

The Struggle for Girl-Child Continues: Reimagining Educational Gender-Equality in South Africa through Lesiba Maphoso's *O iphihletšeng?*

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that literary texts serve as the eyes of the society. Texts always reflect on real-life events. Maphoso accomplishes this through his Sepedi radio drama text, *O iphihletšeng?* In it, he reflects on the difficulties that a Black (African) girl-child faces in modern times. Rebone, the main character who has just exceptionally passed her matric is being denied educational rights by her father, Mahunela. Her educational denial is due to the fact that she is a girl child. Maphoso therefore fights against the struggle for girl-child education through the barrel of his pen. By textually analysing his play, this paper endeavoured to discuss how a girl-child in African society still struggles to enjoy her educational rights. The study used a qualitative research approach to understand the educational struggle that a girl-child faces in the (South) African context, which was underpinned by a Feminist theoretical perspective. The text was purposively selected due to its relevancy to the topic under discussion. Data which were collected through a document review method were thematically analysed. The findings of this study reveal that Black girl-children are still struggling to achieve their educational rights (dreams) due to societal patriarchy. It is also heart breaking to discover that a girl-child is still denied her educational rights due to an ancient worldview held by parents who believe that a girl is not for school, but rather for marriage. This paper adds to the ongoing global call for equal quality education for both genders.

Keywords: Girl-child, Educational rights, Society, Patriarchy, Gender-equity & Modernity.

1. Introduction

This paper sought to expose the educational struggle that a girl-child still confronts in (South) Africa, as well as to highlight the reimagining of educational opportunities that benefit (Black) girl-child. The education of girls is the focus of this research. For years, education has served as a tool for global development, and it will continue to be a major source of knowledge for centuries to come. In this

regard, education should accommodate both male and female students equally. This struggle, however, appears to be ongoing for female children. According to Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013:1), education is the right of every girl everywhere, as well as the key to transforming both the girl's life and the life of her community. Educating a girl-child is equivalent to educating the entire community, nation, and world for a lifetime. Nmadu et al.

(2010:107) agree with the preceding viewpoint, arguing that no sustainable development is possible if women remain uneducated.

Kainuwa and Yusuf (2013) discovered that the negative role of parents' cultural traditions and practices is one of the most significant barriers to a girl-child's education. That is to say, the old African worldview does not flatter modern times, particularly in terms of education. Hence, some men (such as Mahunela in Maphoso's play) continue to believe that a society should be patriarchal. They still believe that only men should be educated in order for society to progress. Such men believe that a girl-child should not be able to further her studies because her gender is incapable of attending school. Maphoso demonstrates this through an aggressive Mahunela.

As Amadi (2013:71) notes, the traditional education of the people prepares the girl-child for early marriage. This is an old worldview of most African societies that the girl-child should get married as early as possible, rather than schooling. This is the case with this study. Amadi's (2013) surveyal research, which was conducted in Nigeria, proves that most girl-children are denied educational access due to their parents' cultural and traditional beliefs. In Rwanda, Huggins and Randell (2007) found that a girl-child's educational achievement and access still lag behind as compared to that of boys, thus lacking gender equality in the education system. Amadi (ibid) further notes that it is "modernisation" which is slowly changing the cultural attitude of the people towards girl-child's education. Alabi et al. (2014) describe this girl-child

struggle as a "discrimination" which is perpetuated by the customs, traditions and typical mindset of the society that considers the girl child and women as inferior beings.

This study acknowledges that the South African government, like other African and worldwide countries, has made paramount efforts in supporting and improving both girl and boy-child educational equality. Yet so, it is disheartening to note that a girl-child is still suppressed from achieving her educational potential due to the traditional worldviews of society. A literary reference to the above assertion is made in this paper by thoroughly discussing Lesiba Maphoso's prescribed Grade 12 learner's textbook, *O iphihletšeng?*

2. Synopsis of the play

O iphihletšeng? (lit., Why is he hiding?) is a play that literarily depicts a girl-child's educational struggle. Rebone, a seventeen-year-old girl who recently passed her matric with distinction, is being denied tertiary educational access by her stingy father, Mahunela. Following the death of their mother, Rebone lives with her father and her brother Benjamin, a thirty-year-old man who is having difficulty finding work due to his lack of matriculation. Their father, Mahunela, who has a lot of livestock, refuses to sell the cattle in order to fund Rebone's education. He is adamant that a girl child cannot attend school. He emphasises that in his culture, a woman is only for household chores and marriage, not for school. Many people in the community disagree with Mahunela's point of view. In this regard, a local pastor, Shai, and a teacher, Kgoroši, collect donations for Rebone's university tuition. In the sad

part, Mahunela conceals the money and claims it has been lost. This also disgusts many community residents. Rebone suffers psychological consequences for staying at home while her friends are having fun at university. Consequently, she begins to drink alcohol in local taverns and considers selling her body. She also agrees to marry and be impregnated by Mpoti. During this difficult time, Rebone's tuition fee is surprisingly settled anonymously. Despite her desire to study full-time at the University of Limpopo, Rebone was forced to enrol in a correspondence course with the University of South Africa. Rebone eventually completes her dietetics course shortly before her father Mahunela dies. Sarinki, Benjamin's woman who was also Mahunela's concubine, reveals that she is the one who paid for Rebone's tuition fees.

3. Aim of the study

A girl-child is the future asset of every society. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to expose her educational struggles through textual analysis of Maphoso's play. The paper also seeks to debunk an ancient notion that has long held girl-child ransom; that is, she is not for school but rather for marriage. In a nutshell, the study seeks to disprove an ancient worldview that a girl-child must marry rather than attend school.

4. Significance of the study

Through Maphoso's play, a girl-child's confidence is motivated by Rebone's struggle for education. As a result, this paper will significantly boost a girl-child's educational worldview. This paper condemns parents, particularly male parents, who continue to deny a girl's

educational dreams. The paper is an appeal to education stakeholders to prioritise girl education in the same way that they do male education.

5. Discussion of the findings

Lesiba Maphoso is a notable Sepedi author. He understands how to entice the reader to continue reading his philosophical narratives by beginning with the odds and ending with the successes. Among other themes, Maphoso writes about the struggle of a Black girl-child in the play *O iphihletšeng?* A reference is made in this informative text that the educational rights of an African girl-child are still oppressed. This section describes how Rebone, a girl-child raised by a single parent, her father, is struggling to continue her studies after passing matric with distinction.

5.1 A Girl-Child and her Educational Aspirations

Rebone is a seventeen-year-old girl in her final year of secondary school (Grade 12). Naturally, Rebone works hard in school and in other aspects of her life. Her educational aspirations begin when she realises she did well in the recent matriculation results. She expresses her delight to her father, Mahunela:

Rebone: Ke tšweletše
ka mo go sa belaetšeng.
Bona, Tate...! (*O mo
laetša kuranta*) (pg.19).
(*Rebone: Without a
doubt, I did well. Look,
father...! (She shows
the newspaper to him).*)

Mahunela appears dissatisfied with Rebone's results. He suggests that she is now in a good enough state to go out and look for work. Rebone, on the other hand,

is opposed to the idea and tells her father that:

Rebone: Ke swanetše go tšwela pele ka dithuto, ke ye go ithutela tša dijo. Ke moo ke tlogo humana mošomo o mokaone (pg.19).

(Rebone: I need to further my studies, so I am going to study dietetics. That is how I will land a good job.)

According to the excerpt above, Rebone aspires to further her studies rather than her father's demeaning idea of going out to look for work. She informs her father that nowadays, getting a job with only a matric certificate is difficult. This indicates that, unlike in the past, the mindset of a girl-child in modern times is focused on education. Rebone further shares her aspirations with her teacher, Kgoroši, that she had initially planned to become a psychiatrist. Unfortunately, her dream of becoming a psychiatrist is dashed due to a lack of study funds. Interestingly, she does not throw in the towel, so she chooses dietetics.

5.2 Prioritising Education over Marriage

Most people of the older generation believe that a girl child should be married rather than educated. The current generation, on the other hand, sees it the other way around, prioritising education over marriage. According to Amadi (2013:73), the culture of the people still believes that the place of the girl-child is in the home, specifically to help with domestic chores. Maphoso, as an eye of

his society, agrees with this ideology. While Mahunela wishes for Rebone to marry before continuing her studies, Rebone is opposed to the idea. She informs her boyfriend Mpoti of this:

Rebone: Thuto pele, banna ka morago (pg.18).

(Rebone: Education comes first, men follow.)

Rebone utters these words after Mpoti proposes that she come and stay with him at Rustenburg after matriculating. Rebone sounds like she is sticking to her slogan: “*Thuto pele, banna ka morago*”, with no intention of letting anyone change her mindset. This is reinforced when Rebone rejects her father Mahunela's suggestion that she marry.

Maphoso also warns against the archaic belief that a girl-child must marry in order for her family to survive through her *magadi* (dowry). This is reflected in Mahunela's belief that Rebone's *magadi* will help him financially.

Mahunela: Makgarebe a go lekana le wena a nyalwa ka mo ntle, batswadi ba ona ba humana tšhelete. (pg.25)

(Mahunela: Girls of your age are getting married, and their parents are receiving money).

The author here introduces us to the concept of marriage as a source of income for the bride's family through Mahunela. Marriages are a major source of income for the family. This concept appears to be amusing to Rebone. Her own words:

Rebone: A! Tate, le nyaka go nthekiša?

(Rebone: Oh, no! Do you want to sell me, Father?)

Rebone wonders if her father intends to sell her to other men (families). This concept is problematic for today's generation. Some may view marriage as a business in which a girl child is sold to other families. Hence, Montle (2020) maintains that lobola (magadi) is a significant source of gender-based violence. Matsepe in *Kgorong ya Mošate* unpacks the significance of marriage. He has these words to say:

Nyalelano ga se khumišano eupša ke go nyaka leloko le kwano gobane motho ga a na kelo ya theko.

(Marriage is not a profit-making venture, but rather a quest for relative and unity, because a person cannot be priced).

Matsepe literary condemns parents who encourage their daughters to marry with the expectation that they will earn something in return. Montle and Moleke (2021) discovered that 'lobola' has evolved from a cultural practise to a business venture in (South) Africa today. That is, according to latter scholars, the high *magadi* payment fee leads to what is meant to be business. This subject is important in this paper. Mahunela's marriage philosophy is widely acknowledged to be incorrect. Through him, the author of the text believes marriage and business are two distinct concepts that should not be

associated in any way. Mahunela highlights:

Mahunela: Yo ngwanenyana o na le mereba. Ga a nyake ke eja magadi a gagwe. Ge e le sekolong gona pho! Šea (pg.27).

(Mahunela: This girl is extremely disobedient. She does not want me to benefit from her dowry. I swear she will not go to school!)

Mahunela maintains his plan to sell Rebone. He believes that a girl-child should marry rather than attend school. That is purely an obsolete worldview that the current generation must reject at all costs.

5.3 Consequences of denying a Girl-Child educational access (rights)

Denying a Black girl-child her educational rights often has negative consequences in her life. The first sign of such effects comes when Rebone tells Hlogi that she feels like strangling herself. Her words, "*gape o ka re nka tšea thapo ka itekeletša*" (I feel like taking a rope and hang myself) (pg.28) reveal that she no longer enjoys the atmosphere. After Hlogi has tried to console her, Rebone cries out, "*Ge e le nna ditoro tša ka tša bongaka, di padile,*" (As for me, my medical career dream has ended) that her dream of becoming a medical doctor has died down. Rebone also has bad money-making plans:

Rebone: Ke tla ba ka ipha banna ba dilori gore ke ikgobokeletše tšhelete. (pg.28)

(Rebone: I am considering selling myself to truckers in order to make some money.)

Rebone's situation remains hopeless. Mahunela's stealing of Rebone's university registration money appears to be having a negative psychological impact on her. She tells her aunt Jemina that she would rather go to factories to look for work because her school dreams appear to have been swept away. Rebone continues to say she would rather go to brothels, and Jemina is amused by this thought:

Rebone: Go ena le gore
ke boele ka gae,
nkampane ka ya go
gweba ka mmele
(pg.45).

(Rebone: I would rather sell my body than to return home).

Rebone believes that commercialising her womanhood (body) will solve her problems. This is solely the result of being denied educational access. When Rebone begins to frequent taverns, readers are assured that she is indeed on her way into sex-work. Phaswane, a local policeman, is taken aback when he meets Rebone at a local tavern. Rebone gives Phaswane a definitive reason on why she is at a tavern:

Rebone: Ee, ge sekolo
se padile, lebotlelo le e
tla ba mogwera wa ka
(pg.55).

(Rebone: Yes, because going to school has failed, this bottle will be my companion.)

Rebone has become a drunkard. This hurts Phaswane, as well as readers. Rebone has

completely lost her self-esteem at this point. She believes that sex work will help her overcome the mental oppression caused by the denial of her educational rights. Rebone finally submits to her boyfriend Mpoti after denying him the opportunity to marry her. She informs him that she will be staying with him (pg.56-57). When she arrives at Mpoti's residence, she unshyly tells him:

Rebone: Ke itlišitše,
Mpoti. Ge ke tloga mo
ke nyaka go bona
dimpa tše e le
mararampana (pg.57).

(Rebone: Here I brought myself, Mpoti. When I leave here, I want to see this stomach full.)

According to the above excerpt, Rebone is now willing to stay with Mpoti and wants to get pregnant. This appears to be desperation on its own! This is due to a lack of support at home following the denial of getting into university. A girl who aspired to be a dietitian is now surrendering herself to (early) marriage.

5.4 The Success of a (Black) Girl-Child

Despite all of the obstacles a girl-child faces, she eventually achieves her (educational) aspirations. This is reflected in Rebone. Despite her father's opposition, Rebone is able to pursue her dream of attending university. Rebone receives her registration fee thanks to society donations organised by Reverent Shai and teacher Kgoroši. Unfortunately, the donations are given to her father, Mahunela, who hides the money and later claims that it is lost. Benjamin, who is innocent, is accused of stealing this money and is eventually

arrested. Mahunela is hiding Rebone's registration fee because he dislikes seeing Rebone in school. During his cattle-milking soliloquy, he emphasises this demeaning plan:

Mahunela: Rebone o a gafa. O nagana gore a ka ya sekolong e le mosadi?...Tšhelete ye kaaka kaaka ya no tšewa ke batho ba sekolong bao ke sa ba tsebego (pg.49).

(Mahunela: Rebone must have gone insane. She believes that as a woman, she can attend school. Such a large sum of money to be taken by people I do not even know.)

The above excerpt clearly demonstrates Mahunela's mandate to conceal Rebone's tuition fee. It is because Rebone is a girl, and as such, she is unsuitable for school. However, an anonymous donor eventually pays Rebone's registration fee (pg.58). Sarinki, who had a secret affair with Mahunela, uses his (Mahunela's) money to pay Rebone's tuition. Rebone, who is described as a hard-working girl from the outset, makes certain that she does not waste the opportunity bestowed upon her. She completes her correspondence course at the University of South Africa. She eventually qualifies as a dietitian.

6. Conclusion

The words of Alabi et al. (2014:393), "Today's girls are tomorrow's women," should be heard and understood by those who continue to suppress a girl-child's educational rights. Education stakeholders,

particularly parents, should invest in the education of the girl-child. In many cases, it appears that girls have begun to regard their education as a major self-development tool. Modern (South) African parents should therefore support these girls' academic efforts. This paper discussed how society should reimagine educational change by granting equal educational opportunities to both boys and girls. The traditional worldview that girls are unsuitable for schooling should be challenged. Through Rebone's success, the paper demonstrated how Maphoso strives for educational gender equity.

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