm this perception by indicating that the attitudes that differentiate men and women and lead to differing socialisation develop at a very early stage. Socialisation is defined by Wharton (2005) as a process through which people become gendered. According to most African cultures, there is a lens through which a typical African girl or boy is viewed. A girl is expected to be kind, gentle, peaceful, and weak, while a boy is expected to be aggressive, a bully, to explore and above all to assume a leadership role towards the female counterpart. This is confirmed by Coleman (2010) who argues that girls have traditionally displayed a passive posture while boys exhibit an active one. For instance, in Northern Sotho culture it is not advisable for a girl child to engage in fights with boys, even if they are of the same age, because it is believed that boys are more powerful than girls (Machobane 1996).

Traditional stereotyping starts from the moment of birth, because the child is handled differently according to whether it is a boy or a girl (Lahtinen and Wilson 1994, 16). Sharpe (1976) asserts that the sex label assigned to each child at birth determines the way the baby will be brought up as well as the appropriate gender role and identity development. Expressions such as *monna ga a lle*, literally meaning “a man does not cry,” and *o ka se fenywe ke ngwanenyana*, meaning “you cannot be defeated or be beaten by a girl,” cultivate what Wood (1994) refers to as a masculine gender identity. The formation of gender identity can result from many factors, one of them being socialisation, as already illustrated.

Crying is a gesture associated with girls, who are considered timid and emotional and are also seen as more dependent than boys, who are held to be adventurous. Boys are therefore discouraged from crying, as it would make them look weak and dependent, a character trait that supposedly best describes girls. If boys cry, they will be labelled “sissies” (Horowitz 2001, 114). Bolich (2007) points out that boys are encouraged to hide their emotions and sensitive feelings. A boy grows into manhood with the understanding that it is unnatural for him to display feelings of being hurt because such feelings are viewed as part of the nature of girls and women, but not men.

At puberty or the adolescent stage as well as during adulthood the expression *monna ga a lle* is informed by the proverbial expression in the Sepedi language that says *monna ke nku o llela teng*; this expression depicts men as brave and differentiates them from women, who easily cry. In this instance a man is viewed as a sheep, which is known for its meekness, such that even during slaughtering time it remains silent. In this way a boy is encouraged to display a strong character even when faced with serious challenges. Boys are thus portrayed as having a very strong character and are motivated not to

display their emotions, but to suppress their feelings even if they are hurting, because crying is associated with girls. The mindset created by some of these expressions may account for some suicides where a man either commits suicide or wipes out his whole family because he could not share his frustrations with anyone lest he be labelled a woman.

Contrary to how men are expected to conduct themselves, women are to some extent given the latitude to express their feelings openly by crying rather than by talking, hence the proverbial expression *mosadi ke pudi, monna ke nku* (meaning “men do not cry but internalise their pain”). A goat is identified by the noise it makes all the time even when it is just about to be slaughtered. This means that women are portrayed as being more emotional than men and as such cannot handle challenges.

Some African games and songs also play a role in strengthening the differences in gender roles between males and females and ensuring the woman’s position in the community. Lahtinen and Wilson (1994) affirm this idea by stating that childhood games in which children engage may have a consequence for women’s failure to take part in power struggles. The Northern Sotho game that is played by girls and is called *ka šila šila milie-milie ngwana wa batho* (home based) is a type of a game in which play links with singing. It is normally performed by girls who sing it while they are playing. The girls’ squat down to make a circle, each holding a stone in their hand and demonstrating the process of “grinding.” As they continue singing, there is a moment where each player has to move her stone to the next player in a circular form.

Ka šila šila miliemilie ngwana wa batho (2x)

Chorus (2x)

Ijoo! dali wa tsamaya

Lerato le fedile

The song is translated as follows:

I grind, grind the mealies, me the poor child

Chorus (2x)

Oh my darling is leaving because the love has ended.

This song displays two things; first, it portrays the role of a typical African woman. This is a protest song, which is revealed in the form of a game, but at the same time it ensures that the status quo is maintained. The idea expressed in this game is that it is normal that grinding mealies is the responsibility of women, since they are the ones who are known to be the caretakers. They have to grind mealies so that members of the family can be provided for. The message conveyed in this song is that it is a woman who does the grinding but not a man. The role depicted in this song is one of the multiple roles that an African woman has to contend with and is seen as normal. The second aspect is that men are not always there to assist in the maintenance of their families. When they have

lost love and affection they leave, and then the poor woman will be the one remaining behind with the children and ensuring that they are provided for.

The other Sesotho sa Leboa folksong “*Wainama-wee wa inamologa*,” which is usually sung by women during hoeing/weeding times, also explains the situation of women in the society.

wainama wee wa inamologa
mmagwe ke moloji
wainama we wa inamologa
mmagwe ke moloji
ke moloji wa bošego we wa inamologa
ke moloji wa bošego we wa inamologa

My dearest is released
Her mother is a witch
Her mother is a night witch

This can be translated as “the mother of a person who bends down and straightens up when the work of hoeing or weeding is done is a witch who practises witchcraft at night.”

The women sing this song during *letšema* (communal work) to encourage each other to work continuously without a break since as soon as one straightens up her mother will be labelled a witch but not her father. This was done to encourage women to work continuously without taking a break so that the work can be rapidly completed.

There are many other Sesotho sa Leboa folksongs that are usually sung at wedding celebrations that reiterate the perception that it is women but not men who are witches. An example of such songs is one which says *Basadi ba mo le baloi le hloka le mekgolokwane*, translated as “you women of this area you are witches because you are unable to ululate.”

Another song says:

Mme mme matswale
Mosadi wa molotšana
O ruile dithuri
Ka mo dikamoreng
Di lala, di lala di opela
Di lala, di di opela
Di lala di opela ka mo dikamoreng

Mother-in-law
A sly woman
She has dead-living people in her house

The dead-living people sing at night in the bedroom

The two songs above, that is “*Basadi ba mo le baloi*” and “*Mme mme matswale*,” reiterate the belief or the perception that it is women or mothers who are witches but not men or fathers. What is even more alarming is that the songs are not sung by men but by women referring to their fellow counterparts.

The Role of Some African Folktales in Maintaining Stereotypic Gender Roles

The idea of women being referred to as witches is also found in the folktale “*Dilwana tša bogadi bja ka*” in which two ladies were married in the same family at different intervals. It was believed that their mother-in-law was a witch. The first lady could not stay in the marriage as she was made to perform tasks with which she was not familiar. The mother-in-law instructed the lady to cook food and leave it to cool after dishing up and then put it in the backyard (*ka mafuri*). She was warned not to look back but to go immediately and come at a later stage to collect the plates. After a while, when the lady went back to the place where she left the food, she would find empty plates. She would collect, wash and keep them ready for the following day. Out of curiosity, one day the lady decided to put the food out and watch from a distance to see who eats it. As she was watching, she saw some zombies eating the food. The “zombies” were strange to her, so the only conclusion she reached was that the mother-in-law was a witch. The lady could not wait for her mother-in-law to come back. She decided to return to her home. When the mother-in-law came back the daughter-in-law was nowhere to be found.

The second lady was then married and brought into that same family. She was instructed to do exactly the same as the first lady. She was also curious. She cooked food, put it in the backyard and watched who would eat the food. As she was watching, she saw some zombies coming out from where they hibernated, heading to the food. She went out and started singing:

Dilwana tša bogadi bja ka
Le gešo di gona le gešo di gona

She sang the song repeatedly until the mother-in-law came back. When the mother-in-law returned, she was excited to hear the lyrics of her daughter-in-law’s song. She then sang in return saying:

Ngwetšana ya mohla monene
E re le gabo di gona le gabo di gona

(Old girls
They even exist at their home)

This folktale, though interesting to listen to, emphasises what one may regard as a myth or rather the stereotyping notion that one of the many roles women play is that of being a witch.

Language is seen by some feminists and linguists as playing a significant role in the continued marginalisation of women. Not only do some men use language to define women in a negative way, some women also contribute towards this. This idea of defining women in a negative way and perceiving them as an inferior social group was shared by most linguists of the nineteenth century, who were mostly men. Smelser and Baltes (2001, 71) note that Comte, who was considered the “father of sociology,” asserted that women are biologically inferior to men and will always be so. Not only do men regard women as inferior but women at times also contribute towards this. One female author (Lakoff cited in Spender 1980) asserts that compared to men, women lack authority and seriousness in their talk. She goes on to say that they also lack conviction and confidence (cited in Spender 1980, 8).

Language encompasses some semantically feminine meanings for which there are no masculine equivalents. The Northern Sotho words *sefebe* or *kobabane*, *setšhatšha* are only used in association with women and have a derogatory meaning. There are no male equivalents for these words. The words are used only when referring to either a woman or a girl who is engaged in more than one sexual relationship. Similarly, the compound noun *moitshwarahlephi*, which derives from the class prefix of class 1 *mo-*, the reflexive morpheme *i* plus a combination of two verb stems, namely *swara* + *hlepha*, refers to a woman of loose morals pertaining to sexual relations. One other Northern Sotho word, *kgeke*, which initially did not denote any derogation, has undergone a semantic shift and has since been used as an equivalent of the words mentioned above. The word *kgeke* simply means a girl who is in her puberty stage. Summarily, all the words mentioned above refer to a woman who is sleeping around or a woman who has more than one sexual partner. However, there is no term used to refer to a man who sleeps around, since it is perceived as normal for a man to have multiple sexual partners. A man who has more than one sexual relationship is linguistically and culturally justified to behave in this manner, and he is also considered a real man. Some members of the society, including women, also go to the extent of quoting or even misquoting some proverbial expressions to justify this behavioural anomaly. Proverbial expressions such as *monna ke thaka o a naba* and *monna ke tshwene o ja ka matsogo a mabedi* are used respectively to maintain the status quo. In the first expression, a man is likened to a bean plant which when it grows occupies space by spreading into various angles.

Some feminists affirm that many languages have an underlying semantic rule whereby anything that is male-related is perceived as positive while those that are female-related are associated with negativity. Pringle and McDowell (1994) note that in most languages women are always defined in relation to men. The word *morena* (lord) in Northern Sotho is believed to be equivalent to two Northern Sotho codes, that is, *mohumagadi* (married woman) and *mohumagatšana* (unmarried woman), and does not in actual fact

have an equivalent. The word *morena* is used to refer to any man irrespective of his marital status, while the words *mohumagadi* and *mohumagatšana* are used to refer to a married and an unmarried woman respectively. The word *mohumagadi*, which refers to a married woman, has been marked by what Lombard (1985) refers to as the “augmentative suffix” *gadi*, which means “to enlarge.” The semantic implication of the absence of this suffix is that an unmarried or a single woman is not yet “made whole” or “enlarged.” This may be viewed as implying that the woman who is not yet married is somewhat lesser than a married woman; however, there are no equivalents for men as the word *morena* refers to both married and unmarried men.

Furthermore, the word could also be understood as denoting that a single woman in Sesotho sa Leboa is formed by the diminutive suffix *ana*, which indicates that she is still in a diminutive state and can only be promoted from that state through marriage. If a woman does not get married, she will remain in that state until her hair turns grey. In English the words “witch” and “wizard” have different connotations simply because they are gender-based. The word “witch,” which refers to a woman who practises witchcraft, has a negative connotation in African cultures, since it is usually used to denote anything that is connected to the evil world, for example a witch doctor. The word is always associated with negativity, hence the verb “bewitch,” which according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2022) means to work magic on or to place under a magic spell. However, the word “wizard,” which refers to a man who practises sorcery, does not reflect negativity—it is always associated with positiveness; hence a person who excels at using a computer is referred to as a computer wizard, but not a computer witch. There is no such verb as “bewizard.”

For the two English words mentioned above, Northern Sotho employs only one word, namely *moloi* (witch) for both genders. However, the word is more often used in relation to women than men, as illustrated in the song alluded to above. In addition, it is also believed that women are the ones who practise sorcery and not men. Women who are usually very dark-skinned and old are often associated with witchcraft. Another point worth noting is that women are also regarded as gossipers, hence the word *mmalelengwana* in Northern Sotho. *Mmalelengwana* is a compound noun that is composed of *mma*, which refers to a woman, and *lelengwana*, which is the diminutive of the noun *leleme* (tongue). Yu (2009) confirms this belief when he states that gossip is regarded as women’s speech and very rarely are men referred to as gossipers. The speech of men is regarded as a conversation.

Conclusion

Proverbs, folksongs, linguistic expressions and folktales are significant to the transmission of cultural values and historical events; however, the study has revealed that women have been portrayed as witches, weak, gossipers and evildoers and generally inferior to men. Some of the expressions in Northern Sotho’s oral literature reveal an attempt at disempowering women and this results in women not believing in themselves and having low self-esteem. Linguistic expressions, proverbs, and folksongs that

connote negativity in women should be discarded. Men and women should be viewed as equals as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa.

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