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The Oral-Paradigmatic Semiotics and Women Imperative in South African Folklore

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Abstract

The article systematically examines the folkloric literature in South Africa and discusses phenomena using the oral-paradigmatic semiotic style the portrayal of women in the articulation of ideas and society. These portrayals have been exponential from the lenses of orality and semiotic interpretations. From the ancient assumptions to the current dispensation in Africa, stories, events, mythical beliefs have been copiously structured to pass from one generation to the other through the technical devices espoused by word of the mouth. Consequently, during these oral renditions, women in traditional Africa have had to be reconfigured because women, apparently, have had to suffer from the consequences of patriarchy, misogyny and relegation which was also passed from generation to generation in Africa. The article titillates the feminist critical theory of Nawal El Saadawi which constructively questions the representation of women in literary epoch. It visualizes the folkloric trajectory and the economic disposition of women within the purview of folkloric configuration of women in South Africa.

Keywords: Semiotic, Orality, Folklore, Politics, Literature, Culture, South African and Women.

1. Introduction:

By Oral-paradigmatic semiotic linguistic style, oral artists discuss the configuration of meanings in different orature by situating the content and context showing multiplicities of interpretations within the oral purview in society. Over the years, orality in South Africa has been dynamically subjected to scintillate mimetic and semiotic conflagration. More so, Folkloric tradition in Africa is presumably the same in the form of rendition because most events that were been encapsulated from one generation to another with the medium of the mouth have now enjoyed linguistically acclaimed written analysis and criticism. Previous oral renditions which are not axiomatic, events and presentations enjoy additional information which could have been added to the corpus because of exaggeration of contents to make it elaborate. Folklore tradition largely informs, every day's life through the power of imagination in Africa through oral presentations (Otiono and Akoma (2021)). Such presentation is dynamic, content preserved but specifically distorted because it has passed through stages and generations of distortion of oral data before it graduated into the written form.

Consequently, the politics of women roles and their imperatives have been presented to illuminate and support different ways women were perceived in some African societal configuration. Oral tradition embodies orality which deals significantly with how societal idioms, language is said, expressed and orally transmitted from society to society (Sunarti, et al, 2023).

Worthy to note is the perception of Finnegan (2012) when she critically and undoubtedly opined in her new version of the book on Oral Literature in Africa when she indicated that from 1970 when her first book on African orature was released. Cosmologic African folkloric events have been drastically postulated as dynamic entities. According to her, from 1970 till date, folklore and oral literary trajectories (including its semiotics and pragmatics) have taken a new dimension in their endeavor. This is predicated and existent in most African countries. Relevant conceptual understanding about how society functions were some of the themes discussed in the oral art (Odongo, 2023). From the Zimbabwe's Shona folkloric permutations to Limba in the Northern part of Sierra-Leone's idealistic folkloric performance to Kenya-Kikuyu's dynamic performance to Nigeria's Yoruba evolving pragmatic performance, and finally to the Zulu and Khoisan's artistry folkloric disposition in South Africa and the Southern African Lesotho-Sesotho speaking people.

It is exponential to note that in Africa before the emergence of the White colonialists, oral traditions have concurrently existed in Africa to uphold the religious and cultural behaviours of the Africans. This significantly and conscientiously allowed everybody to co-exist in harmony (Pereira 2004: 7). Apparently, in South Africa, people co-exist and practice their ancestral traditional worships which gave pre-eminence to folktales practices in divergent ways. The article would succinctly probe into how politics of rendition had influenced the presentation of folklore in Africa and most especially in South Africa. It would critically analyze the creation and diversification of roles assigned women and the need for an articulate presentation that will assign dynamic folkloric roles to both men and women living within the enclave of African Folklore and Women Artistic Portrayal in Society. In the act of examining divergent diversifications, it is highly significant to underscore the serious positions played by folklore and different genres in Africa (Zavyalova, 2023).

2.Theoretical Framework: the Feminist Trajectory

There is a distinct and clear relationship between language and culture. Both language and culture are inextricably and strategically an expression of society. Ogunyemi and Motseki (2024: 68) opined the cogency and the synchronic manner language is used. Pishghadam et all (2020) emphasized how language delineates culture, and this phenomenon unpacks the notion of

‘cultulings’. This model or concept is an amalgamation of different linguistic and cultural models which aid and situate societal and communication functioning that oral literature based its precedents. Through language, women have consistently suffered some rejection and relegation which is carried persistently in some works of literature, culture, and language. However, Uche (2020) in the same vein postulated the significance language plays in societal functioning. This could be projected and ostensibly handed down ‘from generation to generation’. The usefulness of culture, language and societal teleology which were rendered from one generation to the other visualize oral rendition and related themes and concepts being discussed in African oral literature. Language has generated many standards of appraising and relegating women in literature and society.

Nawal El Saadawi, Butler and a host of feminist critics have questioned the innate standards used to relegate women to the background which is also applicable in Africa. While Saadawi examined the feminist trajectory and the critical nature of women in society, Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) sees the interplay of gender social construction to be performative. This is opposed to the essentialist drive of genetics stipulating human behaviors. Such dimensions should also be passed on or passed forward from one generation to the other to see the social relevance. The ancient history of the Lobedu tribe from Rozwi in the Limpopo Province below Drakensberg about the legendary “Rain Queen” has been passed on from generations to generations. For the past six generations the Lobedu tribe have been led by female rulers, all carrying the “Modjadji” dynastic title. It is believed that Queen Modjadji possess rain making powers. She inherits sacred Rain making beats and horns that possess rain medicine and holy water.

According to the Lobedu culture, it is believed that to make the rain medicine, the dirt and skin of deceased queens is mixed with water. When the queen dies, it is kept a secret to people for a whole year. Her “body is washed every day, and the dirt is made to fall into an earthenware basin” (Joubert, 2011). The medicine is made from her peeled skin and body dirt and then after she can be buried. Her soul will then become the people’s most intimate god, acting as the middleman between the living and their ancestors (Joubert, 2011). The Lobedu people sung sacred rain songs to the queen during droughts to pay homage to their queen and proclaim her power as the one who brings rain. There are different songs for different occasions however, there are special proper rain songs accompanied by a rain dance. Only in special designated areas and at a particular time like when there is drought, calamity and famine can the songs and dances presented (Joubert, 2011). The

essence of constant repetition in the song or oral performance and incantations revisit the collective memory of the people and their cultural heritage (Muleka, 2023).

The participation of the Rain Queen in this context is significant to the Lobedu culture and traditional practices. She is seen as the link between the living and the spiritual world. The queen and her royal lineage are regarded as godly, dignifying her to be a supernatural being capable of maintaining order and communication from the ancestral gods to the land of the living. The rain queen is also capable of withholding rain to her enemies, making her feared and respected by other nations which wishes to oppose her. Unlike other kingdoms the Lobedus are few with little soldiers compared to their opponents who opprobriously surround them physically. However, the queen was feared for her ability to withhold rain and causing drought and famine. “Her status and authority require adherence and loyalty” (Joubert, 2011).

Shaving of a woman’s head is an ancient practice in South African culture to showcase mourning of a family member. A woman is required to shave her hair off and wear black mourning clothes for a period of one year. The mourning woman is also expected to sit on a mattress and is restricted from using a chair. She uses separate eating utensils from the rest of the family and sits at the back of the bus or church. She is isolated from people as it is believed that someone who has had an encounter with death, carries bad luck.

For Nawal El Saadawi, feminism is all about freedom, through her Islamic enclave relegated women and do not give them active voice. Similar phenomena in cultural display is exhibited in other parts of Africa. South Africa is not an exception of some problems experienced. To Butler, the concept of western feminism allaying total freedom is exemplified.

3.Methodology

3.1 Material: Four (4) songs have been analyzed. These songs are long songs but put in the best shortened forms to artistically discussed the significance of oral literature and the re-configuration of women position in the South African experience. The materials analyzed here are the songs associated with South African folkloric songs. The part also views how songs have been used from generation to generation to limit women social construct and the new dimension of scholarships.

3.2 Procedure: The collection of these songs and the procedure are carefully analyzed. Some of the songs were initially written in the native language and finally translated and analyzed in English.

Most of the songs were analyzed showing the aesthetic nature they have and the messages which they portend.

The rendition Oral literature from ancient times have basically been basically rendered with the aid of the mouth. This oral rendition has simultaneously promoted Afrocentricity in Africa in culture and in history (Ogunyemi: 2023 and 2022). The nature of oral folklore emphasizes that, there is an observation of audience in the performance of folklore. Praises and the performer's body language, voice and gestures are used to convey a message to spectators (Masuku, 2005). The main theory behind folklore is to deliver literature by "word of mouth" (Masuku. 2005). Okpewho cited by Masuku (2005) defines folklore as:

"Oral literature may be defined as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree that artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression". Such expressions and discourses have portend, that the method with which oral literature functions is orally manifested with diverse and dynamic content.

4. The Semiotics of Oral Rendition

To stress more on the semiotics and teleology of oral literature and the place of women in the collective memory of rendition, Khan, Awan, and Hussain (2019) there are certain similarities between African and Punjabi cultures with regards to their traditions, under-development and how agri-based they both are. Moreover, this can be verified through their gender ideology of oral genres analysis. Through their research Khan et. al (2019) have discovered that through "thematic content analysis" women are portrayed as primarily biased and face threatening and nullifying situations. The study reveal how womenfolk is see as "unreliable, insensible, loquacious, insincere, ungrateful, opportunist, materialistic and trouble making" Khan et al (2019).

Furthermore, Dlamini (2009) argues that an analysis on a review of South African Swazi women folk songs only focuses on oral literature. However, she mainly focusses on one genre, specifically folksongs. In her investigation, Dlamini used a feminist approach to highlight how women protested cultural rules and norms that are oppressive in Siswati culture. The folksongs were a means of communication to communicate an expression of dissatisfaction with the prevailing oppressions against women. In her thesis on songs by Swazi women, Dlamini did a review of Swazi women's folksongs. Her study analysed a sub-genre of folklore named folksongs. Her findings were that "the Swazi nation is a nation which is still dominated by culture and women have no position in the Southern Semiotic Review Issue 20 2024 (ii)

Swazi society” Dlamini (2009). Moreover, these women were not content with their status quo and the only option available for them to speak out about their grievances was through the singing of songs. Through singing these songs, she was able to express her feelings, her views and herself about the perception of her environment.

Her songs can express her complaints and dissatisfactions.

Ka šila šila miliemilie ngwana wa batho (2x) (I grind, grind the mealies, me the poor child).

Chorus (2x)

Ijoo! dali wa tsamaya. Lerato le fedile (Oh my darling is leaving because the love has ended).

The song above is a Pedi song which can be depicted as a protest song and is sung and expressed as a game. The mood of the song guarantees that the status quo is kept. The song expresses that it is a women’s job to grind mealies because women are well known for being caretakers and housekeepers. It becomes their responsibility to ensure that members of the family are well fed and taken care of. The message this song conveys is that it is the responsibility of a woman to grind mealies but not of a man. This is one of the many responsibilities African women must be content with (being a caretakers). The second chorus of the song translates a message that women always do things on their own without the help of their partners to maintain their families. When men lose love and affection for their women they leave. Leaving poor women to deal with raising the children and ensuring that the family is provided for (Masoga, Maluleke and Baker, 2021).

Most times, the volatile nature of the female body should not be misappropriated for weakness or for any form of comic and sexist relief (Otieno, 2023). Renzetti et.al (2014) clearly substantiates this by assert that, African folklore songs involves sexist language that define a woman’s place unequal in the society. Prah cited in Masoga et.al (2021) believes that the best way to measure the development and growth of culture is through language. Through language one can express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Obododimma (1998) argues that proverbs were designed by men as one of the linguistic aspects to uphold men as custodians and producers of knowledge. These men believed that women are not capable of such a responsibility. This re-enforces the concept of submissiveness of women in Cameroun, Ghana and in Nigeria where they do not use proverbs in the presence of adult men during community discourses. Many folksongs in Africa are sexist and are often involves ignoring women and defining her status in society unequally.

Mosadi ke tšhweni o lewa mabogo (a woman is a baboon; her hands are eaten)

Monna ke tšhweni o ja ka diagram the pedi (a man is a baboon; he eats with two hands)

The configuration of sexist interpolation drives a wide divergence between men and women and these divergent dynamics are exemplified and illuminated during folkloric performances by assigning weaker roles to women as opposed to masculine roles and obvious display of powers usually tied to male performers and their apologetics in contemporary literature and performance. The above cited proverbs are constructs of Sepedi cosmos feelings about the perceptions induced psychologically and structurally and projected over the ages. In Sepedi proverbs, the use of the animal imagery and the construction of ‘baboon and hands’ are created as metaphors to allay or assuage gender roles for both women and men as typified by their culture. The woman is compared to a baboon by how she can become a good housekeeper and perform domestic duties. Only by her virtue of her obligation to become a good caretaker is a woman compared to a baboon. “[T]he beauty and charm of a woman I’d found in her labour (that is in her daily household chores) and her ability to take care of her husband” (Masenya, 1996).

Concurrently, a man’s comparison to a baboon is to emphasize how a man is entitled to “eat with two hands” which always places men on top of women in African cosmology. According to Masenya (1996) this proverb means that “even if man is married to a woman, it is acceptable that he can have other women outside the marriage; women who will also satisfy his needs”. Moreover, men are exalted for polygamous relationships and promotes promiscuity amongst men become the comparison of a man to a baboon is to justify how he can satisfy his sexual desires without being intercepted by any woman in Africa Masenya (1996). Words used to describe men in this case connote power and authority whilst for women it means weakness and disadvantage.

A book by Radin *African folklore* about African myths tells a story of how mankind inherited diseases. The book emphasized the place of language, culture, and orality. By enhancing language and culture, there is the cognition abilities in society which swiftly facilitate the development of oral skills in dynamic society (Pishghadam, et al, 2023). Below is a section in the novel where a messenger narrates the story of the beginning of sickness.

{“The } sky-god said we must take the woman to him.”

Ananse said, “That is she sitting there, take her away.”

After she had been taken, Ananse went and got the gourd into which all the diseases he had taken from the woman had been poured, and he stretched a skin

over the mouth of it. Then he stretched a skin over another gourd and gave it to his child. Ananse went with the drums to the harem, and the sky-god came and danced, and all his wives danced. Now, there remained the one who had been sick. When she saw that

Ananse had stretched a skin over the gourd in which were all her diseases, because of that she said she would not dance. And now the sky-god forced her, and she came; and when she was about to dance, Ananse lifted up the gourd and struck the woman with it, and the diseases scattered with a sound” like tese! That is how syphilis, stomach-ache, headache, leprosy, Guinea worm, smallpox, yaws, fits, diabetes, and madness came among the tribe. Once there was no sickness among mankind. It was the sky-god who was the cause of Ananse's bringing diseases among the (tribe’} (Radin, 2015).

From the tale above, the remote reason people, particularly African men have diseases today is because of a woman’s disobedience. A woman’s representation is portrayed as one who is rebellious and because of her rebellion, mankind was published with diseases. Although the diseases were brought to humankind by “the sky-god”, it is the woman who provoked him to reach that point. The woman is perceived as the “bad guy”. The presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased (Weinger et.el, 2006).

“See in many African cultures, everything that is done and featured during a traditional ceremony has a meaning. You can ask, but nobody will ever tell you the truth about why a woman has to be followed by a kist when she leaves home to get married. But if you look at it, that kist signifies your coffin, that even in death, you will not return to your home” (Busani-Dube, 2015).

Above is a quote from the novel *Hlomu the Wife* by Busani-Dube when Hlomu was getting married. According to her Zulu culture a bride is sent off with a kist to her husband’s home as a symbol of her never coming back to her house no matter the challenges she faces in her marriage. Hlomu in the novel experience’s domestic violence from her husband Mqhele however, she does not speak up nor attempts to return to her father’s house. She is groomed to persevere through all hardships she may encounter in her marriage. The cultural practice of sending a woman away with a kist does not apply to men as well. A man is not taught to persevere everything that comes with marriage nor is he told to leave his family to be with his wife and not return to his father’s house. These kinds of

cultural practices are representing women as one who must leave everything (her family) to follow a man. Women are posted as nothing without men. Some of these practices are unspoken or explained but the representation can be interpreted as practices that promote woman inequality and oppression. As much as the above quote from *African folklore* is about a woman's rebellion and the one from *Hlomu the Wife* is about submission and perseverance, a woman's representation is still "sloppy and biased" (Weinger et.al, 2006).

The portrayal of a woman in African folklore is either weak, below a man, a victim or she is rebellious and causes disorder. The first folklore is an African folksong which depicts a woman as a victim of a failed relationship. She is left by her man because he is not attracted to her anymore and now, she is left to provide for the family. The song uses words like "*ngwana wa batho*" translating to me poor thing to emphasize how the woman is abandoned and rejected. The woman seeks sympathy from the audience. A woman in this scenario is painted with an image of sorrow, shame, and rejection.

The second folklore is an African proverb which compares man and woman to baboon. However, the woman's comparison to the baboon is quite different from a man's comparison. She is praised for how capable she is with her dedication to the household work moreover, a man is praised for how he can handle more than one intimate relationships. The woman is portrayed as one who needs to gain approval by her ability to perform domestic duties. Again, her picture is sloppy. The third folklore is an African folktale *African folklore*, a woman causes chaos and consequently there is punishment to humankind. Because she refuses to dance due to her sickness, she is struck with diseases which falls to humankind. The sky-god is a male character with many wives, he represents power and authority. The wives dance as the sky-god commands but when one wife refuses to dance because she is sick, she is punished. The folktale narrates how once the world was a peaceful and healthy place until a woman's rebellion which led to all kinds of diseases and sickness. The woman is portrayed as the reason for chaos in many South Africa, Southern African folkloric traditions. Yet, in the fourth folklore which is a cultural practice in the novel *Hlomu the Wife* a woman is submissive, and she perseveres. Consequently, she loses her baby because of her husband beating her up while she is pregnant. She suffers from physical and emotional abuse. Her image is sloppy because she is dependent on her husband. She is so much in love with him that she dares not leave even when the Gender Based Violence is unbearable and became copious because "she is weak and She is nothing without her husband". An African woman is not well represented in all the selected texts above.

In most oral performances, the composition of various songs addresses various rules and conceptual functionality of that particular society (Kolawole, 2023). A study was conducted by Kotze (2012) about stories of South African women mourning practices titled *Women Mourn and Men Carry on: African Women Storying Mourning Practices: A South African Example*. These stories from mourning women show women's contributions to African cultural practices. In the research Nstki was interviewed and this was her contribution:

{'When} it comes to mourning, we used to shave our hair...in my family there was this woman, she was amakoti [a daughter in-law] in the family—she is my uncle's wife, and then she said to my father, it was death of another uncle, she said: "But do you think we need to cut our hair? Look, it was R85.00,6 we paid R85.00 for this [braids=plaits], and we are not going to cut our hair." And my father called the other three uncles and said: 'Listen, she is a makoti, you know...they are boycotting this...she didn't even have a doek on her head...they said they paid R85.00.' And the uncles said: "Yes, but this thing is very expensive, let's just cut a piece of hair, just a piece of hair...so from then on, it was a piece of hair...now the others complain about the piece of hair...They said: "Re tlamo oma," which means they only take scissors and pretend to cut a tiny piece of hair on top of the {head}'.

The scenario above typifies the significant contribution a woman makes to change certain cultural practices that have been respected for generations. The Makoti's resistance to adhere and submit tenaciously to cultural norms could have been due to gender and age (Kotze, 2012). She was younger than the generation which made these set of traditional rules however, it was an economic crisis that put the woman in an advantageous position (Kotze, 2012). The woman's ability and resource-fullness to negotiate a different practice became a solution for her and generations to come of women in the family (Kotze, 2012).

Apparently, an annual Zulu reed dance (Umhlanga) is hosted to celebrate girls' virginity. The participants must be verified virgins and the method of verification is done by older women under the spotlight of many people who share the same value. Girls who fail the test are subjected to rejection and shame. Resulting in a girl's worth diminishing. This would mean she is not worthy of marriage and has brought shame to her parents. Resulting in psychological trauma and violation of the right to dignity. However, men are not required to do the testing nor do participate in testing. This practice deprives women of equal right to enjoy and have freedom.

In this context, women's participation in African practices result in oppressing other women. Because women are primarily involved in this activity, they have the power to protect the young girls from shame and male supremacy. Furthermore, creating a safe space for other females.

In the first two given contexts, women have a great participation in South African folkloric tradition and play an outstanding role in shaping culture. Both queen Modjadji and the Makoti show the importance of women in culture. Their contributions paint a strong character in women. Which is empowering to see women having such impact in societies. It is an inspiration to women to have female characters who can be strong, admirable without a male character. It proves tremendously that women are capable as much as men are. Yet in the last text women's participation contributes to the oppression of other women.

5.0 The Systematization of Semiotics Interpolation in Culture

Cultural representation is systematized in the oral songs and folktales in South Africa. Zhumasheva et al (2022) practically explained the cross-cultural currents which assumed the societal mythical beliefs and to what extent 'metaphor' of life influence culture and influences the aesthetics and activities of men and women in society. The research articulately discussed the trajectory of women and the folkloric imperative in South Africa. Using some related songs in analysis, the songs showed the aesthetic twist in orality and effects they create.

Women have been subjugated in most African cultures and traditions. Future scholars would re-interpret the configuration of these oral songs to the development of technology, language and culture showing how significant they were in most contemporary societies. The findings could be applied to countries in Asia and Africa.

The significant role of performances has been handled by women in African cosmology. Fela Anikulapo in his interview opined concurrently that women keep the shrine, and they are very cognate in ensuring that activities and decisions were taken clearly and copiously. The etymological disposition of such, is that of a suppression and submissiveness usually exemplified on women.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

The study has examined the folkloric performances through songs, songs-drama, proverbs, and short tales. These have espoused the perception that Africa is male-centred or masculine with regards to the creation of metaphors and symbols used to represent women. In South Africa,

therefore, women have been represented in diverse folkloric dimensions which have become of cognate study to academics and other scholars of folklore, orature and social scientist.

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