

DENOUNCING CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AGAINST BLACK WOMEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY THROUGH THE PRISM OF NORTHERN SOTHO CULTURAL PROVERBS

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental assumptions of women in African societies were and are still underpinned by stereotypical notions. Specifically, it is the cultural stereotypes, *inter alia*, that assert gratuitous societal roles that often marginalise women. Today, (South) Africa is vexed by upsurging issues such as femicide, sexism and domestic violence as a result of the cultural stereotypes that, particularly, perturb black women. Therefore, to explore these cultural notions that pose a menace to black women's lives, this qualitative study sought to denounce some of the cultural stereotypes that perpetuate socio-economic and political maladies against black (South) African women. It is undergirded by the theoretical framework of cultural identity and feminism which serve as grounding for the study. The latter has drawn mainly from purposively selected Northern Sotho cultural proverbs coupled with supplementary data collected from critical essays, journal articles and books. The study, among other discoveries, found that the interface between cultural underpinnings and modernity engenders identity-crisis, intricacies and persecution of black women in the contemporary (South) African society, with special focus to the Pedi/Northern Sotho tribal presumptions used as a case point.

Keywords: Black women, Cultural stereotypes, Domestic violence, femicide, Identity-crisis, Sexism.

INTRODUCTION

In most African societies, cultural notions serve as a lens through which the interaction, status and role of women are sought to be comprehended. Likewise, cultural underpinnings have and still mould the identities of women in the contemporary (South) Africa, with black women eminently depicted by cultural thoughts. Furthermore, these cultural beliefs are often excused for the socio-economic and political alienation and maltreatment of black women. This marks the plight of black women in the present-day (South) Africa as a result of unaddressed stereotypes meted out by cultural systems. Kalu (2001: 14) asserts that "the role of women has constantly been questioned in many societies, as women have struggled to find their place for many years, in a predominantly male-orientated or dominated world." The cultural stereotypes besieging black women have occasioned gender-inequalities, patriarchal ideals and power struggles, thus, giving favour to their male counterpart. Jenifer and Raman (2015) state that cultural stereotypes create problems even in the work environment where women are subjected to fallacies such as unintelligent decision-makers and problems with communication. In line with the point above, Nnoromele (2010: 189) notes that it is colonialism that "in its attempt to civilize or rather Westernize African cultures, took away the rights that African women had in

the pre-colonial society.” This derogation of rights includes the enforcement of black women into slavery and removal from their land. Pauline (1963: 5) confirms that “western observers have focused the burden of labour on women, submissiveness to men who lack intimacy in marriages concludes that women are oppressed.” However, it is worthy to unravel the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes from the pre-colonial African societies to present, which, will be done through the analysis of Northern Sotho cultural proverbs.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The identities of black women from ancient African societies have long been defined by cultural notions. The primary role of the black women was limited to domestic work; cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and babysitting. This cultural depiction of black women’s role, *inter alia*, hindered them from accessing education, job opportunities, equal rights with men, and ultimately, “reduced women and black minorities to stereotypes that included ‘virgin’, ‘whore’, ‘savage’ and ‘heathen’” (Caslin 2009: 2). Notably, in the (South) African society, Phillip (2004: 11) postulates that the colonial system “upheld a firm emphasis on the theoretically biblically notion that women’s contributions to the society should be normally approved by, or be on half of, men.” This is because the apartheid regime adopted the Afrikaner religious belief systems which imposed restrictions on black women from the 1950s, whereas, “many lived in squalor, in the former homelands, where malnutrition, illness, and infant mortality were much higher than in urban area” (Berger 1992: 10). This noted, the ancient African cultural system was intensified by colonialism to entrap, hegemonise and deny black women a sense of self-identity. Caslin (2009: 5) affirms that “even constructions of the pre-colonial are strongly influenced by the phallogocentric prejudice that wrongly defines black women as passive and subsidiary inferior.” For instance, in the ancient Northern Sotho tribe, Magubane (2019: 3) asserts that girls would undergo a *byale* initiation process where they were taught to respect all men, particularly the chief, be given instruction in sexual matters and subjected to endurance tests:

The girls were summoned to the chief’s *kgoro* by the blowing of the war-horn *phalafala*. They were led to a secluded place in the veld where all their hair was cut off. Their mothers gave them a special leather apron *kgakgo* which they wore in front, combined with a back-apron *nthešana*. They also wore a short smocked shirt *gentswana* or *nyebelese*. The smocked style was originally introduced by missionaries but has become an article of clothing which denotes a traditionalist orientation. Their bodies were smeared with a mixture of red ochre and fat, after which they had to collect firewood and return to the chief’s *kgoro* for the night. Before sunrise they were lined up in rank and treated with protective medicines. This was followed by individual lashings in rank order, prior to being marched off into the veld.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher has thrived on the theories of cultural identity and feminism to framework this study. These theories are chosen by virtue of their relevance to the focal theme of the study, which is, the cultural stereotypes besieging black (South) African women.

Cultural Identity Theory

Cultural identity is a fundamental characteristic of an individual and serves as a determinative of a person's role, status, attitude and interaction in a particular society. By the same token, Grop (2019) notes that cultural identity refers to an identity of a cultural group or of a person to an extent that one is inspired by a sense of belonging to a certain society, whereas, Lustig (2013: 133) adds that "cultural identities are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one's self-concept." Furthermore, it is these cultural identities that tend to mete out standards and expectations that pose a menace to the progress of black women in African societies such as South Africa. Today, Black women in South Africa are overwhelmed by stereotypes that are perpetuated by their cultural identities. Timberlake and Estes (2007: 150) note that "individuals may form stereotypes and specifically assign attributes to certain groups that they may have indirectly learned from influential agents such as parents, teachers and peer groups." Black women in African societies were inferiorised by patriarchal notions and this could be evidenced from the minuscule role of women in Kingships, leadership and success. For instance, cultural notions such as this Northern Sotho proverb, "*Tša eta ke ya tshadi pele di wela ka leopeng*" (If a woman is a leader, the followers will follow into a cave). This cultural proverb declares that a woman cannot lead and hence, she shouldn't be given a position as a leader. This noted, cultural identity theory becomes relevant for this study as it is "the content of values, guiding principles to meaningful symbols, and a lifestyle that individuals share with others, though not necessarily within recognisable groups" (Strus & Tiaga 2004: 112).

Feminism Theory

Feminism has emerged as a movement to liberate women and open up democratic avenues for them. Fervent advocates of feminism are often referred to as feminists. In an attempt to define what a feminist is, Mitchel and Oakley (1986: 9) note that "many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that the satisfaction of needs would require a radical change in a social, economic and political order." This study singles out cultural stereotypes as one of the challenges that feminists have yet to completely address, with special focus to black (South) African women. Nnaemeka (1998: 32) states that "to speak of feminism in Africa is to speak of feminism in the plural within Africa and other continents in recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives." This is because the African continent was historically built on patriarchal and stereotypical cultural systems that approbated men than women. Therefore, feminism becomes the "African women to work with patriarchal/ cultural structures that are liberating and ennobling while challenging those that are limiting and debilitating" (Nnaemeka 1988: 32). However, it is noteworthy to point out that feminism is still in its infancy in the African continent due to the contradictions and complexities of African cultures, cultural allegiances, and overall resistance to the extreme radicalism of Western feminism among other things and its insurgency against motherhood and emphasis on sexuality (Aina 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to French (2008: 4), an African woman is proverbially apprehended as a mother and caretaker rather than a provider or an independent individual. This is exacerbated by cultural

notions that defied the feminist movement that aimed to close the gap between feminine and masculine structures. Manicom (1999: 31) explains that “the democratic transition opened up rhetorical space for a consideration of women’s liberation and feminism...” Despite this initiative, (South) African women are plagued by cultural stereotypes that could be examined through the societal perception of:

Lesbians

Homosexuals have desperately attempted multiple efforts to attain societal acceptance. This includes awareness initiatives such as Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) social movements. Lesbians, *inter alia*, have reportedly fallen vulnerable to domestic violence as a result of their sexual orientation. Asokan (2012: 24) postulates that “in addition to being accused of witchcraft and sorcery, lesbians in South Africa are assaulted for their sexual identity.” This discriminatory treatment serves as a blatant indication of societal rejection of Lesbians. It is found to be inspired by cultural notions that depict lesbianism as taboo and un-African. Asokan (2012: 24) asserts that “families, churches and schools are described as being homophobic and transphobic, openly promoting the belief that being gay is un-African.” This riposte has led to an alarming toll of deaths of lesbians in the (South) African society. Notably, a phenomenon known as corrective rape was initiated with the belief that lesbianism “is an issue that can be remedied and that lesbians have yet to be satisfied during heterosexual intercourse” (Asokan 2012: 23). Equally important, according to South Africa: No Arrests in Murder Case (2011: 1), a 24-year old lesbian activist, Noxolo Nogwaza, was stoned, stabbed, and raped because of her sexual orientation, whereas, in 2007, a lesbian couple, Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Massooa were gang-raped and shot near their homes in Meadowlands, Soweto, and their deaths led to the formation of the 07-07-07 campaign: a coalition of human rights and equality groups calling for justice for women targeted in such attacks (Kelly 2009: 1). Amid these killings, cultural stereotypes appear to a perpetrator as “when a lesbian presents her preferred orientation to community leaders, she may be correctively raped by members of the same tribe or township and instead of being punished for the act, the rapist is exalted and venerated” (Asokan 2012: 24).

Female leaders

As Radebe (2012) avers, the democratic system in the contemporary South Africa is geared towards empowering women. This is reinforced by the impact made by women in culturally perceived male-orientated dimensions such as entrepreneurship, science and engineering. Moreover, Sczesny, Bosak, Neff and Schyns (2004: 633) postulate that stereotypes still influence the perception of leadership in the contemporary (South) African society coupled with the existence of cultural variation which views the leadership of women as less traditional than men’s. Due to cultural ideals that braced the role of a woman beneath that of a man, Heilman (2001: 657) notes that “one area in which gender stereotypes manifest themselves is the attribution of leadership abilities.”

Despite women excelling as doctors, engineers, drivers, soldiers, managers, principals and chief officers, there seems to be a stigma that attempts to hold down these women. This raises “the question of whether the cultural background influences the perceived incongruity between feminine role and leader role as well as the self-descriptions of women and men regarding their

leadership traits” (Sczesny et al. 2004: 633). The cultural stereotypes against women in executive positions are stressed by participants in Hryniewicz and Vianna’s (2018: 5) study:

I think men are more accepted as leaders than women. There is an inherent perception that women would not bear some jobs’ responsibilities [...] things happen very naturally, and I think the pressure on women and their requirements is very intense. I never thought I wanted to be a team manager, things just happened and I think at some point I want to take the next step, but not now.

Equally, the assertion above points out the urgency to invalidate cultural stereotypes that perceive women as failures, unable to deliver and not worthy of executive positions in the work environment. According to Eagly (2007), cultural notions place a premium on men than women, as the latter is considered to be more communal, demonstrating characteristics such as empathy and kindness, whilst men are more agentic, showing confidence, aggressiveness and autonomy.

Married Women

Marital affairs are fostered by cultural preconceptions that tend to marginalise women. This involves the reduction of women’s roles, matrimonial obligations and identities to subservience. Hadjithodorou (1999: 76) asserts that “the experiences of marriage and womanhood traditionally dominated the lives and identity of women in Africa, that is, it was expected of every girl or a woman to marry and have children where she would have a family and enjoy the benefits of motherhood.” Given the argument above, cultural notions in marriages demoralise women’s right to identity and independence which qualifies Radebe (2012) to reckon marriage as an oppressive institution that women endure for the sake of financial security. This is braced by Sikweyiya et al. (2007: 40) who note that “rape within marriages tends to be overlooked because women are culturally perceived to be their husbands’ paid properties.” A participant’s experience in Radebe’s (2012) story is recounted as:

Tumi started dating another guy in January 2003. This guy was a divorcee. She broke up with this guy in June as she discovered that the guy was broke. They had planned to get married in December 2003. After this boyfriend, Tumi has been in and out of relationships and by the end of my research, she was still single and looking for a serious relationship. Tumi’s problem with the men she’s been meeting is that they didn’t seem to be serious, some they didn’t want to spend money while others they are just playful according to her. Tumi had a clear expectation in her relationships: financial support and stability and neither of this was easy to find hence she remained single (Radebe 2012: 130).

The experience above alludes to financial undertones that bind women to inauspicious marital conditions. Memela (2002: 17) asserts that marriage is an “institution that forces women to become prostitutes because men expect women to give something in return for the stable home.” This is fortified by cultural stereotypes that deprive married women of independency, thus, causing a high toll of unemployment amongst them. Stats SA (2019) declares that approximately 6.7-million people in South Africa are jobless, whereas, women

remain the most impuissant to be unemployed (Mahlangu 2019). Further confirmatory information could be drawn from the Labour Force Survey of the first quarter of 2019 released by statistician general, Risenga Maluleke, which reveal that “in terms of unemployment breakdown by population and sex, African black women were most affected with their unemployment standing at 31.1% with white women least affected at 6.6%.” However, for the exceptional black women who manage to secure employment, in most cases, their jobs “remain either within the traditionally female occupations or within the domestic and farming sectors all often as casual workers or they are concentrated within positions that are paying minimum wages and which have high rates of turnover” (Mohatle 2015: 4).

Ukuthwala

Amongst the cultural practices that vex black women in South Africa is the marital fashion known as *Ukuthwala*. The latter is a marital practice that involves the enforcement of women into marriages without their consent. Makho (2009: 10) depicts *Ukuthwala* as a “means to carry and it is viewed as culturally-legitimated abduction of a woman whereby a young man will forcibly take a girl to his home to signify the intention of marriage.” The element of force used in this martial practice becomes a subject of enquiry regarding the respect for women’s rights. Thus, Kwesa and Hoho (2014: 2808) note that “although some abductions are consensual and arranged, reports indicate that in forced marriages, adolescent females are raped, emotionally and psychologically abused.” In this manner, the women are robbed off their virginites, education, job opportunities and to a greater extent, their lives are threatened to the point of death through diseases such as HIV/AIDS as well as domestic violence. This worsened by the patriarchal attitude of “parents and poverty-stricken backgrounds that, among other factors, contribute to *Ukuthwala* where vulnerable girls are being sold by parents for poverty relief, without considering that owing to lack of negotiation of safe sex between the girls and abductors, HIV/AIDS transmission is likely to occur” (Kwesa & Hoho 2014: 2808).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was employed in this study to investigate and understand cultural notions, and how they influence the perception of black (South) African women in modern-day society. Hancock, Windridge, and Ockleford (2009: 4) notes that a qualitative approach “is concerned with the social aspects of our world and seeks to answer questions about why people behave the way they do, how opinions and attitudes are formed.” The study is guided by textual analysis research design which is a methodological technique that “involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences” (Allen 2017: 1). The study has drawn from Northern Sotho proverbs that demonstrate the marginalisation of black (South) African women with supplementary information obtained from books, journal articles, theses and dissertations and critical essays.

Sampling

This study has predicated on five purposively selected Northern Sotho proverbs that carry messages that are often excused and interpreted to oppress and marginalise black (South)

African women. The selected Northern Sotho proverbs are: *Tša e ta pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng*; *Mosadi ke kgano, o gola ka fase*; *Monna ke kobo re a apolelana*; *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*; *Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo*. These proverbs unveil the cultural stereotypes that perpetuate resistance to female leadership, sexual and physical violence, male promiscuity, and the ‘mammy’ image of black women. Chikhungu, Amos, Kandala and Palikadavath (2019, 1) aver that “violence against women is a global issue with estimates indicating that 35% of all women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner violence in their lifetime.” Therefore, the researcher chose the outlined proverbs from the Northern Sotho population as they are thematising cultural stereotypes emerging in different sectors of life against black women. Northern Sotho also known as *Pedi*, Transvaal Sotho or *Bapedi* refers to Bantu-speaking people inhabiting Limpopo province, South Africa, and constituting the major group of the Northern Sotho ethnolinguistic cluster of peoples, who numbered about 3,700,000 in the late 20th century (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2008). Their traditional territory, which is known as Bopedi, is located between the Olifants and Steelpoort rivers. Moreover, the ancestors of the Pedi are thought to have settled in the present region about 500 years ago after having migrated from Central Africa (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2008). The cultural proverbs used in this study originate from the above explicated South African tribe, Northern Sotho.

Data Analysis Technique

The study has thrived on the thematic content analysis technique which has enabled the researcher to interpret and discuss the results of the study in thematic patterns. Maguire and Delahunt (2017: 353) assert that “the goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue.”

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Northern Sotho proverbs could be explicated as one of the cultural initiatives intended to educate and guide both black (South) African men and women. Therefore, it becomes problematic when these proverbs manifest to women as a tool of othering them. In the midst of culturally informed problems, there is a “male domineering factor, a patriarchal system. This oppressive patriarchal system was found in (South) Africa even before Whites came with their Western capitalistic culture [which] has reinforced the oppressive system, out of which it derives more benefits” (Ramodibe 1989: 14-21). This noted, the Northern Sotho cultural proverbs that demonstrate an oppressive or negative system towards black women in different spheres of human endeavour are thematically analysed below:

Resistance to Female Leadership

Northern Sotho proverb: *Tša e ta pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng*

English translation: A herd that is led by a cow (female) will fall into the cave

This Northern Sotho proverb is an indication of a cultural stereotype towards women in leadership. Rakoma (1971: 222) interprets this proverb as “If men can be controlled by women they will be in trouble and experience many unnecessary faults for the one who is ignorant and

powerless is the one who is controlling them.” Cultural notions as exemplified by the aforementioned Northern proverb, reject women as leaders and rather anticipate them to be wholly subservient to men and be valued as followers (Masenya 1996).

Sexual Violence

Northern Sotho: *Mosadi ke kgano, o gola ka fase*

English translation: A woman is a mongoose, she grows underneath

This Northern Sotho proverb makes excruciating remarks about women’s bodies and this “relates to stereotypical notions of black women as being exotic and overly sexual” (Thomik 2014: 76). On close examination, the proverb compares a woman with a mongoose which is known to be an animal that uses its sexual anatomy, the anus, to lure and catch its prey. Kingdon (2012: 1) states that a female mongoose “occasionally would sun-bathe lying on her back, in which position her pale pink anal area assumed a quite startling prominence against the surrounding fringe of dark fur. This display is claimed to induce birds to approach and peck at the anus, whereupon the mongoose seizes the bird.” As a result, this proverb paints a stereotypical association of women with sexual activity, thus, they have fallen prey to sexual predators to an extent that in (South) Africa, sexual violence against women has become an apex challenge as “the police recorded 40,035 rapes in 2017/18, up from 39,828 in 2016/17 and an average of 110 rapes were recorded by the police each day” (Africa check 2018). Moreover, Masenya (1996: 125) notes that “from all sides then, women’s sexual lives appear to have been controlled by patriarchal social order; at home by their fathers and in their families (if they happen to get married) by their husbands.”

Male Promiscuity

Northern Sotho: *Monna ke kobo re a apolelana*

English translation: A man is a blanket, we share

This Northern Sotho proverb is a representation of male promiscuity. It perpetuates, among others, sexual immorality amongst men as it emphasises the significance of sharing a man by different women. Masenya (1996: 121) notes that “a man can satisfy his sexual desires anywhere with anybody; that will not be a problem” as corroborated by this cultural proverb.” Therefore, this proverb could be perceived as a tool of institutionalising adultery, sexual immorality and polygamy. These malicious acts pose threats to women’s lives as they escalate the spread of lethal diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Domestic Violence

Northern Sotho: *Lebitla la mosadi Ke bogadi*

English translation: A woman’s grave is at her in-laws

This Northern Sotho proverb directly binds a woman to her marriage at the same time unleashing an unfair treatment towards her. It urges women to endure the hardships of marriage without thinking about divorce, going back home or dying single. Rakoma (1971: 146) notes 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.” Today, wives experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse in marriages and are discouraged by cultural notions to leave their abusive husbands.

Chikhungu et al. (2019: 1) postulate that these hardships confronting women are worsened by “the strength of association between husband's alcohol consumption, woman's working status, and marriage type and domestic violence increased by level of abuse.”

The ‘Mammy’ Stereotypical Image

Northern Sotho: *Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo*

English translation: A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten.

This Northern Sotho proverb is concerned with a woman's ability to fulfil her domestic duties such as cleaning, cooking, washing and babysitting and it alludes to the ‘mammy’ stereotypical view perpetuated by cultural notions. The ‘mammy’ is the term that was used to refer to black women who “were forced to work in the Big House: cook elaborate dinners, clean the entire premises and take care of the children. In reality these women were often teenagers, ripped away from their families in order to take care of white families they had never met” (Versluys 2014: 10). This proverb motivates and gives praise to a woman who gives in to her cultural obligation of doing household duties, however, Masenya (1996: 197) notes that “the first part of this proverb, *Mosadi ke tšhwene (A woman is a baboon)* may be interpreted negatively to mean that what counts in a woman is her hands (*matsogo*), not her beauty [and] it, therefore, does not matter whether she is as ugly as a baboon, as long as she is diligent.”

CONCLUSION

This article has exposed some of the cultural stereotypes that confront women in the contemporary (South) African societies through the analysis of Northern Sotho proverbs. It is these cultural stereotypes that are found to hinder the progress of women politically, socially and economically. Today, women are at the upper stage of unemployment, physical and sexual violence, and political exclusion. This indicates that more is still needed to be done to empower women and alleviate the cultural stereotypes rising against them. However, cultural stereotypes are seemingly difficult to deface especially when they are deeply rooted in an individual's upbringing. Therefore, it is recommended that governmental initiatives be infiltrated in educational and justice systems where the society is educated to blend with the culture of equality between men and women which include the understanding of homosexuals, female leaders, respect for women's bodies and rights, and justice be served for those who violate these women's rights through mystifying activities such as corrective rape.

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