Chapter 8

Interrogating South African Reality and Probing the Interconnections of Language, Hegemonic Masculinities and Patriarchy

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Introduction

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Africa abounds with heroes and heroines who ruled their countries with precision and were at the forefront of the liberation struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Queen Aminatu of the 13th century—the daughter of Bakwa Turunku—ruled a country called Zazzau in Hausaland. According to history, Queen Nefertiti and Cleopatra ruled ancient Egypt, while Queen Ranavalona ruled Madagascar from 1788 to 1861, and Queen Nandi, the influential mother of Shaka, was able to guide him to rule the Zulu kingdom. In the northern part of South Africa, we had Queen Modjadji, who ruled without regard to patriarchy or gender discrimination (Matshego 2019).

In the origin of the family, as catalogued by Engels (1893), it is documented that the family formed the cornerstone of a class society and, with it, some forms of women's oppression as they (that is, women), for the first time, became the private property of their husbands. This is where the adage 'a woman's place is in the home' began to take root. With this, we saw how girl children were nurtured to become obedient and boy children were trained as future leaders (Mohanty 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Hill-Collins 2000). However, in pre-class societies, or primordial communities, women and men enjoyed equal freedom. Later on, there was a state called gynecocracy, where women were in charge of their governments and the running of their communities as a whole. Gynecocracy is defined as a form of government or political system which is governed by women (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2019). This symbolised female power. So, where did we learn about gender-based violence (GBV) or domestic violence?

When he critiques identity and gender, Thiongo's gender dimensions allude to the fact that gender-based violence should be seen against the backdrop of slavery, colonialism and

globalisation. This continuum of colonialism and oppression in Africa has led to the post-colonial personality being trapped in a contradictory Western civilisation.

Violence in the home setting is rife in most countries. Unfortunately, women are its usual victims, while most men are the perpetrators (Thobejane 2015).

Despite their immense contribution during the liberation struggle, South African women still face all forms of oppression. Every township and village boast of many women who sacrificed their lives on the altar of freedom. Yet they still find themselves marginalised by the same men they helped to emancipate. Women's organisations, including the judiciary, continue to fight against those customary, cultural and religious practices that subordinate them. They are calling for the protection of women against racial and sexual harassment and for accessible shelters and counselling services for survivors of rape, battery, sexual assault and demeaning gender roles that have been perpetuated by some of the antiquated cultural aspects in our communities. The Commission for Gender Equality has played a meaningful role in making gender transformation part of the South African march towards democratic laws that protect women. Therefore, this chapter argues that gender-based violence is perpetuated in language form. Gender subjugation continues to show itself in spoken language and the acceptable norms and values that condemn women to the kitchen and to being mere child bearers.

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Objectives of the chapter

The objectives of the chapter are as follows:

1. To elucidate how language can be used as a tool to perpetuate gender discrimination.

2. To show some concepts that are embedded in language (especially Northern Sotho or Sepedi, spoken in Limpopo Province, South Africa) that may advertently or inadvertently perpetuate gender-based violence or gender discrimination.

Research questions of the chapter

The following are the research questions:

1. How can language be used as a tool to perpetuate gender-based violence or gender discrimination?

2. What are some concepts embedded in language that may advertently or inadvertently advocate for gender-based violence or gender discrimination?

Significance of the study

This chapter looks at some of the arguments advanced by feminist paradigms in deconstructing the patriarchal hegemony perpetuating itself in language and culture. The focal point is that language can perpetuate hegemonic masculinities by way of using language that conforms to gender exploitation and discrimination. The chapter aims to expose some of the dehumanising aspects of language and to foster a dialogue that is based on egalitarianism. The study is significant as it strives to expose some sexist tendencies that are grounded in language.

Literature review

The South African Government, at the highest policy-making levels, vowed to address human rights violations against women. However, the state's response remains sporadic and often discriminatory. The lack of a systematic approach to addressing the scourge of domestic violence means that lasting democratic change cannot be achieved. South African women's organisations estimate that as many as one in every three women was raped and that one in six women was in an abusive domestic relationship from 2005 to 2013 (Abrahams et al. 2010; Nduna and Nene 2014; Vetten 2007). These figures have increased to an alarming degree since the advent of COVID-19, with Mexico leading the fray.

Crime statistics released annually by the South African Police Service (SAPS) do not provide much information about GBV. They provide some information about sexual offences, but questions have been raised about their reliability and whether they are overestimating or underestimating the scourge. Furthermore, it has been reported that many victims of GBV are unlikely to go to police stations to report their cases due to the patriarchal attitudes of some police officials (Vetten 2007). There is, therefore, a reporting bias in the statistics released by the SAPS.

In Sudan, we are told that law enforcement bodies are biased towards mainly policing the public behaviour of women in the name of protecting morality. They are targets of religious propaganda that preaches obedience and chastity. If they are seen in the street and judged to be inadequately

covered or without an escort or to be walking in a 'provocative' manner, they can be sentenced to a jail term. The wearing of the hijab, which is a combination of a headscarf and a long-sleeved blouse, is widely accepted in Sudan. However, it becomes problematic when it is imposed on women. Women in Sudan cannot travel unaccompanied by men. This restricts women's movement. Also, Sharia law is used to send to prison women who brew alcohol to support their families. Women are often raped in prison (House 2008). At the heart of these malpractices is the language that is rooted in patriarchal codes where women are referred to as secondary to men. Another practice that valorises female subjugation—a daily practice in most Muslim countries and, of course, here in South Africa—is genital mutilation, which is also celebrated in language. In Sepedi, a language spoken in the northern part of South Africa, we are told that '*Sa mosadi ke go ya komeng*' ('a perfect woman is one who is circumcised').

Female genital mutilation, already practised comprehensively in northern Sudan, has also spread to the non-Muslim community in the south and west and among urban migrants responding to social pressure to conform. It is mistakenly regarded as an Islamic practice and a safeguard against immorality and AIDS, although it has been suggested by medical experts that the opposite is true. Medical complications regularly result from this practice, which involves cutting the clitoris and the outer vaginal labia and, in the severe form most widely carried out, includes infibulation (which means the sewing up of the vaginal orifice, leaving only a small outlet for menstrual flow) (Vetten 2019).

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One out of every three women in Nigeria suffers from domestic violence, and in some areas, physical violence against one's spouse is not even considered a crime. As many as 56% of women in parts of Nigeria are also subjected to female circumcision (Equality Now n.d.). This chapter does not argue for or against female circumcision (or genital mutilation as it is called by Western feminists). Rather, it shines a spotlight on issues that women need to resolve by themselves instead of being dictated to by their immediate cultural milieu.

Gender stereotypes produce behaviour patterns that conform to expectations, such as female submissiveness to males. Kay et al. (2015) state that a stereotype is a belief that individuals in a group (for example, gender, occupation, race, ethnicity or particular background) generally have one or more traits or behaviours. People make use of stereotypes to explain their own or others' behaviours, to justify actions or decide how to act and to define group boundaries. In society, gender stereotypes are used as standards for evaluating people's mental capabilities, social roles, positions and qualities possessed. When gender stereotypes are used this way, they lead to discrimination and prejudice. These stereotypes can be found in how we classify people and the language we use to authenticate this classification.

Elouard et al. (2013) posits that due to the cultural and institutional devaluation of characteristics and activities associated with women, men have had very little incentive to move into very often badly rewarded traditional female activities. These activities include homemaking, among other primarily female-dominated roles. There are, however, powerful economic incentives for women to move into historically male-dominated occupations despite issues of inequity in the remuneration levels of women as compared to their male colleagues in similar jobs (Elouard et al. 2013). A study on the gendered nature of poverty in northern Ghana found that the effects of general poverty are experienced more by women than by their male counterparts. This includes the calculated deprivation and marginalisation of women (that is, inadequate education of females), lack of access by women to productive resources, limited decision-making power, and ultimately, powerlessness. Men have long dominated positions of power in economic and political spheres, the legal system, religious and educational institutions, as well as most community organisations (Elouard et al. 2013).

Feminism and gender

According to feminist activist Patti Lather (1991), every woman has something important to say about the disjuncture in her own life and the means necessary for change. Feminism addresses this disjuncture and issues of domination, class oppression and gender inequality, whose end results are domestic violence, abuse and patriarchy. Feminists (especially radical feminists) also posit that capitalism is highly patriarchal. Men own the richest of industries (and capital) everywhere in the world. This system of patriarchal capitalism translates into domestic violence in many countries (as alluded to earlier in Engels' work). Many of the abused women have been found not to have developed a standpoint vis-à-vis their oppression as most think it is part of the culture and religion that they are treated that way and can therefore not resist it, especially given that the languages we speak still valorise this dehumanisation.

Some feminists have argued that domestic violence has its roots in the traditional definitions of gender relations and gender roles that determine the legitimacy of wife-beating (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). When wife beating escalates, it is because of factors such as militarism, consumer capitalism, portrayals of violence and sexism and our everyday language that depicts women as inferior to men (Crenshaw 1994).

Language and GBV

Speech (or language) reveals the links between power and patriarchy. Speech may not simply be a means by which we communicate; it can also show the desire to dominate. It is no more than just a verbalisation of conflicts and systems of domination. It is the very object of man's conflict. Almost all languages have some patriarchal undertones, some of which stem from what we may call hegemonic masculinities.

According to Thobejane (2014; 2015), language is the engine of reason. Language forms part of the production of knowledge. Reason, which comes in the form of language, can present itself as universal. Therefore, the continued silencing and degrading of women can be found in spoken language. Foucault (1972), hooks (2000) and Hill-Collins (2000) argued that power is widely dispersed and operates in the form of language—diffusely, through the ways we talk, write and conceptualise. In language, one sentence may have two meanings (Thobejane 2014). An obvious meaning, understood without difficulty by everyone, may conceal a second esoteric meaning that requires a more subtle deciphering to finally reveal it. Language may be the terrain where differently privileged discourses struggle via confrontation and/or displacement.

Ramaite (2016) once argued that:

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> Most languages are sexist, and this implies that languages 'represent' or 'name' the world from a masculine viewpoint, and 'in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes. The male representation, as well as the monopoly of naming has detrimental effects on relationships between women and men, particularly when men feel threatened by what they regard as 'women being too presumptuous for their gender' or when they believe that 'women do not know their place in a man's world (Ramaite 2016: 13).

Women have been at the receiving end of gender-based violence for too long. They should start setting up clearer goals of attaining social justice and equality and transforming their economic, political and social structures. This will help them to fight for social change in their communities. If feminism is to liberate a woman, it must address all forms of domination. Women fill the ranks of every category of oppressed people.

In addressing the issue further, Makgopa (2018) adds that with respect to the status of women, from a traditional and cultural point of view—especially in the context of practice, tradition and

beliefs in Africa—women are addressed in different ways within the society. In most cases, they are treated as minors. Makgopa further illustrates that in Northern Sotho, there is a proverb that goes, '*Mosadi ke ngwana*' (A woman is a child). In this light, children are always expected to carry out directives and instructions from their parents. At certain stages in women's lives, their parents decide on their behalf what they eat or wear (Makgopa 2018). Further, there is another saying that goes, '*Mosadi ga a na lentšu kgorong*' (A woman cannot speak in a traditional court, or a woman is not allowed to express herself in a traditional court). Women are not allowed to participate in traditional courts even if the case handled rests squarely on their shoulders. Women are not allowed to participate in many gatherings, such as the courts. Another proverb elucidated by Makgopa (2018) to show how women are not fully recognised and treated like men says, '*Mosadi o hupa meetse*' (A woman keeps water in her closed mouth). This proverb indicates that a woman is supposed to keep quiet, even during tribulations.

Theoretical framework

This chapter uses radical feminism as a lens through which to deconstruct oppressive language that valorises gender discrimination and, ultimately, domestic violence, which emanates from sexual relations of power (Hill-Collins 2000). At the core of oppressive gender-based language lies the system of patriarchy, which excludes women from political and economic power and destroys the potential that women have as a group. Furthermore, radical feminism argues that the experiences of women are interlinked with ideological and economic assumptions about women at the international level (see Lather 1991). The emergence of property and the capitalist mode of production are once more seen as levers towards women's oppression and subjugation that exemplify themselves in our daily usage of language (what Lather calls 'Languacentricity'). Language can be used as a hegemonic critique, where elites are imposing their ideology to leverage themselves as 'leaders' to unquestioning 'followers'. It is, therefore, imperative to learn how to unlock the consciousness of the oppressed (in this case, the marginalised women) so that they can be conscientised about their position. Hence, there is a need for a definition of educational theory whose main aim is to raise the consciousness of women vis-a-vis their oppression and denigration. This can only be realised when oppressive language is changed to be a tool for conscientisation and liberation.

With the development of capitalism, women have been pushed to the margins and relegated to reproductive labour at home. This separation of labour, argued Hill-Collins (2000), Mohanty (2003)

and Lather (1991), is seen as important to the development of capitalism and patriarchy. Capital accumulation cannot be achieved unless patriarchal gender relations are maintained. Control over women is entrenched in economic, ideological, cultural and political structures. These structures authenticate themselves in spoken language that entrenches gender discrimination. Anything that challenges this setup is strongly resisted by men. Hill-Collins (2000) also maintains that capitalism has channelled women into commodity production. This largely impacts what men and women think about themselves. This devaluation has led to men thinking that women cannot challenge them. Feminist organisations are striving to deconstruct this male-hegemonic world outlook which presently determines the consciousness and meaningfulness of societies. Feminism is more concerned with critical social science and the politics of empowerment. Feminist thought defines empowerment as a general analysis of the causal factors of powerlessness and collective actions to change the material conditions in which women find themselves. For this to happen, we should start with the way our languages are constructed to perpetuate gender discrimination and the way male hegemony is celebrated in the form of language.

Research design and methodology

Critical discourse analysis was used as a method of gathering the data for this chapter. This approach included the usage of literature regarding how hegemonic masculinities perpetuate themselves in language. The study relied on content analysis, which is a method of analysing various texts from literature. Through content analysis, the researcher extracts material (as sample) out of a huge amount of texts (for example, newspapers and books) regarding the topic under study. The view of content analysis is that different perspectives provide different forms of knowledge about a phenomenon under study so that, together, they produce a broader understanding. Content analysis always remains a matter of interpretation. As there is no hard data provided, the reliability and validity of one's research/findings depend on the force and logic of one's arguments (Renkema 2004).

Even the best-constructed arguments are subject to their own deconstructive reading and counter-interpretations. The same holds true for this study. The validity of critical analysis is, therefore, dependent on the quality of the rhetoric (Renkema 2004). By enabling us to make these assumptions explicit, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) postulate that content analysis may allow us to view the 'problem' from a higher stance, to gain a comprehensive view of the 'problem' and ourselves in relation to that 'problem', and ultimately, to solve concrete problems—not by providing

unequivocal answers but by asking ontological and epistemological questions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). This research is, therefore, a product of the understanding that research should be openly ideological and based on a liberatory advocacy for an oppressed group (Green and Thorogood 2018).

Observations and findings

What follows are the themes that emerged during the textual (content) analysis of books studied regarding the topic:

Sexist language

When confronting the issue of language, it appears that gender roles and the power attached to men permeate the texts studied (as shown in the literature review). The role of women is largely reduced to that of a sexual object. Languages interpret the world from a masculine viewpoint. In arguing this point further, Hill-Collins (2000) opines that male andragogy is deeply entrenched in our languages.

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In our communities, there are proverbs which are used by men and are said at weddings and when they are alone celebrating their hegemonic masculinities. Proverbs such as those used in Sepedi, for instance, are inadvertently reinforcing the subjugation of women. Utterances such as '*Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*' (meaning that even if a woman is being ill-treated in marriage, she must not seek divorce because by so doing, she will be transgressing on the sanctity of marriage) are re-enforcing gender subjugation. Furthermore, if a man shows that he has feminine characteristics, he is chastised by other men and called a weakling and not worthy of being a man. Men are not supposed to show emotion. They are not supposed to cry.

Language and patriarchy

In everyday usage of language, women are frequently portrayed as objects of violence, sex and/or aggression. This view is supported by Ramaite (2016: 13) when she says that gender and language structure has demonstrated numerous ways in which women are ignored, trivialised and depreciated by the words used to describe them. Thobejane (2015) further indicates that culture (be it Western, Asian or African) also regards men as having been endowed with the authority to

rule over women. This perpetuates itself in coded patriarchal language. Language is the backbone of power relations in every society. It is through language that women continue to be vilified and dehumanised. Speaking has never been neutral. The spoken word, or the formal language, is loaded with gender insensitivities. Feminists, in their endeavour to deconstruct the patriarchal power structures in language, are presently searching for feminine styles of writing. For instance, Lacan (cited by Jarviluoma, Moisala and Vilkko 2003: 111) says that women will always be at a disadvantage in language because the organising principle of language is the opposition between the masculine phallic presence (or hegemonic masculinities) that lacks any feminine analysis.

The literature engaged thus far indicates that the patriarchal power structures in language should be deconstructed by offering a sort of counter-language that will amplify the voices of the women who remain marginalised. Women still need to rally together to fight against systems of language that are demeaning to them.

Implications

Women around the world have played a distinctive role in opposition to totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Their struggles continue unabated to date. They still play a meaningful role in helping the families of those who have been harassed, executed, arrested or dismissed from their jobs because of gender discrimination and patriarchy. Gender-based violence remains a pandemic which is unparalleled around the world and especially in South Africa. This violence is sometimes hidden in codes that are embedded in our everyday use of language. A collaborative approach is needed where linguists and policymakers can start to work out a curriculum that seeks to root out all sexist notions that are transmitted through language.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the arguments advanced by feminist paradigms in deconstructing patriarchal hegemony perpetuating itself in language and culture. The chapter showed that language can be used as a tool for subjugation. Hegemonic masculinities are also alluded to as oppressive bodies that are connected to the everyday lives of men while also affecting women. Marriage is also critiqued as an institution where hegemonic masculinities may find fertile ground for the perpetuation of the domination of men over women. The chapter posits that some of our behaviours can be attributed to cultural constraints that may stem from patriarchal relations.

Languages continue to have a gendered position in our culture. Male hegemony can, therefore, find its place in language. Language that perpetuates patriarchal norms that, in turn, contribute to gender-based violence has to be deconstructed in order to offer language codes and nuances that resonate well with the plight of women.

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