



Language that denigrates women in selected isiXhosa poems

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ABSTRACT

Language plays a critical role in isiXhosa poetry. Through the play and interplay of morphemes, words, phrases and lines, poets carry their messages to the intended audience. In investigating five (5) isiXhosa poems, we discovered that poets do use language that denigrates women. This language manifest itself in isiXhosa poetry by words, phrases, and lines that paint women as gold diggers, robbers, lacking intellect, promiscuous, properties of men. The discovery was made through the use of qualitative research approach and critical discourse analysis design. The selected data was analysed through the lenses of African feminism, which examines the experiences of women in literature, such as oppression of women, traces of gender inequality, role of women, as well as representation of women. Main findings of the study demonstrate that language used in isiXhosa poetry upholds the ideals patriarchal ideology and logic. It uses language that is gender bias, sexist and anti-feminism. This form of language contributes to gender-based violence, as it represents women as objects of men, lacking intellect, promiscuous. In this paper, we recommend that poets find alternative language in criticising women; using language that uphold dignity of women will not compromise their message. Furthermore, poems that uses language that denigrate women must not be selected to be studied in basic education.

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Introduction

Language plays a critical role in poetry. According to Ali and al-Utbi (2021, p.9), “Language is the fundamental element of communication and understanding in society.” Poets rely on sound effect, words, phrases, clauses, and punctuation marks to convey significant messages to the society they live in. These messages tend to reflect three ideologies Ngara (1990) spoke off, which are critical in the examination of African poetry (Makhenyane, 2020) - dominant ideology of the era, their authorial ideology, as well as their aesthetics ideology. Hebbert (as cited in Manoliu, 2017) notes six functions of language and lists them as referential; emotive; conative; phatic; metalingual; poetic. In every word, phrase, clause, or text, one or more of these functions are at play between the message and the factor. The message carried by the words of the addresser to the addressee, within a certain context, influences the perception of the addressee about the context. Therefore, the language used by poets (addresser) in isiXhosa poetry about women (message) influences how the society (addressee) perceive women (context). It is against such a backdrop that in this paper we examined language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry written in 21st century.

In the past, most isiXhosa poetry has been premised on patriarchal ideology and logic. Patriarchy as a worldview widens the gap between men and women. In that widened gap, Hadebe (2020, p.42) notes that “Patriarchy has put women at the centre of gender inequality, exposing them to violent behaviour imposed by [toxic] masculinity.” In isiXhosa poetry, patriarchy manifests itself in the language used to represent and depict women. Jha (2019), citing Lakkof, notes that language used to represent women in literature reduce them as objects who are depended on men. Ashimbuli (2022) adds that in Namibian poetry women are depicted as secondary to men, evil, weaker vessels, emotional wrecks and worthless. Ali and al-Utbi (2021, p.10) further posit that “The images that are associated with both genders are often different. Clearly, this is manifested in the fact that females are usually described with negative,

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trivial and fragmented images.” The language that bears gender connotations influences how society perceives women, shaping public opinion. Cameron (as cited in Bamgbose 2012, p.103) citing Cameron, argues that “there is a relationship between language and gender. Language is linked to gender in two ways: ‘it spells out the connection on the one hand, between language and gender identity, and on the other hand between language and women’s oppression’.” Therefore, how language is used in discourse, isiXhosa poetry in this paper, can either help women to have a positive identity about themselves or lead to their oppression, abuse, and low self-esteem.

Feminist language critique has long argued that language can sustain and reproduce social inequalities (Piergentili, Fucci, Savoldi, Bentivogli, & Negri, 2023). This manifests itself in events where a same act by both genders gets different linguistic treatment. Jha (2019) refers to this as language discrimination, Ali and al-Utbi (2021) speak of it as linguistic sexism and anti-feminism language. A man with multiple partners is praised by isiXhosa terms such as *tyayo*, *isbethi*, *iskhokho*, which are loosely translated to mean ‘player’, ‘boss’. A woman with more than one partner is called with derogatory terms such as *isifebe*, *ihule*, *ifele*, which can mean ‘harlot’, ‘promiscuous’, ‘loose’. The man is praised, while the woman is verbally abused, creating a perception that whoever wants to sleep with her can go to her and even force her, because she is termed a whore. Ali and al-Utbi (2021: 11) allude to the fact that “The problem with linguistic sexism is that despite the fact that roles have changed as women today perform almost every role men perform in public, military, economic, etc. fields, the male dominance is still exhibited in language.” Indeed, the role of women has shifted culturally, socially, economically, and politically. We have states led by women and those states are stable. The place of women is no longer “in the kitchen”, if it was ever there, they are in the forefront of economic activity, as they occupy leading roles in the corporate world. This notable shift is a necessity on the linguistic front as well. In the 21st century, it is unfortunate that we continue to read words, phrases and poetic lines that speaks in sexist and anti-feministic tones. Anti-feminism language is the language that promotes the sovereignty of men over women (Ali & al-Utbi, 2021). Ali and al-Utbi (Ibid.) examines this language in the poetry written by men. In this paper, we have evaluated this language on poetry written by both men and women.

There is substantive and dynamic scholarship (Diko, 2022; Makhenyane, 2020; Makhenyane, 2022; Mtumane & Tabu, 2021) on how language is used in isiXhosa poetry to mould and shape behaviour and social fibre in society. Similarly, there is extensive scholarship on the language used to represent women in literature (Ali & al-Utbi, 2021; Ashimbuli, 2022; Jha, 2019; Kwatsha, 2009; Zwane, 2024). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of extended research on how language is used to undermine women in isiXhosa poetry. This form of language in isiXhosa poetry contributes to the global problem of gender-based violence, gender inequality, as it encourages a certain public opinion about women. Therefore, this paper sought to critically examine language that denigrates women in selected isiXhosa poems written in the 21st century.

In the light of the identified problem, this research answers the following questions:

- i. How is language used in isiXhosa poetry denigrate women?
- ii. How does language that denigrate women in isiXhosa poetry contribute to gender-based violence?

The objectives are as follows:

- i. To evaluate language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry.
- ii. To evaluate the contribution of language used in isiXhosa poetry to gender-based violence.

In response to the asked research questions, the outline of this paper is as follows: following the introduction given above, the study reviews literature in relation to the theoretical background of the study and phenomena being studied. Literature review is followed by the methodology used to answer research questions, which is followed by the analysis and the findings of the study. Finally, this paper concludes with key points, recommendations, and future research directions.

Literature review

This section evaluates literature that discusses theoretical underpinnings of this study and language used to represent women in literature. This literature notes African feminism as a theory and how women have been portrayed, depicted, and denigrated through gender-bias, sexist and anti-feminism language. The review allowed us to identify a gap in knowledge concerning language used to denigrate women.

Theoretical background

The analysis was premised on African feminism. According to Makhenyane (2022: 294), “this theory offers insight into examining the experiences of African women in certain contexts and reimagines their role in the society.” This view is further confirmed by Diko (2024: 6) who argues that “African feminist theory is a dynamic and evolving intellectual framework that concentrates on the experiences, perspectives, and liberation of women and young girls in Africa.” This theory is “feminism articulated and rethought by women residing in Africa and the diaspora” (Memela & Mkhize, 2024: 168). In observing experiences of women in society and the relationship between men and women, Atanga (2013) notes that African feminism unearths women oppression, gender inequality and the role of women. It does this with the purpose of “finding solutions for issues specifically of African women and of African

nature” (Molubo, Johnson & Mazwi, 2024: 230). Therefore, we used this theory to examine language that reflects oppression, inequality and role in the experiences of women as represented in isiXhosa poetry, with the purpose of finding solutions.

Empirical review

In their study on anti-feminist poetry in English and Arabic language, Ali and al-Utbi (2021) argue that poetry written by men about women is filled with sexist imagery that reveals parity between men and women. They posit that this is as a result of subscribing to patriarchal ideals, as they note that “Even in the presumably positive attitudes towards women, patriarchy is clear; whereby the poet is still contemplating the weakness of women against his superior identity” (Ali & al-Utbi, 2021, p.24). They emphasize the point that language which places men above women is anti-feminist and problematic in nature. In examining poetry from two different languages and cultures, they noticed that “English and Arabic poems suggest different ideas about women that are worth mentioning. First, the English poets depict women as weak, cunning, inferior, and conceited, while the Arabic poets portray women as weak, humiliated, scheming and worthless. This distinction, though close, provides that the Arabic poets have a much negative attitude towards women” (Ibid.). Their findings call for examination of such language in other languages and cultures, hence this study examined language used in isiXhosa poetry.

In addition, Ashimbuli (2022) studied the phenomenon of language and gender in Namibian poetry. Ashimbuli (2022, p.87) discovered that “most of the poets represented women as victims rather than survivors ...” This is made manifest by the diction they use to represent women. The researcher further notes that poets use literary devices such as metaphors to reduce the role of women to domestic and childbearing roles. This language fails to represent the women of today, who are in the forefront of culture, politics, and economic activities. Ashimbuli (2022, p.63) identifies words like “little”, “cold” to demean women and terms such as “men and women” to show superiority of men over women, as “In the English language the elements of which comes first is generally seen as the most important in the information processing, thus women in this case are seen as less important.” Despite the emphasis of equality, language used in poetry continue to place women below men and the study that identifies such language is a call for change in contemporary poets.

Mtuzze (1996) notes similar aspects as those noted by Ashimbuli in some of isiXhosa poetry. He notes linguistic features that see the role of women as homebound and metaphors that define her beauty according to patriarchal ideals. In the same paper, Mtuzze (1996, p.64) notes language that places women side-by-side with men, although some men are “reluctant to grant them full equality in a non-sexist and democratic new South Africa.” Mtuzze examined three isiXhosa poems that were written in the late 20th century and the current study examined poems written in the 21st century. These eras are different as the political, social and economic landscape continue to change in South Africa.

In examining aspects of gender-inequality in selected African literary texts, Kwatsha (2009) notes the use of derogatory words against women to perpetuate inequality. She notes the use of intimidating language by male characters when talking to women to put women in their place in marriages. Through such language, the researcher identifies men as refusing to take advice from women.

The review of the literature above identified the following gap:

- There is a paucity of extended research that critically examines language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry written in the 21st century, as well as its impact on women identity. This is problematic in that it contributes to the global problem of gender-based violence.

Having identified this gap, the paper used qualitative research approach, which is further explained below.

Research and Methodology

In this paper, we used qualitative research approach, as we interpreted written texts focusing on the significant messages conveyed in the chosen data. Diko (2023: 591) vouches for the use of qualitative research approach in the study of isiXhosa poetry, as it “denotes the selection of certain fragments of the literary text and an attempt to interpret such fragments.” The literary text in this study means selected isiXhosa poems written in the 21st century and the selected fragments is the language that denigrates women in the identified literary text.

Research design

In addition, this paper used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as research design. We used CDA as it “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2001: 352). The social power abuse, dominance and inequality is examined at two levels, micro and macro levels. According to Van Dijk (2001: 354), “language use ... belong[s] to micro-level of the social order”, while “[p]ower, dominance, and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macrolevel of analysis.” In analysing texts, Van Dijk (2001) notes that we must close the gap between the two levels and our analysis must consider the following four aspects to arrive at the unified critical analysis:

- i. *Members–groups*: Language users-engage in discourse *as* members of (several) social groups, organizations, or institutions; and conversely, groups thus may act "by" their members.

- ii. *Actions–process*: Social acts of individual actors are thus constituent parts of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, newsmaking, or the reproduction of racism.
- iii. *Context–social structure*: Situations of discursive interaction are similarly part or constitutive of social structure; for example, a press conference may be a typical practice of organizations and media institutions. That is, "local" and more "global" contexts are closely related, and both exercise constraints on discourse.
- iv. *Personal and social cognition*: Language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition: personal memories, knowledge and opinions, as well as those shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. Both types of cognition influence interaction and discourse of individual members, whereas shared "social representations" govern the collective actions of a group.

Therefore, in the selected poems, we examined the poet as a language user that belongs to a certain social group, organization, institution or world view; his or her social actions as he or she performs them through the language they use to reproduce oppression of women. In addition, we examined the selected poems within a certain social context of the national discourse; how the language used in these poems encourage certain opinions about women, because "human beings create anything ..., through language, ..." (Gqola, 2021, p.49). In the language used in the selected data, we identified and analysed words, phrases and lines that reflect gender inequality in certain contexts with the purpose of redefining the role of women today.

Data selection

According to Mouton (2022, p.156), in CDA, "Data are usually collected through ... existing discourses" Extracts of language that denigrates women was obtained from five (5) poems written in isiXhosa in the 21st century. Purposive sampling was used to select the five poems. We selected poems that has words, phrases, and lines that degrades and malign women. In the 21st century, we have seen shifts in the role of women culturally, socially, economically, and politically; nevertheless, the language used to portray women still leaves a lot to be desired, as it reveals gender bias, sexism, anti-feminism and manufactures female fear. It was apparent for this study to examine such language, as Kiguwa (2019: 220) encourages that we "critically engage women's lived social realities with a view to changing them for the better." Therefore, there is a need for a paradigm shift on the language used to refer and portray women in society.

Analysis and Findings

We analysed the selected poems using thematic analysis. The four aspects in Van Dijk's (2001) conception of CDA led to identification of themes. The identified themes through inductive reasoning were "checked for internal homogeneity (coherence and consistency) and external heterogeneity (distinctions between themes)" (Dawadi, 2020: 67). The review of themes allowed us to make conclusions about the phenomenon under study.

We examined the following poems, where we found traces of the language that denigrates women: 'Imali' (money); 'Intombi zanamhlanje' (Ladies of today); 'Isiko lolwaluko' (Boy-initiation); 'Igama lomfazi' (The name of a woman); 'Intombi' (Ladies).

Imali by Bunge

i) Members-groups

The poet belongs to a group of Xhosa men, whose ideals are couched in patriarchal system, which is characterised by marginalisation of women (Mazibuko, 2024). He is bemoaning the love of money, which leads to corruption. The poet believes that societies are falling apart due to the love of money, which the Bible calls the root of all evil. In his articulations, the poet uses a language that speaks ill of women.

ii) Actions-process

The poet's actions in relation to a language that denigrates women are revealed in the following lines:

13. Zintombi zale mihl' ezimel' amadod' ezikoneni, zizithengisa.

14. Zintombi zale mihl' ezikhuthuzayo.

13. Women of today who wait on the corners of the street for men, prostituting

14. Women of today who are robbers.

Using incomplete parallelism, a literary device used to emphasize a point, the poet draws our attention to these two lines that reveal his authorial ideology of women of today. His authorial ideology is further revealed in the diction he used with verbs such as "zizithengisa" (selling themselves) and "ezikhuthuzayo" (robbers). The poet is warning men to be careful around women of today, because they will strip them off their cash. One might argue that the poet must have seen these women standing on the corners of the streets as prostitutes. Nevertheless, the poet is gender-bias in his use of language, as women are not the only ones who practise prostitution. For the poet, it is acceptable for men to do so, yet it is unacceptable for women. Line 14 is ironic on two counts. The poet says in line 13 these women are standing, an action that denotes passivity, yet in line 14 they are said to be robbing men.

Physically, women are not as strong as men, making the imagery of robbers questionable. This leads us to conclude that the poet is using a language that denigrates women by painting them negatively.

iii) Context-social structure

This poem was written after year 2000, at a time when the socio-economic status of women had improved drastically. Women today occupy high positions in the cooperate world, and they can sustain themselves, yet the poet uses a language that paints them as second-class citizens, as dependent upon men for survival. Although things have changed in the society, this poem reveals in its use of language that gender inequality still exists as for women to have money they need to sell their bodies to men or rob men. The poet says men can make money through hard work, good administration, and education, but women use nefarious ways to get their money.

iv) Personal and social cognition

In painting women as prostitutes and robbers, the poet is creating certain perceptions about women. He is leading the society and individuals to view women as goldiggers, prostitutes, thieves, and robbers. This public opinion he is creating exposes women to certain forms of oppression and discrimination.

Iintombi zanamhlanje by Dyanti

i) Members-groups

In this poem, which was published in 2021, Dyanti shows his dissatisfaction with the way ladies of today conduct themselves. He makes mention of their laziness, sleeping around and failure to value oneself. It is one of the roles of a poet to correct ill-discipline in the society. Nevertheless, this role does not give the poet a license to be destructive in his criticism, as the purpose of having a poet in a nation is to build the nation. The poet's criticism identifies him with patriarchal ideals, hence the use of sexist language.

ii) Actions-process

Dyanti's language in the following lines reveal a social act of belittling a certain gender.

10. Ziphi n' iintombi zenene?

11. Sisizwe sangomso na esi kanene?

12. Zowazuz' amasoka kusini na?

13. Intombi yintombi ngokuziphatha

14. Hayi ngokwaziwa nanguthathatha

10. Where are the real ladies?

11. Is this tomorrow's nation?

12. Will they find husbands?

13. Good conduct defines a lady

14. Not being known by every man

The use of rhetorical questions in lines 10 – 12 emphasizes the poet's perception of women of today. According to the poet, these women fall short in meeting the standard of real ladies; a standard set out by patriarchy. The first two rhetorical questions in lines 10 and 11 denote that there are no real women anymore and the future of the nation is bleak. The poet's utterings are oppressive in nature, blaming women for all the ills in society. The third rhetorical question reveals that the poet perceives women to exist for men; his biggest worry is that there will be no wives to marry for men. This ideology was dominant in the past, that the place of women is in the kitchen. This authorial ideology is in stark contrast with the dominant ideology of today's world that views women as having their own identity outside men, and they do not depend upon men to exist, neither are they defined by men.

It is clear from lines 13 and 14 that the poet noticed something from the conduct of women today, which is commendable. Nevertheless, his approach is not constructive in nature, it discriminates against women and is oppressive in nature. Instead of using corrective measures in his language, the poet is bias, anti-feministic, and punitive with no purpose of solving the problem. Although the poet rightly teaches that good conduct defines a woman (line 13), the standard set out by men for women oppresses women and discriminate against them, while setting their male counterparts at liberty to do as they are pleased. This is corroborated by Adichie (2014) in noting that we rebuke females for a certain behaviour while praising males for the very same behaviour. This paints a vivid picture of gender inequality, one of the themes of this poem when, viewed through the lenses of African feminism.

iii) Context-social structure

The lines that are cited above from the poem under discussion reveals a poet who is ignorant of contextual factors of his time. Social structures have improved on their definition of women, even among cultural groups. Women are no longer raised to be second-class citizens to men, they are taught independence, they are prepared for leadership roles, they overlook estates of deceased parents. Although the poem is published in 2021, it speaks with an ancient voice that is filled with anti-feministic undertones.

iv) Persona and social cognition

Despite having the role of a nation-builder, the poet uses languages that vilifies women and exposes them to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. As men in the past felt that they owned women's bodies, the poet encourages men of today to follow suit when he identifies women as available for men to marry. The kind of thinking that blames women for the ills of society and is published for public consumption leads the society to blame women for everything and to take unnecessary actions against women.

Isiko lolwaluko by Somana noDudumashé-Luthango

i) Members-groups

In this poem, the poets speak harshly against men who abuse alcohol during the festivities around initiation. In the opening stanza, the poets refer to two groups present in the event, men and women. Although the poets are fulfilling their role of a poet in rebuking the abuse of alcohol by men on this day, it is hard not to notice the language that denigrates women in lines 5 and 6, associating the poets with sexist language.

ii) Actions-process

The poets reproduce the action of oppressing women through language used in lines 5 and 6 in the following stanza.

1. Ngendithetha ngendixela,
2. Ndixakwe kukuthetha;
3. Madoda size kwalusa,
4. Amakhwenkwe ayaluka,
5. Sendiva ngohabababa
6. Abafazi behabaza.

1. I'd speak and report,
2. But I am puzzled
3. Men, we came to initiate a boy
4. The boys are going to the mountain
5. Vain babblings tell it all
6. Women are having meaningless babblings.

The verb *ukuhabaza* refers to meaningless babblings. In line 3, the poet addresses men with the respect they deserve, reminding them of the purpose of the day. In the same breath, the poet reveals women as having vain babblings, meaningless conversations on a special event and significant turning point in the lives of their sons. This suggests that women cannot offer logical advice on such an occasion, instead, they engage in common conversations. This view of women is in stark contrast with feministic ideals, where women are viewed as "thinking subjects and not mere ciphers or physical objects" (Boswell, 2020: 204). The poets has used anti-feminism language to represent women in these lines.

Furthermore, the language that is used by the poets in this poem reveals gender-bias, as it favours men, who are addressed with respect while women's intellect is reduced to a zone of nothingness. The authorial ideology of the poet is couched in the ideology of patriarchy, where women's voice is silenced, belittled and erased. This view is supported by Gqola (2023) who writes against erasure of women's thoughts, ideas and contribution.

iii) Context-social structure

This poem is about initiation of boys, a custom where the views of women are silenced by cultural norms.

iv) Personal and social cognition

The view that women engage in meaningless conversations leads societies to exclude and malign women. On issues such as boy initiation, which is the central theme of this poem, their voice is silenced and vilified, an action that Mbungwana is protesting against in her poem titled 'Ababuyanga' (Makhenyane, 2022). Makhenyane argues (Ibid.) that women are intelligent enough to contribute to solving the problem of dying initiates.

Igama lomfazi by Somana and Dudumashe-Luthango

i) Members-groups

In this poem, the poets paint a picture of a cultural event where a newly-married woman is given a new name. Although they are not present at the event as men, the poets reveal patriarchal ideals around the naming of the newly-married woman. Men's and women's power relationships can be manipulated (Mensah, 2023) through naming, and through a process of reproduction and maintenance, gender becomes naturalized within cultures. Mensah (2023) goes on to argue that, through their names, young females are conditioned to be subservient, helpful, and agreeable. This kind of patriarchy's effects include inequality and prejudice against young girls.

ii) Action-process

The poets action in relation to a language that denigrates women are revealed in the following lines:

33. UnguNobantu uyaziwa,

34. Unomtshiso utshisiwe,

35. Loo nombolo sisigxina,

33. You are Nobantu and you are know

34. You have been marked

35. That number is permanent,

The young lady is given the name of Nobantu, the mother of people. It is in lines 34 to 36 that the poets use language that oppresses women in the era of liberation. By referring to the woman as "Unomtshiso" in line 34, the poets reduce women to livestock that a farmer marks to separate them from the other farmer's livestock. The language is anti-feminism in nature, as it reduces women to objects. This line also reminds us of the violence committed by European and American nations when they marked African captives sold into slavery. The name given to women not only reduce them to objects, but also to slaves whose masters decide for them how they should lead their lives. The language is oppressive in nature. depicts a demotion of a surviving woman's dignity, as she is likened to livestock with a mark to separate it from other because it is likened to a farmer's livestock or a herd, he marks so he can separate them from other herds. The hot iron mark proves to be his when there is a dispute.

In lines 35 and 36, the poet uses prison language to cunningly emphasize this point. They paint a picture of women being given a permanent number that one gets when they join a prison gang. In referring to permanency, the poets emphasize the point that women are expected to stay in their marriage despite abuse, cheating, lack of love from the husband and his family. The poets call women to endure and persevere in their marriage, as the name they have been given ties them to the husband and his family permanently.

iii) Context-social structure

Marriage is a social structure where patriarchal system has failed to see women as equals with men. The terms of the marital contract are not the same, as women are expected to lose their identity when they enter marriage. The era we live in is beginning to view women differently, as equals in marriage, no longer as objects who belong to their husbands, but husbands do not belong to them. Although this poem comes at the time of such shifts, the poets still espouse ancient ideals that are oppressive to women and encourage gender inequality.

iv) Personal and social cognition

The language used in these lines sends a wrong message to the audience. It encourages husbands to do as they please, treat women anyhow, knowing they will not leave, as they have signed a permanent contract with the family that gave them a name. furthermore, this kind of language exposes women to gender-based violence, as they are painted to be viewed as objects who will endure anything, just like slaves.

Iintombi by Mdende

i) Members-groups

A woman wrote this poem. In the last decade of the 20th century, Black women were already writing poetry that upholds the dignity of women. Zwane (2024) states that this is caused by many virtuous deeds performed by women today and will continue to do so

tomorrow. If the 20th century closed on such a high note on Black women poetry, it is shocking in the 21st century to find a Black woman in the following poem uses a language that fuels sexist stereotyping against women and derogatory terms to refer to women.

ii) Actions-process

Mndende's action of using language that is filled with sexist stereotypes is shown in the following lines:

23. Ithi yakuzijonga ibone iseyiyo kodwa ubuyona baphel
24. Amabele ajong'esinqeni kungekafiki ixesha
25. Andithethi ngokuzala zogqitha abafazi bemizi
26. Imizimba yazo kudlalwa iziqendu kuyo akukhonto ingenziwayo.
23. She thinks she is still the heat, but not anymore
24. Her breasts are pointing downwards before time
25. They give birth more than married women
26. Their bodies are playing fields for different sports.

In line 23, the poet attaches beauty to certain ideals espoused by certain religions, where females lose their worth the moment they have children, as alluded in line 25. If a number of children determines the value of a woman, then our grandparents and parents who bore more than three children were of no value, yet these women taught us discipline, respect, love, loyalty. In line 24, the poet denigrates women by the shape of their body parts. As a woman, you would expect the poet to know that breasts pointing downward are not a sign of sleeping around. A woman who lies on her belly when she sleeps can cause her breasts to point downward without having slept with a man.

iii) Context-social structure

Ladies among amaXhosa are the pride of the nation. Positive images are used to depict them, as they are often likened to beautiful flowers and the beautiful fields. In this poem, the authorial ideology is in stark contrast with the dominant ideology, which leads the poet, who is a woman, to speak with an anti-feminist voice.

iv) Personal and social cognition

The poet is leaving an impression that any woman with breasts pointing downward can be viewed as promiscuous and a soft target for men. As a female poet, she should be in the forefront of protecting the dignity of other women and not expose them as preys. Her critique of women is destructive and exposes women to more abuse. In saying their bodies are scenes of every illicit act in line 26, she is encouraging a public opinion that women are of no value.

Discussion

The study focused on evaluating language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry written in the 21st century and how it contributes to gender-based violence. The findings indicate that the language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry is the one that paints women negatively, as evil, promiscuous, instead of their true identity. This finding is supported by Ashimbuli (2022) who noted similar traces in Namibia poetry. This language manifests itself in isiXhosa poetry with phrases that paint women as prostitutes, criminals, promiscuous in poems 'Imali' and 'Iintombi'. Despite evidence of women's status improving in the 21st century (Ali and al-Utbi, 2021; Zwane, 2024), they are still represented negatively in isiXhosa poetry.

Altohami (2023) holds the view that, any human language is firmly anchored in culture. Diko (2024, p.3) affirms this in stating that "The depiction of women in African literature ... reflects intricate reciprocation of culture" This was proven in this paper, as the language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry finds its voice in the culture that upholds patriarchy and views women as secondary to men. The presented data showed poets using gender-bias, sexist and anti-feminism language to represent women. Although the role of women has shifted on many facets of life, as Ali and al-Utbi (2021) noted, language used to represent women still reflects an age that saw the place of women only in the kitchen, if it was ever there in the first place.

The poem titled 'Igama lomfazi' used language that is oppressive in nature, as it reduces women to livestock and slaves. The liberation of African women is at the centre of African feminism and it protests against any language that oppresses women. The view of marriage in the language used in the poem shows gender inequality by placing women as subordinates of men, symbolised by the mark put on them by the name they get when getting married. Although African feminism agitates for the power and significance of women in Africa (Mazibuko, 2024), language used in this poem paints them as weak and subjects of abuse.

Diko (2024) notes that certain legacies, such as traditional systems continue to downplay women contribution in society. This is confirmed by the language used to perceive women in Dyantyi's 'Iintombi zanamhlanje'. In the 21st century, the poet still ties the

identity of women to men, by stating an old societal norm of nurturing women for marriage, properties of husbands who marry them. Women continue to be seen as nothing without men, manufacturing what Gqola (2021) terms female fear, as such language lead women to believe they are nothing without men. Similarly, the poem titled 'Igama lomfazi', uses a language that ties women to their husband like livestock marked with a farmer's mark. This language is filled with patriarchal logic and tells women if they leave their marriages, there will be consequences. Not only is the language used in these poems anti-feminism, it locks women into the prison of fear, where they are locked for life, fearing to get out, despite the abuse of the husband.

In 'Isiko lokwaluka', poets used a language that paints women as lacking intellectual astuteness. This is in contrast with what Makhenyane (2022) discovered about women in Mbungwana's poem, 'Ababuyanga', where he posit that the poet reveals women as intellectually capable of contributing meaningfully in the issue of dying initiates. In the poem we analysed, they are painted as having meaningless conversations at a crucial point of their children's life. The language shows traces of linguistic sexism and gender-bias. When poets paint women as having low intellect, they leave the audience to view women as having nothing to offer in solving societal, cultural, political and economic problems of the country.

Conclusions

Criticism is a hallmark of isiXhosa poetry. Mkiva notes that poets have a license to criticise leadership (Makhenyane, 2020). Nevertheless, this criticism must be constructive, it must not incite hate speech, violence, or any form of abuse on the subject of praise. In the poems analysed above, poets used a form of language that denigrates women. In their quest to build and fix the nation, they have done so in a manner that leaves women victimised, exposing them to hate speech, violence, and abuse. Therefore, this paper has proven that a language that denigrates women contributes to the social ill of gender-based violence.

Although literature revealed men being in the forefront of using such language, this paper has shown that women as well are capable of speaking ill of their fellow women. As Ali and al-Utbi (2021) noted that language is the only area that has not been reformed in its view of women. In examining poetry produced in the 21st century, this paper confirmed their assertions by noting traces of words, phrases and clauses that denigrate women in isiXhosa poetry of the 21st century. Although it is expedient for poets to call out social ills in individuals and institutions, it is equally significant for them to choose language that is constructive, that is free of gender-biases, sexism, anti-feminism, and that does not manufacture female fear. This paper has proven that such language develops negative public opinion about women, exposing them to different forms of abuse, oppression, and discrimination. There is a need for a paradigm shift in the language used to represent women in isiXhosa poetry, as it continues to denigrate women in an era where the role of women shifted culturally, socially, economically and politically.

Having investigated the language that denigrates women in isiXhosa poetry, we recommend poets to consider finding alternative language to critique societal issues. Upholding the dignity of women in their poetry will not compromise their message. As this study focused on isiXhosa poetry, we encourage scholars from other languages and cultures to investigate the language that denigrates women and how it affects women in their societies. Exposing this language and its impact will minimise societal problems such as gender-based violence, as this study proved that language which demeans women contribute to gender-based violence. Those responsible for selecting isiXhosa poems to be studied in basic education must exclude poems that use language that denigrates women, as they will lead boys to disrespect women and girls to develop low self-esteem. Finally, publishers must be on the forefront of upholding the dignity of women by rejecting manuscripts that uses language that denigrate women.

As researchers, we are both men, suggesting that our personal experience of the phenomenon under study is limited and this has a potential of limiting the findings. As researchers, to mitigate this limitation, we studied more literature about women to gain insights on the phenomenon under study.

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