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## The presentation of female characters in three of BM Khaketla's texts: A literary analysis

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Like most literature around the world, African literature initially portrayed women poorly. This is in accordance with Kalu's (2001:14) observation that the role of women in society is constantly questioned and 'for centuries women have struggled to find their place' in a world that is predominantly male oriented. Inaccurate and incomplete portrayals of female characters littered early African works. This may be largely due to the fact that African literature was first written by men, whose education was put above that of women. Educated men not only came from a patriarchal society but were educated by missionaries and colonisers, who also came from a patriarchal society. The article attempts to investigate the representation of women characters in BM Khaketla's texts. His penchant to portray androcentric narratives is at variance with the female gender that is trivialised through patriarchy, culture, a gender socialisation process, marriage and domestic enslavement. The images of African women in these texts will be reassessed and redefined. The article concludes with some contemporary issues showing that women do have control over their own lives and are therefore the designers of their own future. There is room for contemplation of individual responsibility in women's plight apart from their cultural classification and expectations.

### Introduction

This article examines the presentation of female characters in three selected texts by Khaketla, namely *Tholoana tsa Sethepu* ('The consequences of polygamy') (1982), *Bulane* ('Bulane') (1985) and *Mosali a Nkhola* ('The woman lands me into trouble') (1960). The female characters are not seen as the quintessential African women or mothers. The questions that may be asked are: In what way are the experiences and responses of Mosele, Pulane and Mathabo to events in their lives representative of the conditions of African women? To what extent do cultural expectations contribute to their plight? Is there room for contemplation of individual responsibility? In asking and evaluating these questions, it is argued that Mosele, Pulane and Mathabo are not a construction of a universal African woman. As Nnoromele (2010) states, a concept such as a universal woman does not exist. Reality for African women is neither homogeneous nor embodied in a single identity. The female existence is as 'multifaceted as the women's different backgrounds and intrinsic personalities' (Nnoromele, 2010:182).

These three texts offer an alternative perspective of female characterisation in contemporary African literature as opposed to the unquestioning, demur, obeisant wife and mother and is received as 'a welcome diversion from the [African] canon' (Hadjitheodorou, 1999:9).

According to Hadjitheodorou (1999), 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 woman to marry and have a home where she

would have a family and enjoy the benefits of motherhood). Traditionally, marriage and motherhood are often used by society as the measuring instruments by which to gauge a woman's social development and success. This is not surprising when one considers the enormous 'weight of the structural, cultural and ideological processes' which bears upon these women (Hadjitheodorou, 1999:8). Despite the above-mentioned unrelenting pressure, however, women do find some time to rebel and create personal lives 'within the framework of possibilities, limitations[,] set structures and culture' (Gordon, 1990:17).

Gordon (1990:61) explains that 'the social construction' of motherhood and marriage 'runs very deep, and is embedded in our psycho-social make-up' with the result that a 'particular culture, social and structural construction' is 'presented as natural and instinctual' (Gordon, 1990:31). These women are trying to transform their identities and create their individual profile in the context of social relations. Their struggle to reconstruct their lives differently is, however, perceived as negative and rebellious.

Without undermining the power of emotion attached to the expected behaviour of women in a particular culture, the female protagonists in the three texts selected for discussion ultimately reject the stereotypes held up as the only possibilities for women by their respective societies. The misfortune and plight that these women suffer in their journey to self-discovery cannot be attributed to the culture and the societal institutions controlled by men. Women have their own say in their social well-being.

### Literature review: The question of gender

In her essay about African writers' representation of male–female relationships, French (2008:1) had a better understanding compared to earlier works of how African writers view gender roles 'including the application of religious aspects, marriage and identity, midwives and slave women nationalism'. In her view, earlier works perceived female genders as 'the queen mother', that is, many African writers portrayed women in traditional roles whereas articles written more recently over the past few decades analyse male–female relationships within a more feministic approach.

Chukukere (1995) affirms that the ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional role as wife and mother. So strong are social values that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptation to these roles. For instance, if a wife adapts to the role of a child-bearer, especially of male offspring, she is honoured. In this regard Fonchingong (2006) observes that Chinua Achebe's character Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row. Culturally it was an honour for a father to have more boys in a family than girls. Elechi Amadi's Madume in *The Concubine* (1966) is demoralised by his wife's inability to produce a male heir. A barren woman is stigmatised, considered a misfit and evokes the wrath of her family and society. This point is also noticed by French (2008:2) when she says that women are most often portrayed as the caretakers of the home (cooking, cleaning and washing) and as providers of heirs. While the male–female relationship depicted by African writers indicates bias on the part of the male against the female, the African female gender is nevertheless more respected than in some first world countries such as in Europe and America where a woman is expected to be independent, does not need to be married for any specific reason or to be taken care of by her man. Culturally there are some special roles for African women in a specific custom. These roles can only be fulfilled by women and even powerful men are unable to perform their functions. In most African literature, women are depicted as morally inferior without the presence of men. They were led to believe that there is nothing they can do without marriage and children. African men, as in other cultures, prefer to have sons over daughters, yet the role of the female is indispensable.

In 'Maidens, mistresses, and matrons ...', Davies (1988:81) argues that Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka often offers only stereotyped images of women which fall into one of three categories: the foolish virgin in rural settings, the femme fatale in urban settings and the masculinised matron. This perception is also observed by Muhammed (2007:2) when she claims that Soyinka in *The Lion and the Jewel* makes a caricature of women as foolish in spite of their age. In this text, Soyinka portrayed women as being the cause of their own destruction (that is, instead of assisting each other they contribute towards each other's downfall).

In Davies's (1988:81) opinion, the characters which fall in the masculinised matron category, come closest to

being non-stereotypes but even they are portrayed with 'no depth'. The 'foolish virgins' and the 'femme fatale', Davies argues, fill only the roles of stereotypes and symbols, possessions or trophies to be won away from Western influence by African traditions (i.e. most of these stereotypes were uncommon in the African culture), or, more threateningly, these women are seen as dangers which can distract and destroy. However, Davies (1988:85) acknowledges that Soyinka's work sometimes shows women briefly in a positive light but notes that 'throughout Soyinka's work one finds the kernel of positive portrayal of the female image' which is never fully realised. She concludes with the argument that 'the artist has the power to create new realities' and that women are 'neither victors nor victims but partners in struggle' (Davies, 1988:86).

In many African texts, the female gender is stereotyped as either the fertile and nurturing earth mother or the lazy, disastrous young beauty. French (2008:4) regarded this perception as the African women's identity – the mother, the caretaker, not the provider or independent woman known in today's society. The difference in the gender roles is a division determined by the different functions performed by African men and women, whereby men were generally responsible for war and long distance trade, helping to clear land, hunting and running political affairs, while women took care of agriculture, household chores, such as supplying water and gathering fire wood, gardening and small scale subsistence and neighbourhood trading.

Fonchingong (2006:136) contends that male writers who examine women also assist in endorsing an 'institutionalized and one-sided vision of female heroism in African fiction'. This point endorses the fact that the presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased.

Female roles portrayed in Sesotho texts represent and reflect the lives of societies during different eras and times. This is so because literature depicts people and their social institutions, in other words character studies in literature often depict the way people perceive their culture at a given time. At present, a transition is taking place from oral traditional literature to a written literature and as such one may expect traditional norms, customs and views to get mixed with those from the Western world.

It seems as if little attention has been given to individual writers with regard to the presentation of female characters in Sesotho texts. Ngcangca (1988) is one of the few authors who examined the changing image of women in Sesotho novels. Several studies on the presentation of female characters have been done for other languages, for example for isiXhosa by Jafta (1982) who observed that the theme of *Izinto Zodidi* (Mzamane, 1988) is about the liberation of women from their traditional role of subservience. Both these critics share a similar point, that there is an observable change in the image of women from the dictated predominantly male culture.

### Female gender issues in BM Khaketla's texts

In *Tholoana tsa Sethepu* ('The consequences of polygamy') (Khaketla, 1982) we come across a conflict between two wives of chief Matete, who are fighting for their sons' succession when their father, chief Matete dies. All female

characters are presented as flat characters, in the sense that they belong to one of the two types (that is, those that represent evil and those that represent good). They are regarded as being flat characters because they are predictable and they display a one-sided personal trait throughout the story. La Plante (2009:6) defines a 'flat character' as a character that 'lacks complex realistic personalities' and that presents 'stereotypical one-dimensional, almost predictable natures'. One would say that they are not developing characters. The reader can always foretell what they are going to say in a given platform and their behaviour is predictable in a particular episode. The eldest wife, Lireko, and her daughter in law, Mookgo, represent good and positive intentions; while the second wife, Mosele, and her daughter in law, Dipuo, represent evil intentions on the opposing side.

Even though these characters find themselves entangled in a cultural institution of polygamy, they both know well who is to be the next chief when Matete dies. However, because they have their own agenda, they decide to act wrongly. By portraying Mosele the way she is, Khaketla wanted to show that it depends on the individual to do good, not on his or her dissatisfaction with culture. Initially, Mosele knew that by being the second wife of the chief, her son, Mohapi was not entitled to be the heir because the eldest wife's son, Bulane, was still alive.

Being a flat character, Mosele goes from bad to worse. She starts being jealous of her counterpart, Lireko, and says nasty things about her. Eventually she ends up by presenting Lireko as an unfaithful wife to the chief and fabricating a conspiracy that Lireko's son, Bulane, is an illegitimate son of chief Matete. Mosele took a wrong decision to run down her co-wife, Lireko, in pursuit of a good life for herself and her son. If all the principles of polygamy had been observed and respected, they could have lived happily without uncertainty. By spreading lies about Lireko, Mosele failed the community, the chief and herself. When the truth was revealed she became ashamed of what she had done and everyone looked down on her.

(1) *Mosele: O utlwang? Matete o a kula, ha a tsebe seo a se buang. Morero wa hae o ntse o eme. O buiswa ke bohloko, ho ba ke a bona bo mathetse hloohong. Tsohle tseo a di buileng re di ripitla ka maoto. Malokobe a se ke a ba a tseba. Ke tsa rona ba bararo feela, hobane enwa wa bone (o supa Matete) e se e le wa badimo. E be o utlwile, Tladi.* (Khaketla, 1982:61)

'Mosele: What do you hear? Matete is sick and does not know what he is saying. His plans are still standing. It is only pain that forces him to speak, because it has gone into his head. All that he has said should be ignored. Even Malokobe should not be told. It is only for the three of us, because the fourth one (she points at Matete) is now for the ancestor. I suppose you heard, Tladi.'

This incident took place when chief Matete summoned his eldest wife, Lireko and his son, Bulane, so that he could confess and apologize in front of everyone about his behaviour of believing that Bulane, his son is an illegitimate

child and that his mother, Lireko was unfaithful to him (Matete); but this was not going to happen because the wicked Mosele was there to ensure that Matete would die without changing his initial plans about who was supposed to succeed him. The quotation reveals much about Mosele's character. She is able to manipulate everyone in the house. Even when important messages were to be delivered, she stood her ground so that no one would stand between the throne and her son, Mohapi. It was entirely her choice to act the way she did.

Khaketla's naming technique in these female characters also bears some clues to revealing their personalities. In Mosele ('the one who does unbecoming things'), we encounter a number of negative elements (i.e. untrustworthiness, manipulation, cunning, betrayal, mercilessness, and so on). Nowhere in the text do we find her doing any good things. On the other hand, there is Lireko ('one with mercy'), who creates all the good things that are happening in the community. She was even summoned to the chief's kraal after she had been chased away. In this case, she had time to forgive the chief for what he had done to her and others who wronged her. The title of the text, *Tholoana tsa Sethepu* ('The consequences of polygamy'), alludes to unhealthy relations in a polygamous marriage. Khaketla (1982) may be saying to both men and women, be cautious when practising this cultural institution.

*Bulane* (Khaketla, 1985) is a continuation of the drama *Tholoana tsa Sethepu*. Bulane, the main character, is crowned as the new chief after his father, Matete, died. His brother, Mohapi, from the second house, is dissatisfied about this and he therefore conspires against his brother, Bulane, together with his (Mohapi's) men. The plan was to be executed with the aid of Pulane, the youngest wife of the late chief Matete. Pulane was to poison Bulane to ensure that Mohapi would acquire the chieftaincy. In actual fact, *Bulane* becomes an elaborate exploration of what went wrong with Pulane. The response that the text presents has little to do with cultural expectations. Pulane's speech reveals her to be a dishonest person.

(2) *Pulane: Kwana ke manganga a ka. Ke ne ke kwenehele Mohlalefi a se a nkukile, ka re ke batla ho nyalwa ke morena, ke tle ke je mafura, athe ke ikenya diheleng.* (Khaketla, 1985:49)

'Pulane: Well, that's because of obstinacy. I betrayed Mohlalefi who was supposed to marry me. I said I wanted to marry a chief, so that I can live in riches, not knowing I was putting myself in hell.'

Pulane was supposed to marry the gentleman of her choice but rejected him when the chief proposed to her. Her lust for riches caused her to betray her lover, Mohlalefi. She accepts her inability to gauge between the actual facts and her ambition. Here Pulane cannot be seen as an object on which society heaps its unfair practices and demands, but as a subject of her own actions, as an active determinant of her own destiny. Again, by making wrong choices, Pulane not only fails herself but the community and other women. By making Pulane believe that the traditional role of marriage to the chief is the only way to happiness and fulfilment, Khaketla makes it clear, however, that Pulane's

impulsive desire for marriage is not compelled by her love for the institution or some grand philosophical belief in sanctity of human life, but by her own life's vision and the personal gain marriage would have in store for her.

Pulane is conscious of the tension between bad and good, but again failed to follow her heart as revealed in (3).

(3) *Pulane: Ha ho letho leo ke le tsekang le yena (Bulane), ke mpa ke le letsoho la Mohapi le Malokobe feela, nnete ke hore taba ena ke e kene ka fole... Ha ke dumele ho jesa Bulane, madi a hae a tla botswa ho nna, athe Mohapi yena ha a na ho qaphaletswe ke letho.... Ke tlohlile heso ke sa tsebe le sa mala, empa kajeno... (o lla. Ka mora metsotswana)... (Khaketla, 1985:47)*

'Pulane: There is nothing we are fighting for, I am just Mohapi and Malokobe's hand, the truth is that I just put myself into trouble ... I do not believe to poison Bulane, his blood will be asked of me, whereas Mohapi himself will be bloodless ... I left home not knowing even a stomach remedy, but today ... (she cries. After some few seconds she speaks) ...'

Instead of seeking a way out of this conspiracy, she keeps on crying and regretting her actions. Crying may denote a number of things. It may signify a need for help or symbolise a way of releasing one's anger and regret. Even though her cry was not a rowdy one, Pulane was indeed in need of help. She was also angry because she was uncomfortable with the situation she found herself in.

Can we say that Pulane is a victim of society? The point that Khaketla wants to make here is that Pulane questioned the road she had crafted for herself. It is significant that as Pulane watches everything she had sacrificed her life for, dissipating before her, as she nears the consequences of being exposed for multi-murders, she arrives at a moment of recognition with clarity of vision acquired through a lifetime of horrifying self-denial, and she acknowledges that something has gone terribly wrong. She told herself that she would have been better off had she taken the time to cultivate a relationship with those people who had offered her their hand of friendship.

*Mosali a nkholo* ('The woman lands me into trouble') (Khaketla, 1960) is a story about Mosito, who arrives from high school in Cape Town. As the only son of a chief, he is supposed to succeed his father when he dies. His father decides that his son should marry before he (the chief) dies. In this case, Mosito is allowed to choose a wife for himself. He marries a beautiful girl ('a Standard 4 dropout'). After his father's death, Mosito is crowned chief of his tribe. During his reign a few changes are implemented in his district, with regard to the powers of the chiefs, salaries, taxes, and land issues. Mosito and his advisors (initially his school mates) understand how things are supposed to work, but his wife, Mathabo and his late father's advisors don't. They insist that Mosito should protest and fight against the new regulations. This leads to Mosito committing ritual murder in order to stabilise his chieftaincy.

The main theme of *Mosali a nkholo*, the destruction wrought when ambition goes unchecked by moral

constraints, finds its most powerful expression in this novel's characters. Mosito is an educated young chief who is not naturally inclined to commit evil deeds, yet he deeply desires power and advancement. He commits the ritual murder of Tlelima against his better judgement and afterwards stews in guilt and paranoia. He is convicted and executed by hanging. Mathabo, on the other hand, pursues her goals with greater determination, yet she is capable of withstanding the repercussions of her immoral acts. As one of Khaketla's most forcefully drawn female characters, she mercilessly spurs her husband on to kill Tlelima and urges him to be strong in the murder's aftermath. Mathabo's behaviour certainly shows that women can be as ambitious and cruel as men. Whether it is because of the constraints of her society or because she is not fearless enough to kill, Mathabo relies on deception and manipulation rather than violence to achieve her ends.

In the beginning, Mathabo is depicted as the more strong willed and more steadfast of the couple, while Mosito is kinder but less decisive (that is why he relied more on his friends, Pokane and Khosi, for their opinion). Mathabo's temptation to commit evil is very similar to that of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Eve's temptation by the serpent that was able to seduce Eve because she was the weaker vessel. In all these cases the characters contributed to the downfall of their own domain.

Mathabo's action is seen to have a huge impact on Mosito's character as he transforms from a decent being into an overly bitter creature, as a result of Mathabo's constant excretion of heartless information into his mind.

(4) *Ntho lipeli feela tseo u lokelang ho khetha ho tsona: bophelo ba Tlelima kapa bophelo ba ka.* (Khaketla, 1960:107)

'There are only two things to choose from: Tlelima's life or mine.'

(5) *Haeba 'na mosali, ntho e tenang mose nka ba le sebete se se kaalo, eka ba uena, monna u ka sitoa ke eng ho ba le sebete se fetang se sa ka ha sekete?* (Khaketla, 1960:105)

'If I, a woman, something which wears a dress, could have that much courage, what about you, a man, what can prevent you from having that bravery which is a thousand (times) more than mine?'

Mathabo manipulates her husband by questioning his manhood and wishes that she herself could be unsexed. She says fear is for femininity and is not found on men's lips. She uses these quotes to push her husband beyond limits and is therefore responsible for his dramatic change in attitude. She constantly feeds his thoughts with negative comments and later on Mosito realises that he has another side to him. As he moves along to discover the concealed side of him, Mosito falls in love with himself and begins to be drawn towards his evil desire.

Because of Mathabo's wicked behaviour which resulted in Mosito's evil transition, he was led to become a murderer. Throughout our lives, we are all influenced under pressure, as we see and observe the actions of those around us. Although it may not cause an effect immediately, it will have

a great impact on our behaviour, changing us for better or for worse.

The negative representation of Mathabo does not come out to revolt against any social system (cultural, illiteracy, social class, and so on). Mathabo chose this path because she wanted to protect her family and stabilise her husband's chieftaincy. It was so unfortunate that her choice was not the right one. The title of the novel itself *Mosali a nkholo* ('The woman lands me into trouble') can be considered the androcentric bias of the text in which the male protagonist blames his wife for his misfortunes and his downfall. Khaketla is again warning his readers against unsupportive women; that one needs to take one's conscience into consideration before heeding someone's advice.

In these three texts, Khaketla represented these women as liberated. No matter how uneducated they were, they all desire equality and choices. They are not represented as victims of society, but they are the victims of their own actions.

### Conclusion

This article has attempted to add another dimension to the looming question of inequality in African literature through a gender lens. Male writers have not been spared the criticism of being androcentric based on their amplified presentation of male gender. The tendency has been to draw hasty conclusions on the dilemma of the African woman. The study shows that women have not been terribly trivialised, for their instrumental roles in family and community building are hailed everywhere by their male counterparts.

The response that these texts present has little to do with cultural expectations; it is basically about what went wrong with the identified female characters. Their experiences and responses to their world cannot be perceived as ideal representations of African women's existence and as indictment of culture in which women have little control over their lives. In this case we have to agree that the literary genres should emphasise depiction of societal values of individuals and how those values and morals contribute towards the development of people in general. Practices that are often considered inimical to development like widowhood, polygamy, incest, tribal conflict, forced marriages, and so on warrant a stronger interrogation without any biases and prejudices.

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