

Sexism: A Study of Bessie Head's *Maru*

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Abstract

Sexism is a behaviour that is based on stereotypical gender roles, prejudice or discrimination based on gender especially against women. Unfortunately, Africa as a patriarchal society has been impacted negatively by the challenges that come from inequality. Hence, this paper focuses on sexism in *Maru*; it explores the demoralizing effects of sexism on the social, economic and psychological wellbeing of the protagonist and other major characters in the hand of the Batswana people. The analysis of the novel is based on feminist literary theory, careful study and examination of the protagonist and other characters. The study highlights their travails and how they eventually prevail against external and internal forces of subjugation, discrimination, suppression and intimidation through formal education, polished personality, love for social justice, their will power and determination to succeed. The level of their success in their quest for emancipation is also considered in this paper.

Keywords: Sexism, Discrimination, Emancipation, Inequality, Patriarchy

Introduction

Sexism is an abnormal social behaviour that some people try to rationalize and justify because they serve their evil and wicked purposes of subjugation of others. For example, in order for some male chauvinists to feel alive, they must intimidate, harass and ill-treat every woman within the sphere of their influence. These may include their mother, mother-in-law, wife, sister and daughter and other women. On the other side of the coins, some women and feminists believe that for them to be seen and regarded as independent women, the men in their lives must be emasculated through exchange of traditional roles. That is, the traditional roles of the headship of the family that belongs to the man must be usurped by the wife, once she finds herself in the role of bread winner of the family. These abnormalities in gender relation and relationship between men and women is the focus and purpose of this paper. This article tries to demystify some of the notions, values and traditions that propagate sexism in and out the context of the primary text of this paper.

Margaret the protagonist in the narrative was born a bastard (her father was not mentioned anywhere in the narrative) by a mother who belonged to the lower social class of slaves and social outcasts of Masarwa people. From her birth she becomes a victim of gender, racial and social discrimination. Though she was later raised by a white foster mother, she remains at the receiving end of sexists' remarks and action in a male dominated and patriarchal society of Dilepe. She is entrusted with the responsibility of liberating her people from social and racial discrimination and subjugation from powers that be in the hotbed of classism and sexism -Dilepe. To a great extent, she was able to achieve her goal. She rejects sexism through her identity (when she refuses to deny her race before the high and mighty of Dilepe). She embraced her gender and race (when it was not popular to do so). Other factor that works for her is her ability to face and communicate with her oppressors and her people's oppressor's such as Moleka, Seth, Pete, Morafi and Maru. According to Hazam (2015) "[Moleka of the totems at Dilepe] ... falls in love with Margaret on account of her politeness and beauty ... (p. 404). Her demure and beauty attracts powerful friends that help her cause of liberating herself and her people from shackles of sexism and classism.

Conceptual Framework

Sexism is a broad and an interdisciplinary ideology. Based on this, definitions are sometimes based on professional leanings of discipline or field of human studies of the writer. In this study we shall attempt some definitions and narrow it down to those that are relevant to the purpose and intent of this paper. Psychologist Crawford and Unger (2004) explicate sexism as “a form of prejudice held by individual that encompasses negative attitudes and values about women as a group” (p.9). Hooks (2000), a feminist author, defines sexism from feminist perspective as “a system of oppression that result in disadvantages for women” (p.48). Frye (1983), a feminist philosopher perceives sexism as an “attitudinal –conceptual –cognitive- orientational complex of male supremacy, male chauvinism and misogyny” (p.41). All the definitions above point to girls and women as the ones at the receiving end of sexism. However, these assertions are not absolutely true. This opinion is supported by the balanced explication of sexism by Jary and Jary (2005), as “any devaluation or denigration of women or men, but particularly women, which is embodied in institutions and social relationships” (p.210). This definition illustrates the reason behind why it is almost impossible to write prose-fiction in or about Africa without delving into sexism or sexist comments and statements. Most African institutions and social relationships are built on patriarchy. Sexism in African literature is real and alive. The domination and subjugation of women by men are fully exploited and discussed. They form the basis of discourse in the primary text under study.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts feminist literary theory in its analysis. Feminism is a multi-disciplinary concept and movement that advocates for gender equality between men and women. The above explication of feminism is based on the notion that in the binary of existence, the men are stronger than the women. Generally, women are referred to as the weaker sex. The men are regarded as superior, while the women are regarded as inferior. The dichotomy of inferiority complex of women and superiority complex of men since the time of Adam and Eve has had great impact on the relationship of both sexes. Feminism and feminists’ tasks are to bridge the gap and break the shackles of patriarchy domination and gender inequality. Feminism, according to Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra (2001) “is a serious attempt to formulate the issues and find solution to gender problems” (p.74). In the same vein, Millet (1970) distinguishes between sex and gender thus: “sex is determined biologically whereas gender is cultural/socially/ psychologically constructed through sex-role stereotyping and historical conditioning” (p.24). The implication of the statement above is that women are not only physically dominated, but are culturally, economically, socially, religiously and psychologically dominated. The situation in Africa is more pathetic.

Feminist Criticism to us can be describe as the tool of analyzing texts written by feminist writers. Feminist critics also use the same tool in criticizing feminism and feminist works, especially feminist work of literary value. Krishnaswamy et.al (2001) expand the scope of feminist criticism as a tool of analysis to all literary works that contains male and female characters. Their position is articulated below:

One can look at almost any literary text from gender point of view, whether it is the Ramayaha or the Mohabharata since men and women are portrayed in the texts; secondly, since all representations are made through language, the language of the text reveals the attitude of the society towards gender issues (p.78).

Maru qualifies as one of such texts refer to above by Krishnaswamy et.al because it discusses the protagonist’s travail against the subjugation of a patriarchal society.

Sexism in *Maru*

In keeping with our definition of sexism as a differential treatment, prejudice or discrimination based on exploitation of people because of their gender, we can say that apart from Mrs. Cadmore, other major characters in the novel *Maru* are victims of sexism. Amongst others, we can also say that both Moleka and Maru are male chauvinist in words and actions. Most of their sexist deeds and words are mostly directed at women, and both Margaret and Dikeledi are at the receiving end of their sexist exploitation, and manipulation. Other instances of sexism that involves Pete and Margaret, and male and female pupils in the narrative are also discussed. Below, we examine some of them.

In the narrative both Maru and Moleka are presented as the two sides of the same coin. They are both presented as one body. While Moleka is the body without a heart, Maru is the heart that was missing in his friend Moleka. Both of them are known in the entire village as incurable womanizers. But the effects of their sexual escapades with their numerous lovers whom they treat as discarded tissue paper is different from Maru to Moleka. For Moleka, because he does not have a heart, all his relationships with women are devoid of any emotional attachment. He sleeps with them, put them in family way and drop the child from such relationship with his mother. While most of his lovers fall in love with him genuinely, he is only interested in their bodies. Whenever he ends such relationship abruptly, the lovers are usually emotionally and psychologically damaged to the extent of insanity. Whereas on his part it is always as if nothing has happened. He carries on like that till there were eight children from different mothers living with him and his mother without any emotional attachment to them

Maru on the other side of the coin, though a very complex and manipulative character, cannot have a relationship with the opposite sex without falling in love with his heart. Moleka does not know what it means to fall in love, but Maru understands the feeling very well. Maru's love relationship usually ends tragically for him and the lovers in his life. Whenever he brings his relationship with them to an end, there is always one form of sickness or a disease attached to the break up at both ends. Maru is drained emotionally and his lovers are also drained emotionally. However, he has the means of taking care of himself, and after sometime, he recovers enough to engage in another relationship that will ultimately end in destroying the live of another lady foolish enough to fall in love with him. The outcome of their relationship with women are the same. They use and dumped women. In the process they damage them physically, emotionally, socially, mentally and most importantly psychologically. They never truly love any lady until Margaret appears at Dilepe

Before Margaret appears at Dilepe, Dikeledi has been in love with Moleka, but he is too busy to pay any attention to a particular lady. He knows that Dikeledi is in love with him, but he was not ready to offer what Dikeledi wants which is a relationship between them that will end in marriage. Both Maru and Moleka are eligible bachelors, but they are not ready to settle down. Dikeledi who is also Maru's sister keep hoping that Moleka will settle down with her. Whether that would have happened before the arrival of Margaret is not certain. Margaret appearance at Dilepe clanged everything between Dikeledi and Moleka. For Moleka and Dikeledi, the change was a good and positive one, while for Maru and Moleka, the change changed them form friends to rivals, and almost enemies.

When Margaret appears at Dilepe, Maru was on a visit outside Dilepe community. Both Maru and Moleka work at the Dilepe Tribal Administration. It is part of their job descriptions to allocate accommodation to teachers posted to Leseding school. Ironically, it was Dikeledi that took Margaret to Moleka's office. Their first encounter set of the bombs of love at first sight in their respective hearts. That night for the first time in Moleka's life, he genuinely fell in love with Margaret, the effect of her love on him made him so dumb that he could not bring himself to express himself and his love for her. The effect of the love was so great that he started muttering to himself on the street. The change was so drastic that he could not sleep with any of his numerous lovers. It was a great change for a man who has been sleeping with women every night since he was twelve years old!

While he was preparing himself on how to approach and profess his love to Margaret, other events occur that further delay his proposal to her. It was discovered by Pete that Margaret is a Masarwa through her own admission. Maru claims that Moleka delayed in confessing his love for Margaret because of his social status as one of the totems. He has to start a revolution that will upgrade the status of the Masarwa in order for him to be able to propose to Margaret who has publicly identified herself as a Masarwa. As the revolution was going on in Moleka's house where he eats with the same cutlery with his Masarwa slaves, and on the same table with them in the company of his invited guest, Seth, the education supervisor, Dikeledi was also busy at the village school foiling the principal's plan to disgrace Margaret out of the school.

While all these were going on, Maru who has been out town came back, and his spy Ranko informed him how a new Masarwa teacher has been causing so much trouble in the town. How Moleka has release and eat with his Masarwa slaves, and how Peter's plan to get rid of the Masarwa teacher backfired through the intervention of his sister Dikeledi. Maru who is at that point already the paramount chief of Dilepe in name listen to all Ranko has said, and there after set his own plan in motion. His first personal encounter with the Masarwa teacher comes when Margaret came to beg Moleka to give her time to return the mattress lend to her by Moleka. Maru Interrupted them and told her that he is the one that asked her to returned the mattress, and from that point, a deadly game of love and will start between Maru and Moleka, and the price to be won by the winner of the game is Margaret.

It must be mentioned that Margaret is not the only pawn in this game. Ironically, Dikeledi's hope of getting married to Moleka was also in the balance. While he was madly in love with Moleka like a dog who is devoted to his owner, Moleka is madly in love with Margaret. Both Moleka and Margaret are in love, but Moleka could not express his love for Margaret. While he was waiting for everything to fall into place for him to propose, Maru capitalized on his hesitation and stole the initiative to marry Margaret from him. Dikeledi is aware that Maru has fallen in love with Margaret, but Margaret is not aware that Maru is secretly in love with her. Maru is fully aware that Moleka is in love with Margaret, but Dikeledi who is a friend of Margaret does not know that her best friend is in love with her man. Maru deliberately decides not to tell Dikeledi that Moleka is behaving strangely because he is in love with Margaret. Both Moleka and Maru were playing Dikeledi and Margaret like a fiddle in spite of their intelligence and social status as teachers and enlightened ladies who should know better.

After both Moleka and Maru have threatened to kill each other because of Margaret, Moleka was forced by Maru and his spies to marry the second-best woman available: Dikeledi. In spite of her education and social status, Dikeledi was initially treated by Moleka the way he treated his other lovers. He even thought of killing her if she refuses his sexual advances and in order to get back at Maru for snatching Margaret away from him. He put her in a family way and changed back to his old way of loveless and non-committed sexual relationships that treats women as toys. However, when it finally dawned on him that he has been fooled and beaten by Maru for Margaret's love, he turned and became a responsible husband to his wife Dikeledi on the night of their wedding ceremony. It must be mentioned that Maru forced the marriage between Moleka and Dikeledi in order to snatch away Margaret from him.

For Margaret and Maru, their situation was slightly different from the other two of Moleka and Dikeledi. Maru never propose to Margaret until the night of their wedding. However, through her paintings, Margaret was communicating with Maru without knowing it. Maru projects his ideas to her through dream, and she respond by painting exactly what Maru desired her to paint without any physical communication. All the things that Margaret desire in her painting were provided for by Maru without her knowledge. Just before their wedding ceremony, Dikeledi revealed to Margaret that she is in love with Moleka but fears if Moleka is in love with her. This revelation crushed Margaret who was hoping that someday Moleka will come to her. Eventually, Maru showed up at her place and convinced her to marry him. Margaret did not have a choice but to get married to Maru because Moleka has been forced to marry Dikeledi. She agreed to marry Maru and follow him to the home of her dream which is far from Dilepe.

In the build up to Pete's plan to disgrace and chase Margaret out of Leseding School and Dilepe, his plan involves using one of the pupils to cause commotion in her class. The boy used for the evil act reveals another aspect of differential and preferential treatment between boys and girls in terms of their formal education. This time, the differential system of education is against the boys. According to the narrative: "at the time the beginner's grade consisted of a varied age range. Most of the girls were six or seven, but the boys who worked as cow-herds started school from the age of ten to fourteen" (Head, 2008, p.34).

In the face of such gender discrimination against male child education at the beginners' grade, how will they be able to bridge the gap between them and the girls intellectually. Most of men in the primary text

- *Maru*, apart from the educated ones, are presented as spineless men who only rear cattle and sleep with as many women they can find. And when they see women like Dikeledi and Margaret, they are psychologically intimidated by them. They only gossip and fantasize about educated and independent minded woman around them. Their so-called gender superiority complex imposed on them by patriarchal tradition and custom becomes hollow when they are confronted by bold, beautiful and educated woman.

Before Margaret steps into Dilepe, her fame has been spread around the village as “a teacher with Grade A for every subject” (Head, 2008, p.39). When she gets to the village the people of Dilepe also notice “that the new mistress had dignity and respect for everyone” (Head, 2008, p. 39). However, the music changed when it was discovered that she is a Masarwa. Pete, the school principal has been envious of Margaret because of the brilliance of her advance papers. This made him assume that she must be a coloured or a mixed breed because of the fair colour of her skin and level of intelligence. Margaret boldly informed him that she is a Masarwa. Pete ran to Seth, the education supervisor to report that the new teacher is a Masarwa and something must be done about it. In the process of their discussion on what to do about it, Seth told Pete, “They are going to blame me...I only look at qualifications. She was top of the class whole way through, how the hell did she get in? God, Pete this is a mass” (Head, 2008 p.31) Pete’s sexist response is appalling. She can be shoved out It’s easy. She is a woman” (Head, 2008, p.31)

Their irrational gender prejudice against her did not stop there. They continue to wallow in their foolish sexist vituperation. “Her qualifications are good. She couldn’t possibly have gotten there on her own brains. Someone was pushing her. We don’t know who is pushing her. We don’t know who and they might be important” (Head, 2008, p.31). To Pete and Seth, a woman cannot be as beautiful and bold, yet brilliant as Margaret without someone, probably a man, pulling her strings. They believe that some important people are behind her academic prowess. This kind of sexist attitude is what is ruining the continent. So, if they have known in advance that the lady with the brilliant certificates is a Masarwa lady, they would have stopped her and all the good qualities she has from coming to Dilepe. Their racism and sexism will not let them see that people are just people and the only thing that qualify them for any appointment or position is proof of their competence that they can get the job done, and not their race or gender. They would also have denied the paramount chief in waiting of his future wife, if they had succeeded in their evil plans of chasing Margaret out of Dilepe

Both Maru and Moleka do not have any respect for women because they do not know how to be committed to their women in mutual respected relationship. They believe that they are too good and superior to any woman of their chosen. When Maru’s desire and plan to marry Margaret was revealed by him to his sister, Dikeledi. Dikeledi asked him if he has proposed to the lady before planning for a marriage with her. His chauvinistic response to such rational and reasonable question is to ask Dikeledi thus; “As for proposals, who else do you think would want to marry her, beside myself?” (Head, 2008, p.56) His sister responds by telling him that it is not unusual for women to have many admirers. However, when Maru asked himself the same question, he answered himself, and his answer is that instead of accepting rejection from her, he would rather kill her. This line of thought is not pursued by Maru alone. After Ranko, one of Maru spies, stopped Moleka from proposing to Margaret when he finally had the nerves to do that. Moleka turned his attention to Dikeledi, and in his musing, the idea of Dikeledi rejection of his intended sexual advances crossed his mind. Like Maru, he banished the thought by telling himself that he would just kill her. Both of them have bloated sense of entitlement when it comes to relationship with women. They believe they can have and do whatever they like with any women when they feel like it whether such lady is royalty or a commoner like Dikeledi and Margaret respectively.

Findings and Summary

As mentioned in the introduction, this article tries to debunk some of the unfounded notions, values and traditions that propagate sexism in the primary text of the study. For instance, Moleka in the narrative is presented as a heartless lover who feels emotionally superior to all his lovers without any emotional

attachment to them. Both Maru and Moleka thought they were emotionally and psychologically superior to their numerous lovers, and can continue to use and discard them without any commitment. However, both Moleka and Maru helplessly fell in love with Margaret to the point of becoming rivals. Their early posturing of being heartless disappeared before Margaret.

Moreover, the notion that a woman cannot succeed or amount to much outside the kitchen without a man pulling her strings becomes very shallow and untenable through the presentation of Margaret as a shy, but intelligent, brave and beautiful. She is not just beauty without brain; she has A in all her papers. She achieved all these and more without undue influence from any man or woman.

Conclusion

Sexism is a two-edged sword that is capable of destroying both the sexist and the victim. In the narrative under analysis, both Moleka and Maru could not find fulfilment and satisfaction in sleeping with different ladies. In fact, Maru contracts different types of diseases from his numerous lovers. On the other hand, Moleka's reward from his escapades with his many lovers were unwanted pregnancies and children dumped with his mother. However, when they both became committed to Dikeledi and Margaret respectively in an exclusive, mutual love-filled romance, they found the elusive stability and satisfaction that makes them responsible and committed to their spouses.

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