

# **Delineation Of Selected Women In Protest Poetry In The Post-Independence South Africa: A Feministic Orientation**

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## **Abstract**

Throughout the world, protest poets have been the nations voice of conscience and among those were women (Srestha, 2000). They have resiliently served as the champions for the rights of the oppressed and downtrodden to the point of incarceration, exile and torture against unfair systems. This study, therefore, strives to depict selected women in protest poetry in the post-independence South Africa from a Feministic orientation. It further acknowledges the significant role played by women in the fight against social injustice As a politically and socially conscious breed whose role is marginalised by their male counterparts, these South African female post- apartheid protest poets have from the very beginning, claimed their struggle credentials by persistently resisting the South African oppressive apartheid regime and patriarchy by bravely capturing in words and disseminating the horrors and the injustices unleashed against them by the government (Simmons, 2015). Exploratory research design was employed to guide the qualitative research approach in this study. The selected female poets delineated in this study were selected through the use of purposive sampling because of their relevance. The poems were analysed through thematic textual analysis technique. The recommendation is that all women should be galvanised into active participation against any form of discrimination in society.

**Keywords:** protest, apartheid, patriarchy, Feministic, female poets, social justice

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## **Introduction**

Women's protest poetry has, throughout history, swayed governments, toppled dictators and changed political systems. It has, like a true crusading instrument, also brought about political stability, social harmony and above all, the sanity of the nation (Srestha, 2000: 259). This literary genre forms part of the post-colonial literature(s) whose objective is to, among others, assist the formerly colonised countries redress the imbalances of the colonial past and reclaim their eroded cultural identity by writing back to the centre (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000).

South African women's poetry and protest poetry in particular, is relatively under-represented in publications and anthologies due the historical discrimination, marginalisation and subjugation meted against them by both the apartheid laws and entrenched socio-cultural patriarchy. Vogt (2008:3) acknowledges that there are many South African women poets who produce a wealth of poetry, the existence of which is largely unknown, and where it is known, it is greatly underestimated. This is despite the significant contribution their poetry makes and continues to make towards conscientising their communities about poignant issues of social injustice such as gender disparity, oppression, patriarchy, sexism, racism, poverty, ageism and structural

oppression, which plague the nation (Apleni, 2012). For this reason, their poetry serves as an awareness-raising voice for the people.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

This study derives its basis from Feministic theoretical assumptions. Mc Cann and Kim (2013) declare that Feminism is a transformative political activism by women on behalf of women. This theory advocates for the incorporation of women's rights into the discourse of international human rights, and seeks to develop human rights to encompass women's concerns (Nayak, 2013). This is due to the harsh reality that voices of women are sidelined in the imaginings of most nations and are treated as the second issue because of patriarchal tendencies. This Feministic study shows that through poetry, women reinvent themselves by crafting their day-to-day painful experiences (Anantharam, 2009). Qualitative research approach supported by exploratory research design was employed in this study. Selected poems were purposively sampled because of their appositeness to the study, with thematic textual analysis technique used to analyse them.

### **Women in Protest Poetry in the Post-independence South Africa**

This study seeks to delineate the following selected women in protest poetry in the post-independence South Africa Feministic orientation: Luvuyo Mkangelwa, Malika Ndlovu, Makhosazana Xaba, Lebogang Mashile and Gcina Mhlophe (Chapman, 2007). These women were and still are in the forefront of the struggle against social injustice in the post-independence South Africa through the use of their poetry. Poetry serves as a lethal weapon in this kind of protest because its ability to facilitate intimate self-expression as it allows the poet to explore issues under the blankets of metaphor, symbolism and literary convention (Anantharam, 2009).

In her poem "**At Darling Street**", Luvuyo Mkangelwa exposes the problem of destitute children in South Africa after independence. She declares:

**"At Darling Street"** - Luvuyo Mkangelwa

They lie

On the pavement Asleep  
and agape In the broad  
daylight The ones  
dreaming Glue dreams  
Evading the pain of  
hunger and begging Their  
daily rhetoric

Luvuyo expresses the problem of poverty and homelessness that children face in the post-independence South Africa. They resort to drugs, "glue dreams" to elevate themselves from the grips of hunger and thirst. These are pauperised children who "lie on the pavement" and live in the streets like hobos "asleep and agape in broad daylight". The poet highlights the grim realities in the so many ways promising, independent South Africa (Vogt, 2008). The poem further elucidates additional forms of crime that have joined the fray; South Africa has also become an important centre of international drug trafficking. It depicts the living conditions in the townships in which majority of black and coloured populations still live, whose standard of living is still far from the living standards of the whites. This is one of the many important challenges which South Africa still has to grapple with today (Vogt, 2008).

Malika Ndlovu's poem "**Wrapped Up**" is a poem that portrays contemporary everyday life which underlies the rich cultural differences found amongst the people of South Africa. The poem is full of assorted languages

that form the cultural hub of South Africa. There is use of Afrikaans dialects called Kaapse Taal, language of the Cape and Kombuis Taal which is a Kitchen Language spoken in the Cape region by people who work in the white people's kitchens.

**“Wrapped Up”**- Malika Ndlovu

Hanging out with my bra

Somme chooming about the way South Africans are We took a trek across the nation

To sort of S.A.B.C the situation

You see, between bunny chow and boerewors Between melktert and breyani

There's a flavour that's our own Between phutu and samosas

There's a taste we can call homegrown Ag, with a chommie, beer and skyfs Even Hillbrow's not a bad place

Every face.

This lively discussion of the essence of the South African spirit will be difficult to understand for people who are not familiar with the South African variety of English which is enriched by other languages spoken in the region (Vogt, 2008). In **“Wrapped Up”**, readers have a mix of Afrikaans, English, Pidgin and Muslim Arabic that is spoken by the people of Cape Town. South African culture is shown as a rainbow mix of the diverse and rich cultures of all the people who settled there during the last centuries. This way, the researchers examine the extent to which some of the South African female poets write back to the centre to challenge their history as well as their current situation. (Vogt, 2008) argues that women struggle with their identity and the implied double marginalisation of being labelled as a weaker sex (Vogt, 2008). Makhosazana Xaba's poem **“Suggestions Please”** was written in the post-apartheid South African era to highlight the plight and ill-treatment of women after nine years of democracy.

**‘Suggestions Please’** – Makhosazana Xaba

At the National School of Arts the other day What? What did you just say?

I was reminded of a question

That the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council And nine years of democracy,

Excuse me; I didn't hear what you said? Colluding, lulled into believing

Jou ma se gat.

I'll never hear again

Msunu kanyoko, ungiwayela kabi!

Xaba exposes the humiliation which black people, women inclusive, still suffer at the hands of white people nine years after South Africans had attained their freedom. The new leadership has not done enough to reverse the apartheid discriminatory laws to protect people against humiliation and create job opportunities for the marginalised black South African women and other vulnerable people in the country such people living with disabilities.

Lebogang Mashile is another popular South African performing protest poet. She is a performance artist and TV presenter who was born in 1979, and lived in exile in America until her return to South Africa in 1995. She wrote a poem titled **“Kedi's Song”**, in which she explores issues of skin-colour and belonging (identity). She also deals with the prejudices that coloured people face, such as the narrow-mindedness of people who consider them as illegitimate because most of them were allegedly the products of the secret romantic relationships between white men and black women, secret because the then Immorality Act was against interracial relationships let alone marriages. The result of the immoral act left behind a child who is neither black nor white (Vogt, 2008).

**“Kedi's Song”**– Lebogang Mashile

When profanity clamoured unto seduction's breast  
When power devoured and nightfall offered no rest

These women sweep the whispers beneath their children's skins  
Suckled on hush voices  
Shaded by history's sins  
Even as her voice is captive, Her skin will always sing:

"I am the colour of fresh bread  
The colour of secrets spoken  
The colour of pale tokens

Another poet who is involved with the theoretical theme of womanism (a struggle for the recognition of the rights of women) in the post-apartheid South Africa is Gcina Mhlophe. She is popularly known for writing and performing children's stories on stage and television. Her poem "**We are at war**" tackles issues of social injustice and prejudice levelled against women in South Africa post 1994. The poem indicates that "Customs" and "Religions are set against us". With the slogan "forward ever/backward never" the poet encourages women to soldier on without flinching (Vogt, 2008). The poem motivates and strengthens women to keep on fighting for gender equality and recognition, and to fight against their marginalisation in the male-dominated world.

**"We Are at War"** - Gcina Mhlophe

Women of my country

Young and old Black and white  
We are at war

The winds are blowing against us  
We are at war

But do not despair

We are the winning type

Let us fight on Forward ever Backward never

Customs are set against us Religions are set against us

### **The theme of poverty, violence and crime**

In "**At Darling**", Luvuyo Mkangelwa challenges the plight of orphans and street children which is caused by poverty and lack in the post-apartheid South Africa. This further leads to crime and violence by these orphans and street children in their struggle to survive hardship which torments them. Vogt (2008:27) expounds that the living conditions in the townships such as Khayelitsha in Cape Town and Alexandra in Johannesburg, in which majority of black people still live are reminiscent of the apartheid era. The social factors that produce violence and crime have neither changed nor disappeared after the end of apartheid (Vogt, 2008:27). Furthermore, the apartheid regime and its then opponents have flooded South Africa with arms and violence which the new regime has to deal with. Additional forms of crime include substance abuse with drug abuse and trafficking topping the list.

The description of children who appear to be futureless in "**At Darling Street**" by Luvuyo Mkangelwa is an accurate depiction of one of the unpalatable realities which should not be occurring in the new South Africa (Vogt, 2008:27). Mkangelwa clarifies exposure to drugs in the phrase, "glue dreams", hunger in, "pain of hunger", poverty in "begging their daily rhetoric". Crime and substance abuse, human and physical resources are normal occurrences in the post-apartheid South Africa, with children of mixed parentage affected the most (Vogt, 2008:27). The poem is written in lower case and without punctuation marks to indicate the urgency of the misery under which orphans and street children live. "They" is capitalized to highlight the children. These squalid conditions demand a swift resolution from the government of the day before it gets out of hand. South Africa should not turn a blind eye to the problem as it happens "in broad daylight" (Vogt, 2008:27). Vogt (2008) avers that these days South Africa has to battle with an increasing crime rate of alarming proportions. She postulates that since the abolition of apartheid, the black and coloured populations are politically free but not economically emancipated hence the prevalence of poverty and violence in their communities.

In her highly philosophical poem **“Observations”**, Luvuyo Mkangelwa registers her concern for class inequality (Bamgbose, 2014:7). Mkangelwa illustrates the disproportion between the rich and poor: “Children play with dolls and toys/ others play in mud and dust, / .../ A man commands and another complies/ ... / some live in cans / others in mansions” (Bamgbose, 2014:8). Bamgbose further states that the poem echoes racial segregation of the apartheid system in South Africa where whites were and still are in the advantaged centre, while blacks are the stereotypically relegated to the disadvantaged margins of society. Poverty causes them to play “in mud and dust”, whilst their white counterparts play “with dolls and toys”.

Mkangelwa crystallises economic the disparity between whites and blacks which leads to the vast majority of blacks and coloureds still “living in cans” whilst many whites “live in mansions”. Mkangelwa resolves the disparity between the advantaged whites and oppressed blacks by declaring that it is only nature and death as levellers of life which will bring an everlasting solution to this man-made challenge. By this she purports that nature and death are blind to colour or class, as apartheid did and neo-colonialist post-apartheid government still does, which further betrays her belief in the pointlessness of power (Bamgbose, 2014:8). She hypothesises in the poem: “We only breathe the same air/ live in the same planet/ and die in the same way”. She further proclaims that in nature and death, people are the same. Mkangelwa appeals to the new democratic government to re-establish equality amongst people of all races in South Africa.

### **Socio-political and economic issues**

Lebogang Mashile is a performance artist and presenter who explores social cohesion issues in her poetry. In **“My imagined community”** and **“Tell your story”**, she deals with the effects of colonisation in South Africa and the re-writing of history by combining performance poetry and hip-hop (Vogt, 2008:155). Her work characteristically addresses the socio-political conditions and violence from the perspective of gender and identity (Mogoboya & Montle, 2020).

Potgieter-Gqubule and Ngcobo (2009:13) asseverate that Lebogang Mashile’s statement has managed to capture both the “progress, freedom, opportunities”, and challenges the “legacies of apartheid” in South Africa fifteen years after the end of apartheid. She depicts the serious impact of the legacy of the past on the society today as well as the opportunities the new democratic order presents. There is also an intense awareness that the building of a new society in South Africa will be yet another “long walk”; and that given the deep-seated problems the country faces after independence, each step on this new road still needs reflecting upon (Potgieter-Gqubule and Ngcobo, 2009:14).

Mashile highlights some aspects of growth and economic achievements in South Africa after independence following decades of stagnant and negative growth during the apartheid era. She, however, repudiates the unacceptably high levels of unemployment, persistence of old patterns of racial inequality, poor state capacity, weak leadership and emergence of new forms of inequality (Potgieter-Gqubule and Ngcobo, 2014:14).

### **Recovery of women’s voice in the post-apartheid South Africa**

Bamgbose (2014:7) asserts that (South) African colonialism was immediately followed by neo-colonialism, which is a disguised form of colonialism. Small wonder the post-apartheid South Africa is afflicted by corruption, abuse of power, oppression, injustice, marginalization of women, and all other different sorts of prejudices. Bamgbose (2014) further advances that modern (South) African poets of the Marxist and revolutionary phase attack these socio-political issues in their poetry.

Women have always been victims of oppression and subjugation under the patriarchal culture that is prevalent in most African countries (Bamgbose, 2014). Although they are culturally relegated to a marginal position, literary expression has made them “visible and articulate not only as performers, but also as

producers of good poetical knowledge, moral imperatives and educational foundations” (Nnamaeka, 1994:138).

Bamgbose (2014:7) contends that gender disparity has caused the late arrival of women into the modern South (African) literary sphere which is dominated by men and their phallogocentric ideology. He also observes that “African females were portrayed as a voiceless lot who, as a result of patriarchal suppression, remained silent victims of oppression”. Luvuyo Mkangelwa is one of those (South) African female protest poets who were pushed to the fringes of human existence. This contention of women’s marginalisation and voicelessness is crystallised in her poem **“The Women Sing”**.

**“The Women Sing” - Luvuyo Mkangelwa**

The women sing Songs of worship

To make their journey

Only a step away

The women sing

To conquer the thoughts

Of the day’s orders

Making drum-like sounds

Using their strong hands

The women sing!

The women sing

To be free!

The women sing

To possess themselves

For a moment

at least

Luvuyo Mkangelwa’s poetry expresses the protesting voice of women yearning for freedom, visibility, voice and choice (Bamgbose, 2014:7). The poem shows a longing by women to be recognised (Ojaide & Sallah, 1999). The first stanza illustrates the women’s intention to initiate action to voice their thoughts “sing songs/ to make their journey”. They realise that their goal of wanting to be heard is not too far from being achieved “only a step away”.

Taking “a step” shows the redefinition of women in their fight for emancipation (Olowookere, 2013:168). The women sing to free themselves from the clutches of the suppressive, stifling and dominant patriarchal order. They chant to free themselves, “to conquer the thoughts” from authoritarian commands of men “day’s orders”. They, furthermore, use strong expressions and words such as “drum-like sounds” to summon all their strength and their hidden talent to seek their freedom. According to Mkangelwa, women are in bondage to the African societal norms and values, that is why they sing “to be free”. The refrain and repetition of “The women sing” focuses the women’s urgency for freedom. “The Women sing/ The Women sing/ to be free/ The Women sing / to possess themselves/ for a moment at least!”

The women are eager for independence, self-definition and self-determination. Olowookere (2013:168) argues that the women desire to hold their destiny in their hands “for a moment/ at least!” They yearn for recognition as women and not necessarily to be like men, to be heard and honoured for the contribution and role they play in society. Olowookere (2013) further consents that Feminism, in the Afrocentric mode, is not

like its European radical Feminist counterpart, as it is not equating with man but is seen to be playing a complimentary role with man. The Afro- feminists are liberal. They accommodate men, enjoy complimentary roles played by both sexes, believe in family and celebrate motherhood (Olowookere, 2013:168).

### Conclusion

This study was aimed at portraying selected women in protest poetry in the post-independence South Africa from a Feministic perspective. South African female protest poetry encodes South African realities and experiences in their diverse forms and complexities. Female poets depict some of the key social cohesion issues such as poverty, unemployment, violence and crime committed by the youth which bedevil the current generation. Mkangelwa. They, furthermore, find marginalisation of women and their need to be heard as also imperative. Potgieter-Gqubule and Ngcobo (2009:36) assert that though South Africa has made a remarkable political progress, a lot more still needs to be done on employment, skilling and reskilling of young people, women and people living with disabilities so that they can also get opportunities in the labour market. These female poets also cry out, through the barrels of their pens, for youth empowerment and women emancipation from patriarchal subjugation which are social cohesion dimensions that need serious consideration before they spiral out of control. They want society to create an enabling environment for women and other vulnerable people to take control of their lives (Apleni, 2012).

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