

CONCEPTUALISING *LOBOLA* AS A PERPETUATOR OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH *INTSIKA*

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ABSTRACT

South Africa, in the present day, is overwhelmed by a vexing toll of domestic violence and femicide. News reports in the country confirm that some women are murdered and abused by their intimate partners if not spouses. This worsens the dilemma when husbands become perpetrators instead of protectors of their wives as anticipated by the society by virtue of their identities as husbands. This study singles out the cultural practice of *Lobola* as one of the impetus of abuse against women and aims to explore its role in the perpetuation of gender-based violence. The malicious act of domestic violence besieging married women threatens the future of South Africa and the success of women. As a result of the nature of this abuse, women tend to lose self-esteem, suffer from depression and ultimately die. Therefore, this qualitative study which is guided by a narrative analysis design sought to conceptualise the rapport between the element of marriage, *Lobola* and gender-based violence in South Africa. It is underpinned by the theory of feminism and has thrived on the narrative analysis of the South African telenovela, *Intsika* which epitomises gender-based violence incited by *Lobola*. This abuse against women might conventionalise the so-called ‘men are trash’ idea, foster marital phobia and marriage decline in South African. This noted, *Lobola* needs to be redefined in such a way that it leaves no misconception about wives being properties of their husbands. The study has predicated on the South African context using the *Xhosa* couple in the selected telenovela where it found that *Lobola* is often excused to marginalise women within matrimonial affairs, thus, endless reports emerge about deaths and horrific abuse of women in South Africa.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Femicide, Feminism, *Lobola*, Matrimonial affairs.

INTRODUCTION

The modern-day South Africa is perturbed by alarming reports of domestic abuse and killings of women by, specifically, their partners. Therefore, to navigate through this vexation, the study identifies and puts emphasis on *Lobola* as one of the contributors of gender-based violence in South Africa. Shope (2006: 65) asserts that “*Lobola* is an enduring custom that offers insight into past and present gender and power relations.” It is the South African cultural system that compels a man to pay a certain amount of money or cattle to the family of the woman he loves in order to receive her hand in marriage. This custom is eminently known as *Lobola*. The latter is culturally depicted as a unifying element between the bride and groom’s families and also serves as a token of appreciation for the wife to be (Baloyi, 2016). Moreover, this cultural practice blatantly manifests an incident of exchange as the man gives money or cattle and receives the blessing to marry the woman he loves. This noted, there are compelling arguments that it is this act of exchange that causes power struggles in marital affairs. For instance, Kethusegile et al. (2000:2) note that “some husbands claim that they can do whatever they want with their wives because they paid *Lobola* for them.” In this case, *Lobola* becomes

a tool of othering as it eternises the fallacy that women are more like properties under the ownership of their husbands. Thus, Wagner (1999: 56) asserts that “countries where *Lobola* is still common, women are seen as property owned by their husbands.” This misconception marks the dawning of domestic violence against married women in the South African society. Mapara (2007: 1) states that “men who abuse their wives on the ground that they have paid *Lobola* for them show lack of understanding of the essence of this cultural practice.”

The South African cultural practice of *Lobola* involves cattle or monetary reciprocity as an attestation of veneration for the wife to be. This is also meant to seal a covenant between the bride and groom’s families, thus, fulfilling cultural obligations that come to grips with marriage in the South African context. However, there seems to be a strand of intricacy in the delineation of *Lobola* as men tend to use it as a “facilitator of the oppression and abuse of women in marriages” (Chirese & Chirese 2010: 216). This exploitation could be traced from the meaning of trade. According to the Oxford online dictionary, the term trade refers to “exchange (something) for something else, typically as a commercial transaction.” In the same fashion, the process of *Lobola* includes the exchange of either cattle or money for the woman’s hand in marriage. Back to the meaning of trade, Boshoff (2013: 11) asserts that the rights of property owners include “entitlement to control which allows the owner to physically control and keep a thing; Entitlement to vindicate which allows the owner to claim the thing from someone else and lastly, entitlement to use, which allows the owner to benefit from the use of the thing.” This noted, when a customer pays for an item or reaches an agreement with the trader, the customer attains rights of ownership to the item. This is, arguably, a reference point in which men justify the ill-treatment of their wives. For instance, in Baloyi’s (2010: 60) study, a participant said, “I do not understand why I am arrested for beating my own wife because I paid *Lobola* for her.” It becomes evident from the aforementioned assertion that “some men misconstrue the payment of *Lobola* as their right to control and treat their partners as their property” (CSVR 2016: 8).

Furthermore, the marital process in South Africa involves the woman acquiring her husband’s surname and the cultural identity of her in-laws. The unfolding of this process has led to the plight of married women as domestic violence is an apex concern against the women in South Africa. Chirese and Chirese (2010: 216) confirm that “*Lobola* custom is vulnerable to abuse, leading to abuse of women by their husbands and in-laws.” This is also buttressed Ludsin and Vetten (2005: 15) who note that “84% percent of women interviewed in the South African provinces, Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo agreed that, once he has paid *Lobola*, it is culturally acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she does something wrong.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pilgrimage into marriage incepts with *Lobola*, which is a custom that comes with a variety of complications. Matope et al. (2013: 192) note that *Lobola* “is a traditional practice that has been commercialised because of the dollarisation of the economy and has since lost its real value and function as men use it as a tool to oppress, exploit and dominate women.” These complications are discovered to affect mostly married women in South Africa. To underprop this, in a study conducted by The Institute for Security Studies (2011), it was found that more than “50% of women in Gauteng have experienced intimate partner violence while 80% of men admitted having transgressed against intimate partners, whereas, married women experienced the most intimate partner violence (53%).” This is because paying *Lobola*, especially a huge

sum of money, has somewhat deluded men into believing that they have bought their wives and own them. This accounts for the unapologetic physical abuse that men mete out to their wives. In Matope et al.'s (2013: 195) study, a male participant justified his abuse of his wife and said, "I paid ten cows... she does not work and I do everything for her like I do for my children so I discipline her now and then to remind her of her place." In this circumstance, the husband is convinced that the ten cows that he has paid for his wife have afforded him the right to discipline her as he pleases. Thus, Ripkin (2017: 13) affirms that "money is power in a relationship and the person who earns the most money, generally holds the balance of that power." This noted, monetary undertones in the process of *Lobola* subject married women to despair. Matope et al. (2013: 191) depicts *Lobola* as a "gendered construct which constrain both the men financially and the woman by stripping her of her human rights."

Furthermore, as a result of the monetary exchange, the South African marital practice known as *Ukuthwala*, has become a trending threat to women. *Ukuthwala*, according to The Commission for Gender Equality, "is a harmful cultural practice, especially given its link with Gender-based violence as it is hard for young girls to negotiate safe sex in these relationships" (CSVR 2016: 8). This is because women as young as 15 years old are enforced into marriage and their parents in most cases, consent to these marriages on the basis of receiving *Lobola*. The latter is found to be a motivating factor for the parents to give their daughter's hand in marriage without her permission. Thus, Chiwese (2016: 1) asserts that "the increased demand for money has led to a widespread belief that marriage payments are synonymous with buying a wife."

Reasons Why *Lobola* Binds Women to Abusive Marriages

Most married women, despite the observable hardships that they go through, choose to stay in unfavourable marriages. This necessitates the question, why? Ludsin and Vetten (2005: 65) postulate that "some women feel trapped in abusive marriages because of their inability to pay back the *Lobola*." However, it is not culturally expected that *Lobola* must be paid back, but some men may demand it and this leaves the women with no other option but to stay in the abusive marriages (Ludsin & Vetten 2005). According to The Daily Abuse (2018), victims of domestic violence endure the abuse several times before they can report it or die out of it. Mapumulo (2016: 1) states that "one in every four women is physically abused by her intimate partner [and] every six hours, a woman is killed by her current or former intimate partner." The involvement of an intimate partnership raises the curiosity of the span of the abuse. Thus, sometimes married women are often "blamed for remaining in abusive relationships" (Eckstein, 2010: 21). Furthermore, other ways in which *Lobola* binds women to abusive marriages include:

Huge Sums of Money for *Lobola*

In an article on Mail & Guardian by Holmes (2017), most South African men have confirmed that the huge sums of money that they paid for their brides make it difficult for them to accept separation. One of the respondents in this article, who paid R 60 000 for *Lobola* from all his savings said, "If the woman decides to leave one day, she'll leave me with debt" (Holmes, 2017: 1). Given the above sacrificial initiative of using up all savings to pay *Lobola*, marital failure in this circumstance would be a stigma against the couple, particularly the man financially. Thus, De Stewart (2014: 1) postulates that "... because of *Lobola*, the husband and

wife could not easily separate and divorce. There was always a discussion with the family members before marital separation and that's why back in the olden days, this made marriage to be more binding." It becomes problematic when women feel obligated to stay in abusive marriages by virtue of the amount of *Lobola* paid for them.

Cultural Underpinnings

Cultural systems are found to be amongst the chains that bind married women to abusive relationships. This is evidenced by Northern Sotho cultural proverbs such as *Lebitla la Mosadi ke Bogadi* (A Woman's grave is at her in-laws) alluded to in the section of the theoretical framework. It is such proverbs that serve as a setback for women to leave abusive marriages. The proverb pleads with women not leave their marriages despite the odds stacked against them. This may encourage them to also endure domestic violence. Nevertheless, exceptional women who bravely decide to leave abusive marriages are culturally mocked, called names and also seen as failures in life (CSVR, 2016: 7). In Matope et al.'s (2013: 191) study, a participant said, "When I go to my paternal aunt to complain about the beatings I get from Musa, she says her husband was and is still no different as he still beats her. My aunt says there is nothing to do once the cows are paid. Society sanctions violence as the community insist he is right." In this manner, the society affords *Lobola* an entitlement to abuse women who are seemingly not subservient to their husbands (CSVR, 2016: 8).

Pre-marital counselling

The process of *Lobola* culminates with an indigenous pre-marital counselling session which is renowned as *Go laya*. This is a cultural practice where the bride is taken through the necessary steps of marital preparation depending on the tribe she is marrying into. For instance, in the Northern Sotho tribe, this is usually done by the maternal aunt of the bride in an effort to strengthen her to deal with the worst that she might encounter in her marriage. However, Moeti et al. (2017: 247) postulate that "traditional pre-marital counselling seems threatened and not benefiting the couple as it should be." This is because, the pre-marital counselling is found to be a stimulus that prevents women from exiting abusive marriages, hence, deteriorating gender-based violence. Moloko-Phiri (2015: 10) points out that "once the woman enters into marriage, the expectation is that she conforms to her new role of being a submissive wife as well as a docile daughter-in-law whose freedom in terms of movement and expression has all of a sudden disappeared."

Financial Dependency

In a conversation on Powertalk (2018), Makoti Makhuwula said, "If it was according to me, there would be no *Lobola* because in most cases, it ends up depressing women and [the] women end up being reduced to only doing domestic chores and being dictated to how many kids they should have." Equally important, South Africa has had a dominant historical culture that subjected women to domestic work while reserving education and job opportunities for men. Thus, inequality between men and women in different walks of life still rife. For instance, in the work environment, Hearne (2014: 60) asserts that "for every 100 male business leaders there are 57.5 women and for every 100 male business owners there are just 25.5 women." This points out the degree of vulnerability that unemployed wives may find themselves in as

they are struck by the fear of poverty if they leave their husbands, especially if they have children with them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Feminism as a theoretical lens seeks to underpin studies that interrogate maladies against women. This study, particularly, examines the realities of South African married women. Hassim (1991: 65) states that “South Africa in the 1980s was dominated by organisations that worked to mobilise women for the national liberation struggle, as opposed to women’s liberation.” One of the notable ills that South African women have and are still struggling against is domestic violence. As a result of this seemingly persistent odd, Thomik (2014: 11) asserts that “during South Africa’s transition into a democratic society, debates shifted from whether feminism had any relevance to South African women’s struggles, to what the shape of an indigenous feminism might be.” The struggles against women are cemented by the complexities affixed to the cultural practice of *Lobola* amongst other factors.

It is *Lobola* that is often used as a justification for domestic violence against married women. Then, this qualifies *Lobola* to become one of the nemeses that feminists are set out to address. Thomik (2014: 12) notes that “even though feminist politics has been extensively considered and theorised upon over the last two decades, there are still large gaps in the equality of gender in South Africa.” In matrimonies, *Lobola* attests to be the cornerstone of gender inequality. This Northern Sotho cultural proverb, *Lebitla la Mosadi ke Bogadi* (A woman’s grave is at her in-laws) which means that a woman should endure the hardships of marriage until death and its counterpart, *Lebitla la Monna le ka Thoko ga Tsela* (A man’s grave is beside the road) which means that a man should rather die on the road looking for means to provide for his family, unveil cultural underpinnings which create inequality between a wife and husband by asserting their roles. These opposing proverbs seem to marginalise the woman than the man as she is bound to her marriage, regardless of the hardships that she may encounter. This brings Thomik (2014: 12) to argue that “feminism has not yet fully developed and manifested in South African society; it has not come to any conclusion, and is still in the process of being fully realised.”

METHODOLOGY

This study has employed a qualitative methodology to comprehend the manner in which *Lobola* perpetuates gender-based violence in South Africa. Qualitative research, *inter alia*, “is a holistic approach that involves discovery” (Williams, 2007: 65). Moreover, the study has predicated on a qualitative narrative analysis design to comprehend *Lobola* and gender-based violence in South Africa using a telenovela as a case in point. This is because a narrative research design is a literary form of qualitative research about collecting and telling a story or stories in detail (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher has purposively sampled *Intsika* telenovela out of 10 most-watched soap operas on SABC 1 in 2011 by virtue of its portrayal of *Lobola* as a contributor of gender-based violence in the South African society, with special focus to the matrimonial union of Xolani and Ntosh. The data that was collected from the sampled soap opera for this study, *Intsika*, will be critically analysed using thematic content analysis technique where the researcher will present the data by means of formulating themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study utilised a qualitative paradigm to investigate the rapport between the *Lobola* and gender-based violence in South Africa and the extent to which this relationship threatens married women's lives. The SABC 1 soap opera, *Intsika* has been sampled and examined with intent to ascertain the role of *Lobola* in the gender-based violence that besieges South Africa in the present day.

Abusive Marriage in *Intsika*

Intsika is a South African soap opera set in a fictional village, Zithuthe in Eastern Cape and mirrors a series of issues such as transactional sex, transition to manhood, corruption and notably, gender-based violence within marriages which is the focal theme of this study. Raba (2011: 2) states that *Intsika* "exposes the very abuse that shapes our homes on a daily basis. It is a wise choice to tell these stories so that the very abusers can watch or see that there will always be someone out there to tell a story whether directly or indirectly of what is happening behind the stereotype "respecting my husband..." This is portrayed by the characters of Xolani and his wife Ntosh. Their marriage is predominated by cultural stereotypes that marginalise Ntosh as Xolani is regarded to as "indod' eqotho," (real man) when he imposes patriarchal conditions upon his wife because he has paid *Lobola* for her. As a result, Xolani became a very abusive husband to his wife and the abuse manifested in these ways:

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is a crucial concern for many families in South Africa as research estimates that "men who commit domestic violence in intimate relationships are 3.5 times as likely to have experienced physical abuse in their homes and 4 times as likely to have witnessed violence between their parents than men who do not commit domestic violence" (Gass et al. 2010: 40). This is reflected in the abusive marriage of Xolani and Ntosh in *Intsika* which include physical violence. Xolani would beat his wife, Ntosh whenever he feels challenged by her and claim that he has the right to discipline his wife as he has paid *Lobola* for her when confronted by a close friend. The physical abuse is notable on episode 5 of the story where Xolani slapped Ntosh with an open hand and she hit the wall and bled terribly. She was rushed to the hospital where she lied about her injury and said she accidentally hit a wall. In this situation, Ntosh has protected the perpetrator by lying about her injury. Moreover, there is a reluctance to report abuse as the victims of violence in most cases "are not effectively supported by public services and this makes it more widespread and discourages the victims from reporting" (Infotears, 2010: 1).

Sexual Abuse

Marital rape is one of the most controversial subjects that have garnered attention in the contemporary South African society. This is evident from the article titled, "First arrest puts marital rape in the spotlight in Eswatini" published on news24 where a 34-year-old Nhlanhla Dlamini became the first man to be arrested and charged with rape for having sexual intercourse with his wife without her consent. In *Intsika*, a similar act has occurred, however, it was not reported. On episode 20, Xolani came back home drunk and Ntosh tried to sedate him, telling

him of better ways to deal with stress other than resorting to drinking, nevertheless, Xolani responded to Ntosh's comforting words by forcing himself onto her claiming that "it is a wife duty" whilst Ntosh begs him to "stop". This ordeal sparked a debate amongst viewers around the South African community as they raised their comments on social media platforms. To mention a few, one viewer said, "You can't tell me that a wife I married and paid dowry for, following our customs and traditions, can say to her husband he has raped her."

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse often involves name-calling and belittling of the others and entails acts of embarrassment, humiliation and disrespect (Ludsin & Vetten 2005). This is reflected in the abusive marriage of Xolani and Ntosh, where the latter is subjected to emotional pain. On episode 5, Ntosh confesses to her friend that she is not happy in her marriage, she is scared of a husband instead of loving him as a result of the insults, disrespect and beatings she gets from him. Thus, Matope et al. (2013: 198) states that "the discussion of the various forms of sexual abuse, rape or threatening to rape proved to be an emotionally charged dynamic."

CONCLUSION

Lobola is blatantly a phenomenon that needs to be visited and revisited. This is due to the role that it plays in the perpetuation of gender-based violence in South Africa. *Lobola* is used in matrimonial affairs to justify the harsh conditions such as domestic violence that husbands subject their wives to. Despite this, *Lobola* is still widely cherished in South Africa: "Lobola is here to stay. You can never just abolish it. It's going to live for many years to come...even the educated, he still wants his *Lobola*" (Shope 2006: 65). This noted, the battle against gender-based violence requires extreme sacrificial measures such as redefining *Lobola* in such a way that there would be no room for the conception of objectifying wives as their husbands' properties. However, this may compromise cultural obligations that also serves as African identity.

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