

Female Stereotypes in Selected Xitsonga Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Language, as well as its different forms of usage, is the most important assets that every nation and linguistic community possesses. It is a dynamic and multi-faceted, God-given asset that is used in a number of ways and in a number of contexts to express a myriad of feelings and thoughts, including stereotypes in poetry and other forms of artistic expression. The Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary (1828) defines a stereotype as something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; especially an often oversimplified or biased mental picture held to characterise the typical individual or a group. It further mentions that a stereotype is used to refer to an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic. This paper explores the socio-historical context of women, their roles in society and the family in order to understand the reasons they are portrayed in particular ways. In some African cultures, women have historically not been accorded the same status as their male counterparts. The status quo which currently exists with regard to women poets in South Africa is such that there seems to be no women poets as compared to other African countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, where women authors are challenging the status quo to restore their dignity as poets and human beings (Mutiso, 2011). The South African experience may be different. This paper therefore, sets out to expose the negative stereotypes that have been perpetrated by male poets about women.

Keywords

stereotypes, poetry, gender

Introduction

The beauty of language as a vehicle for communication is its ability to convey messages that carry different meanings between people. One can only imagine how life would be if people did not have a language to communicate with. This article sets out to explore the negative stereotypes that male poets express about women in their poetry. I will make reference to poems written by authors such as Rikhotso (1983), Magaisa (1987), Maluleke (1991), Malungana and Babane (2011), Marhanele (1975, 2006) and Ngope (2006), which contain discriminatory tendencies that are meted to women on the ground of their gender. In order to do justice to the length of this article, I will not analyse poems by all the above authors, but will choose two poems and use them as units of analysis. Vogt (2009:3) argues that in most anthologies, poems by male poets outnumber those of women writers, and in her view, this amounts to discrimination. Evidence gathered from male Xitsonga poets such as Marhanele (1975), Ngobeni (2002), Chauke (1998), Magaisa (1987), Malungana and Babane (2011) shows the stereotypical way in which women are portrayed. In some poems they are portrayed as witches, murderers, prostitutes, trouble-makers and other

negativities. The evidence shows that the number of poems which value women is outnumbered by those that devalue them.

Research problem

Apart from animals, the world is inhabited by men and women to whom it owes its existence. Consequently, writing in the different genres will, in one way or another, portray the interactions between the different genders: their lives, their behaviour, and so on. In addition to writing about themselves, men will also write about women. The reverse is also true. But how men portray women in poetry will not always be positive. It is therefore important to explore how, and to what effect, men portray women in Xitsonga poetry. Stereotypes based on attitude towards one another as humans; particularly towards the opposite sex. They are informed by many factors and have an impact on how we view one another. These problems can be manifested in poetic texts written by men that portray women as trouble-makers, witches, hypocrites, thieves, weak, lazy, and other negative attributes.

Literature review

The following section is a literature review which focuses on the following subtopics: contextualization of the concept of 'gender' and

the status of women in the African context. In dealing with the status of women in the African context, focus is placed on how women are portrayed through poetry in the African continent, with specific reference to countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Contextualization of the concept of gender

According to Fonchingong (2006:136), the presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased. This author refers to famous authors such as Chukukere (1995), who contends that those male poets who examine women also assist in endorsing an institutionalized and one-sided vision of female heroism in African fiction; Ekwensi (1962), who treats women through preconceived stereotypes – prostitution versus motherhood and wifehood. Men and women, irrespective of their levels of education and social and/or political status, always associate this concept with being female. It is these mixed views and representations of women in different socio-political contexts and works of art, and in particular, poetry that this study sets out to deal with.

The portrayal of women in African poetry: A continental perspective with reference to Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe

Oral history provides that the dominance of males over females is not unique to South Africa but it is a feature that has been and still defines being African (Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Ngugi Wa Miri, 1980; Ngugi, 1964 in Fonchingong, 2006). History has it that over many decades, women in Africa have been subjected to acute subservience to their male counterparts. Women were not allowed to go to school. Their role was to give birth to children and to stay at home and look after the children, while their husbands worked for them. Fonchingong (2006:141) refers to this as the subjugation of the female gender. This study follows after many studies in post-colonial South Africa, which focused their attention on the mediation of gender relations in contemporary literature, particularly in poetry.

Contrary to the existing South African experience, there is evidence that in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, there are popular female poets who wrote poetry on a number of subjects. Mutiso (2011) refers to three female poets in Kenya who

used their poetry as a weapon to liberate their society. These are Phyllis Muthoni, Njeri Wangari and Sitawa Namwalie. Through the lenses of formalism, feminism and marxism, these poets used their poetic voices to address the dynamics of their social cultural practices, including situations of hope and/or helplessness. Thus, the poetry of these female poets was also used to extend a liberating function in society. This view suggests that the status and circumstances of women in Kenya was not different from other women in other African countries.

The situation of women in Zimbabwe is not different from that of Kenya and other African countries, including South Africa. According to Vambe (2008:1), the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe is associated with women, who are objectified as dangerous and loose on the one hand, and who are expected to become respectable and disciplined to attain the newly projected status of a proper woman, on the other. An example of one renowned female poet is Kristina Rungano, who became popular for exploring and exposing injustice against women, the poor and down-trodden.

The role of theory in the study

The subject matter of this article is women and how they are portrayed by male poets. In order to understand this subject matter, the feminist theory will be used. This word 'feminist' is derived from feminism which, according to the Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus (2009), is a noun that indicates a movement or theory that supports the rights of women. It is the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men. For this purpose, this section will focus on African feminist theory that will be employed in this study. It will also succinctly present the rationale behind the adoption of this theory.

In a critical review of the literature on feminist theory, Hooks (1984) projects a picture which shows that feminism in the US emerged from the white middle and upper class, college-educated women, who were not concerned with economic survival or ethnic and racial discrimination in a capitalistic society, but interested in resisting sexism or gender inequalities. Most feminists of colour recognize that gender, race, class, and sexual orientation not gender alone determine the

allocation of power and the nature of any individual's identity, status, and circumstance (Collins, 1986; Hooks, 1989; Delgado-Bernal, 1998). In other words, for these white women, feminism is about sexism, not about class and racial issues, while for most Black women, feminism is all of the above and more. As though these layers are not enough, for a Black South African woman, the burden is multiplied; that is, central to creation of a Black woman's identity are race, ethnicity, gender, class, mother-tongue/language, traditional values, location, customary laws and the other interlocking layers constructed by apartheid policies (Phendla, 2006:4).

Based on the above presentation on African feminism and the researcher's understanding of this theory and the subject matter of this study, it is imperative to adopt a theory that will respond to the different needs and concerns of different women. This study, therefore relied on the African feminist literary criticism theory. This theory is relevant to the subject matter of this research which is to analyse the stereotypical portrayal of black women in Xitsonga poetry. The African feminist literary criticism theory was adopted due to its capacity to accurately capture and reflect the realities and culture of black women (Mekgwe, 2008:15). This theory is described by Boyce-Davis and Graves (1996:12) as being both textual and contextual criticism; textual in that close reading of texts using the literary establishment's critical tools is indicated; contextual as it realizes that analysing a text without some consideration of the world with which it has a material relationship is of little social value

Research methodology and data collection

According to Schwardt (2007:195), a research methodology is a theory of how an inquiry should proceed. It involves an analysis of the assumptions, principles and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry. For this study, the qualitative research methodology was used. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as a situated activity which locates the observer in the world. It involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, i.e. qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings

people bring to them. Qualitative research implies emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:10).

Selected poems from different Xitsonga poetry books were used. De Vos (1998:358) indicates that when working from a qualitative perspective, the researcher attempts a first-hand, holistic understanding of a phenomenon and data collection is shaped as the investigation proceeds. In light of the above, the researcher had initially intended to use structured interviews with the authors of the selected Xitsonga poems in order to find first-hand information regarding what influenced them to write the particular poems and their choices of words in expressing their views about women. However, due to the fact that some of them might have passed away, the researcher used content analysis to get a better understanding of the content on the poem(s) to establish their themes and to use these to determine what male poets write about women in Xitsonga poems.

Significance of the study

This study will add value to the existing body of knowledge regarding the portrayal of women by male poets in Africa. It will ignite new energy in women, particularly in South Africa to engage in rigorous activities that will be geared towards challenging the dominance of the literary scene by males. The researcher wishes that after reading this paper, more women poets will hopefully emerge and poems by female authors will also receive the same attention as did those written by males. It will also be interesting to get to read about the themes of Xitsonga poems written by female poets. This research will also serve as an eye opener to male poets who were writing unpleasant things about women; they will be conscious when writing and will treat women with the respect they deserve. Members of PANSALB will as well benefit from this research when dealing with gender issues in their projects.

Findings from the content analysis of the selected poems

The subject matter of this paper is to explore the negative stereotypes meted to women by male Xitsonga poets. Their poems which have women as their subject matter present a generalized view

about all women. This means that if one woman commits a mistake, these poets generalize the mistake to be typical of all women. In the poem *Wansati* (Baloyi, 2008:66), for example, women are portrayed as having good behaviour before getting married. After settling with their husbands, they change their good behaviour where they talk to their husbands as they wish. The following lines serve as evidence:

1. *Ha! U nga ha n'wi khoma xikatla?*
2. *Phela no dzivula ku dzivuriwile.*
3. *Ko twala ntsena "Lowu i muti wa mina."*
4. *Loko rirhandzu ra ha sungula, hinkwaswo i swinene.*
5. *Rirhandzu ra kona ro nkholee!*

The poem above translates into:

1. It is not possible to understand her.
2. She has also undergone skin change.
3. One could only hear "This is my home."
4. When the love is still new everything is cool.
5. That love has sweet smell/smells so good.

Another poem with a similar title, *Wansati* by Malungana and Salani (2006:45), women are portrayed as sources of feuds between family members, between friends and between men. This poem is indicated below:

1. *Wansati u sasekile ehandle*
2. *Endzeni u xurhe makhombo,*
3. *U tele hi vumbabva bya lunya,*
4. *U luma a pfurheta ngi kondlo,*
5. *U na nyiko yo hambanyisa maxaka na vanghana.*

This poem translates into:

1. A woman has a beautiful outside appearance
2. Internally she is full of troubles,
3. She is full of extreme wickedness,
4. She bites and blows like a rat,
5. She is talented in causing differences between family members and friends.

The two poems above are just a few of many poems written by male poets that express negative and sometimes derogatory views about women. The portrayal of women as bad people is further justified by some Xitsonga proverbs such as:

"Mavala ya mangwa i mavala man'we (The zebra's stripes are all alike), meaning that women are all alike in their wrongdoings; and *"Loko homu ya ntswele yi rhangela mahlweni, ti ta wela xidziveni"* (If a cow leads the herd, all the cattle will fall into the pool), meaning that when a

woman is given an opportunity to lead, the life in the village deteriorates. It is however, important to indicate that it is not the subject matter of this paper to establish whether the Xitsonga proverbs were written by males or not. It however suffices to indicate that women are always portrayed negatively in most Xitsonga works of art.

Conclusion and recommendations

Drawing from outcomes of the content analysis of the two poems and the Xitsonga proverbs which support the perceptions that male poets have about women as revealed by their negativity, I drew the following conclusions: that male poets regard women as not human enough; that patriarchy dominated the arts to a point of objectifying women, and that at a heart of the Xitsonga language and the male Xitsonga poets, there is a deep seated grain of negativity about women. This last view is evidenced by the support that is given by the Xitsonga proverbs and idioms to the views of the Xitsonga male poets. I further conclude that the current spate of violence against women is a radically improved version of the negative perceptions that Xitsonga male poets created about women.

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