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I. Introduction

This article examines agency in the representation of female literary characters in the Sesotho novel by Moephuli, *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena*, published in 1982. The objective is to demonstrate some novels published the apartheid era, however few they were, portrayed black African female characters whose actions display agency. That aspect of character agency might have been overshadowed by the description of the literature of indigenous African languages as being produced under stringent censorship laws (Gerard, 1983; Ntuli, 1987). Re-evaluating how women characters have been represented in the novel, *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena*, may heightened a "process known as consciousness-raising" (Ruthven, 1984:71) that in certain novels published during the stringent laws of apartheid, some main female literary characters had agency against patriarch and the oppressive system. Gagiano points out that: "If novels are seen to function as enquiries, implicitly evaluating the societies or situations they depict by measuring the degree of social justice […] in asking of the text whether or to what extent it allows the 'subaltern' to 'speak' [...], or the socially voiceless to be heard." (2007:90), in a way, that act is assessing if the narrative of the oppressed is empowering the oppressed voices.

The approach to this study is African womanism. Focus on the Africana womanist assumption that in oppressed Africana communities, patriarchy is in the periphery whilst economic and political oppression are the center of power. In *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena*, the aspects of apartheid racism that impacts on the gender relations between black African males and females is what Gayatri calls the 'subaltern' in the work, *Can the subaltern speak?* – an aspect that is missing in Western feminism because it always accentuates and universalizes male as the problem and oppressor of the female, despite the political and economic factors in which the male problems. Steady, (quoted in Hudson Weems, 1993:25) admits that: "Various schools of thought, perspectives, and ideological proclivities have influenced the study of feminism. Few studies have dealt with the issue of racism, since the dominant voice of the feminist movement has been that of the white female. The issue of racism can become threatening, for it identifies white feminists as possible participants in the oppression of blacks."

Western feminism asumptions are anti-male. From its early days, it had been marked by bickering about the stance for or against the exclusion of male in its discourse. It will be remembered, for example, that in the early stages of theorising Western feminism, Virginia Woolf ([1929]1977) was castigated for propagating androgynous feminist assumptions in *A room of one's own*: she wrote that a "great mind must be androgynous [...] perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine" (Woolf, 1977:148). The earliest rebuke came from Elaine Showalter (1977) in *A literature of their own,* where she defended the 'female tradition' of feminism by women and for women, and dismissed Woolf's feminist theoretical framework as a "flight away from troubled feminism" (Moi, 1985:2).

The earlier debate about the inclusion of men in Western feminist critical discourse raised sentiments that are captured by Ruthven as follows (1984:1):

> To want to 'look' at feminist criticism, therefore, is only what you would expect of a man in a male-dominated society, for in doing so he simply complies with the rules of a symbolic order of representation which displays women's ideas in the same way that films and girlie magazines display their bodies, and for the same purpose: vulgar curiosity and the arousal of desire.

Ruthven (1984:8) feels that this may be an unfair accusation because even though feminist literary criticism aims to serve feminist politics, "by the time it enters literary studies as a critical discourse, it is just one way of talking about books" (1984:8), and therefore men have the right to engage feminism in any academic debate. But Moi (1986:208) takes Ruthven to task: "With few exceptions, the actual criticism produced by so-

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called male feminist critics is not overwhelmingly convincing." Moi (1985:209) further accuses Ruthven:

> This 'balanced' account, entirely 'non-partisan' in its disinterested view of radical feminists as shrill, terrifying, and potentially castrating creatures, is full of 'feminist terrorists' who with their 'intimidatory' rhetoric try to silence their 'moderate' sisters. This rhetoric alone (its divisiveness, aggression, patronising gestures) must make any feminist question Ruthven's qualification as a guide to the basic principles of feminist criticism.

This may mean that all feminists should always take an anti male stance: "an attack on [all] men rather than […] a system which thrives on inequality" (Steady, quoted by Hudson-Weems, 1993:19) and therefore seldom presents entirely 'non-partisan' and 'disinterested views' in their analysis (see for example, the debate of the Afro-American and African women's rejection of Western feminism and South African white feminism (Welz, Fester & Mkhize, 1993)). Such an acrimonious debate in the history of feminism has led to various streams of feminism - a manifestation of its sharp divisions and heterogeneous nature, hence the frequent use of the word 'feminisms' instead of 'feminism' (see for example, Daymond (1996) and Hunter (1999)).

II. Africana Womanist Agency

The theoretical approach to agency in the representation of black African women is Afrocentric and is informed by the views of Clenora Hudson-Weems' (1993; 2004) Africana women's agency. In the analysis of *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena*, black African gender relations between female and male are mainly are regarded as a product of apartheid oppression, racism and the economiscs of impoverishing black people at the expence of white people. So, in the South Afican context, Africana womanism emphasises the experiences and struggles of black African women and men during the apartheid period. the authentic agenda for women of African descent.

Further, Africana womanism attempts to accommodate the whole family, including the male. Western feminist critical studies have been characterised by the unqualified male exclusion – the exclusion that homogenises male as the problem and enemy of the female gender whereas African womanism considers male as a heterogeneous 'species' that is not inherently the opponent of the female gender, as Hudson-Weems (1993:25) reminds that:

> There is a general consensus in the Africana community that the feminist movement, by and large, is the White woman's movement for two reasons: First, the Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women.

On the other hand, Africana womanist agency is a system, or process, that disempowers and challenges absolutes of the economics of race and class that make worse the gender tensions between black men and women.

In this sense then, Africana womanist agency is transformative: it detraditionalizes undesired patriarchal traditions. It rejects and resists the verbal, physical, mental, and systemic violence of white domination on the African woman and man (Hudson-Weems, 2004), but it also rejects and isolates black South African men who hurt, belittle and violate and black South African women. Finally, Africana agency promotes the Africana sense of men who stress the exposure, punishment and removal of men who harm women and children from their communities (Hudson-Weems, 2004).

In this study, black African women's agency focuses on the apartheid's economics of racism and classism, as impacting on the black South African females and males who are marginalized and made poor. Agency is considered to be a resistance system by women and men against the and the apartheid capital system and its patriarchy. It is a resistance tool that disempowers the white power whilst in the process it empowers black African men and women. Hudson-Weems (1993:31-32) puts the impact of the economics of racism as follows:

> Because one of the main tensions between Africana men and women […] involves employment and economic opportunity, Africana's frequently fall into a short sighted perception of things. For example, it is not a question of more jobs for Africana women versus more jobs for Africana men, a situation that too frequently promotes gender competition. […] Rather, it is a question of more jobs for Africanas in general. These jobs are generated primarily by White people, and most Africanas depend on sources other than those supplied by Africana people. The real challenge for Africana men and women is how to create more economic opportunities within Africana communities. Many people talk about the need for enhanced Africana economic empowerment. If our real goal in life is to be achieved-that is, the survival of our entire race as a primary concern for Africana women-it will have to come from Africana men and women working together.

Having said this, black South African female agency in this study, is not viewed in the Western feminist universalist sense of gender as being only based on the anti male assumptions, nor is the lack female agency seen as the eleven female stereotypes identified by the Western feminist Ellmann in her book, *Thinking about Women* (1968) as "passivity, formlessness, confinement, instability, materiality, piety, irrationality, spirituality, compliance, and finally, two incorrigible figures of the shrew and the witch" (Moi, 1985:34). It shall be remembered, for example,

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that in once colonized countries, passivity was a strong political strategy and tool used to resist colonial rule, and the well-known case is the passive resistance led by Gandhi against British imperialism in India. So whisIts feminism sees passiveness as lack of agancy.

I now proceed to explore the representations of women in *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena*.

III. Representations of Women in *Peo Ena E Jetswe Ke Wena*

The setting of the novel *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena* is Soweto between the late 1970s to the 1980s. This period was the height of racial segregation in South Africa. The policy of racial segregation afflicted more poverty in places designated for black Africans because of effect of the Hetzog Native laws and Land bills introduced in the 1930s that things began to change. Life in the rural areas had become more difficult for women and the "wages that the migrant men earned in town were too little to support their families in the country [and] many women realised that the only way they could save themselves and their families was to go to the towns and look for work" (Lawson 1986:15). Because of the constraints, frustrations, violations, indignations and depravations of the apartheid laws, the situation of black African workers in the 1980s had become dire. Cock (1988:205) points out that "Africans […] experience[d] their working lives as a form of slavery." The main employment of the black African women who joined their husbands in urban areas in the late 1970s and 1980s was domestic work and the oppressive nature of domestice service is captured as follows: "The relationship that exists between domestic workers and their employers is often very oppressive. It is a one to one relationship which is not controlled by any law of contract. Many employers treat their domestic workers like children who have to be disciplined, rather than responsible adults" (Lawson, 1986:33). Hudson-Weems (1993:30) observes that "Africana women suffer at the hands of a racist system. There is the oppression of the South African woman who must serve as maid and nurse to the White household with minimum wage earnings".

The picture painted above about the apatheind labour system gives the reader the political, socio-cultural and economic context of the events the novel *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena.* The novel opens with Kgwapo's very poor family living in a small rented four-roomed house in Soweto, as was the case in all townships then. The poverty of the family is a mirror of the apartheid social conditions of the 1980s because black people then earned a meagre income.

The poverty of Kgwapo's family is exacerbated by the fact that his extramarital lover, Samina is blackmailing him. Despite the poverty of his family, Kgwapo gives Samina almost all his wages to silence his adulterous lover. She too, is a product of the apartheid social system that drives black people to crime because of material need and desperation. The reader learns (p.26) that when Samina speaks to Kgwapo, she is full of vengeance. Further, she is unmarried, she likes expensive clothes and she is an impulsive and selfish gambler. She is wicked, consequently the narrator describes her as *motho e mobe* (a cruel person) (p.11) and *o a nyedisa* (she despises people) (p.5). Her evil power in the novel is heightened when she meets Kgwapo under the bridge. She displays her haughtiness: *a hatela hodimo ka seeta se phahameng, a bua ka lentswe le tletseng nyediso* (p.3) (she walked with a fast pace with high shoes, and she spoke with a despising voice.). Kgwapo is one the latest victims of the men she blackmails, and the blackmail destroyes them and their families.

This gives the reader a picture of Samina who is deviant, rebellious and evil and therefore does not fit the stereotype of Western femininity as a good, passive and compliant woman (Ellmann, 1968), amongst others. She does not fear and care about the men she blackmails. She is rebel against institution of family, and does not care about its chief memebers: husband and wife:

> *...ke motho ya sa kgathalleng letho, ya sa tshabeng letho, ya sebete hoo a ka anehang ditshila tsa hae pontsheng ya batho, mme a se ke a hlajwa ke dihlong; ho fetisa moo, o na le ditsela tsa hae tseo ka tsona a ka kgonang ho utlwisa ba bang bohloko* (Moephuli, 1982:25).
>
> ...she has the 'I don't care' attitude, and she is fearless to the degree that she can hang her dirty linen for the public to see, and she would not feel ashamed. Moreover, she has evil ways she uses to hurt other people.

The concepts 'rebellious', which represents the agency of the chief character of the novel *Peo ena e jetswe ke wena,* Samina, is based on the Africana womanist premise that the black South African women's reasons to rebel against males and apartheid patriarchy are significantly economic, in the sense that Samina's poverty, caused by the apartheid system drives her to blackmailing. Her easy victims are working black African men that she allures where they bet horses. She is therefore portrayed as a depraved township woman who is capable of destroying males. She represents the typical vicious township spinster who is heartless and full of contempt – the product of the Soweto that produced wicked women and men in the 1980s because of apartheid's social, political and economic problems.

All the same, the reader is aware that the rebellious character of Samina is sharply contrasted to the complient one of Mmasefatsa. Whilst Samina is portrayed as a destroyer of men and a rebellious whore, Mmasefatsa is depicted as being typically 'motherly' and a family woman who knows her place. Yet the fact that she is sad is some accusation of the patriarchal system that expects women to behave according to certain traditional norms. Despite her sadness, she

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cooks for her family, she looks after children and she is a domestic servant. Hudson-Weems (1993; 2004) points out that family bond is a strong alement of the African woman remarks that wellknown African women activists have a legacy of solid family- positioned culture.

The fact that she is cooking on a coal stove with an old and badly leaking chimney in a poorly lit four-roomed house, shows her abject poverty – an image of the majority of domestic workers during the aparheind system. Her poverty and suffering are representative of the poor township women who have to keep the candle burning against odds. Her motherly personality is described in feminine stereotypes: *motho ya mosa mme ya pelo e telele* (the person who is kind and patient) (p.2). She is thus presented as the patriarchal archetype of 'big mama' whose toil and suffering not only benefit her family but also her white masters as well. On page 3 of the novel, Samina uses the exclamation word for bad smell *'Phu!'* not only to insult and to despise Mmasefatsa of bady body smell, but that she is stinking as the result of her poverty since her family survives on only her merger salary as a domestic worker.

For all that, she is sad, tired, lonely, hopeless and dejected because of toiling, psychological stress and the financial problems of her family. That is why when she enters the house after the storm has abated, the reader notices a deep-seated pain and disappointment etched into her face. The narrator says her face is miserable: *mahlo a hloka kgotso* (p.2). Her miserable image represents the suffering that township black women in the 1980s experienced in their marriage.

The fact that Mmasefatsa is a domestic servant, enforces the apartheid stereotype of a lower class working urban black woman in the 1980s. This is indictment of apartheid policy that if an urban black women is working, she is employed as a domestic servant in town, but despite that social status, she must also be involved in her own domestic work when she comes back late and tired. Such women are physically and economically exploited. Mmasefatsa is a symbol of women who slog for their white masters and for their families. The reader observes, for example, that when he arrives home tired after toiling, she immediately begins to cook for her family as evident in the following:

> *Ha e se nne a lokilokise ho leng teng le ha a hlotse a fufufelwa haholo letsheare lena kaofela ke mosebetsi wa ho hlatswetsa Makgowa kwana toropong (Moephuli* 1982:2).
>
> It is better that she should prepare whatever is there though she is always sweating of working very hard the whole day in town, doing the washing of white people.

The fact that she is doing washing for her white masters is some blame of apartheid ideology that urban black female workers are involved in menial domestic works because of the enforcement of influx control laws as Cock (1988:206) points out "influx control operates very coercively upon African women", and those who manage to get employment are considered fortunate. Yet theirs is to remove the dirt of white people and keep their homes clean. But despite their hard work, these black female domestic workers are economically exploited.

If black African women worked under such conditions, then it was normal, like Kgwapo's family, that sometimes the families of domestic workers slept with empty stomachs if they were the sole breadwinners. Kgwapo's hungry family is representative of such families. If the reader considers Lawson's (1986:30) figure that in "1981 the average wage of domestic workers was R32 a moth" when the "minimum wage of a labourer in a baking industry [was] R238, 98 a month", then the reader understands how hard it must have been for Kgwapo's family to survive on her wife domestic salary.

The explotation of domestic workers is captures by a domestic servant's story in Lawson (1986:33) as follows:

> Domestic workers each have different problems, because they work for different employers – and people are different. One thing common is low wages. For example, somebody came last week to complain – she is earning R30 a month, and she has been working for those people for twenty-two years! What can you do with R30 today?

Lawson (1986:30) also makes the following observation about the mistreatment of domestic workers: "Domestic workers spend their days and nights serving others. They are also among the most badly paid and least protected in this country." As a domestic worker, Mmasefatsa is exposed to such slave-like working relations. In this sense, the writer accuses the apartheid labour laws, and Mmasefatsa becomes the symbol of a township domestic worker who is a victim of such oppressive laws. However, Cock (1988:207) observes that women are "coerced into domestic service by the need to support themselves and their dependent children." Cock (1988:205) assignes the source of exploitation to apartheid labour laws:

> In South Africa poverty, labour controls and a lack of employment alternatives combine to 'trap' about one million black women in domestic service. These women are subject to intense oppression, which is evident in their low wages, long working hours and demeaning treatment by their white female employers.

This implies that if issues of politics, class, gender and race are taken into account in the novel, the reader is aware that in apartheid South Africa, there obviously existed - and still exists - some hegemonic feminism that was powerful over black people. It was white and it regulated its power relations in such a way that white women economically exploited the majority of black women and men. It imposed its female power over the black working class. Hegemonic feminism had the exploitative capacity of male domination and went

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along with its protected privileges, and was elitist. This implies therefore that postcolonial redress in South Africa should not just address male oppression and domination, but also the power relations between gender, class and race, including ethnicity.

Mmasefatsa is presented in the novel as an oppressed domestic worker and a heavily burdened mother within the apartheid patriarchal system. Yet her resilient image is the archetype of an ideal married woman in a patriarchal system of an oppressed society; she is patient, kind and humble. In order to cope with the problems of marriage in a male dominated society, she considers herself a source of comfort to her husband and cook delicious food for him, be obedient, be peace loving and love him. Perhaps the Africana womanist view of the tendency for African women to comply, be patient, kind and humble, and not to resist is not some weakness, but is a survival strategy. It assures both social and economic security for them. Marsden (1994:27) avers "that the reality of life in Africa makes it far easier for a woman to survive in a marriage than on her own or in a group of women, despite excellent female support networks."

However, the novel lays bare the devastative effect of the socio-political and economic system of apartheid South Africa in the lives of urban African women in the 1970s and 1980s. The novel seems to be advocating for socio-cultural change in the structure of South African racial and gender equality. It also gives answers to critiques of the oppressive myths in order to promote and foster change – "certainly a change in the conscious or unconscious" rejection "of racism [and patriarchy] as the norm" (Davis, 1997: xxii).

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