

# A Transformative Depiction of the Dilemmas of Women by Selected Northern Sotho Poets

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## Abstract

The subject of women disenfranchisement has not been adequately addressed in Northern Sotho poetry though it is a generally common phenomenon in indigenous African literature at large. For centuries, indigenous African literature has been a weapon of women disempowerment, under the veneer of African cultural identity. Women were not given a voice in this form of literary expression. The thrust of this study is, therefore, to delineate the objectification of African women by the following selected Northern Sotho poets: Matsepe, Tseke, Puleng and Kgobe. It is a qualitative study which is undergirded by Cultural Transformative Model which strives to emancipate women from cultural stereotypes which impede them from reaching their full potential in this life. The poets were purposively sampled because of their relevance to the study, and then explored by adopting thematic textual analysis. This study recommends that for humanity to reach their full potential, gender diversity and inclusivity should be prioritised. Women should, on merit, be embraced in the plans of the nation.

**Keywords:** women, Cultural Transformation Model, poets, disempowerment. depiction, gender diversity.

## Background

Literature is the oldest form of human expression. In the halcyon days of Africa, prose, poetry, drama were used in order to transmit culture and tradition to posterity by word of mouth. In other words, literature was oral. As one of the literary genres, poetry was used for a myriad of reasons and situations. When initiates arrived back home from the mountain school, they would praise themselves, be praised by others, and then be rewarded in return with gifts (praise poetry). When the army came back home as victors, they were praised through heroic poetry. For many centuries, African poetry was oral until the arrival of missionaries who introduced the written code of poetry. Traore (2010: 1) asseverates:

In fact, the common denominator of the cultures of the African continent is undoubtedly the oral tradition. Writing on black African started in the Middle Ages...with the birth of the "Negritude," African authors began to write in French or in English.

The emergence of Matsepe, who is believed to be the pioneer of Northern Sotho literature and poetry in particular, opened doors for new poets. For this reason, his influence is inevitable in their poetry. Matsepe's poetic introduction "kgomo e a tsha, e gangwa ke mang" (*the cow's udder is full of milk, who should milk it*), is found in almost all the poets who came after him. This poetic introduction is usually recited by an initiate who is provoking the audience to cheer him on, listen and metaphorically receive the milk in the form of his poem (oral poetry).

Matsepe and his poetic successors have evolved from the African patriarchal culture which privileges men over women. In this cultural setup, women are considered inferior to their male counterparts and must, therefore, depend on men for their survival. In fact, they are counted as men's dependants. African patriarchy does not allow a woman to own land and anything that generates income but can only be employed as a worker. Women are forbidden to hold powerful decision-making positions in society. Rakoma (1975:222) proverbially declares that "tša etwa ke ya tshadi pele di wela ka leopeng" (a nation led by a woman, is bound to fail). This is how insignificant women are regarded in some African communities. Matsepe and those who came after him, wrote

poems which glaringly prejudiced women. Their poetry would praise kings, rivers, mountains and other strongholds of the community, heroes and not heroines, men and not women. They would go to the extent of not appreciating even their mothers, sisters and wives. Eagly and Mladinic (1994:1) indicates:

Women experiences of gender discrimination and feminist protests concerning contemporary backlash against women reflect women's inroads into traditionally masculine arenas, especially their efforts to gain access to high status, highly-paying male-dominated jobs, which are thought to require characteristics stereotypically ascribed to men.

In many African communities, men's positions are established and entrenched, and such positions allow them to own land, gather wealth and have the *carte blanche* to marry many wives. The only *sine qua non* is that these polygamous men must be able to support them and the children, own them and claim respect from all of them. These men actually become like kings in a harem. This kind of polygamous marriages disempowered women more because one man equals many wives in this kind of setup.

In different African societies, men's power was so pervasive that it permeated into designation of roles between them and their female counterparts. Men were assigned the masculine duty of ploughing the fields while women would do their feminine one of cultivating, harvesting and food processing. Comparatively speaking, men did minimal work while their female counterparts were subjected to a lot of work. In the evenings, men would sit around the fire at the 'kgoro' (men's meeting place) next to the cattle kraal while women would cook food, clean the house, do the laundry, clothe the children. Even under these inhumane conditions, they were not allowed to openly complain. All they could do was to lament through songs:

Marriage songs do not necessarily express joy and hope...some songs express the difficulties that the newly-weds may encounter in their lives

Chauke (2004:68).

These songs were used to implicitly call for help from anyone cares to listen as they were prohibited from protesting publicly. For this reason, they could only use songs to cry out to the powers that be to bail them out.

Marginalisation of women was not limited to labour only but were spread across many spheres of their lives. For example, women were restricted from eating certain kinds of food, particularly food that men consider as delicacies. The cow's liver is deliciously rich in nutrients which are needed to nourish the body hence women were barred from eating it. As a way of protecting themselves, such men usually contend that food taboos are known from virtually all human societies. It is interesting to observe an African woman delivering food to her husband at 'kgorong' (men's meeting place). She will kneel down, crawl while carrying food. All the men gathered at the 'kgoro' will observe her way of kneeling, which depicts the level of respect. The woman is not allowed to enter the 'kgoro', in fact it is taboo for her to enter. Even if she wishes to lay a charge against someone, she must find a man to act as a mediator. Furthermore, at the 'kgoro', every man kept a whip made from cow hide to discipline women who do not bring food on time to the very 'kgoro', and who do not cook properly. This dehumanising whipping is often done in front of other men, and newly inaugurated young men. The aim is to transfer the culture of women oppression and abuse from one generation to the other. It is, therefore, not surprising to see the selected African poets in this study writing so subjectively about women. Poems such as 'kobobane ya mosadi' (female prostitute) sell like hot cakes because they promote this culture of abuse against women. Stratton (1994:25), in her analysis of Achebe's texts, observes that "Achebe's women are indeed 'down in one knee' if not both, before their men folk and they are regularly making an exit, no doubt 'in their proper order', from all the spaces in which power, economic or otherwise, is exercised". This study endeavours to deconstruct this mindset from these communities (Mogoboya & Montle, 2020).

### **Cultural Transformation Model**

This study was guided by the Cultural Transformation Model. Gill (2013:73) defines culture as "a system of shared knowledge, beliefs, procedures, attitudes and artifacts that exists among a group of humans". In Africa, these beliefs and values, which are usually ethnic, religious, national, are orally transmitted from generation to generation. Gill further submits that transformation is to convert, alter or metamorphose. Thus, cultural transformation is an act of altering those systems of shared knowledge to ensure that only progressive ones are transmitted to posterity.

Root (2016:10) states that “cultural transformation starts with the identification of a problem or an opportunity. Once one has determined where one is (point A) and where one wants to be (point B), one must chart a course to help himself/herself get there as efficiently as possible”. The model further presents skills to be employed in the manipulation process: define your current culture, describe the culture you want, provide training that supports the new culture and lastly measure progress and celebrate success. Root (2016:15) indicates that “changing an individual’s behavior is a daunting task, but it is possible if the four skills are followed to the latter, and according to their chronological order”.

Embedded in these four skills are cultural values that need to be transformed. They include, *inter alia*, cultural norms, religion, language, rituals beliefs, artifacts procedures, attitudes and systems of shared knowledge. From these seven values, the researchers used three because of their aptness to the study: cultural norms and attitudes, language and artifacts. Cultural norms and attitudes assisted the study understand the reason for the poet’s behaviour. Language is an important skill which enshrines culture. Artifacts (material culture) is important to feed us with information about the reason and level of women exclusion from national economic involvement. For this reason, cultural transformation model has helped the researchers gather and analyse data and arrive at credible findings.

**Research Methodology**

This study sought to depict the objectification of African women by the following selected Northern Sotho poets: Matsepe, Tseke, Puleng and Kgobe. To address this topic successfully, researchers, in this study, employed qualitative research approach. Kothari (1985:5) contends that qualitative research deals with subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviour. He further adds that it derives credence from the researcher’s insights and impressions. The use of qualitative research approach opened new opportunities for researchers, in this study, to assess attitudes, opinions and behaviours of authors, thereby assisting them to understand the reasons behind Northern Sotho poets writing poems which encroach into women’s rights. Creswell (2014) states that “research designs are types of enquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research design”. This study adopted an exploratory research design within qualitative research approach as informed by its aim and cultural transformative model as its theoretical underpinning.

**Sampling Method**

Kothari (1985: 15) avers that sampling is a procedure which “gives each item an equal probability of being selected”. Purposive sampling method was adopted in this study where relevant poems from different poets had equal chance of inclusion in the sample. Thus, the following poets whose poems depict the sub-human way in which African women are treated by society and culture were purposively selected and analysed: Matsepe (1983), Tseke (1991) and Puleng (1991), and Kgobe (2008). Matsepe (1983) represents the pioneering and early period, Tseke (1991) and Puleng (1991) the middle period, while Kgobe (2008) epitomises the contemporary period.

**Data Collection**

Hofstee (2009:117) argues that “once you have your data, of whatever nature, you have to do something with it in order to turn it into evidence...to turn it into information you have to analyse it. You may apply statistical analysis techniques or do some form of textual analysis or combination of the two”. In this study, data was collected from purposively selected Northern Sotho poets on the basis of their relevance to the topic.

**Data analysis**

The study employed thematic textual analysis from the following perspective:

- Each poem with depiction of women’s dilemmas in society was identified and analysed.
- Focus was put on stanzas and poetic lines with negative perceptions on women.
- Data was categorised according to eras and the nature of prejudices society has against women.
- Conclusion and recommendations were made from all the data which was analysed.

**Findings**

Poems dealing with the portrayal of the amount of social injustice unleashed against women were purposively sampled and data collected from them. These selected poems were further grouped as follows: early, represented by Matsepe (1983), middle aged period, represented by Tseke (1991) and Puleng (1991), and contemporary period by Kgobe (2008). The table below indicates poets, poems and period:

Poet(s)	Poems	Period
Matsepe (1983)	Kganya o inaganne (Be proud but be careful not to regret later, girl)	Early period

Tseke (1991) & Puleng (1991)	O ba fa eng Hunadi (What do you give them Hunadi) O ntapišitše Kgopolo (You have made my mind tired) Mosadi yo (This woman)	Middle-aged period
Kgobe (2008)	Kobobane (Prostitute) Mmanalane (Lazy woman)	Contemporary period

Researchers established eight findings from data analysis which were classified into two main factors: social factors and political factors. These two factors helped deepen their understanding of the extent to which the pandemic of women abuse goes and how this scourge can be decimated.

Social factors

*Generation gap*

Cousins (2001) considers generation gap as differences in perceptions between two groups of people. Today, generation gap refers to a perceived gap between younger people and older people. In the context of this study, generation gap implies the extent to which African women have tolerated gender disparity over the years as reflected throughout the three eras: the early era, the middle-age era and the contemporary era. As revealed in the study, gender insensitivity in poetry texts was minimal in the early era because of the high rate of illiteracy among Africans. Africans only enjoyed oral forms of literature (orature). Matsepe (1983) was the only prominent Northern Sotho poet during this era. The number of poets who deal with women’s rights increased in the middle-age era through the influence of pioneers such as Matsepe. This is the reason why majority of the poets who belong to this era have imitated his style of writing. The contemporary era saw a massive proliferation of poets on this subject because of the increase in awareness-raising ventures initiated by Feminists.

*Contrasting gender orientations between males and females*

Several studies have highlighted contrasting orientations between males and females as depicted in poetry. Lange (2008:1) maintains that men and women express their written experiences differently. He further adds that “some believe that male authors are not able to write accurately from the female perspective”. Many poets and authors in general often paint and describe women in a stereotypical way because of their gender, nationality and culture. Matsepe (1983), in the poem ‘Kganya o inaganne’ (Be proud but be careful not to regret later, girl) presented the following poetic lines with evidence of influence of contrasting life orientations:

‘Kganya o inaganne kgarebe mothešana,’  
(Be proud but be careful not to regret later, girl)  
‘Le hlaba o le lebeletše le be le dikele;  
(The sun rises, under your watch and it sets)  
‘Ba tshwe mare o inaganne kgarebe mothešana’.  
(Spit at them, and introspect, girl)

These poetic lines appear to be expressed by a male persona who believes that women have empty pride. He is actually advising women to refrain from coyness when men propose love to them lest they regret it later. African men’s cultural life orientation prescribes that he should be the one to initiate romantic advances to a woman and that a woman is obliged to accept. If she refuses the advances, he denigrates her for exercising her freedom of choice.

*Depiction of women as villains*

Though women and African women in particular, are widely respected for building families by uniting and loving them, they are often culturally taken advantage of and treated like villains in society. In his poem ‘O ba fa eng Hunadi?’ (What do you give them Hunadi), Tseke (1991) confirms:

‘O ba fa eng wena Hunadi?’  
(What do you give them Hunadi ?)  
‘O ba hubela bjang wena Hunadi?’  
(How do you give them Hunadi ?)  
‘Re botše hle Hunadi mohumagadi,’  
(Please tell us Hunadi, woman)  
‘O humile o humišitšwe go lekane,’  
(You are rich, and you were made rich it is enough)

In the above excerpt, the poet expresses surprise at why many men are attracted to this woman. What villainous concoction does she use to draw them to her in her prostitution enterprise or is she just a nymphet? Thus, the poet further exposes her villainous side by suggesting that she fleeces men of their wealth as she financially preys on them. For this reason, she is depicted as a villain. In concurrence, Byrne (2014: 60) concedes that “patriarchal writing including poetry, has frequently constructed women’s bodies in negative and disempowering ways. This most often takes the form of respecting women as only bodies (without minds) or only as objects of male sexual desire”.

#### *Marriage as a symbol of servitude*

Kgobe (2008) wrote ‘Mmanalane’ (lazy woman) which is a poem that vividly denigrates African women. The name Mmanalane refers to a lazy woman who will use her beauty to seduce men for financial gain. Mmanalane will then use the money to buy expensive cosmetics and clothes to enhance her beauty the more. Mmanalana is a girl who grows long nails, polishes them and exposes them to lure men. This is antithetical to many African cultural belief systems. Women are supposed to work hard for their families almost to the point of servitude (*mosadi ke tšhwene o lewa mabogo*). It is a normal expectation for a newly-wed woman to cook for the in-laws, wash their clothes, clean the house and tend for her sisters in-law’s children, and always be there for them while her sisters in-law are lazing and loafing around, offering little or no assistance to her.

#### Political Factors

##### *Poetry and the rights of women*

In many African patriarchal communities, women have limited rights. It is only now that things begin to improve because of Feminism. They are not even allowed to lay a charge in a local court. They have to send a man or a male next of kin to lay a charge on their behalf. Furthermore, they are not allowed to own land; it is regarded as taboo for most traditional churches to have a woman preacher. In some rare cases, women can deliver a sermon but strictly to fellow women congregants and not to men. Poetry is not immune to such violation of women’s rights. Donnelly (2003:211) argues that: “although women had a sad history of near universal systematic suffering in virtually every area of the globe, the idea of group human rights for women was fatally undermined by problems of collective agency for a diverse group that included half of humanity”.

Puleng (1991) presented a poem that served as a proof that women have limited rights. The title of the poem is ‘mosadi yo’ (this woman). In this poem, the poet advises a married woman to mend her ways, to refrain from hating people around her, to desist from being the cause of chaos because her in-laws want peace, love and prosperity. The poet is a man whose patriarchal disposition crushes women. Men are depicted as heroes while women are villains. This situation needs cultural transformation as it is untenable in its current shape and form.

##### *African cultural influence on oppression of women*

Socio-cultural and economic marginalisation was rife in many African communities until Feminism reduced it with its activism. Machaba (2001:169) states that “women were absolutely vulnerable to all forms of prejudices by men”. Kgobe (2008) surged women abuse to a climax with the poem titled ‘Kobobane’ (Prostitute). Line 1 of the poem which reads ‘O sehlephišalebole’ (You are promiscuous) is defamatory in its depiction. The poet negatively refers to the woman as promiscuous, which means that the woman is not selective when it comes to choosing partner(s). In essence, the woman is perceived as a prostitute, which is the attitude that many Northern Sotho poets have adopted over the years. The most educative part of the poem is in lines 3, 5 and 6: “*Mohlant ba go topa nta thekeng, dintšhi di ilile go fofa, o šale o le dikwero le disego*” (The moment they discover your evil ways, men are going to run away, and you will be a laughing stock in the community). This implies that patriarchal superiority has taught African men to abuse vulnerable women and put them to shame instead of assisting them in times of need.

##### *Lack of female writers*

It is axiomatic that historically, many African girls were culturally barred from going to school as educating a girl-child was regarded as a waste of money. The misguided belief was that if you educate a girl you are enriching her in-laws. Women were only regarded as child-bearers and minders. McDowell (1992:73) confirms that “the biological differences between men and women are such that only women can conceive and lactate, only men can impregnate”. This parochial approach has left girls behind while boys were allowed to go to school thereby consolidating patriarchy by further rendering girls inferior to boys through ignorance. For this

reason, men dominated the education sphere by writing many books. They wrote praise and heroic poems about themselves and disparaging ones about women. With the advent of democracy today, things are changing for the better hence it is even said that you educate a girl, you educate a nation, thanks to different formations which fight for the rights of women.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to portray the objectification of African women by the following selected Northern Sotho poets: Matsepe, Tseke, Puleng and Kgobe. The objective was to endeavour to understand the rationale behind this kind of poetry. The study revealed that women are subjugated by society in the name of culture. They are often given derogatory names such as prostitutes, liars, witches, and the root-cause(s) of conflict in most families. The findings of the study were derived from both the literature review and research in general with data collected from purposively selected Northern Sotho poems which were divided into three eras: the early, the middle-aged and the contemporary era. This study recommends that for humanity to reach their full potential, gender diversity and inclusivity should be prioritised. Women should, on merit, be brought on board on all issues which affect them and the nation.

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