

## The Objectification of Women in Barolong Seboni's Love Poems.

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### Abstract

The paper seeks to examine the representation of women in Barolong Seboni's love poems in order to establish the extent to which they portray female sexual objectification by looking at Seboni's representation of sexual relationships between male and female characters. It argues that female characters are objectified by male characters, a practice that emanates from patriarchal gender socialization. Questions the paper seeks to address are: what is the root cause of objectification of women? What is the place of women in sexual relationships? To what extent should women express their sexuality? Do male characters show any sign of guilt for exploiting women in sexual relationships?

**Keywords:** sexuality, objectification, instrumentality, object, appetite.

### Introduction

Male and female sexual relationships in Seboni's *Love Poems* depict treatment of women as objects of sex, tools used to satisfy men's sexual appetite. Women characters have no say about what they want, feel during their sexual contact with male partners. Only men seem to have the privilege of expressing their sexual feelings and even describe the female body. The sexual relationship in the poems occur outside marriage, and such sexual love according to Kant (1797;163-4), "makes the loved person [female in this case] an object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry... as soon as a person becomes an object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationships cease to function because as an object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone."

### Theoretical framework

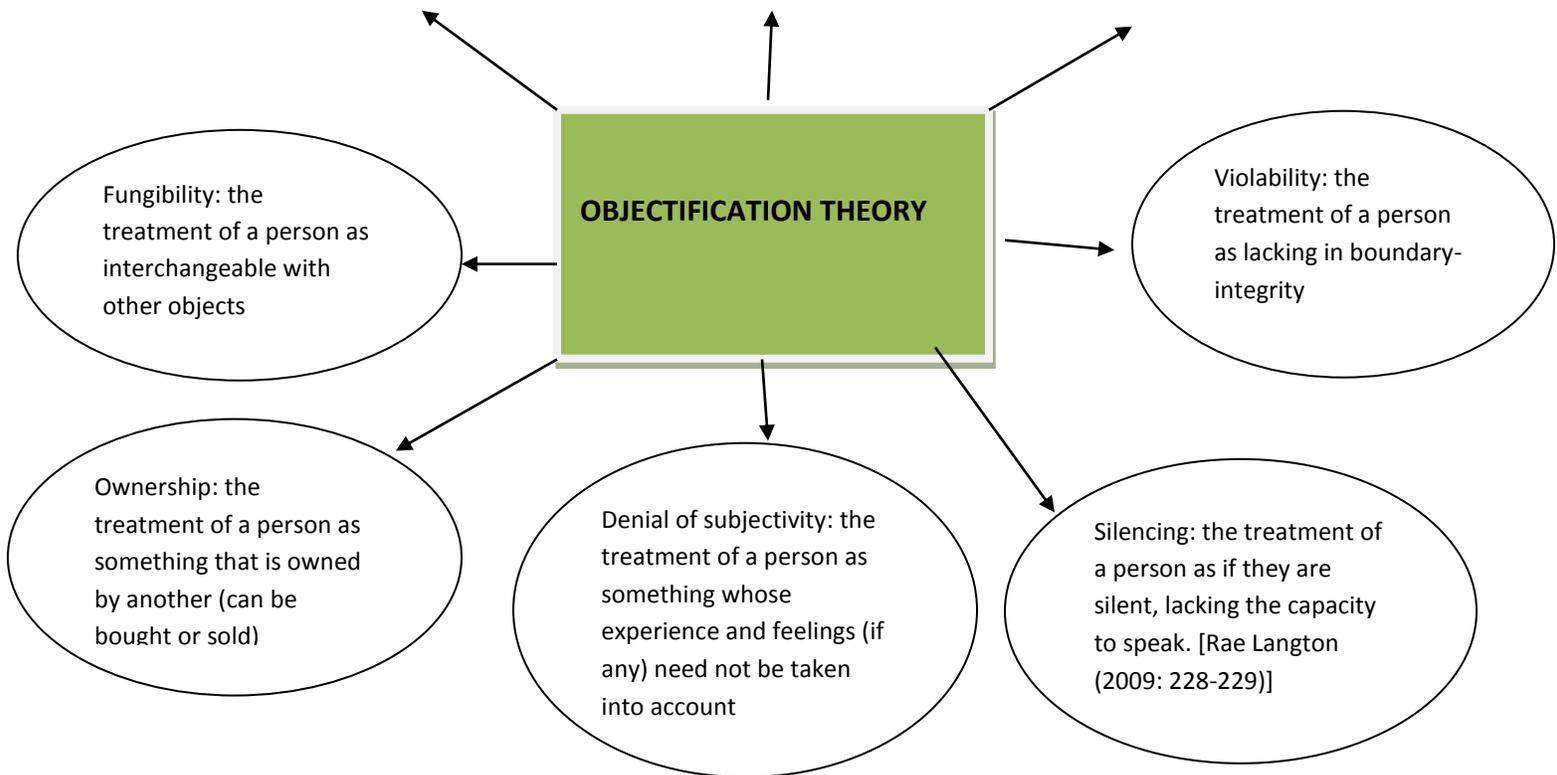
The paper employs Objectification theory in analysing Seboni's selected love poems. This theory helps put into perspective the experience of women in socio-cultural contexts which sexually objectify the female body. According to Fredrikson and Roberts (1997), the theory postulates that women are sexually objectified and treated as objects to be valued for use by others. Martha Nussbaum (1995:257) outlines features that evidence the idea of treating a person as an object namely;

Instrumentality:  
treatment of a person  
as a tool for the  
objectifier's purposes.

Denial of autonomy:  
treatment of a person  
as lacking in  
autonomy and self-

Dr.

Inertness: the  
treatment of a person  
as lacking agency, and  
perhaps also in activity



Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) is “a framework for understanding the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body.” It posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves; it places female bodies in a sociocultural context with the aim to show patriarchal control of female bodies and sexuality; that women are treated as a body predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others and that women internalize their objectification and in turn treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated.

The crust of the theory is according to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997:174) that “bodies exist within social and cultural contexts and hence are constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses.” It is this construction of female bodies by patriarchal societies that the paper seeks to unpack in Seboni’s love poems. The paper also argues that objectification of woman occurs within the patriarchal setup and influences stereotypical expectations of what a woman should be and how she should be treated sexually.

### Analysis of the poems

Seboni's love poems, "For M" and "The passionate Gardener to the Maid" portray women conforming to patriarchal sexual conventions. Patriarchy serves as a nurturing soil for objectification of women since it advocates male dominance and defined gender roles even in sexual relationships. His poems are infested with mute female characters who are gazed at, described and evaluated by the male persona. Their voices are never heard, except when alluded to by the persona. Female characters in Seboni's poems fit Davies and Graves (1986:25)'s observation that "[women in African literature] are seen through the eyes of the males who are the dominant figures in the literary works as well as in the lives of the women characters in those works." The article argues that selected poems from Seboni's *Lovesongs* are good examples of the portrayal of women as sex objects who lack agency. In the two selected love poems, female characters are objectified and the male character is endowed with supremacy over the female. The male dominates all the time; he is the agent and actor during sexual intercourse.

In Seboni's poem "For M", the female character is addressed by a male persona:

Words unsaid

Promises never made

You

like the feathery cloud

that caresses the strength

of Kilimanjaro

Touched

With the husky breath

Of your voice

Me

The core of my existence

Shaken from extinction

Now erupts

Spills lava of love

Overflowing

Potent blood-red wine:

The intoxicating taste of  
 Your grape-swollen lips,  
 Let me pluck them  
 Prick them  
 And together cup the secret inner juices  
 To quell our fiery hearts

Words unsaid  
 Promises never made  
 We flow in the same vein.

The poem begins with an allusion to the nature of the relationship between the persona (who is male) and the female lover, which is possibly out of marital bond as evidenced by the lack of commitment contained in the phrase, “Promises never made.” It is purely a relationship for sexual pleasure, and obviously the persona’s pleasure. The comparison of the woman to a “feathery cloud” and of the persona to “Kilimanjaro” (a mountain), confirms the patriarchal notion that the woman is of the weaker sex, while the man is of the stronger sex. This explains male sexual power over the female lover in the poem.

The poem depicts instrumentality, an aspect of objectification which according to Nassbaum (1995:257) refers to the “treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes”, the purpose in this case being attainment of sexual gratification. The persona, who is a man, describes how the woman “like a feathery cloud” touched the persona with the breath of her voice. She like a tool, is used to stimulate the speaker’s sexual passion and power which he [n turn uses as sexual power over her. This male sexual power over female sexual power is captured in the simile, ‘You/ like the feathery cloud/ that caresses the strength/ of Kilimanjaro’, a metaphor for great height and power. The female lover like a “feathery cloud”, as opposed to heavy cloud, acts as a catalyst of the persona’s appetite. She arouses in the persona who is compared to Kilimanjaro (the highest mountain in Africa), sexual strength or power which later enables him to explore her body and attain sexual gratification.

Another aspect of female objectification in the poem is silencing, which according to Nassbaum (1995) is “the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking capacity to speak.” This is depicted by the absence of the loved female character’s voice in the poem. She is not given a voice but is instead being described and evaluated by the persona. Her body parts are “singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire” (Bartky, 1990 quoted by Frederick & Roberts, 1997:8). The persona is the actor and as is expected within patriarchal societies, the woman is silent. The woman is, as Martin (2009:4&5) observes, “located outside the borders of a language dominated by men....

indeed the woman's sexuality and articulation are controlled and suppressed." The female in the poem is a mute character without speech.

The poem also shows inertness which Nassbaum describes as "the treatment of a person as lacking agency and perhaps also in activity." It is the persona who initiates the sexual act and describes it. He alludes to the woman's "grape- swollen lips", a food metaphor that may be interpreted to be the woman's vulva, which according to *The New Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume*, 1987) is "the external genitals of female humans, including the labia, mons pubis, clitoris, and the vaginal orifis" The <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulva> (accessed on 24/05/21) states that the vulva "has a sexual function; ...to provide sexual pleasure to humankind." The "lips" the persona talks about in the poem may be the "*labia majora*" literally "major lips" which form part of the vulva. The persona further provides the state of the lips; that they are "swollen". This brings to the fore the image of sexual arousal.

The above Wikipedia publication also states that during sexual arousal, there is "increased vasocongestion of the vaginal walls which causes it to swell, decreasing the vaginal opening by 30% [and that] the clitoris becomes increasingly erect." The persona also makes reference to the colour of the *labila minora*- "grape- swollen lips" which is caused by the swelling of vaginal walls; it changes from red to dark red (like a grape). One cannot help but note the inconsiderate nature of the depiction of the female organ which is in most societies always covered. Such freedom of exploration of the female body serves to show the power that men have over women and how they control the female body more than the owners do.

The persona indicates that he wants to "pluck them [vulva] / prick them" suggesting his intention to pull at the *labia majora*, an act that will cause vaginal lubrication, making it easier for the persona to "prick" the "lips". "Prick" is a metaphor for "penis". The persona wants to penetrate the woman's sexual organ and in the process demonstrate "superiority of the penis over clitoris". The persona seems to have the right to own the female body; an attitude that Nassbaum cites as a component of objectification theory namely, ownership- the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another. The woman is objectified and this argument ties well with Dowrkin's argument (cited in Kgafela, 2007:16), that:

The vagina itself is muscled and the muscles have to be pushed apart. The thrusting is persistent invasion. She is opened up, split down the centre. She is occupied- physically, internally, in her privacy...at the same time the penetration is taken to be a use, not an abuse; a normal use; it is appropriate to enter her, push into ("violate") the boundaries of her body... she is a human being, is supposed to have a privacy that is absolute; except that she, a woman, has a hole between her legs that men can, must, do enter. This hole, her hole is synonymous with entry... and something comes into it...that slit means entry into her... Intercourse appears to be key to women's lower status...she is intended to have a lesser privacy, a lesser integrity of the body, a lesser sense of self, since her body can be physically occupied and in the occupation taken over.

The right of men to women's bodies depicts male sexual privileges within patriarchal societies which gives them freedom to touch, enter and explore the female genitals as and when they want without a grain of guilt. Their sense of entitlement to the female body may be a result

of gender socialization which according to Worell and Remer (2003) “encourages many men to be powerful, controlling, and dominant; see women as sex objects; view sex as a conquest; and believe that women are their property.” Women on the other hand “tend to be relationally and expressively oriented and include characteristics such as nurturance, emotionality, passivity, dependence, and harmony” (Bem, 1993). Socialization within patriarchal societies become a breeding ground for the objectification of women who in turn, like the female character in “For M”, internalize objectification and remain submissive either to maintain harmony in the society or out of fear of negative labeling by the society.

The persona then talks about the pleasure that they shall attain from sexual intercourse: “and together cup the secret inner juices/ to quell our fiery hearts.” The question is, how can the persona claim possible shared sexual pleasure with the addressed female when she does not share the same status with him? How can the objectifier and the objectified share any mutual sexual pleasure? The paper argues that any suggestion or claim of female sexual pleasure would be a fallacy, since such pleasure has never been expressed by the objectified. The poem without doubt depicts the relationship between sexuality and power and how the woman in “For M” conforms to female objectification which is cultivated, nurtured and perpetrated by patriarchy.

Another poem that shows traits of female objectification is Seboni’s “The passionate Gardener to the Maid”:

Come away with me!

Away from palatial kitchens

Of Oppenheimer opulence.

Come away from gided

Garden of segregated Eden.

Come live with me in my shack

Of sheltered love,

Where we don’t have anything

To prove.

Come, let me untie the apron strings

That bind us to lily white lounges

And some such things.

Come wash my mudcaked calloused hands  
 Caress them tender, arouse a new strength  
 To plough our wasted lands.

Enter my shack of unshackled love  
 Come live with me and let us be.

In the poem above, the persona invites a maid (possibly a house maid who works for some rich people), to come and live with him. Seboni's Gardener follows the conventional sexual norm by being the one inviting the woman to his place- he becomes the agent and the maid remains silent and passive. The interesting thing about the male character is that he is a gardener, an occupation that does not economically make him better than the maid. However, because of his socialization, he believes that he has something better to offer the woman, sealing the idea of male supremacy over women; a man is a man regardless of his economic status.

He promises the maid freedom from her labour, a seemingly noble act, which is overshadowed by her immediate subjugation by the self- professed liberator who expects her to "wash [his] mud caked calloused hands" most likely for free; after all it is the woman's expected role to nurse a man. The Gardener seems to have distaste for social stratification which entails inequality and invites the maid to "come away from segregated Eden". The question that one may ask is; is the Maid not aware of her socioeconomic conditions? Can she not liberate herself from the exploitative labour conditions? The answer may lie in the received notion that she needs a man to rescue her, provide for her and give her "sheltered love". The man presents himself as her ultimate savior. The woman is represented as lacking agency and capacity to speak. Once again the poet represents the female character as an object; to be gazed at, pitied and rescued by the heroic Gardener.

## Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that female characters in Seboni's love poems are portrayed in line with gender stereotypes within patriarchal societies. They are expected to be passive, modest, silent sexual partners, who do not have a say about their bodies, sexual desire and experience. Such portraiture is largely found in Barolong's 'For M' and "The Passionate Gardener to the Maid" in which female characters conform to sexual mores. These women are objectified and hence live up to Nassbaum (1995:257)'s features that evidence the idea of treating a person as an object namely; "instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, ownership, subjectivity and silencing". There is no reciprocity in sexual relationships and the male characters initiate sexual intercourse, explores the female genitals and is given the voice to describe not only the sexual act but also, the female body. The female characters are objectified, and their sexual experience is nothing but violation of privacy. It has also demonstrated that the female silence may be a result of the internalization of objectification by women which leads to the acceptance of the status quo as normal.

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