



The Impact of Polygamous Marriages on Family Functioning and Cohesion in Xisomisana by F.A. Thuketana

A Radical Feminist Lens

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been much focus on research tailored to unpack and address disputes and societal developments involving polygamous families. In contemporary settings, many people practise polygamy worldwide for societal, cultural, religious, spiritual or personal reasons. As per custom, polygamous relationships have been illustrious in demonstrating how masculinity always often triumph over femininity across polygamous relations, including women-to-women traditional socialisation contexts. The aim of the study is to investigate the impact of polygamous marriages in selected Xitsonga literary texts. The study adopts a qualitative research approach in the collection and analysis of data. Data will be collected through a solicitous reading of the selected texts in search of depicted polygamous marriages using purposive sampling. Textual analysis will assist the researcher to interpret and make sense of polygamous marriages in selected Xitsonga fictional texts. The study will be anchored by the Radical Feminist Theory in exploring the dynamics in which the complexities of the institution of marriage within the gamut of polygamy is censored within and without phallogocentric polygamous families in literature. The findings of the study reveal how women in polygamous relationships suffer, both in the hands of men and in the jealousy hands of senior co-wives.

Keywords

marriage, polygamy, literature, Xisomisana, family

INTRODUCTION

The literature reveals that there are challenges related to polygamous marriages. According to Bahari et al. (2021), polygamous families have distinct household problems, usually stemming from jealousy between co-wives over the husband's affections and resources. Throughout the world, polygamy has long been associated with traumatising, torture, persecution, and unfair treatment of wives by the husband (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). Golele (2002), Mabasa-Nkuna (2018), Mathye (2022) and Ngobeni (2022) analysed Xitsonga novels, but did not consider polygamous marriage in their analyses. Mushwana (2016), Chauke (2004) and Mapengo (2023) analysed Xitsonga music songs, but no polygamous issues were mentioned. Madalane (2021) analysed Xitsonga drama texts but did not comment on polygamous marriage. This study, therefore, intends to close that gap that exist in the analysis of Xitsonga literary texts. According to Shepard (2012), polygamous marriages cause higher prevalence of somatisation, depression, anxiety, hostility, psychoticism, and psychiatric disorder.

The problem of polygamous marriage is also confirmed by Sinai and Peleg (2021), who assert that children from polygamous marriages experience physical and emotional abuse associated with parental neglect and abuse. According to Alhuzail (2020), a polygamous marriage is also an emotional abuse to the daughters, because they always witness their mothers' severe pain, caused by polygamous marriage (Alhuzail, 2020). According to Al-Sharfi, Pfeffer and Miller (2016), a polygamous marriage causes mental health and social problems of children, which lower their academic

performance. This study therefore aims to investigate the depiction of polygamous marriage in selected Xitsonga fictional texts.

As indicated above, polygamy can create psychological and emotional challenges for the wives, including feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and competition for the husband's attention and resources. This can lead to a breakdown in communication and conflict within the family (Beal, 2018). Polygamy can also create power imbalances between the wives, with some wives holding more power and influence than others. This can lead to a hierarchical structure within the family, which can be difficult for children to navigate (Coleman and Khayesi, 2009).

In some instances, polygamous situations can create a sense of instability and uncertainty within the family, as wives and children may have difficulty establishing secure attachments and relationships. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation (Coleman and Khayesi 2009). There are also many challenges created by polygamy for children in terms of inheritance and succession, particularly if the husband passes away and there is uncertainty about how to distribute property and assets among the different wives and children (Lewis and Ocasio 2012). This, therefore, can perpetuate patriarchal structures and reinforce gender inequality, as it often privileges male desires and interests over female needs and desires (Johnsen, 2011).

Gender stereotypes and rigid gender roles, with wives often being expected to assume traditional domestic and caregiving roles has, in many instances, been noted to have characterised many a polygamous family. This can limit their opportunities for education, employment, and personal growth (Berer, 2006). With many challenges crowding polygamous marriages, a culture of secrecy and deception, as wives may be encouraged to hide information from each other or compete for the husband's favor has become a chief icon marking polygamy. This always led to feelings of mistrust and suspicion within the family (Kalolo, 2009).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

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METHODOLOGY

This study is a desktop research which utilised both primary (selected texts) and secondary sources. In gathering primary data, the researcher read the selected text carefully in search of depicted polygamous marriages. Secondary sources assisted in the corroboration of the researcher's views during analysis. The study employed textual analysis. Textual analysis involves understanding language and symbols present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of the text (Arya, 2020). In this study, textual analysis assisted the researcher to interpret and make sense of polygamous marriage in F.A. Thuketana's *Xisomisana*, a Xitsonga fictional text. Textual analysis is done to interpret the text to get the sense or meaning out of it (Arya, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study will be anchored, largely, by the Radical Feminist Theory to interrogate the causes, binary oppositions and cultural assumptions that underlie the portrayal of polygamous marriages in the Tsonga text *Xisomisana*, through a critique of traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and marriage in today's evolving society. Radical Feminism is premised on the notion that patriarchal ideologies form the major baseline for women subjugation, discrimination, and silencing (Millet, 1970) within marital circles. With "Kate Millet (1934-2017), an American feminist writer, educator, artist, and activist, and Germaine Greer (1939), an Australian writer and public intellectual (Millet, 1970)" being the major proponents of radical feminism, they anticipated the oppression of females as "housewives, mothers, and sex partners; and also see the marriage as a formalization of women persecution" (Haradhan, 2022:16; Tong, 2009). In this study, the Radical Feminist Theory will investigate the dynamics in which the complexities of the institution of marriage within the gamut of polygamy is censored, within and without polygamous families in literature. It will also examine the representation of women's experiences within polygamous marriages in *Xisomisana*, exploring how power dynamics,

gender roles, and sexual politics are portrayed within the sphere of Tsonga polygamy. This theory is, therefore, relevant to this study because it will assist the researcher to explore the phallogocentric influences behind the institution of polygamy as a patriarchal phenomenon, and the impact of polygamous marriages on women and children as a strategy to re-orientate African patriarchal dominance to the contemporary worldview that are in tandem with the popular views on fundamental human rights and foresight on health-related matters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that polygamy can also lead to negative psychological outcomes, such as anxiety and depression (Lewis & Ocasio, 2012), particularly among women. Additionally, children raised in polygamous households may experience feelings of instability and uncertainty, as well as difficulties in establishing secure attachments and relationships (Coleman & Khayesi, 2009). Furthermore, polygamy can create financial burdens and strain on the family, particularly if the husband is unable to support multiple wives and children (Berer, 2006). This can lead to poverty, conflict, and instability within the family unit. From an anthropological perspective, polygamy can also perpetuate patriarchal structures and reinforce male dominance within society, perpetuating gender inequality (Johnsen, 2011).

Zwane (2018) investigated the gender dynamics of polygamous marriages, and such dynamics significantly enrich our understanding of the objectives of the study. Through the integration of Zwane's research, the study is better equipped to achieve its objectives of fostering gender equality, enhancing economic resilience, and promoting inclusive development within polygamous communities. There are many reasons why people may engage in polygamy. Reasons may be religious or societal, including stability, safety, companionship, economic resources, reproduction, or love (Henry, 2024). The following are the main causes of polygamous marriages in societies:

Dlamini's (2016) research advocates the recognition and respect of African cultural polygamy. Dlamini's research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural diversity, human rights, and social justice within South Africa. In her research, Dlamini (2016) seeks to challenge prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding polygamous marriages, promoting a more nuanced understanding of this cultural practice and its significance in contemporary South African society. One might add that polygamous marriages, particularly in South Africa, are also linked to African traditional religion (ATR), case in point being the members of Shembe Church in KwaZulu-Natal who practice polygamous marriages as an expression of their allegiance to ATR.

Moyo's (2015) study delves deeper into the socio-economic consequences of polygamous unions, particularly in rural South Africa. Moyo's research comprehensively analyses how polygamous households navigate economic challenges to sustain livelihoods (Moyo, 2015). Polygamous marriages also have a negative impact on family functioning or adaptability. The reluctance to accept and adjust to the polygamous family system often results in conflicts, household crises and unhappiness by the couple (Merket, 2009). After the husband has married the second wife, the first woman becomes more lonely and unhappy about the marriage (Al-Krenawi, 2001). This provides evidence that polygamous marriages can have some impacts on relationships, especially between husband and wife.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study are significant to women, children, men and other family members. This study will assist the society in reducing or minimising abuse, torture, hatred, depression and suicide of children and co-wives within the circles of polygamy. The findings will also assist men and women to understand whether it is important for them to be involved in a polygamous marriage. They will also assist those who are involved in polygamous marriages to comprehend its impacts. Although polygamy poses many problems to family members, many people believe that it is part of their culture and should be maintained. The findings of this study will therefore assist family members to make a final decision of maintaining or abandoning polygamy as part of their culture. The findings will also reveal the strategies of maintaining peace and harmony in polygamous marriages. This implies that the findings will contribute to maintaining peace and harmony in polygamous marriages.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concept “*ethics*” refers to the beliefs of what is correct or incorrect from a moral view point (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:32). Though this study will not use human participants but characters in the literary texts, it remains critical that the study be conducted in a way that depicts a true picture of the way polygamy and the socio-ethnic reactions around it truly reflects the undiluted image of the Tsonga people in South Africa. Thus, the researcher will make sure that the study does not involve sensitive information that could be harmful to individuals or communities if shared inappropriately. It is therefore assured that proper care must be taken to handle such information responsibly and protect the rights of the communities being studied.

POLYGAMY IN *XISOMISANA* BY F.A. THUKETANA: A DISCUSSION

In *Xisomisana* by F.A. Thuketana, polygamy becomes evident in page 162, under the heading “Rirhandzu ra Majuvana”. Xisomisana, after a lengthy wandering in a desperate search for the healer of her dear brother who was seriously ill in the company of Moyasi, is enticed into a noisy polygamous marriage, the consequences of which almost claimed her life. At the time of Xisomisana's arrival at Majuvana's home, he is reported being away working in the mines. She meets his mother, N'wa-Xokola and Nwa-Mbaso who happens to be Majuvana's wife. Having taken much interest in Xisomisana's

conduct and manner of behaviour, Majuvana's mother repeatedly mentions that should Majuvana, by chance, happen to return from where he is, he should marry Xisomisana as his second wife. This is echoed by Xisomisana thus:

A hamba a vulavula ngopfu hi n'wana lowa yena, a vula ni leswaku loko wonge wa vuya, a ta tsaka loko mina ndzi nga tekiwa hi yena hikuva a nga lavi leswaku ndzi suka. A ndzi hlamulanga nchumu eka mhaka leyi, hikuva a ndzi nga ha ri na mehleketo ya ku tekiwa. Ndhawu ya rirhandzu embilwini ya mina a yi nga ha ri kona. Rirandzu leri a ri ri embilwini ya mina, hi leri a ndzi ri chululele Xitapita, kutani a a fe naro; hikwalaho a ndzi nga ha tshembi leswaku ndzi nga ha swi kota ku rhandza. (p. 162)

She often talked a lot about his son making it clear how she loved to have me marry him upon his return so that I don't leave the home. I did not respond to the issue since I had lost hope in marriage. I no longer had any space for love in my heart. I had exhausted my entire love to Xitapita who died with it.

It is painful to note that despite N'wa-Mbaso's resistance to Majuvana's advances towards marrying Xisomisana, Majuvana proceeded to marry Xisomisana. This scenario only creates psychological and emotional breakdown for N'wa-Mbaso who had never thought of sharing a husband in life. Even when she is silent, her behavior and mannerisms reflect lack of peace and she is very much unstable socially, physically and emotionally. This is clear in the way she insensitively treats her children even when they have done nothing wrong. N'waMbaso u tlhela a tela hi mavondzo ni vukwele hikwalaho ka ku hloma ka Xisomisana. Xisomisana u vula leswi:

Ku sukela siku rero, N'wa-Mbaso a hamba a endla vukukuru! kukuru! Swivanana leswi hambu swi nga onhanga nchumu, swo tshama swi ri en'waleni. Kambe vuhofu! hofu! bya yena byi nga n'wi pfuni nchumu; ndzo hloma eka Majuvana. (p. 170)

(Since that day, N'wa-Mbaso always bore some strange behavior. Even innocent children were always pinched. Even though, her bully nature was up to nothing. I proceeded to marry Majuvana).

The line "N'wa-Mbaso always bore some strange behavior" suggests that the character is dealing with internal emotional turmoil and conflict, which may be a result of the polygamy. This is further emphasized by the description of her "bully nature" and the fact that she "always pinched innocent children," indicating that her behavior is unstable and potentially dangerous. The phrase "Even though, her bully nature was up to nothing" indicates that her aggressive behavior was not effective in resolving the underlying issues she was experiencing.

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From the the subsequent line, "I proceeded to marry Majuvana," we note with concern that the polygamous nature of the relationship is causing further stress and complication within the family unit. This line implies that the character may be trying to cope with her emotions and the instability of the situation by adding another wife to the household, which may be a desperate attempt at finding stability or asserting control. Overall, the literary analysis suggests that the polygamous relationship is creating a toxic and dangerous environment for the characters involved, and the volatile nature of the situation is leading to destructive behaviors and strained relationships within the family.

The challenges of polygamy is also clear from the attendant relationship between Majuvana and his first wife, as well as between his first and second wife as indicated below:

Majuvana a a ringeta minkarhi hinkwayo ku n'wi fundza ni ku n'wi tsakisa. Loko a huma a ya eku hloteni, loko a dlaya, a swi fika swi rhurheriwa endlwini ya yena. Na mina a ndzi n'wi fundza swinene hikuva hi nawu leswi a a ri yena nsati lokulu, a a ri mana wa mina; a ndzi fanela ku n'wi tirhela. A ndzi n'wi phamela loko ndzi swekile, loko ndzi ya eku hlantsweni, a ndzi teka ni ya yena maduku ndzi ya hlantswa; hambu va ri vana va yena a ndzi va hlantswela, a va nga tshami na thyaka. Kambe ka hinkwaswo sweswo a ho tlanga etlhelweni. N'waMbaso a nga tilunghiselanga leswaku ku va ni ku rhula laha mutini. Hambu hinkwerhu laha mutini hi tshama swin'we ni ku xuxa swin'we, yena a a tiendla homu ya mpambuka. (p. 171)

(Majuvana tried all the time to show respect and to please her. Even when he goes hunting, whatever he brings would be kept in her house. I also sincerely respected her because, by rule, since she was the elder wife, she was my mother whom I was supposed to serve. I cooked and served her food, I washed her clothes and those for her children, they were never dirty. But all that meant nothing. She was never prepared for peace at home. Even in instances were we all gather together for interaction, she could distance herself.)

From the above statement, it is clear that the challenges of polygamy are clear through the character of Majuvana, who struggles to maintain relationships with his wives and children. The emotional distance between Majuvana and his elder wife leads to feelings of neglect and resentment, particularly among his second and third wives. The novel also illustrates how polygamy can create power imbalances in the family. This goes on to show how polygamy is not proper for any family if the purpose for marriage is sharing love between partners, and not a one-sided burden.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that men replace olden marital practices with contemporary practices by avoiding accumulating many wives to avoid problems associated with polygamy like hatred between wives and divisions within the family, especially children. The problems are also related to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases due to infidelity in the family as the husband cannot also satisfy all the wives.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, issues circulating around polygamy and its attendant challenges confront shroud the text *Xisomisana* by F.A. Thuketana. In the text, it is immediately clear that polygamy is a critical choice by many men aimed at satisfying their insatiate desire for more wives, and it is clear that it brings more problems than solutions. This gives the conclusion that women, more often than not suffer within polygamous families to the advantage of males, and the practice usually threaten the integrity and stability of many a family, especially within African families that are usually characterised by poverty and a scramble for meagre resources within family circles.

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