

Oral literature and the evolving Jim-goes-to-town motif: Some early Northern Sotho compared to selected post-apartheid novels written in English

**Author:**Lesibana Rafapa¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of English Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Lesibana Rafapa,
rafaplj@unisa.ac.za**Dates:**

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The continuation of the discourses of apartheid era African language literature characterised by the *mokgoweng* motif in post-apartheid English literature written by black people has not been studied adequately. In this study I explored ways in which characters of Northern Sotho linguistic and cultural groups represented the same consciousness in both categories of novels across time. I used the qualitative method and analysed some Northern Sotho primary texts, written before democracy in South Africa, as well as selected post-apartheid English novels written by black people. I focused on the *mokgoweng* motif to examine the nature of continuity in theme and outlook. I found that the novels considered pointed to a sustainable consciousness, transcending linguistic boundaries and time. The social function of such characterisation representing the formerly oppressed black people, is a revelation of their quest towards self-definition in a modern world. The portrayed characters significantly point to resilience among black people to appropriate modernity by making sense of the world in a manner sustaining their distinctive outlook. In this way, the Northern Sotho-speaking cultural groups display a consistent consciousness enabling them to manage properly their adaptation to an evolving modern or globalising environment across time. The implication was that a comparison of South African English literature written by black people with indigenous language literature enriched the study of black South African English literature.

Mondelinge literatuur en die ontwikkeling van die Jafta-gaan-stad-toe-motief: 'n Paar vroeë Noord-Sotho romans vergelyk met post-apartheidromans in Engels. Die voortsetting van diskoerse in literatuur in die Afrikatale uit die apartheidstyd gekenmerk deur die *mokgoweng*-motief in Engelse literatuur deur swart skrywers in die post-apartheidsjare, is nog nie behoorlik bestudeer nie. In hierdie artikel ondersoek ek die wyse waarop karakters uit die Noord-Sotho-taal- en kultuurgroep oor tyd heen dieselfde bewussyn openbaar in albei kategorieë romans. Ek gebruik die kwalitatiewe metode en ontleed sowel primêre tekste in Noord-Sotho geskryf voor die koms van demokrasie as geselekteerde Engelse romans deur swart mense uit die post-apartheidera. Ek fokus op die *mokgoweng*-motief om die aard van die kontinuïteit in tema en beskouing te ondersoek. Ek het bevind dat die betrokke tekste 'n volhoubare identiteit openbaar wat bo taalgrense en tyd uitstyg. Die sosiale funksie van sulke soort karakterisering, verteenwoordigend van die voorheen onderdrukte swart mense, openbaar hul soeke na selfdefinisie in die moderne wêreld. Die uitgebeelde karakters dui die vermoë van swart mense aan om die moderne era op 'n manier vir hulle toe te eien wat tog hulle kenmerkende lewensuitkyk bewaar. Die kultuurgroepe wat Noord-Sotho praat, vertoon derhalwe 'n bewussyn wat konsekwent bly, maar hulle in staat stel om wel met verloop van tyd behoorlik aan te pas by 'n steeds ontwikkelende moderne en globaliserende omgewing. Die implikasie is dat 'n vergelyking van literatuur in swart Suid-Afrikaanse Engels met dié wat in inheemse tale geskryf is, die studie van swart Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur in Engels verryk.

Introduction

The study intends to demonstrate that there is a significant thematic and stylistic link between some African writers writing in indigenous languages and those writing in English. The novels *Tsiri* (1953) and *Nkotsana* (1963) by Madiba, written in Northern Sotho, are compared with Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2000) and Moele's *The book of the dead* (2009). The narratives *Tsiri* and *Nkotsana* were written in the 1950s and 1960s in Northern Sotho, while *Welcome to our Hillbrow* and *The book of the dead* were written in the post-apartheid era in English.

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A common feature of the four novels is that they were written by writers coming from a Northern Sotho background. The characters in the four novels can therefore be assumed to share the cultural consciousness and lifestyle of the people they represent. The study can thus explore ways in which the themes, exploited in the earlier novels written in Northern Sotho, are taken forward in the later novels written in English, from a common cultural perspective. In other words, the study probes how cultural consciousness is refracted in the later novels in order to respond to an changed environment. I argue that the selected post-apartheid novels may be described as playing a part in ensuring sustainable cultural development by means of the literary techniques I explore in this study.

The distinctive cultural consciousness and lifestyle of a people constitute such a people's identity. This is why Castells (1997:2–3) defines identity as 'the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes, that is and/or are given priority over other sources of meaning'. He further remarks that identity is people's source of meaning and experience (Castells 1997:3). While the books by Madiba, Mpe and Moele may handle different themes, using styles characteristic of the three different writers, I demonstrate in this article that at the underlying level the cultural identity of the characters aligning the way they construct meaning, is common. I stress this as a further dimension to what Milazzo (2016:135) has cogently described as the macro quality of apartheid era and post-apartheid fiction written by black people to 'continue to address racial oppression'.

In this way, I scrutinise how the four novels may be said collectively to create literary art that delineates a sustainable cultural development of the people their characters represent. Sustainable development, clearly broader than mere cultural development that is the goal of my analysis of the four novels, is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Parry-Davies 2007). That is why this study traces how the outlook, represented in literature of the 1950s and 1960s and written in Northern Sotho, is sustained in selected literature written in the post-apartheid period. I examine the attainment of a sustainability that should grapple with an even more modern environment of the post-apartheid era, keeping up with current levels of globalisation, in a manner that does not undermine the wholeness of the people represented by the characters through time.

By globalisation I mean what Ogude (2004:276) describes as 'the ravages of Western modernity'. Mphahlele (2004:277) gives some concrete examples of items introduced into lifestyles by such globalisation or 'Western modernity', as 'Christianity, money, soldiers with guns, explorers, traders, new forms of government, legal systems, new ways of dress, new foods ...'. It is in these frameworks that I place the characters of the four novels as

I track forms in which aspects of Northern Sotho oral literature and the Jim-goes-to-town thematic matrix remain extant in the written fiction.

A comparison of the two groups of novels written in different languages is deliberate, so as to explore how linguistic boundaries hinder or facilitate the cultural representation that this study seeks to examine in the four novels. According to Pradervand (1989:129, 147, 197, 213), culture and identity are fundamental to the development process of a people. The kind of sustainable development that this study traces in the two groups of literature recognises that the economic development of a people has to take into account social or cultural development.

Sustainable development requires both cultural and any economic development of a people because, according to Parry-Davies (2007), sustainable development should hinge on care and respect for people, the planet and economic prosperity. The three pillars of people, planet and prosperity should be kept in balance simultaneously to ensure that the development does not suffer an imbalance. Care and respect for people implies cherishing and conserving such a people's social and cultural identity. In order to be congruent with sustainable cultural development, the 'care for people, the planet and economic prosperity', that Parry-Davies (2007) refers to, implies letting African cultures be, even in today's globalising world culture.

If the writings of Africans, both in African languages and in English, are to remain meaningful in current debates about literature as a means to sustainable cultural development, analyses of such writings should, as Munck (2008:1228) remarks about any worthy discussion today, 'be embedded within the broader debates around the political economy of globalization and its implications for development'. The implications of globalisation for the cultural development of any population group within South Africa is that 'South Africa exists within the context in which the West dominates and the impetus of West-led globalization is to be at the leading edge of modern capitalism' Hall (1991:31). As Africans and the West belong to separate, distinct cultural clusters (Mphahlele 2002:135–136), alongside their development Africans have to counter what writers like Pradervand (1989:73, 75) describe as the 'suppression of indigenous knowledge systems' that has resulted in 'stereotypes about Africa'. The way in which the culture of the Northern Sotho is represented in the four novels will be tested against the assertion of 'indigenous knowledge systems' that, according to Pradervand (1989), is necessary to rectify 'stereotypes about Africa'.

Pradervand (1989:64–65) sees culture as 'a certain way of relating to time, objects, money, history, and the environment' whereby the quality of the relationships that African people develop among themselves and with themselves form 'a hierarchy of values' in which 'being' is central, as opposed to 'doing or having'. Another dimension of culture, according to Geertz (1973:250) is that it is, 'at once a product and



determinant of social interaction' because it is 'a system of symbols by which man confers significance upon his own experience' that 'to some measurable extent, gives shape, direction, particularity and point to an ongoing flow of activity'. The study will specifically trace the existence of cultural symbols embedded in oral literary devices, like the narrative formula of African travel folktales and the linguistic use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions.

If the cultural development of Africans in today's globalising world is to be sustainable, the cultural symbols reflected in the artistic practice of African artists should assert an African consciousness that is resilient and adaptable through the ages. Geertz's (1973:250) description of culture as 'a system of symbols' implies that the cultural symbols in the fiction of any group of African writers like Madiba (1953, 1963), Mpe (2000) and Moele (2009) should contribute to sustaining African consciousness and lifestyle through the content of their fiction in such a way that an Africanness efficiently remains available for future African literary practitioners and societies to use in ongoing meaning making.

Pervasive Jim-goes-to-town motif and its inflection

Both Madiba's *Tsiri* (1953) and *Nkotsana* (1963) handle the well-known Jim-goes-to-town or *makgoweng* motif. This is what Ntuli and Swanepoel have described as the 'migration to the big cities' plot (Ntuli & Swanepoel in Thobejane 2009:118–119), 'used to be popular with Northern Sotho writers in the 1940s', according to Mokgokong, (Ntuli 1998:5–6).

In a way that is akin to the protagonists of many Northern Sotho folktales, like *Mokgadi le ledimo lejabatho* and *Mohlare wa Mokadiathola* (Makopo 1994), *Tsiri* migrates to an unfamiliar space that is Johannesburg (p. 14), after escaping from school. After exploring Johannesburg and acquiring criminal ways, he returns to his home, where the decadence catches up with him and he ends up losing all the livestock and other riches bequeathed to him by his parents. He is then abandoned by everyone (p. 28). Johannesburg can be seen as a symbol, replacing the figure of the cannibal or monster in Northern Sotho folktales. In the folktales, the character who strays from proper conduct ends up falling victim to the stratagems of a monster or cannibal, similarly to the way the character *Tsiri* is metaphorically consumed by Johannesburg. Of course the 'monster' also denotes the evils of racial oppression, without the Northern Sotho writers necessarily confronting the demoralising apartheid conditions in overt terms. They rather convey it through the corruption of black characters as soon as they come into contact with the urban environment.

This simple plot does not differ much from that of Madiba's next novel, *Nkotsana* (1963), except that in *Nkotsana* the traditional African ethos of the Moletši village (p. 27) and alien lifestyles in a westernised Zimbabwean city, populated by nationals who have returned with vile Johannesburg manners (p. 34), are pitted against each other in a fairly more intriguing manner. The African mythic monster remains the

urban environment that destroys *Nkotsana* and is externalised behaviourally in *Nkotsana*'s addiction to Western liquor (p. 65). This tragic flaw naturally leads to a reversal of fortunes. *Nkotsana*'s prosperous business enterprises founded in the traditional notion of health associated with livestock rearing, flourish until he dies after a car crash caused by intoxication with Western spirits (p. 66).

The presence of globalising tendencies in *Tsiri* (1953) is evident when the protagonist *Tsiri* leaves rural Matolodi and goes to urban Polokwane, Tshwane and an unnamed town in Thoseng (Xhosaland) to look for work (pp. 28, 33, 34), gets arrested and tried in a magistrate's court (31), and is employed on several farms to mind livestock (p. 28). Aspects of globalisation manifest in the latter novel when the character *Nkotsana* is employed on a farm (p. 32), escapes to Zimbabwe to indulge in frivolous carousing, motivated by a hunger for Western commodities (p. 34), where he serves a prison term (p. 38) before returning home to establish a prosperous married life before he eventually succumbs to overindulgence in Western liquor (p. 66).

In Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2000), the characters Refentše, Refilwe and the other friends come from the rural village of Tiragalong where gossip travels through busybodies recounting myths in a manner reminiscent of the oral storyteller of earlier times. Judgement whether someone's conduct deserves approbation or censure is arrived at communally through the use of proverbs translated by the writer literally from Northern Sotho into English. An example is the use of the translated proverb 'a corpse is always deskinning on someone else's back' (p. 45), communally approving of the burning to death of an old woman for being a neighbour of *Tshepo*, after *Tshepo* is struck by lightning 'just after receiving his University degree' (p. 45). The Northern Sotho proverb translated as above is, *letlalo la motho ga le bapolelwe kgakala*, which according to Rakoma (1971:155) means that '*Batho ge ba ka lakana go dira e mongwe bošula ... sephiri seo se ke se kwagale ka pela gomme badiri ba bošula bjoo ba swarwe gomme ba otlwe*' (after plotters have conspired to do evil to somebody, the plot soon gets betrayed, resulting in perpetrators being apprehended and punished [authors own translation]). What this means in relation to the incident in Mpe's novel (p. 45), is that the old woman is believed by the dominant opinion makers of the village to have caused *Tshepo*'s death through witchcraft and thus deserves her grisly death.

By this technique, Mpe modifies traditional African lifestyles to absorb the complexity of the urban life of Hillbrow in the post-apartheid period. This is because all the gossip and events of the rural Tiragalong village transcend rural space and time as they are recalled in a stream of consciousness, while the characters are physically negotiating modern-day urban problems like HIV and/or AIDS xenophobia and rampant consumerism in urban Hillbrow through the African filter suggested by these oral narrative techniques. In this way, the indices of an African worldview are remain intact across the urban or rural or past or present divide. Had it not



been for stream of consciousness, the novel would have been amenable to the tight packaging of events into those that happened in rural Tiragalong before the characters travel to Hillbrow, and those incidents that can be neatly boxed as pertaining to the urban locale of Hillbrow, coinciding with the present juncture of the narration. Such a technique defies the strict division of setting into urban and rural, or past and present, thus allowing the characters' African consciousness to travel in interesting ways across space and time.

Apart from making traditional African mores conquer the urban space and post-apartheid time, such a use of Northern Sotho proverbs by Mpe has the same effect as that Madiba achieves in *Tsiri* (1953) with the use of proverbs like '*tloxatloxa e tloxa kxhale, modiša wa kxhomo o tšwa natšo*'/procrastination leads to failure; success lies in being an early bird [author's own translation] (Madiba 1953:13; Rakoma 1971:222), '*khudu ga e lahle legapi la yona*'/a tortoise never moults its shell [author's own translation] (Madiba 1953:14; Rakoma 1971:143), or '*mahlale a ja monye*'/shenanigans result in the perpetrator's pain [author's own translation] (Madiba 1953:22; Rakoma 1971:160). When the Afrikaner government's laws abolish levy by white people on whose land black people of the former Northern Transvaal stay as vassals, Madiba (1963:12) vocalises the communal verdict of Nkotsana's fellow villagers by means of the proverb '*A tlala a epšha madiba, a hutelela madibana*'/old wells dry up in order for younger ones to fill [author's own translation] (Madiba 1963:12). By this Northern Sotho proverb the choral voice protests that old ways of exploitation merely give way to newer ones.

Such a resilience in the African thinking of Northern Sotho speakers is evident also in Moele's novel *The book of the dead*. In Moele's (2009) narrative, Ntsako is cuckolded by the main character Khutšo (p. 106) and murders his wife Matimba as soon as he (Ntsako) tests HIV positive (p. 108). As Matimba dies cursing the name of Khutšo, Ntsako gets to know that it is his best friend Khutšo who has infected Matimba with HIV and/or AIDS. After Ntsako has failed to shoot and kill Khutšo and the police carry him (Ntsako) away, he laughs 'a little laugh', which reminds Khutšo of the Sotho proverb '*leso legolo ke disego*', meaning that it is ignoble to want other people to die just because you are dying. This, and the other African language expressions like '*komeng*' (initiation school p. 18) and '*o tseba mosadi yo*' which the writer concedes to having translated into English as 'Do you know this girl?' (Have you impregnated this woman?) – these linguistic devices reinforce the African consciousness and lifestyle within which the action of the novel unfurls.

Moele extends the assertion of African thinking and lifestyle to the urban milieu of Pretoria, where it contends with foreign cultural influences that merely reshape it without stamping it out. Unlike the fiction of Madiba in which untainted African culture is portrayed as invincible, the African characters of Moele appropriate the urban setting and deploy their African cultural repertoire to forge a novel African culture in which the traditional and the modern co-exist. The benefit is that

African ways of life and notions like marriage, polygamy, infidelity and friendship are redefined to account for the more complex space and time of the post-apartheid era. That is why Moele's dialogue projects the theme of reconceptualisation of African institutions, for example when the character Ntsako vacillates between traditionalism and modernism in the words:

We can't stop being what we are ... We can't stop being men. Our forefathers enjoyed their women freely, but we can't. We are in danger. But, unlike our forefathers, we have our god-condom (Moele 2009:94).

Origins in the Northern Sotho folktale

The central theme of the fears and consequences of travelling to unfamiliar territory underlying the Jim-goes-to-town motif of the four novels under consideration, has its origins in Northern Sotho folktales. The common Northern Sotho cultural immersion of the three novelists from eras elicits justifiable expectations that in crafting their modern literature they not only appropriate linguistic constructs like proverbs and idiomatic expressions from oral literature, but go further to adopt the travel motif that recurs in a huge number of Northern Sotho folktales.

In the two Northern Sotho folktales entitled '*Mokgadi le ledimo lejabatho*' and '*Mohlare wa Mokadiathola*', there are common phrases that accentuate the stock theme of travel and its attendant mystery. The cannibal who steals the daughter Mokgadi from her parents in the pretext of wanting to marry her (Makopo 1994:24) is said to *wela tsela*/hit the road at dawn with the young woman in the former folktale, while in the latter the polygamist patriarch Mokadiathola, too, is said to *tšea leeto*/undergo a journey (Makopo 1994:27). In the former tale the atmosphere created by the significant phrases *nyalana le monna yo a sa mo tsebe*go/married to a strange man (p. 24), *Mahlo a Mmaphuti a be a hwibitše ka go lla*/Mmaphuti's eyes were red with sobbing (p. 25), *a itiwa ke letswalo*/was scared (p. 25) and *letile gona mo thoko ga tsela*/wait here by the roadside (p. 25) is that of apprehension and insecurity associated with exploration of unknown spaces.

The latter folktale similarly evokes a loathing of the road through the cumulative effect of phrases like *o tla dišwa ke mang*/who will guard the forbidden tree (p. 27) and *re tla ya e le mantšiboa*/we shall take the cover of darkness (p. 28). Respectively, fear of plumbing new spaces is justified when the lady Mmaphuti sees the cannibal lick blood from her thistle pierced soles (p. 25) and the head of the family of Mokadiathola's entire household steals the forbidden fruit and die while he is visiting an unknown, distant village (p. 28).

With these features of Northern Sotho folktales highlighted, it becomes clear that folktales of this category are the prototype upon which Jim-goes-to-town tales like those of Madiba (1953, 1963), Mpe (2000) and Moele (2009) are modelled.



Conclusion

The surface level use of Northern Sotho idioms in Madiba's two novels, and the linguistically mediated use of the idioms in the case of Mpe's and Moele's works, signify a continuity of outlook across the language medium and time. The fact that social issues handled by Madiba in his novels of 1953 and 1963 differ in texture from those handled later in the fiction of Mpe and Moele does not mean that the African characters portrayed by the three writers do not use the same cultural filter to inflect reality as they make meaning out of it. This is shown by the consistent presence of language forms which are repositories of a common cultural perspective. It is significant that the continuity of the discourses of apartheid era indigenous African language novels is present in post-apartheid novels that not only are of great merit per se but, according to Milazzo (2016:130), function within a recognised canon of novels of this category produced 'by black writers' that have 'won literary prizes or garnered international attention'.

The fact that Madiba writes in Northern Sotho while Mpe and Moele write in English does not affect the Northern Sotho cultural lens by which the characters experience reality. In the case of Mpe and Moele, one has to detect the Northern Sotho language and idiom beneath the surface of the narration that is through the English language. In the same way as Barra (1960:i) observes of the function of Kikuyu proverbs and other oral literary devices in understanding the thinking of the Kikuyu, cognisance of these cultural mediations in the writings of Madiba, Mpe and Moele are 'the key for understanding the point of view and psychology' of the Northern Sotho-speaking people, represented in the characterisation of the novels under scrutiny.

While Madiba's novels explicitly exploit the Jim-goes-to-town motif, the later novels of Mpe and Moele continue to handle the theme, yet in more subtle and nuanced ways. The reconstruction of the Jim-goes-to-town motif in effective ways calls to mind a similar feat by the writers of 'Siyagruva novels' (see Kaschula 2007). Like the protagonists in Madiba's *Tsiri* and *Nkotsana*, Mpe's and Moele's characters move away from their rural upbringing to confront the insecurity of facing the monster of unknown space, in much the same way the Northern Sotho folktales have their protagonists venture out into unchartered territories and survive monstrous encounters by means of cultural resource which they have available.

The difference between the examples of oral literature cited above and the written literature under consideration, is that the former is set in a milieu that may be described as free from globalising effects, while the latter progressively grapples with intensifying threats of globalisation. However, Mpe and Moele prove equal, in their crafting of the novels discussed above, to the challenge of addressing social issues within a more complex frame of globalising tendencies.

For this reason, it is understandable that, unlike earlier writers such as Madiba, later writers such as Mpe and Moele

have to handle a bigger set of even more intransigent social issues than just the clash between tradition and Christianity, or the evils of the urban space as opposed to the morality of the rural landscape. The progressive intensity of globalisation that forms a continuum from the Sotho-speaking world depicted by Madiba in the Northern Sotho novels *Nkotsana* and *Tsiri*, to that of Mpe and Moele in the post-apartheid period should not be mistaken as implying that Madiba's novels are banal. On the contrary, the value of his work is demonstrated by Madiba's skilful use of proverbs to signify communal thinking (shown earlier in this study), as well as by his handling of theme and language in no less a profound manner than is the case with Mpe and Moele.

Prowess is seen in his naming of the urban area to which the character Nkotsana escapes (Madiba 1963). It is called Bokgalaka (Madiba 1963:33), a word which means the place where the dead go in a Northern Sotho idiomatic expression, symbolising the character Nkotsana's moral/spiritual death from the point of view of traditional African culture. The plot of the novel enhances the symbolism of the name giving when the main character engages in irregular economic activities (Madiba 1963:34) that eventually land him in a Zimbabwean prison. Nkotsana's return to his rural homestead of Moletši (Madiba 1963:39) symbolises moral regeneration, manifested materially in his perfection as a Christian married man and in the economic success of his farming and other ventures with childhood friend Maseroka in Makgabeng. His demise comes about as a result of addiction to Western liquor, significantly. His childhood friend and kinsmen survive, as they only revel ritualistically in consuming organic traditional beer.

Although the modernised society that is represented in Madiba's fiction of the 1950s is vastly different from that of the post-apartheid novels of Mpe and Moele, my analysis has shown that the Africanist thinking contained in the oral literary devices that inform the common Jim-goes-to-town narratives is continued into the present day. In this way, the cultural development of African communities represented in the post-apartheid novels is rendered sustainable by virtue of mutating as the new environment dictates, yet remaining an African identity within its own consciousness and lifestyle. The outlook is ingrained in the linguistic constructs analysed in this essay, the hotbed of which is the folktales discussed in this study.

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