

The Depiction Of Feminine Characters In Sepedi Folktales

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Abstract

The study of folklore is not only interesting, but important to know the culture, religion and origin of a particular society or speech community. One main reason why folklore had survived and transmissible from one generation to the next, is the aesthetic nature it possesses. Folktales, in their true origin, are oral traditional literature which were narrated by elderlies, women in particular, to children in the traditional thatched hut, in the evening while cooking food collected from the fields. Our definition of Folklore as an oral history that is preserved in societies, able to be transmitted from one generation to the other, coincide with the definition nicely crafted by Bronner (2019:5) who said that:

Folklore as a scholarly term is used in a broad sense to refer to manifestations of traditional knowledge: that is, cultural practices and expressions learned through word of mouth, imitation and demonstration, and custom. In the narrower sense of popular usage, it often refers to oral expressions such as legends, folktales, songs, and proverbs, while social and material traditions such as architecture, crafts, rituals, and festivals are associated with folklife.

Folklore allows people to give meaning to their way of life, how they adopted a particular living style and their attachment to their surroundings. Folklore is made up of two words; folk, which means regional people, and lore, which means stories. Therefore, folklore refers to the stories told by people. Because every culture has different historical backgrounds and traditions, folklore has a different definition to each culture. Culture has been referred to as man's "social heritage" and as "the man-made part of the environment", it consists essentially of any form of behaviour which is acquired through learning and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms (Bascom, 2014: 284). Bapedi are people found at Bopedi, where Sepedi language is the language been spoken. Bapedi have their own culture which procreated unique folktales capable to teach their youth about their origin, religion and values. The emergence of mythology in folklore further qualified this discipline to be more diverse. It is somewhat believed that myths developed from culture. The question may arise; why do cultures develop myths? Myths offer insight into what a specific culture thinks about the nature of the world in general and about key questions, such as the nature and function of gods, humans' relationship to the gods, the social systems and values within a culture, what it means to be a human and the two sexes' relationship to one another (Vandiver, 1984: 5). Myths are commonly used to describe the origins of a group of people, the beginning of the universe, Why they eat the kinds of food, why they merry their cousins and why they have kings. Cultural songs in folktales are meant to consolidate the cultural knowledge in the minds of recipient. Quite often, children would be heard singing those songs learned from the tale that was narrated last night. Songs incorporated in creative writing makes reading pleasurable and serve the following function; one of the functions of songs in the narrative is that they often mark the structure of the story in a clear attractive way. Songs add a musical aspect, an extra dimension of both enjoyment and skill (Ihuezze, 2015:58). What prompted us to initiate and developed courage to pursue this study is how Sepedi folktales attached and associated women with persistently depicted characters. This character is always vulnerable, always chased by the cannibal and in most

cases caught, always found herself in very dangerous situations where she will escape through a very slim and miraculous chances.

Keywords: Folklore, Folktales, Feminine, Feminism, Sepedi, African culture, Males, Character, and Depiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sepedi language like all other languages of the South Eastern Zone is divided into kinds of folktales; which are narrated to different ages of children. Within all kinds of folktales, our study converged emphasis to “Nonwane-tsholo (wonder tales). Wonder tales are the best known of the traditional folktales. They are stories of supernatural wonders typically depicting the conflict between good and evil; in some cases these category make use of animal characters, but mostly human characters are used as well. It is this category of folktales where female characters are used and highest level of depiction is observed. Folktales offer an alternative view to historical narratives dominated by male narrators and ideals. Narrators, most of whom are women and youth, uphold traditional beliefs and shape the construction of identities. Of great concern is the sexism in folktales, which is prevalent, even though narrators are primarily women (Maree, 2016:9). The reason why depicted characters are either girl-child or a woman even if primary narrators are women themselves; is because feminine gender especially girl-child is endangered, vulnerable and despicable in African culture. The girl-child must be armed with values and good morals from the early/infant stages; these values and morals will help the child to fend for herself in real life. Our study supported all the traditional efforts to shape-up the feminine gender; but our only challenge is when almost all characters in Sepedi folktales, who found themselves in a predicament, despicable or unpleasant situation are either women or girl-child. Either a girl is chased by a cannibal, or a woman is barren and the whole village despise of her. In rare or nil occasions do feminine gender inherited heroic characters in traditional folklore; this is not capable of building strong and bold substantial

character in the hearts of developing girl-children. Kumah (2000:1) argues that:

As a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive-perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary status-than roles often trivialized to varying degrees-and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature.

Folktales originated long- long time ago, there is not even a slightest trace of their initial authors; but it can make a lot of sense to argue that men where authors and women narrators. Men as authors were likely to make their male gender characters to be heroes and female characters, depicted characters. African traditional culture was designed to have women married and changed their surnames and identity to their husbands’; women would not own a land, and they would forever remain dependents of their husbands. In the early 70’s, it was considered a waste of money to take a girl-child to school, why do that, because this “thing” is going to be married and become another clan’s property? Rather educate a boy-child because he will remain your kin’s man forever. A famous African proverb appries us, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)” (Suen, 2013:61). What prompted us to initiate and develop courage to pursue this study is how Sepedi folktales attached and associated women with persistently depicted characters.

II. LITERARY FEMINIST THEORY

Our study was guided by literal feminist theory which Arizah (2020:512) argues that literary feminism is a literary study with a feminist theory approach...in literature feminism is related to the concept of feminist literary criticism, namely literary studies that direct the

focus of analysis on women. Hooks (2000:19) as well expresses feminism as: “the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression. Depiction of feminine gender was not limited to folklore alone but to literature in general. It was only in the 18th century when feminism was introduced; and the first, second and the third waves were only introduced from 1990 to date. Amidst all marginalization, frustrations and prejudices women were exposed to, they continued to survive. “...women are regularly making an exit, no doubt ‘in their proper order’ from all the spaces in which power or otherwise, is exercised (Stratton, 1994:25). Stratton synthesized the idea that today there are women organizations which advocated for better life of women, political and economic emancipation (liberation) of women’s welfare. Friedman et al. (1987:1) examined the five main categories of feminism which prevail today; namely “liberal feminism”, “radical feminism”, “Marxist feminism”, “socialist feminism” and “feminism in the third world”. Out of all different kinds of feminisms, liberal feminism is a more accommodative and considerate kind as it does not directly challenge the system itself or the ideology behind women’s oppression. Instead, this kind of feminism works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into it and make it more responsive to individual women’s rights.

Liberal feminists feel it is ideal if women are treated same as men because they are equally capable. They further argue that women deserve an equal education and equal rights to own property, be economically independent and have careers. Many women are irrational, helpless and vulnerable. Reading as a woman means reading with awareness of uncovering the prejudices and ideology of the power of androcentric or patriarchal men, who until now still master writing and literary reading, sex differences in the poets, readers, elements of work and external factors that influence the situation of literary communication systems (Arizah, 2020:512).

Central to the literary feminist theory, are social values that we recommended authors to heed in their literature in order to write depiction free

literature. Equality and respect, justice, freedom, social morals, gender sensitivity, feminine attitude and authenticity character. Out of the listed social values, only three values are most recommended for this study: **Equality and respect, gender sensitivity and feminine attitude**. We wanted to caution and align authors to write literature (folktales included) with a considerable equality and respect over female folk, alternate and mix depicted characters over male and female genders equally, be gender sensitive at all times and portray reasonable and living characters in their literature, folklore in particular. This model was then used to collect and analyse data.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was meant to address the social issue: depiction of feminine characters in Sepedi folktales. To best address this social issue diligently, we found a qualitative research approach suitable because it allowed us to fraternize with folklore scripts and thereby gain concrete perspective of the problem under study.

Kumar (2011:15) ascertains that:

A study is classified as qualitative if the purpose of the study is primarily to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem or event; the description of an observed situation, the historical enumeration of events, an account of the different opinions people have about an issue, and a description of the living conditions of a community are examples of qualitative research.

Within the qualitative approach we adopted a case-study design, which allowed to gather extensive understanding of the facts around the motive behind depiction of feminine gender in folklore. Starman (2013:31) described a case study as: “a comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis; i.e. the characterization of the case and the events, as well as a description of the discovery process of the features that is the process of research itself.” Overlapping to some degree with anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics is ethnolinguistic, which studies language in relation to the study of ethnic groups and

behaviour. The chief notion is language as the mode of ethnic identity, as in, for instance, the manifestation of ethnicity through specificities in use of a particular language variety, or in the choice of language variety for communicating with another ethnic group Silva-Fuenzalida (1949: 454). This allowed us to become qualitative anthropological and cultural ethnolinguistic with vast episteme to analyse cultural literary work.

IV. SAMPLING METHOD

The study adopted purposive sampling; only three folktales were collected from two prescribed Sepedi folklore scripts. The three folktales with Fertility being compromised, destitute and prejudiced were selected for purpose of providing evidence of depiction of feminine gender in Sepedi literature and folklore in particular. Alvi (2016:30) propounded that in purposive sampling the sampling is approached having a prior purpose in mind. The criteria of the elements who are to include in the study is predefined. So we do not include everyone who is available to us rather those available are included who meet the defined criteria. We therefore linked purposive sampling with non-random and non-probability sampling.

V. DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from two folklore scripts (books); two folktales containing evidence of depiction of feminine gender were collected from the book by Makgopa (2014). Another one folktale was collected from the book by Mathiba (2015). First, the folktale was summarised and later analysed using the three aspects of the literary feministic theory where applicable. The contents and contexts of the three folktales were clearly interpreted and feminine depiction nicely exposed.

Data collected from prescribed books is called secondary data, thus confirmed by Kabir (2016:205) that data collected from a source that has already been published in any form is called secondary data...secondary data is essential since it is impossible to conduct a new survey that can adequately capture past change and/or developments." Books, records, biographies,

newspapers, data archives (journals) are all sources of secondary data. Caution was taken when the three folktales were considered for data collection; that data must comply with the three aspects of literary feministic theory: equality and respect, gender sensitivity and attitude and authenticity character. After collection of relevant data, its analysis was inevitable.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data was aligned to the three aspects of literary feministic theory: equality and respect, gender sensitivity and feminine attitude; that is, the three aspects of literary feministic theory were each used as subheadings to analyse the four folktales. The following two folktales from Makgopa (2014:15) were analysed:

1. *MMADILLO O LLELANG (MMADILLO, WHY ARE YOU CRYING)*

Summary of Folktale

Long time ago, there was a woman by the name of "Mmadillo", she couldn't bear children. All women in the village used to laugh at her and did not allow their children to help her. She would spend much of her time crying. One day while asleep, she heard a voice instructing her not to cry and to go and wash herself in the sacred pond near the village. She was scared but went, she later conceived and delivered boys twins. That year a pandemic came and killed many children and not "Mmadillo" twins. The folktale ended with "Mmadillo" having the last laugh.

In the above folktale, the feminine gender was depicted in the following ways:

Equality and Respect

- Why the author preferred that it had to be a woman, "Mmadillo" alone who is unable to have a child? It could have been a man, or both a man and a woman. This compelled us to reflect back to persistent woman blame every time when the family cannot have children in African culture. Following this, Etuk (2002: 91) writes thus: "In my part of Africa, the woman bears the brunt of attack for childlessness

in marriage. The male except where he is clearly impotent, is hardly ever suspected as the cause of infertility.” So where there are no children, the husband will not go for investigation.

Gender Sensitivity and Feminine Attitude

- Depiction of women is nicely exposed when “Mmadillo” is giving birth; why the author preferred, the woman must deliver male twins, is it wrong if she could have delivered female twins? Again, reflection to African culture is repeated, which completely captured the author. African culture value the birth of a boy child over a girl child. Female children are valued less in societies than males, where female children are considered to have less social and economic potential (WHO, 2009: 5).

2. MMAKGWADI LE LEJAPELA (MMAKGWADI AND THE BIG MOUNTAIN SNAKE), Makgopa (2014:33)

Summary of a Folktale

This folktale is about an old woman who was able to perform extraordinary domestic duties than a group of active women together; this woman, “Mmakgwadi” was able to perform all these duties because of help from the big mountain snake. In essence, the woman was a ‘witch’ as villagers were scared of her. The setback was that the snake wanted to be fed human meat; “Mmakgwadi” offered grandchildren and lastly her own children. The snake would irrigate the woman’s fields, cultivate and prepare home-made beer in exchange of human meat. It was until the woman had no more next of kin to offer as meat for the snake that she was the last resort. She escaped, her secret revealed to the villagers, the snake was killed and buried. Where the snake was buried developed into a big hill and later all people who were devoured by the snake emerged from the hill; and “Mmakgwadi” as well died. In the above-folktale feminine gender was depicted in the following ways:

Equality and Respect

Again women are associated with staying and entertaining big mountain snakes. Is this association perfected because women are fearless gender or because women are most vulnerable gender fit to be pushed into unpleasant situations? We finally thought that this is because women are perceived less important and quick to be depicted and prejudiced. Critics of cultural feminism, particularly those belonging to men’s rights groups, assert that cultural feminism is misandric in nature, and also claim that there is no evidence to support that a woman’s way is any better than a man’s way (Bingham, 2009:6). The author or creator of the folktale could have equally used the male character instead of the poor vulnerable woman.

Gender Sensitivity And Feminine Attitude

In the above folktale, women are grossly depicted; a dimension of witchcraft comes into the picture. “Mmakgwadi” is allocated the role of a woman who is a witch, is feared by villagers and uses the snake to seem to perform extraordinarily. The role of a witch was allocated to a woman intentionally, to remind us that in African culture women are witchcraft experts. Any witchcraft incident in a village, a woman is a capable and probable culprit. The first group of people associated with “witchcraft” is the so-called “witches”. Witches are mainly older women (Stadler, 1996: 88). African culture prescribe that it is taboo for a man to be accused of witchcraft. There is an African belief that women are “snakes” because they are potential witches, and men are “dogs” because they are promiscuous like dogs.

The third folktale for analysis; with depiction of women was sampled from Mathiba (2015). The following is the folktales and its analysis:

3. NGWANENYANA WA GO RAKA PULA (THE GIRL WITH SUPERNATURAL POWERS TO CHASE RAIN AWAY) MATHIBA (2015:38).

Summary of Folktale

The above folktale narrates the girl who took care of her uncle's head of cattle. One day after a heavy rainfall which killed one cow, the girl with supernatural powers was so sad. Every time when it's about to rain, the girl would sing her magical song and rain-clouds would fade off. The village experienced drought but her uncle's cattle were not at all affected. She was later noticed and the king promised her ten cattle if she allowed rain to fall. The rain fell and the girl received ten cattle. The above folktale expose a complete depiction of women in the following way:

Equality And Respect

An element of inequality and disrespect is observed in the folktale; we know and accept that division of labour in our culture dictates that boys must care for the cattle and girls remain at home to assist their mothers in their domestic duties. Why abruptly do we have a girl doing boys duties? We considered this as depiction because girls are perceived less important and even in African oral literature an evil character should be given a feminine gender even if the rightful character must be a male. Alahira (2014:50) asserts that: "The division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between two sexes. The men went to war, hunted fish, and provided the raw materials for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house and prepared food and clothing. They cooked, weaved, sewed. Each was master of his or her own field of activity." Maybe if the character was a person with supernatural powers to make rain to fall, then the character would have been a boy from the onset.

VII. FINDINGS

Our first and most important finding about folktales as oral traditional literature, is their unique structure. Folktales possesses an interesting introduction and conclusion; these unique and interesting structure, is important to consolidate the active attendance and conductibility of the listeners. In most instances the narrator is an elderly woman and listeners

being children. Makgopa (2014:15), projected the folktale introduction as: "E rile e le nonwane!" (Once it was a folktale); these words are uttered by the narrator. Then the children's respond should be: "Keleketla." This children must respond that way as indication of acceptance to be told the folktale and as a sign of interest. The narrator will then narrate the folktale with enthusiasm. The listeners must continue to repeat "keleketla" at all intervals of story-telling. To end the story, the narrator must then say: "Mpho, se seo sa mosela wa seripa" (I spit off that small piece of a tail). This is done because the tail of any animal is signifies the end part of an animal; therefore it means the narrator has come to the end of his/her narration.

WOMEN; SOLE NARRATORS OF FOLKTALES AND MALE GENDER, SUPREME IN AFRICAN LITERATURE (Depiction is inevitable)

Our findings revealed that women were the sole narrators of folktales. The labour of caring for children rested upon the shoulders of women; women give birth to children, must care for them and create an informal learning centers to narrate folktales to teach, educate and guide children to instill cultural knowledge and values. Division of labour in many African culture prescribe that men's sole responsibility is to hunt, plough the fields and protect the entire tribe. For the fact that men are respected gender; always out for hunting and gathering, they do not play much role in children raising and thus will not feature much as characters in folktales. If men are used as characters, they are then used as heroes, and if there is any competition between a man and a woman, a man always must win.

The folktale presented by Makgopa (2014:26) consolidated the relentless cultural dominance of males over women. The folktale introduced an old man and woman playing a game of cooking each other in a pot filled with water and heated by fire. The rule of the game was when the old woman has had enough, she will say: "ke a swa, ke a swa!" (I'm burning, I'm burning), then the man should open the lid and the woman will go out and it will be a man's turn. They alternated

that way until at last the man did not let the woman go out, and she died. The folktale rule always offer the man an upper hand.

FOLKTALES EDUCATE GIRLS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE (Depiction inevitable)

The most important revelation about folktales we discovered was the education they offer to young developing girls; to be conscious about sexual abuse through story-telling. Mathiba (2015:53) presented the folktale with a little girl left alone in a house next to the big mountain with cannibals. Carelessly the little girl went out alone to collect “Marula” fruits, the cannibal (who is male) caught and took her to his home with the intention to cook and eat her for supper. Fortunately the girl managed to escape using her magical powers; when she spit saliva, the hole is immediately created where she would hide inside. The chasing cannibal could not see her and sadly return home and the little girl arrived home safely. Narrating this folktale to little girls would automatically instill the character of not trusting male strangers and will avoid probable sexual abused.

EDUCATING A WOMAN, YOU ARE EDUCATING THE NATION

African people were gifted with the knowledge that; you educate a woman, you are educating the nation. This expression is valid and well realized by Africans, because many if not all characters in African oral literature are feminine. To make sure that their oral literature is transmitted from one generation to the next, they reduced female characters to submissiveness and dupes rather than tricksters, with the intention to print this literary inheritance in their minds. The old African proverb “If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)” was a pioneer in its time for realizing the importance of women’s education when men predominated education opportunities (Suen, 2013:1). Although the African wisdom was not written for generations, but it had a way to navigate into permanent existence from one generation to the next.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

REVIVE NARRATION OF FOLKTALES TO YOUTH OF TODAY

There are different types of folktales, each is narrated to a specific age and time. We therefore recommend that our children need to be orientated to different kinds of folktales. Besides orientation of children to cultural traits and beliefs; folktales can play a delicate role in their education. Finnegan (2012:17) asserted that:

For many people around the world—particularly in areas where history and traditions are still conveyed more through speech than in writing—the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of culture and memory. Very often, local languages act as vehicles for the transmission of unique forms of cultural knowledge. Oral traditions that are encoded in these speech forms can become threatened when elders die or when livelihoods are disrupted.

It is indeed true that if aesthetic literature like folklore are not introduced to our children so that they make these cultural stories their second culture, then if we die they will become extinct.

CHARACTERS TO BE USED INTERCHANGEABLY TO AVOID DEPICTION

Our second and major recommendation is that women and elderly women in particular, when narrating folktales, must use male and female characters interchangeably. In one folktale the depicted character must be a boy and in another, a girl or they should both face unpleasant situations. If this is successfully done; a girl-child will not feel depicted and vindicated. Women, throughout the world, are under the sway of various scourges that range from gender-based discrimination, male chauvinism to physical violence. In the light of this, one needs to ask the role scholars and intellectuals play to change this reality. It is from this perspective we should understand the ostracism of women writers from the literary field (Dieng, 2017:4). However some feministic writers

developed a way to use the feminist literary tradition to dismantle the myths that jeopardised their dignity as individuals.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Sepedi traditional oral folklore and folklore in general is capable to preserve the beliefs, religious practices and culture values of societies. The African belief in ancestors is promoted and advocated in oral literature like folklore. Traditional African religion is based on oral traditions, which means that the basic values and way of life are passed from elders to younger generations. These traditions are not religious principles, but a cultural identity that is passed on through stories, myths and tales (SAHO, 2019:2). For millions of year's oral traditional literature had been preserving the history of nations and provided basic education to children to demarcate good from bad.

Through story-telling children were able to associate themselves with good and rational characters; interesting about folktales, is that, illicit and mischievous characters are punished while licit and well-behaved characters are later rewarded. Over and above, folktales had been the source of entertainment for ages in African culture. Folktales are a good form of entertainment but they have other roles they play. For instance, they educate and validate cultural and social practices (Turner, 1992). It will not be too much to mention that some folktales unearth the mysteries of societal origin and history. Dikul (2019: 1) ascertained that: folklore is an ancient story that has become a special characteristic for every nation with diversity of cultures that embraces the cultural historical riches of the nation. We therefore reiterated the notion that folklore should be taught to children whether it be formally or informally.

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