

# Gender and Cultural Representations in the Sesotho Novel

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## Summary

This article examines gender representations in older Sesotho novels – the first one, *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, having been published in 1907. The objective is to observe whether or not there have been gains in the narrative of gender equality. Rereading the older Sesotho novels makes one understand them from a different perspective, and they give one a glimpse, albeit broken and fragmented, of the gender relations of the community that they narrate. A novel is a powerful social instrument of representation because it uses literary devices such as characterisation, plot and setting to construct shared meanings within a cultural space. In this regard, the ideas, concepts, feelings and actions of the characters that such a novel constructs stand for real issues in the culture that the writer knows well, and in this regard a novel (re)-produces certain cultural notions. The Sesotho novel, like other Sesotho art forms, is thus seen as a creation that serves Sesotho cultural representation.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek gendervoorstellings in die ouer Sesotho-romans, waarvan *Moeti wa Botjhabela* die eerste een was om gepubliseer te word (in 1907). Die doel is om vas te stel of daar vordering gemaak is in die narratief van gendergelykheid of nie. Om die ouer Sesotho-romans te herlees, stel 'n mens in staat om hulle beter te verstaan; hulle gee 'n vlugtige blik, hoewel gebroke en gefragmenteerd, op die genderverhoudings van die gemeenskap waarvan hulle vertel. 'n Roman is 'n kragtige sosiale uitbeeldingsinstrument omdat dit, onder andere, letterkundige tegnieke soos karakterisering, intrige en ruimte gebruik om gedeelde betekenis binne die kulturele ruimte te skep. In hierdie opsig verteenwoordig die idees, konsepte, gevoelens en dade van die karakters, wat sodanige roman skep, werklike kwessies in die kultuur wat die skrywer goed ken. Sodoende is 'n roman verantwoordelik vir die ontstaan van sekere kulturele idees. Die Sesotho roman, soos ander Sesotho-kunsvorme, word dus gesien as 'n skepping in diens van die Sesotho kulturele uitbeelding.

## 1 Introduction

Said asserts that recent literary criticism has concentrated on narrative fiction, yet very little attention has been paid in the position of narration in history (1993: xiii). This article explores the historical progression of gender representations in the Sesotho novels published between 1907 and the 1980s. Taking into account Wood's view that "gender is socially constructed and expressed" (2011: 20-21), this article argues that narrations of gender are social processes of their times. Said points out that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture" (1993: xiii) in the sense that it leads to identity formations: "us" versus "them". Gender identity becomes essentialised in a similar way. This article examines blocked narratives of gender equality in Sesotho narrative fiction.

It is now an established view that patriarchy operates like colonialism in as far as both generate the discourse of othering and at the same time create narratives of inequality through processes of representation that produce identities of the self by denigrating the other. According to Coetzee (1988), in the 16th century stereotypical representation aimed at forging identity; the early European explorers of Africa constructed debased images of blacks in Africa in order to contrast them with whites and thus build up images of the superiority of whiteness and Western civilisation. Coetzee further points out that such texts were "mere narrative rather than comprehensive descriptions" and that such "items were copied from one book to another" (1988: 13). Yet the writers gave the impression that what they observed was the indigenous African people's "human nature" (p. 12).

Reading the extracts in Coetzee's work one is struck by how profusely the explorers of Africa used the phrases "by nature" or "it is in their nature" or "it is inherent amongst these people" in the tarnishing of Africans with the clear aim to foregrounding difference and to cut the connection between the narrator and the subject of narration in fashioning a clear us-them distinction. Theirs is a grand narrative aimed primarily at constructing identity and sameness within Western Enlightenment paradigms through the debasement and objectification of Africa and its indigenous citizens. Debasing women's images across the globe operated in similar terms. One is aware of the following Western perception of gender:

For many years American and European researchers looked for and found evidence that the primate males (human and ape) were "by nature" competitive, dominant and promiscuous, whereas primate females were "by nature" cooperative, submissive and monogamous.

(Peplau, DeBro, Veniegas & Taylor 1999: 16)

The words *by nature* remove the behaviour from the sphere of socialisation. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin remind us that

[i]n many different societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of the “other”, “colonised” by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory.

(Ashcroft et al. 2006: 233)

Racial identity formation was coupled with gender formation, and it follows that both are social categories that are ideologically reproduced and created through domains such as “production, reproduction (to include social reproduction, biological reproduction, as well as reproduction of the labour force), care giving, socialisation/representation and sexuality” (Bhavnani 1997: 28).

Said sensitises readers to “the lines *between* cultures, the divisions and differences that not only allow us to discriminate one culture from another, but also enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they *include*, incorporate and validate, less benevolent in what they *exclude*” (1993: 15). I adopt Said’s views on cultural exclusion and inclusion, and blend them with Bhavnani’s (1997: 29) feminist strategies to analyse gender exclusion and inclusion: *erasure*, *denial*, *invisibility* and *tokenism*. Erasure means that women’s participation and contribution are *erased* in the discourse generated, and that means their roles are *denied*. They are in this regard rendered *invisible* in the discourse; that is, they become absent.

## 2 The Narration of Exclusion

The novels analysed in this section tell stories that make women invisible and absent in the sense that they are spoken about rather than being speaking subjects, and they are thus excluded from the grand narrative. The representation of exclusion operates in a system that excludes what it wants to keep out of the mainstream discourse, so that it is rendered invisible and absent, thus privileging what is retained as the grand narrative. Gender privileging functions in similar ways, as is evident in most of the novels in this study.

In Thomas Mofolo’s first novel, *Moeti wa Botjhabela* ([1907]1983a), the notions, perspectives and interests of one gender are placed above those of the other, as in the case of the male characters Fekisi and Phakwane. The novel has no female characters in the true sense of the word *character* as a functioning participant in the narrative. The only reference to women in the novel is that they are objects of male violence. For example, the minor character, Phakwane, beats up his wife for nothing when he comes home from his drinking-places. The worrying factor is that he habitually beats her

up until he murders her one day, which is enough to make the main character, Fekisi, see that he indeed lives in the “dark world” that calls for civilisation to rescue it from self-destruction. It is when Fekisi begins to crave a civilised world that he is singled out as the only “human” amongst “beasts” in his uncivilised world:

*Lefifing le letsho le reng tsho, mehleng ya ha ditjhaba di sa ntsane di jana jwale ka dibatana tsa naha, motho o ne a le teng ya bitswang Fekisi. E, ke re motho, e seng motho sebopeho, le ho tseba ho bua feela, empa motho dipuong, motho diketsona, motho mekgweng yohle; motho sephiring le pontsheng, motho bohlokong le thabong, boiketlong le mathateng, le tlaleng le naleng.*

[In the darkest darkness, when nations were still eating one another like beasts, there once lived a person named Fekisi. Yes, I mean a person. Not a person because he was able to speak but an honest person in what he said and did – a cultured person indeed, in his private and social life; in sad and happy moments; in good and bad times; and in times of hunger and of plenty.]

(Mofolo [1907]1983a: 1)

Wife-beating is narrated in older texts of African literatures as a reflection of how the writers witnessed it in their communities. One remembers, for example, how in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe light-heartedly (and ironically) tells about Okonkwo, who is well known for beating his wives, which his community takes as normal practice, except during the Igbo holy week. The reasons for beating his wives are somewhat unconvincing, for the reader is told that Okonkwo beat his youngest wife for going to plait her hair at her friend’s house and not returning early enough to cook an afternoon meal for him, even though his two senior wives were present and he could have asked (perhaps instructed) them to cook for him:

He [Okonkwo] walked back to his *obi* to wait for Ojigu’s [his third wife] return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His two first wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess .... Okonkwo’s neighbours heard his wife crying and sent their voices over to the compound walls to ask what the matter was. Some of them came over to see for themselves. It was unheard of to beat someone during the sacred week.

(Achebe 1958: 22)

Beating wives (and children), amongst other forms of domestic violence, is a deliberate strategy to suppress their presence. Domestic violence enforces unquestioning behaviour: silence, absence. It is a method of domination, of silencing weaker voices. This view is captured as follows in *Things Fall*

*Apart*: “[His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his [Okonkwo’s] temper, and so did his little children” (Achebe 1958: 9). The reason for his youngest wife to constantly fear him more than his senior wives do, is evidently her having been beaten “very heavily” (Achebe 1958: 22) during the sacred week. Consequently, it is pointed out in the novel that “his wives and young children ... suffered ... but they dared not complain openly” (p. 10).

A similar fear is evident in Eugene’s wife and his two children in Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel shows that the dynamics of instilling fear in women and children in contemporary Nigeria has shifted from traditional to religious patriarchy, and thrives as religious fundamentalism and repression. The novel narrates the story of a Nigerian girl who lives in constant fear of her father, a rich but heartless Catholic patriarch: “Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours” (Adichie 2004: 196).

Segoete’s novel *Monono ke Mohodi ke Mouwane* ([1910]1986) is somewhat similar to Mofolo’s *Moeti wa Botjhabela* in the sense that both novels are characterised by absent female characters. *Monono ke Mohodi ke Mouwane* is a clear sermon with an obvious Christian message: man’s wealth is nothing; it is like mist and vapour and should therefore be forsaken for true salvation, which is found by following Jesus. In the preface to some Sesotho novels published by missionary houses from 1907-1950, the writers’ intention, which is often a didactic message within the Christian framework, is explicitly stated. For example, the intention of the author of *Monono ke Mohodi ke Mouwane* is expressed clearly in the letter addressed to the reader:

1. *E bolela ho fela kapele ha maruo a lefatshe.*
2. *Bophelo ba motho le bona bo a senyeha, mme qetelo ya bona ke lefu.*
3. *Bohlale ba motho boo a lekang ho iphedisa ka bona, bo sitwa ho mmoloka mme bo mo hlahisetsa ditsietsi tse ngata.*
4. *Bophelo ba nnete bo fumanwa ka tumelo ho Jesu ya bolaetsweng baetsadibe.*

- [1. It is about earthly wealth that disappears quickly.
2. Man’s life deteriorates and its end is death.
3. All the clever ways man tries to make ends meet fail to save him; instead, they bring more troubles.
4. The true meaning of life is found in believing in Jesus, who died for sinners.]

(Segoete [1910]1986: Preface)

The male characters in *Monono ke Mohodi ke Mouwane* exemplify this biblical message. For example, Khitsane, the main character, loses his riches. He is portrayed firstly as a man who wants to possess what other

people have in order to gain more riches. Secondly, he is presented as a rogue who finally accepts Jesus as his personal saviour, and at the end he is portrayed as a dedicated Christian.

Nqhekus's *Arola Naheng ya Maburu* ([1940] 1983), Matlosa's *Molahlehi* (1946) and Machobane's *Mphatlalatsane* ([1947]1962) are no different from the novels discussed above in the sense of the omission of female characters in their narration.

### 3 The Narration of Inclusion

The narration of inclusion may have different agendas. It could include those who have been traditionally kept outside the grand narrative as tokens or as objects of contrast to enforce difference rather than erasure (Bhavnani 1997: 29). One sees a combination of these aspects in the novels to be examined in this section. In his second novel, *Pitseng* ([1910]1980), Mofolo reveals his maturity as a writer in his control of his subject matter. The reader also sees evidence that in writing *Pitseng*, Mofolo was unshackling himself from focalising the events through "Western eyes" as he had done with Fekisi in *Moeti wa Botjhabela* and seeing Basotho as "beasts" of the "dark world". In *Pitseng*, Mofolo is at his best writing about the moral issues of his church and his Sesotho values. However, the Christian slant is easily detectable in the fact that three characters stand out in the novel as "true" Christians: Aria Sebaka, Alfred Phakwe and their teacher, Mr Katse. All three characters are cooperative and submissive. It is through their submission that the marriage of Aria Sebaka and Alfred Phakwe is arranged by Mr Katse. It is worth bearing in mind that arranged marriages were common in Lesotho about hundred years ago, when *Pitseng* was written. But the way that the young women consented to the arranged marriages was an issue of both persuasion and coercion. Yet, if one were to ask young women today whether they would enter into arranged marriages, they would protest passionately. Many Basotho girls protested then, but they eventually went where their parents knew they would get much *bohadi* (lobola). Aria Sebaka did not protest. Aria Sebaka is made by Mofolo to go to school for one purpose: to be eventually married to the well-educated Alfred in order to elevate Christianity to a higher level than paganism. As a Christian himself, Mofolo constructed a marriage of Christians. If there had been no Aria, Alfred would have had no choice but to marry one of the uneducated and immoral girls symbolised by Ioda Msimang, and would consequently have been dragged back to the dark world of paganism. This could be illustrated by the way Mathabo, the traditionalist advisers and the bogus traditional doctor persuaded Mosito to murder Tlelima in Khaketla's *Mosali a Nkhola* ([1960]1982).

In Majara's novel *'Makotulo* (1969) the reader is exposed to woman-bashing similar to Phakwane's in *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, but 'Makotulo, the main female character in the novel, does not wait to be beaten to death like Phakwane's wife. She leaves the abusive marriage. For this, the writer criticises her harshly by portraying her as an immoral, frivolous and adulterous woman. She hooks up with man after man and begets child after child from them, while she deserts child after child for new men. It is only after she has gone back to the same abusive man that her dignity is restored.

In Thomas Mofolo's third novel, *Chaka* ([1925]1983b), Nandi, Chaka's mother, and Noliwa, her lover, are ruthlessly murdered by Chaka, one after the other, because of the influence of the sangoma Isanusi and his *mahlahana* (trainees). Before their murder, Noliwa is Chaka's most favourite lover, but he sacrifices her for greater kingship – the ultimate evil nurtured by Isanusi. If the murders of Nandi and Noliwa represent the death of conscience in Chaka's personality, the reader understands why Chaka turns against his own people and kills them to an extent that amounts to genocide of the highest proportions.

But why did Mofolo invent such a sad story about the betrayal and death of Noliwa? Why does Chaka kill his own mother in such a wicked manner? Some of these questions one cannot answer, except that missionaries in Lesotho at the time encouraged literature that was explicit about goodness and malevolence. It is also a fact that *Chaka* was kept on hold for almost ten years and reworked, revised and rewritten in parts before it was published in order to sharpen its focus on goodness and malice.

Mofolo's *Chaka* is somewhat similar to Khaketla's *Mosali a Nkhola*. But there are significant differences: Mosito is a modern king; he is educated, but he marries an uneducated and traditionalist wife. Perhaps that was what Mofolo was avoiding with Alfred Phakwe. Mofolo seems to be saying in *Pitseng* that an educated man deserves an educated wife – a message that Khaketla illustrates with Mathabo and Mosito in *Mosali a Nkhola*. It is Mathabo's traditionalism in *Mosali a Nkhola* that drives Mosito to murder Tlelima for his liver, which is to be mixed with medicine for "*lenaka la borena*". Yet a deeper look at this situation gives the impression that Mathabo's wickedness does not seem to come essentially from the fact that she is less educated and therefore a traditionalist – there were indeed thousands of good and uneducated Basotho women at that time. Her wickedness seems to emanate from her distorted philosophy about human beings as the subjects of their king.

Mathabo is given a wicked character as a person who is nurtured in the Sesotho traditional system, as if that tradition were essentially evil. The system was portrayed as such by missionaries in order to sell the idea of a new and moral religion. In this sense, then, Mathabo's view about kings and their subjects are not necessarily the views of the dark world of the Sesotho tradition, but the views of a vile and vicious person who has no regard for

other people's lives. The only person who matters to Mathabo is her son, Thabo, whom she wants to be king after his father. Furthermore, Mathabo sees nothing wrong with murdering her subjects. These subjects, in her view, are there only to serve the king's interests. Hers is clearly an abuse and distortion of the Sesotho culture, which is grounded in values and a belief system that makes a clear distinction between good and bad as binary oppositions.

What could be observed about the male characters in *Chaka* and *Mosali a Nkhola* respectively is that Chaka and Mosito become evil because of the influence of the forces of darkness. The reason for this could be to exaggerate, from a Christian perspective, the depth of the evil that inhabits the world of barbarism where sangomas rule supreme. Yet such a narrative certainly does not seem to be part of the Sesotho culture as a "concept that includes a refining and elevating element" and "society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" (Said 1993: xiii). Medicine men in Lesotho were healers like doctors in the West were. Yet both the West and Africa have witches and wizards. The generalisations that one finds in *Chaka* and *Mosali a Nkhola* about African medicine as belonging to the "dark world" can best be seen as belonging to the metropolitan narrative that seeks to represent the colonisation of overseas territories as both good and desirable.

Gender representation in the novel *Peo Ena e Jetswe ke Wena* is more complex than in most of the novels discussed so far, as will become apparent. It tells the stories of two Soweto women in the late 1970s; one is Kgwapho's wife and domestic worker, Mmasefatsa, who is trapped in racial and patriarchal oppression, and the other is Samina, Kgwapo's extramarital lover who rebels against the patriarchal system but with fatal consequences. The novel opens with Kgwapo's family living in a poorly-lit rented four-roomed house in Soweto. The family is in dire financial straits and the writer paints a gloomy atmosphere; for example, the structure and the roofing of the house are so poor that water leaks in through the stove pipe. The poverty of the family is a reflection of South African township conditions in the 1980s. The family earns a meagre income, but Kgwapo's extramarital lover, Samina, who is blackmailing him, exacerbates their situation. She too is a product of a social system that drives people to crime because of need and desperation, and Kgwapo is her victim. Despite the poverty of his family, Kgwapo gives Samina almost all his wages, yet her wickedness blinds her to the suffering of the family. In a way, she is happy to see the suffering of the family, especially Kgwapo's wife, Mmasefatsa's, as they survive on only her meagre salary as a domestic worker.

Consequently, the narrator describes Samina as "*motho e mobe*" (a cruel person) (Moephuli 1982: 11) and notes that "*o a nyedisa*" (she despises people) (p. 5). She is a compulsive gambler who likes money and believes that "*tjhelete ke senotlolo se bulang mamati a mangatangata*" (money is the



key that opens many doors) (p. 26). This gives the reader a picture of Samina's deviant character. The following quotations from the novel give the reader the idea that she is malicious and evil: "*o pelo e thata*" (she is hard-hearted) (p. 4); "*ke ... lerabele*" (she is a rebel) (p. 4); "*o kgopo*" (she is wicked) (p. 12); "*[ke] tauhadi*" (she is a lioness) (p. 17). She is further portrayed as a depraved township woman who is capable of destroying people. She represents the typical vicious township spinster who is heartless and full of contempt. She is a product of the Soweto that produced wicked women and men in the 1980s because of the social, political and economic circumstances of apartheid. In this way the novel lays bare the devastating effects of apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.

On another level the novel portrays an evil spinster to drive home a moral message; for example, the attack on Samina and her death are symbolic of the defeat of immorality: the free and rebellious township virago, gambler and blackmailer. The moral of the story is clear. Samina's stillborn baby and eventually her sad death are symbolic of the crushing of unmarried urban women's wickedness. In this regard, good and bad in the novel assume symbolic status and the novel portrays a realistic female character who is a product of her socio-political and economic conditions. The writer seems to be saying to the readers that despite the devastating effects of the socio-political and economic system of apartheid in South Africa on the lives of urban Africans, they should not sell their souls as cheaply as Samina does, lest they meet a tragic end as she does. It would seem that the writer of the novel believes that unmarried urban women's malevolence, such as lying, blackmail, seduction and gambling – as personified by Samina – will eventually be defeated by the forces of good, embodied by the reunification of the football club Mashapa and the reconciliation of Kgwapo's family in *Peo Ena e Jetswe ke Wena*.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

What can be observed about the majority of older novels discussed above is that there is a clear pattern of exclusion and othering of female characters in the narration. It seems a deliberate strategy. Also, the act of not narrating women's experiences could be interpreted as suppressing notions of women's existence, thus privileging the male notions that are narrated. Absence has the power to obliterate the "other" by not giving it space to form its own identity, and the act of othering female characters is part of the process of constructing gender difference and discrimination, never sameness and inclusion.

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