The Effect of Proverbs and Portrayal of Women by Society

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate how culture and tradition can bring a unity or disunity and perpetual disintegration and the renewal to people. Tradition ally, women were portrayed by society through the use of proverbs as tools and submissive to men. For example, women were abused undermined and dominated by men through the name of culture and tradition that resulted to stereotype behavior. To be clear, in the use of proverbs there is no classification of women in the portrayal by society such as class, age, ethnicity, sexuality and ability. This classification of women in proverbs is of more important to address the ethnic mosaic and expectations by society. Setswana proverbs struggle to imagine the lives of a single women or mature divorcees who fall under the societal women. The paper argues that proverbs are used on various experiences as a means of social control and represent life lessons and accumulated events that make up conscious of a nation or humankind in general. Most of the proverbs and sayings are directed mainly to women with the intention of teaching women and young girls how to behave and take care of themselves but most proverbs that touches on women contains negation of the value of women in society. The purpose is to show that cultures do not remain the same, they change over time through interaction with other cultures and to find out whether in contemporary society is it possible for the proverbs to change. Thus, the study recommends the need for change of mind set and designing appropriate intervention mechanisms focus on cultural beliefs and values. In contemporary times there has been a turn-around on the lives of women where urban/rural women are no longer submissive to men. This shows that women change but proverbs do not change. The common problem of portrayal of black women is cultural pluralism. In this paper a qualitative approach is used to explore and discuss the cultural expectations and portrayal of black women in South Africa. This paradigm is explored through the use of feminism approach and post-modernity theory. Secondary method of collecting data is being used to gather more information about the use of proverbs in the South African perspectives.

Keywords: Effect of Proverbs, Cultural Expectations, Post-modernity, Feminism

1. Introduction

Setswana is one of the South African official languages. It is the language of the Batswana who are mostly found in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia but due to migration some are found across the African continent. The paper focused on black South African women, particularly, Batswana where the society portrayed them through the use of proverbs. This paper examined the impact in the lives of women who aspire to libertarian values of democracy of South African through the cultural beliefs and values imposed on them. Traditionally, proverbs are meant to teach moral lessons, shape society. They are more interesting and vibrant because they reflect accumulation of human experiences and demonstrate human experiences that are built on frequently occurring situations that demonstrate the human behavior or tradition in a country [5, 12]. Yoruba proverbs are depicted as mines of information and knowledge about women. Setswana (one of the South African official languages) proverbs concur that the rich oral history of the Batswana people, their cosmology, morality, indigenous knowledge system, rituals, drama, sayings and memo scripts are deeply embedded in memory [6, 11].

Traditionally, in Setswana men are regarded as the head of the house. The expectations of men to be economic providers of the family and for women to be the caregivers is the past gender norm. This is related to societal expectations as regards to the role of women and their status in culture.

The aim of this study is to investigate how culture and
tradition can bring a unity or disunity and perpetual disintegration and the renewal to people. Hence, the paper argues that proverbs are used on various experiences as a means of social control and represent life lessons. Most of the proverbs and sayings in the indigenous languages are directed mainly to women with the intention of teaching women and young girls how to behave and take care of themselves. The purpose of this paper is to show that cultures do not remain the same; they change over time through interaction with other cultures. The objective is to demonstrate the possibility of creating new modern proverbs that can transform the South African society and erase stereotype perception on women.

In this paper a qualitative approach is being used to explore and discuss the expectations and portrayal of black women in South Africa. This paradigm will be explored through the use of feminism approach and post-modernity theory. The post-modernity theory has been used to show how the proverbs portrayed and had changed the lives of black women in the society. Feminism in this paper is being looked as a political ticket to freedom and liberalism. Some scholars previously researched about the portrayal of women across the world but none of them displayed how proverbs can be changed or modified for the benefit of women in the society. The importance of this study is to display that in contemporary times there has been a turn-around on the lives of women where urban/rural women are no longer submissive to men, particularly the black women in South Africa. The contemporary literatures need to address the use of proverbs by society. Literature of proverbs such as and concur that every proverb that touches on women contains negation of the value of women in society [2, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13].

This portrayal of women by society encouraged the author to write this paper with the intention of displaying that now is the time to transform and create new modern proverbs that can bring unity and renewal to South African people. The world will recognize women’s positions and potential in the society. The eradication of traditional beliefs that separated women and men is of most importance to change the mind set regarding traditional cultural practices that will suit the situations of today. Among the most things commonly remarked and rued by the missionaries were the prevailing politics of production; the unenlightened selfishness of the Africans; and their unnaturally gendered division of labour. Therefore, different perceptions and actions are needed to address this historical inequality among men and women. In order to achieve gender equality factors such as women’s rights, trans-sexuality, gender gap and transgender need to be addressed not as only perpetual distortion to people but as a lesson to eradicate stereotype perception brought by cultures and traditions.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this paper a qualitative approach is being used to explore and discuss the expectations and portrayal of black women in South Africa. Therefore, the qualitative research approach is explorative and descriptive. It relies on non-numerical data.

Desktop and Secondary method of collecting data from different books, articles and journals has been used to gather more information related to the use of proverbs in the South African perspectives. In this paper the qualitative research approach is designed to assist researchers to understand the position of women in society and cultural context within which they live.

Examples of proverbs addressing women and men had been randomly selected from Setswana literature. These examples of proverbs were analyzed through the use of post-modernity theory and feminism approach with the intention of encouraging discussion on the creation of new modern proverbs.

Feminism gives fight for women’s rights in many spheres of lives, e.g. the right to gender identity, sexuality, working conditions and acting together. Feminism is a fight for equality for all, not just for some. It is a political-orientated movement that fights against patriarchy. Sometimes most women prefer to use labels other than feminism, such as fighting for economic independence and universal suffrage. Feminist struggle needs unity to achieve certain rights and justice for all [14, 15].

In the portrayal of women is a depiction of gender ideology in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society [11]. The discussion will open more promenade for the creation of new proverbs that address the problems not only for women but for the renewal to all people.

3. Cultural Practices

3.1. Ethnic Mosaic

Mosaic in Setswana can be described as a clay pot, like in America the melting pot is cultural pluralism. The problem with the melting pot does not embrace the value of diversity which is not different to Setswana cultures, e.g. there is no classification of women in the portrayal of women by society, such as people occupying particular social locations in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and ability. The Setswana proverbs struggle to imagine the lives of a single woman or mature divorcees who fall under the societal women. This indicates the pluralism of women by society as problematic. From contemporary perspective pluralism implied a racial ideology because it never included as part of formula for mix interactional cultures. In the contemporary Nigerian popular literatures struggle to imagine the lives of a single women who fallen outside the marriage market [8].

For example, in Setswana proverbs that says ‘Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi’ means when the husband dies the widow is not expected to return to her father’s household or to make any independent to marry. This implies that single women cannot make an honest living. Nowadays, this proverb is no longer working because people had their
rights. In every society had sufficient differences in the distinct behavior of men and women to qualify them as belonging to two different cultures [9]. Today much progress has been achieved and the contemporary theorists claimed that women and men must be considered alike as free and equal beings.

In male – dominated societies, women’s subordination and men’s dominance are so pronounced that their subcultures are literally separated by a world of differences; even in the Western culture.

For example:
(a) In Setswana ‘Monna ke tlhogo ya lapa’ means the man is the head of the house.
(b) In isiZulu ‘izwi lendoda liyabekwa’ means a man’s word is taken note of.

This in the modern society and the migration of people today, the ideology of headship does no longer exist. In the changes of attitudes in some women about their cultural status no longer reflect certain women [9].

The paper needs to address this question: Is it possible for the proverbs to be changed or transformed for the benefit of all the people?

3.2. Cultural Practices and Beliefs

Cultural practices and beliefs presented Batswana with a challenge to their existing way of life. In cultural practice does not only control female sexuality but also ensures that the assets accumulated are returned and placed under the control of the deceased husband’s family [4]. This cultural practices is also applied to Batswana and it discriminate women from men, in Setswana the woman is expected to wear black from head to toe when the husband passed on and to lie on bed but not practiced to men because men are expected to go outside when the wife is dead.

Traditionally, Setswana proverbs indicate that it was a taboo against women to handle beasts. It of this reason that ‘moswagadi ga tshwanela go ra la la dikgomo gonne o tla dira gore di folotse’ means a taboo for a widow to cross the door when she enters in the house. The word ‘maabo’ is being used in Setswana means she must bear children and love people. As a result it suggests that women fidelity should be encouraged.

The paradox of being ‘ngvetši’ (married woman) as subordinate dimension when she is expected to bear children to continue her husband’s line. This subordination dimension does not only applied to Batswana cultures but it is also found in other cultures in South Africa such as Nguni people, e.g. ‘Makoti’ means a married woman and has an important role in the house, i.e. she must work hard with little rest as she is expected to do everything. Therefore, women’s issues or matters pertaining to gender discrimination are important contemporary themes in post-apartheid South Africa where women worked hard to provide for the families. Contradictorily, this view seems to demeaning men, e.g. ‘mosadi ke tshwene o jewa mahogo’, means a woman is like a monkey, you can only eat her hands. Literally, in this proverb is a classical expression of the hard work expected to the bride by her mother-in-law and the sister(s) -in-law as a proof that the price paid for her was not in vain [3, 6]. Furthermore, in concur that a woman does not marry for her beauty but to build her household which means a married woman, must show her potentials by working very hard [5].

In every society male-dominated societies, women’s subordination and men’s dominance are pronounced that their subcultures are literally separated by a world of differences, even in the Western culture since the beginning of humanity women have been dominated by men [11]. Therefore they are still struggling to affirm women as a country’s number one. Furthermore, in reference people have managed to put women down and still operate a viable society [9]. They are terrified of being accused of suffering from the copycat ‘Western feminist syndrome.’ What is happening in the women ‘league shows what happens everywhere in the world, e.g. in United States women are still struggling to hold president position.

3.3. Cultures Do Not Remain the Same

Some of the proverbs model the contemporary values and beliefs, e.g. Today is not a taboo to raise a child without a father figure in the house. This is not surprising, for in Africa in general, women are held in little esteem [4]. Furthermore,
women were traditionally expected to submit to the authority of males, without questioning but this patriarchal status quo has changed because of the beliefs and identification of modern society.

Educationally, women play a vital role in human progress and have significance place in the modern society. This affirms that new proverbs are needed to deal with stereotypes of women being likeable and pleasant, and perception of men as being assertive and powerful. Setswana proverbs such as:

(a) In Setswana ‘Monna ke thogo ya lelapa’ means man is the head of the house because of the inferiority complex or where women believed to have cultivated the land and built houses in the era of the missionaries, while men never condescend to lend a helping hand to them and this might result to

(b) In Setswana ‘Mangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng’ means women had to protect their children.

In the key element of feminist analysis is a commitment of the creation of knowledge grounded in the experiences of people belonging to marginalized groups, including for example, women, people of color, people in the Global South, immigrants, and indigenous people, gay, lesbian, queer, and trans-people, poor and working-class people, and disabled people [2]. Therefore, this implies that the actual day-today experiences of groups of people who have traditionally been excluded from the production of academic knowledge like traditionally women throughout their life were expected to maintain fidelity and obedience to their husbands.

In feminism as socio-critical theory acknowledges that society is characterised by the pain and suffering caused by the domination of some human beings, in particular women, by others with a view of achieving their liberation [3]. In the effect of the worldwide concern about the woman's position in Africa has been varied [9]. Whilst this can be expected, multi-faceted and contradictory when it is not totally false and misleading.

Therefore, the male-dominated society reacts in the usual sexist fashion by denying that there is any oppression of women in Africa, glorifying a distorted pre-colonial past where women activists were accused of being victims of western ideas and copy cats of white women. To illustrate this point further claiming the family is more hypocritically brushing aside women's concerns on the pretext that national development is a greater priority now than women's liberation and also asserting that women anyhow do not need to be liberated because they have never been in bondage.

However, these claims show the manipulation by society. Setswana proverb’s ‘tsa etelelwa pele ke e namagadi di vela ka lengope’ means those who led by a female leader fall into dongas. In the chief of one of the northern villages in Rustenburg, in the North West Province, passed away in 1985 [14]. His wife could not take over the throne to lead because she was a woman. The younger brother of the chief was forced to relinquish his work, in order to take the chieftaincy of the tribe. He lacked leadership skills, but because he was a man, he was crowned the chief of the tribe. This is because some customs inhibit men from allowing female leadership. This cause disunity among people.

The latter statement might seem to contradict the former, the reason being that there is a compounding of historical and sociological falsification, all to the end of frightening some women into silence. Therefore, Setswana proverb ‘Dibaga di tlogile baaparing tsa ya bafololeding’ means things which were found to specific people are now found to ordinary people.

African women who are engaged in theology view the African culture as one of the stumbling block towards the liberation of women and their self-identity. In Setswana proverb ‘Macho ke motho ka ba bo’ means a human being is (to) because of others. This expression shows the spirit of unity that encourages women to come together and form a force against the unjust structures impacting on their lives as women, e.g. in South Africa the establishment of ANC Women’s League after the new election of democracy had been vocal about the patriarchal issues and challenges the structures of their organization. There are also LGBT community to raise stigma, discrimination and abuse of women and children by men.

4. Results

One has to conclude that the vision of the Batswana society built on a fusion of the genteel bourgeois and contemporary value which is being completely rejected by Batswana people. Few of them were to be embargoed and others were compelled to seek employment in the industrial or commercial sectors but others resisted that. In number of proverbs no longer reflect certain women’s realities today [13].

There was a belief that the missionaries used their evangelism to encourage the Batswana women to work hard and produce more crops. In this case the Batswana women believed to resist the European practices by interrupting irrigation routines, damaging dams and stealing fruits from the missionaries’ gardens and they were regarded as unduly arduous, even unnatural. In the traditional African agriculturalists practiced shift cultivation with a ‘slash and burn’ method for hundred years [1]. Therefore, women were thought to be dangerous to cattle and were excluded from pastoral activities and thus implicitly from political power.

These observations of the separation of duties might have caused the unequal positions in the society which resulted in the creation of proverbs that seems to be harsh to women. It is worth pointing out that Setswana traditional practices is influenced by Western Christian culture.

The contradiction made by society no longer exist because now a paramount shift has been realized among the African women, where women are now in leadership positions, e.g. Biblically women in theology were not supposed to lead the congregation, they were not allowed to be pastors, preachers or reverends, today women are leading as bishops, pastors,
etc. they are no longer church-goers only.

Today marriages in African settings break down as a result of women’s rejection of the dictates of the patriarchal status quo in their lives. Most children are affected by this break down. They found themselves being classified as hobos (street kids). Lack of shelter and parental hood contribute to abuse of substances, abuse of women and children, hijacking, rape and killings that most countries experienced in modern times.

Proverbs are flexible and adaptable to the ever new contexts and interpretations because their metaphorical language is not limited to specific context. The most memorable instance of women protest was of 1956 where women matched to Pretoria and which catapulted to a new stage and gaining sympathy from many countries. These women brought to life the Setswana proverb ‘Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng’ means a mother holds a knife by its sharpest part, the blade, i.e. a mother can do anything to protect her children from danger. This shows that women can lead.

Sociably, some of the proverbs are used to approve and accept behaviour, while others are used to disapprove or ridicule the actions of those who deviate from prescribed social norms. However, in today’s life, these functions and purposes of proverbs have changed. In contemporary times there has been a turn-around on the lives of women where urban/rural women are no longer submissive to men, i.e. the society has changed. The lives of South African women have been shaped by self-identity and self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that in order for one to deal with ideal proverb scenarios of portraying a women as useless or filthy as the society portrayed her, one need to change the previous perception by creating modern proverbs that address the societial issues of modern society, e.g. LGBT i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, domestic violence where women and children are victims, particularly in South Africa. In the language influences thought and action [15]. Therefore, changing times and situations require forms of expression that the traditional proverbs can no longer supply. However, it often suffices to create, adopt and antquiate proverb to the modern context.

Hence, in Setswana ‘Mosadi a ka baya nkwe botsetse’ which means a woman can take care of leopard when it is breast feeding is the indication of how strong a woman is. This study will provoke the creation of new proverbs that will be relevant and develop social responsibility amongst the South Africa women of today.

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