

APPRAISING THE MOTION FOR POLYANDRY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT THROUGH THE SELECTED EPISODES OF *GENERATIONS THE LEGACY*

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ABSTRACT

The South African community has exuded a great interest in the suggestion for polyandry to be legitimised in the country. The year 2021 saw a rapid rise of inspired debates and scholarly views on polyandry in South Africa. These scholarly and public engagements sought to conclude whether polyandry should be institutionalised in the country or not. Polyandry is a form of matrimonial union that entails one woman marrying or having two or more husbands. This kind of union has been exalted and cherished by several South Africans but also renounced by different opinionated citizens of the country. This paper has utilised a qualitative method to fulfil its main objective, which is to conceptualise and appraise the proposal for the recognition of polyandry in the South African society. It has employed a telenovela, *Generations The Legacy*, which has established a storyline that aided the researcher to explore polyandrous marriages and also comprehend South Africans' attitudes, perceptions and reactions towards polyandry. Moreover, supplementary data was acquired from journal articles, magazines, newsletters and other social media platforms such as Twitter. The paper finds that polyandry is a relatively new phenomenon in the South African society and most of the predominant cultural assumptions discard it. Polyandry has been perceived as alien and tabooed by several citizens of the country in question, probably, by virtue of its threat to polygamy, which most South African are well acquainted with and have normalised. Therefore, it is the cultural conventions that strengthen the repudiation of polyandry today. The research implications of this paper include the focus on, enactment of specific polyandrous unions such as fraternal, associated, Nayar polyandries, and their fundamental assumptions on a broader scale.

Keywords: culture, marriage, polyandry, polygamy, taboo

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multicultural nation constituted by a variety of cultural, political, religious and social principles that often influence the citizens of the country's subscription to meaning and sense of sanity. The emerging proposal of marriage involving one woman with two or more husbands also known as polyandry has become one of the heated topics in the present day South Africa. This form of union is criticised and reviewed on a daily-basis by South Africans who portray a warm welcome to this phenomenon whereas some condemn it. The inspired debates about the validity of polyandry in the South African society have materialised in a variety of platforms where scholars and the public raised their authentic voices. According to Nkanjeni (2021), the debate on polyandry heightened when members of the South African parliament deliberated on the matter. The members of the South African parliament raised rebutting views regarding polyandry. For instance, in a hybrid plenary sitting of parliament

(2021), Ganief Hendricks from the Al Jama-ah party said, “you can imagine when a child is born more DNA tests will be needed to discover who the father is. The problem is only going to get worse.” In contrast, Natasha Mazzone from the Democratic Alliance organisation claimed, “in this day and age, in the year 2021, to think a public representative of this country would dare stand up in the parliament of SA and say something like that is an absolute disgrace. I want it referred to the ethics committee, and may I say that the only woman in this country who would possibly feel that way is his wife.” The above statements from the two parliamentarians are just a select few of clashing comments that emerged in parliament on the topic of polyandry in the South African context. Furthermore, TimesLives (2021) conducted a survey to attempt to discover South Africans’ views on the matter and the question was whether polyandry should be legitimised in the country or not, and it was found that 43.67% of the participants agreed that polyandry should be practised whereas 39.32% postulated that polyandry is “un-African.” Some of the advocates of polyandry such as the actress Bonnie Mbuli reason that polyandry deserves societal recognition just like polygamy: “the same thing that happens when she has one man, she gets to decide who she wants to sleep with at any given time, and anyway women have far more stamina than men so azishe” (TimesLives, 2021). Conversely, several citizens of the country condemned polyandry and protested that it is actually “un-African”. These anti-polyandry agents backed up the claims that polyandry is taboo with cultural and religious notions. For instance, Bishop Marothi Mashashane said that polyandry is “a disgrace and mockery to both our religion and our African cultures. According to the Bible, which we believe in, polyandry is considered sexual immorality, like the marriage between people of the same sex, and we shall by no means bless such a relationship as a marriage” (In TimesLives newsletter, 2021).

South Africa is one of the African and global societies at large that celebrate, embrace and honour indigenous cultural systems, which, among other things, “blend beautifully to give the country its unique identity on the globe” (Misachi, 2018: 1). Among the insignias of African identity, lie marital cultural practices such as polygamy with which the African identity is sometimes discerned. Baloyi (2013: 164) asserts that “polygamy is a phenomenon often associated with African people [and] in almost all African societies, polygamy is an acceptable and valid form of marriage.” This could be confirmed by Northern Sotho cultural proverbs which pinpoint polygamy as an African praxis. For instance, one of the Northern Sotho cultural proverbs affirms that *Monna ke tshweni o ja ka diatla tše pedi* (A man is a baboon and must eat with two hands). This proverb basically denotes the importance of a man to have two wives, thus, promoting polygamy (Masenya 2005: 188). However, the contemporary South African society has experienced a dramatic turn of events when a similar act to polygamy materialised, this time with a woman seemingly eating with “two hands” which means a woman having two or more husbands, and this practice is christened polyandry. In an article published on *Dailysun live* (2019), a woman has reportedly married two men, and this was confirmed by one of the alleged husbands who said in isiZulu, “As you all saw us getting married. I wish all of you to know that the fiancée we were marrying is a wife to myself and my twin brother. When she feeds me, she will also feed my brother as per the norm...” This article, *inter alia*, aims to unwrap the intricacies revolving around the role of polyandry in African identity. Murdock (1949:25) notes that “polyandry is so infrequent, a phenomenon that there is no justification for assigning to it...an important place in the evolution of the social organisation.” As a result of this mystery, the polyandrous marital notion is confronted by a surging wave of societal

rejection in the present-day South Africa. This reflected in a storyline on *Generations: The Legacy* soap opera airing on SABC 1 which will be used in this article as a point of reference.

The notion of polyandrous marriages has seemingly stuffed a thorn of confusion directly into the cultural societies of the contemporary South Africa. This is evidenced by the negative reaction of the South African society towards the storyline of polyandry in *Generations: The Legacy* soap opera. Kweza (2016) asserts that the so-called educated people are ought to be conscientious when introducing alien cultural practices as some of them such as polyandry would not fit in the South African society. The majority of South Africans living in the contemporary society, as well as scholars, uphold a similar belief about polyandry as Kweza (2016). Starkweather (2010: 61) states that “polyandry seems to be a far more unstable form of marriage or union than is polygyny, although there are no exact numbers to do a proper comparison.” To this noted, it becomes problematic when polyandry receives little or no support and to a greater extent, societal backlash and rejection. Therefore, polyandrous spouses would be haunted by stereotypes, criticism and societal hatred, which could make their lives difficult. Mishra (2011: 1) asserts that “polyandry is generally considered as an obstacle in the way of social progress; it causes harm to married life and creates several other psychological problems.” Some of the disquietudes against polyandrous marriages according to ethnographic studies “indicate that polyandrous marriages generate certain types of problems and tensions among co-husbands” (Nancy and Joan, 1997: 4), for instance, “men may resent perceived inequities among co-husbands, particularly the younger brothers, who are dominated by their elder siblings and may have unsatisfactory interpersonal and sexual relationships with their wives, particularly those who have older wives” (Ekvall, 1968: 27).

Despite the concerns against polyandry, arguably, most from men, several South African women have risen to show their support and favour for polyandry, regarding it as a contrivance to resist cultural oppression. Phungula (2018) on Dailysun newsletter reports that a woman muttered that the problem “is that men left their women at home to go to the mines and the women only had sex during the December holidays.” To remedy this problem, the woman said, “we must be allowed to marry a second husband. If my husband is spending time with another wife, I must also have another man to go to” (Phungula 2018: 5). This is deemed feasible by Advocate Sifiso Sithole who postulates that women are capable of winning such cases in court due to the verity both men and women have equal constitutional rights, which means if the court could grant same-sex marriage indulgence and there wouldn't be a reason not to permit women to marry two or more husbands also. Conversely, Zulu culturist Jabulani Maphalala asserts Africans are ought to be stigmatised by a request of this nature (DailySun 2018).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Yamani (2008), polyandry originates from polygamy and “from its Greek origin, the word polygamy is understood in the broader sense to include any simultaneous multiple marriage unions for one person, such as female polyandry and male polygyny” (Yamani 2008: xi). This study centres on polyandry, which is commonly understood as a cultural practice that involves a woman marrying two or more men. Seawright (2014: 2) adds that the concept, polyandry, which originates from Greek terminology, “poly” (many) and “andros” (men), depicts to concomitant bond between a woman with multiplex men, whereas “all the parties involved (the simultaneous bond of one woman to more than one man) have sexual rights and

economic responsibilities towards each other and towards any children that may result from the union” (Starkweather 2010: 42). Furthermore, McCullough and Hall (2003) argue that polyandry is often at variance with polygyny, the latter involves one husband with multiple wives. To this noted, Fischer (1952) rejects the general definition of polyandry as one woman taking two or more husbands as the researcher postulates that polyandry does not exist, thus, claiming that “all known cases of so-called polyandry were truly polykoity or 'plural mating', without the benefit of marriage for all participants as the woman truly had only one husband and that one husband was sufficient to legitimate any children produced by the marriage” (Fischer, 1952: 56). Therefore, in an effort to comprehend and validate polyandry, it is worthy to trace the historical background of the latter. According to data from Britannica Encyclopaedia (2018) polyandry is a marital custom that is less likely to be practised by most societies, hence, it “must be distinguished from privileged sexual access to a married woman, a practice that was fairly common in traditional cultures and was often associated with customs of kinship, hospitality, or fertility rites” (Britannica Encyclopaedia, 2018).

Some of the eminent regions in which polyandry was conventional prior and still in the 21st century include “Himalayan, Plateau of Tibet (a region shared by India, Nepal, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China) and the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific” (Britannica Encyclopaedia 2018). Gurung (2012: 75) notes that polyandry is a cultural practice in the Gurung tribe of Upper Mustang and this custom comprises a woman marrying concurrently more than one legal husband or several men sharing one woman as a wife. This marital system has become an increasingly adopted phenomenon in the aforementioned regions as a field survey (1998) reveals that 93% of the population in the Upper Mustang region are actively engaging in polyandry. Gurung (2012: 75) asserts that the dynamic participation in polyandry practice in the mustang area is perpetuated by its perception of “being a tool of reducing the further fragmentation of inheriting property especially, livestock, fragile land and grazing land or forest of the family.” In addition, Seawright (2014: 2) notes that scholars these suggest different ideas to explain polyandry, “an imbalanced sex ratio; large male contribution to subsistence and economy due to poor resources and harsh environs; and a high male mortality or absence frequency.” Through modern technologies and economic development, polyandry has reached many societies such as South Africa. It has manifested in different forms, namely:

Fraternal Polyandry

Fraternal polyandry, also known as adelphic polyandry, alludes to joint-resident brothers marrying one woman and subsequently forming and sharing a household (Starkweather, 2010: 44). This form of polyandrous marriage has recently headlined the news in the contemporary South Africa where a woman married two brothers. NemaKonde (2019) on *The Citizen* newsletter reports that “a woman from KwaZulu-Natal made history in the Shembe church after allegedly marrying twin brothers [and] this comes after a video and pictures circulated on social media showing the three wearing wedding rings and kneeling on a grass mat while placing their hands on a bible.” This fraternal polyandry which involves joint-resident brothers marrying one woman could be anticipated to maintain peace, joy and security amongst the wife and two husbands. Levine and Silk (1997) assert that “although there could be a cultural absence of male jealousy in polyandrous societies, especially in fraternal ones, it is still an issue as tensions among co-husbands may be as a result of a number of situations, including the dominance of the first husband over the secondary husbands” (50). This is because the first husband is habitually the head of the family

and this culturally authorises him to exercise dominion over his co-husbands and the degree to which he metes out this, may cause power struggle and problems between the husbands, which will eventually affect the solidity of the marriage (Levine and Silk, 1997).

Associated Polyandry

Starkweather (2010: 50) notes that “associated polyandry may or may not include men who are brothers or other close male relatives but is different from fraternal polyandry because the marriage always begins monogamously, and additional husbands are incorporated into the pre-existing union later on.” This type of polyandry is common in most African societies such as South Africa and is the closest to the cultural practice of polygamy as in most cases, polygamous marriages include spouses that are not related. Levine and Sangree (1980: 398) add that this marriage is not “begun as a joint venture (as with fraternal polyandry), rather it begins monogamously and additional husbands are incorporated with the pre-existing union at a later date.” This associated polyandrous marriage could be evidenced by the case of a South African woman, *Puseletso*, featured on *Sofaselahlene* (2018) reality show episode titled, ‘2 husbands, 1 wife, all under the same roof’. This woman confirms to be living happily with her two husbands under the same roof and has children with both of them. She said, “I was dating *Kagiso* while still living with my husband...I loved my husband, but he wasn’t satisfying me in the bedroom...” (*Sofaselahlene*, 2018). Further supplementary information that seeks to validate associated polyandry, could be drawn from the life story of the 35-year-old Kenyan woman, *Rale Mukeko* who lives with her two husbands and her tale was featured NTVNewsRush (2018). Mukeko said, “I love them equally because they are both my husbands. When my first husband was away, I fell sick and it was the other one who took care of me.”

Nayar Polyandry

Nayar polyandry is unique amongst the other polyandrous marriages explicated thus far as the women and the husbands involved do not stay together (Peters 1982). Furthermore, Gough (1959: 56) describes Nayar marriage “as a form of group marriage, although it may also be a case of polyandry and polygyny occurring simultaneously, as cohabitation is atypical but the unions are almost always non-fraternal.” This is because the woman in this marriage has several husbands, of which, there is a ritual husband as well as visiting husbands. Starkweather (2009: 22) outlines a wide range of the details of this marriage:

- (i) The first is a ritual husband, given to her just before puberty in a ceremony referred to by as the tali-rite. After the ceremony, the ritual husband and his bride are secluded together for three days, during which sexual relations may take place. After this period is over, the ritual husband would leave the girl and have no further obligations to her;
- (ii) She, on the other hand, is obligated to observe death-pollution, a traditional death ritual, for him, along with all of her biological children, but this is her only obligation to her ritual husband. The tali-rite is an extremely important event in a girl's life, as its intent is to mark her social and physical maturity. It was vital that a girl have not reached puberty at the time of the tali-rite, and could be expelled from her lineage or even killed if it was known that she had;

(iii) After the tali-rite, and after the girl has achieved puberty, she began accepting a number of visiting husbands (sometimes as many as twelve). These husbands did not cohabit with her, arriving in the evening after dinner and leaving before breakfast in the morning. While neither the ritual husband nor the visiting husbands held any rights in the women or their children, they allotted certain rights to the women and their children and served important purposes.

This polyandrous marriage is predominant in the Nayar South Western India where the Nayar people are referred to as “matrilineal, avunculocal Hindu caste of landholders living in Central Kerala in India who practised a rare form of informal polyandry” (Gough 1952: 53). Owing to “the nature of the matrilineal” and “avunculocal family structures”, Starkweather (2010: 64) asserts that fathers did not have much care-taking obligation for their wives or reproduction.

Second Marriage

Second marriage is another form of polyandry in which a chronological matrimony occurs devoid of severing the pre-union or the rights and obligations associated with pre-union, whereas, the wife chooses to live with a sole husband despite married to many, but she remains married to all the other men permanently (Peters 1982). Correspondingly, Smith (1953: 150) notes that it is the “marriage of a woman, during the lifetime of her first or primary husband, to one or more secondary husbands, which neither necessitates nor implies divorce or annulment of previous or temporarily co-existing marriages.” There are several exemplary cases of this marriage in the contemporary South Africa, notably, the case of a woman with two husbands in Durban court reported on the Iol newsletter by Broughton (2016). The reporter notes that “an unusual case of polyandry - a woman with more than one husband - is before the Durban High Court in an application in which the woman is trying to get maintenance from her most recent husband who is arguing that, unbeknown to him, she was still married to someone else,” but in her affidavit, “the woman - who cannot be named to protect the identity of her son, fathered by her first husband, and her daughter by her second - says the Marriage Act is applicable to her” (Broughton, 2016: 10).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodology to apprehend the concept of polyandry and its perception by the contemporary South African society. Qualitative studies put emphasis on “understanding human beings’ richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences” (Ronald, Darlene and Sakile, 2007: 21). Therefore, the human affair sought to be understood in this study is polyandrous marriages and a narrative research design was adopted undergird the study. This research design has qualified the researcher to select and tell a story of a polyandrous union and use it as a point of reference to appraise polyandry in the South African context.

Data Collection and Sampling

In this manner, the study chooses a soap opera, *Generations: The Legacy* as a frame of reference in an effort to comprehend polyandry in the present-day South Africa. The selected

soap opera has been used as a primary tool of data collection with additional information collected from journal articles, Tv reality shows, critical works and newsletters. The study has purposively sampled *Generations: The Legacy* soap opera out of 10 most-watched soap operas on SABC 1, with special focus given to the storyline of polyandry characterised by Karabo, Tau and Zola in the story. The researcher found *Generations: The Legacy* relevant to the study as it mirrors the perception of polyandry in South Africa, and also choose it, *inter alia*, because the storyline has received plenty of attention, comments and criticism from the South African society at large and this aids the researcher to get acquainted with the country's perception of polyandry.

Data Analysis Technique

The soap opera chosen for this study, *Generations: The Legacy* will be critically analysed using the thematic content data analysis technique which enables the researcher to formulate relevant themes from the data collected in an effort to get results. Maguire and Delahunt (2017: 353) note that “the goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue.”

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study thrived on a qualitative investigation as a method of navigating through the complexities that come to grips with the concept of polyandry. The SABC 1 soap opera, *Generations: The Legacy*, which features a polyandrous marriage was chosen and critically analysed with the intent to understand the manner in which the contemporary South Africa n society perceives the marital form of polyandry. The soap opera, *Generations: The Legacy*, has mirrored the unfolding of a polyandrous marriage that involves the characters, Tau and Zola who are both males and Karabo the female amongst the trio. Karabo is initially married to Tau and in the long run, she becomes romantically involved with another man, Zola. She finds herself in a challenging situation regarding this love triangle taking place and decides to take Zola as a second husband in order to resolve her problem. She said, “This hasn't been an easy decision to make, but it's the only sensible decision. I want to take Zola to be my second husband ... My lawyer says I can marry Zola under the rules of customary law” (*Generations: The Legacy* Episode 57). Moreover, Karabo's chief reasons for polyandry are thematised and discussed as:

Love

Karabo has pointed out several reasons to substantiate her desire to take two husbands. To start with, she claims to love both Tau and Zola equally and cannot spend the rest of her life without both of them as her husbands. She said, “You know I love you both, but it's the only solution. Our constitution allows customary marriage and a central tenet is gender equality. And polygamy is legal so ...” (*Generations: The Legacy* Episode 57). She alludes to love as a source of motivation for her to have two husbands.

Sexual Satisfaction

As has been pointed out in this study, sexual satisfaction is one of the major catalysts of polyandry. This is evidenced by the case of *Puseletso*, who confessed that her lack of sexual satisfaction with her first husband prompted her to take the second husband who pleased her in the bedroom (*Sofa selahlene* 2018). Likewise, Karabo's decision to take Zola as her second husband began with sexual acts in secrecy between two. Their relationship in the soapie is based on sexual intercourse as in most scenes, Karabo sneaks out to have sex with Zola.

Resistance to Cultural Oppression

In the soapie, Karabo's desire to take a second husband was deemed unacceptable by her family, claiming that it was taboo in their culture. Karabo took defence and lambasted this cultural perception used by her family to stop her from proceeding with her polyandrous marriage. She said, "if a man can do it, why can't a woman? Culture is now set in stone. It must change with the times" (*Generations: The Legacy* Episode 57). Furthermore, Mugo (2016: 1) asserts that "feminism has taken things too far" with regard to the reflection of a polyandrous marriage in *Generations: The Legacy*.

The portrayal of the storyline of polyandry on *Generations: The Legacy* has sparked a heated debate in the contemporary society of South Africa. Many South Africans have risen to express their reaction towards the notion of polyandry by criticising this storyline to a point of threatening to boycott the soapie. *Media Girl Chronicles* (2016), it is noted that "while the youth are eating up the idea of a woman being married to two men, parents across South Africa repeatedly mutter the words "sies" and "mihlolo" at the TV every evening between 8 and 8:30 pm." By virtue of the above, it is evident that the majority of South Africans are in possession of a negative perception towards polyandrous marriages. Mbangeni (2016) on IoL newsletter brings forth different opinions of South Africans regarding the story of polyandry from social media platforms such as Twitter:

- @Morena_Thinane said: "This whole Mfundu Vundla play #Generations, the saga between Tau and Karabo it's starting to make women forget their role in the society."
- @SbuMpungose said: "The gasps in the salon when Karabo said she wants Zola to be her second husband. Actually, I gasped too."
- @Palesa_Motau said: "Generations ... Karabo is officially my HERO! Second husband? Yasssssss."
- @HendreJ said: "Karabo's proposal for 2nd marriage a tipping point agenda-setter. Challenge norm, tradition, culture, history, law, etc ... etc."
- @Spoonkz said: "Generations definitely breaking new bounds with this topic."
- @TheMJDaniels said: Love how Karabo challenged traditional African views on marriage.
- @E_Mathonsi said: "If Karabo marries 2 men I swear I'll stop watching Generations."
- @abutirams said: "Mara Generations Legacy #Generation Legacy is losing it now."
- @Sindy_Masina said: "Big ups to #Generations: The legacy writers for spearheading another very important discourse on Gender equality."

- @IAmPaliey said: “I fully support Karabo in her decision to take a 2nd husband. Down with patriarchy!”
- @AndileLN said: “Whatever they are smoking at #Generations it’s some really good stuff!!”

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to divulge the perception of polyandrous marriages in the present South Africa and has argued that the majority of South Africans are still grappling to accept this marital practice. Therefore, polyandry is deemed a taboo in the country as reflected in *Generations: The Legacy* because families, especially, devout cultural ones, find it hard to accept a woman with two husbands. Therefore, Starkweather (2009: 17) notes that “marriage can take many forms, and depending on how it is defined, can determine whether a society is actually polyandrous or not.” Due to the rare marital practice of polyandry that has manifested as a shocking and complicated phenomenon in South Africa, the latter has arguably yet to attain an identity as a polyandrous society. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to investigate power roles in polyandrous marriages with the intent to ascertain who the head of the family is. Who does domestic duties in the household? Who pays Lobola? These questions, among others, assist in unwrapping the complexities that revolve around the marital practice of polyandry.

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