

IMITATION IS A CONSCIOUSLY INTERTEXTUAL PRACTICE. A CASE OF THOMAS MOFOLO'S MOETI WA BOTJHABELA

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Abstract

The paper seeks to demonstrate that Mofolo borrowed from previous texts written before *Moeti wa Botjhabela* so as to provide layers of meaning in his novel. Mofolo was a reader of different texts before he became the creator of *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, and therefore, his work of art is unavoidably shot through with references, quotations, and influences of every kind of text he read, and this finds expression in the manner in which history, folktales and Bible have been distributed consistently in his work of art.

Keywords: intertextuality; quotation; references; Bible; folktales; history

1. INTRODUCTION

As Chandler (2003: 11) aptly put it, texts are influential not only in the production of other text, but in the construction of experiences. Much of what we know about the world, is derived from what we have read in books, newspapers and magazines, from what we have seen on televisions and from what we have heard on the radio. Life is thus lived through texts and framed by texts to a greater extent than we are normally aware of. What precisely is meant by the preceding assertion is that, life emulates art in all aspects in that it is mirrors through the works of art.

The notion of "intertextuality" as Keep, McLaughlin and Parmer (1993:1) contend, is derived from the Latin word "intertexto" meaning to intermingle while weaving. The concept was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1969 after examining Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and contradiction. Every text does not exist in isolation as Plett (1991:17) argues, but is related to a universe of texts. Whenever a new text comes into being, it relates to previous texts and in turn becomes a forerunner of subsequent text. A text is an intertext, i.e. concurrently post and pre-text. Culler (1986: 33) states that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning, but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of texts blend and clash... a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of cultures".

It is clear from the foregoing that where a new text contains the elements of texts written earlier, that will be referred to as intertextuality. Culler (1981:103) in support of the preceding statements states that:

It calls our attention to the prior text, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has a meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written.

In light of the above except, it is obvious that there are certain texts which were written earlier than Mofolo's *Moeti wa Botjhabela*. It is worth mentioning that as stated above, there are immeasurable centres of culture, and one place where meanings are focussed is a reader and not the author.

Mofolo wrote *Moeti wa Botjhabela* with the aid of his vast knowledge of ditshomo, history and Bible. The facts in the texts were not taken as they appear in the Bible, *ditshomo* and history, but were re-organised in the way Mofolo understood them. Ntuli (1984) as quoted by Manyaka (1992:17) asserts that "it is common knowledge that an artist cannot work in a vacuum. For him to produce anything, a number of influences work on him. In the first place, these influences are his experiences which he experienced in the medium of his choice. In the second place, he is influenced by the models of expression found in his cultural and artistic environment". The preceding assertion implies that Mofolo's environment had an impact in his artistic work, and shaped his writing skills.

In the novel, *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, Mofolo is portrayed as a person who clearly understands the word of God, and this is vividly evident when we follow the delineation of the main character, Fekisi. Fekisi's character is portrayed in the same way the Lord Jesus Christ is delineated in the Bible. He is faultless, impeccable and correct in whatever he does. The events also play a major role in the depiction of Fekisi. They are linked to *ditshomo*, Bible and history. Though Mofolo was merely writing a novel to redress the social ills that were engulfing Lesotho at that time, it is apparent that he was unconsciously influence by many factors that were part of his socialization process, hence the Bible, *ditshomo* and history are singled out as major forces that influenced him. The following factors discussed hereunder serve as crux on which intertextuality in *Moeti wa botjhabela* is based:

1.1 The black darkness

With his vast knowledge of the Bible, Mofolo is relating the black darkness with the darkness that is reflected in the first book of the Bible, namely, the Genesis 1:1 - 2. The book states that 'when God created heavens and earth, the darkness was all over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was lingering over the waters'. This is a citation from the Bible, and in *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, Mofolo presents this Biblical quotation in the manner in which he understands it. He even starts the first chapter of the novel describing Africa as a "black darkness". This shows that, with his understanding of history, he unconsciously tries to relate the incidents of the cannibals who were eating people in South Africa.

The history vividly states that 'Shaka scattered the four tribes of the Hlubi, the Ngwane, the Ndebele and the Batlokwa, who became tyrants themselves ruling the Highveld of Transvaal, displacing even more blacks, driving them up and down and criss-cross over the land, plundering and being plundered. Killing and being killed... Not a clan was left untouched, and across the length and breadth of the central plateau, not a single permanent kraal remained. Cultivation ceased and as food ran out many people crazed by famine turned to cannibalism... There were people sitting there cooking. I saw human heads on the ground. I took another way and escaped from these cannibals' (Smith:2011:1).

The cannibals as explained in the previous paragraph were ultimately tamed by King Moshoeshoe. Mofolo continues to show his knowledge of *ditshomo* by reminding the reader about Dimo and Tselane. It is during this darkness when people were killing each other and committing some heinous crimes. The cases in point in *Moeti wa Botjhabela* were the bullying of the herd-boys, jealousy prevalent everywhere, and only the strong survived. Fekisi was against all these acts of violence. It is therefore evident that Mofolo was relating the incidents in *Moeti wa Botjhabela* with his knowledge of *ditshomo*, history and the Bible.

1.2 Heroism/Bravery

Fekisi was a hero who protected the innocent and defenceless people. When he fought the enemies, he would strike an opponent and knock it down, and with the swiftness of a tiger, move backwards and smash the opponent's eye. The heroic acts and fighting skills of Fekisi remind the reader of Samson, the strongest man who single-handedly killed the Philistines with a donkey jawbone (Judges 15: 15 -17). Fekisi's character like Samson did not change. He was just the same at the end of his life as he was at the beginning.

Once more, Mofolo peeps into the history of the world. The physical strength that Fekisi had can be matched to that of Napoleon Bonaparte who was fighting to liberate his country. *Ditshomo* is another added knowledge that influenced Mofolo to build the character of Fekisi, and Senkatane is a case in point. Senkatane's prowess enabled him to kill the beast single-handedly. Fekisi also killed a lion and lioness. The facts about the heroic deeds of Fekisi are not told for the first time, but were told earlier before Mofolo wrote *Moeti wa Botjhabela*. He is not reporting the incidents as they appear in the Bible, *ditshomo* and history, but interprets them in the way that he understands them.

1.3 The Holy Trinity

The number 'three' plays major role in the depiction of Fekisi. The narrating character states that all creatures will fear him, will listen to him, and will respect him because he has unique brightness that other creatures lack. The preceding statement is closely related to the manner in which God is honoured in the Bible.

According to the book of Matthews 26:34, Jesus came to his disciples and commanded them to go and make the disciples of all the nations, and baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Mofolo clearly shows his understanding of the Bible. This influence is further revealed in Matthews 26 when Jesus told Peter that he will disown him three times before the cock crows, and this happened. Yet again, Jesus promised to destroy the temple and build it in three days. Another time, He was crucified between two criminals, one on his right and the other on the left. He was the third “criminal” as perceived by the Jews. He died, and was buried. He rose from the grave after three days. The meaning of figure three does not appear for the first time in Mofolo’s novel, but was mentioned in the Bible long before Mofolo could write *Moeti wa Botjhabela*.

1.4 Retribution

In the Bible, Saul, the persecutor of innocent souls is a true reflection of Phakoane. Phakoane kills his wife in a very ghastly manner. He is like Saul who persecuted Christians by putting them in jail. For all his heinous acts, Saul is punished by God. On his way to inflict more pain on the Christians, he fell to the ground and heard the voice of Jesus Christ talking to him (Acts 9: 3-4). His vision became impaired. The same happened to the Egyptians when they were punished for disobedience. From the preceding statement, it is clear that Mofolo like all Christians, believes that every sin committed is followed by sanctions from God. The readers are not surprised about what followed after the death of Phakoane’s wife. The whole place was engulfed with darkness. It was in this darkness that Phakoane and the killers of Sebati died. The Christians like Mofolo, believe that when a person commits a violation and sins either intentionally or unintentionally to any of the Lord’s holy things, retribution will follow and such an offender will be punished. It is clear from the foregoing that Mofolo in *Moeti wa Botjhabela* was imitating the ideas as reflected in the Bible about the sinners, but interpreted them in the way that he understood them. The facts about retribution and punishment meted out to the sinners, helped Mofolo to show creativity in his work.

1.5 Women lament Jesus

When Jesus was crucified, many women were crying and watching from the distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. The same happened to Fekisi. People cried for him, and more specifically women. This is another way where Mofolo rewrite what has already been quoted in the Bible. The reader is not surprised by the illustration in the novel that women were lamenting the disappearance of Fekisi because in real life situation, every woman who has a child, knows the complexities and pain that accompanies child bearing. Therefore, Mofolo was merely influenced by the tradition and the Bible in depicting women as the cogs in everyone’s life.

1.6 Dreams

Mofolo is an African. He subscribes to the view that when one feels disgusted and experiences a painful episode in his life, the ancestors will always be there to provide support, and this type of support is usually communicated to such an individual through dreams. Dreams are also the revelation of individual's life according to the Christians religion. In one of the hymns, there is a song that recounts the journey of a traveller who dreamt of being next the Lord (Difela tsa Sione 19:126). Mofolo has unconsciously drawn deeply from the Bible by relating Fekisi's experiences with that of the dreamer from the Bible. Fekisi in his dream, heard the voice of God whispering to him:

*Fekisi o se ke wa tepella, o sa le tseleng. O phehelle,
O tla be o fihle, ha o sa le sebaka (Mofolo, 1983:63).*

The above excerpt implies that Fekisi is not far from God. He is just about to cross the river Jordan. The writer as an African, has a vast knowledge of life after death. He knows that there is a border between heaven and earth. This border is the ocean that Fekisi crosses with the aid of three strangers, and at the other side of the Ocean, Fekisi finds his God.

1.7 Travelling character/s

The Israelites journeyed in the northerly direction and passed the land of Edom on the East. They avoided confrontation with the Moabites whose land was situated in the eastern side of Dead Sea (Numbers 34: 1-3). The same happened with Fekisi. During his travelling to the east, he was faced with many confrontations. In the Batlokwa territory evil constituted a way of life. Law and order were disregarded and the inhabitants were doing as they pleased. The common factor in this regard, as presented in the Bible and the novel is the eastern direction as well as the disobedience and conflict amongst the people. In this way, Mofolo is rewriting what has already been written, and this shows that Christianity had an impact in his life.

1.8 The well

The wilderness is the place where Fekisi finds himself. This is the place that signifies sorrow and suffering. The darkness of the night, the isolation and hunger that Fekisi experienced, remind the reader of Job, a man of God (Job 2: 7–8). Job like Fekisi, was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil. In the wilderness, there is no hope that life will go on and this is heightened by the silence that encapsulate the entire region. Fekisi arrived at a well – a well is a shaft dug in the ground to obtain water from below the earth's surface – a source of energy and rebirth. When Fekisi arrived at the well, he was drunk with fatigue, and this well serves as a place that signifies sanctuary in his life.

After drinking water from the well, his spirit was revived, his soul resuscitated, his minds refreshed and his life came back to normal. One of the well known hymns from *Difela tsa Sione* describes the situation in this way:

*Se teng sediba sa madi;
Aletareng ya tefelo, sediba seo e leng
Setlhare, matla a sona ke tumelo (Rolland 1979:89).*

It is clear from the above hymn that Mofolo was rearranging what he learnt from the Bible, and also alludes to the traditional Sesotho beliefs that water symbolises rebirth. The water that Fekisi drank, remind the reader of John the Baptist, the man of God who used water to baptise the people. In church, water is used to baptise children as a sign of welcoming them to the Kingdom of God. Added to this, after a burial, it is a tradition that people should wash their hands as a way of cleansing bad luck. It is therefore, evident that the ideas regarding the importance of water existed long before Mofolo could author *Moeti wa Botjhabela*.

1.9 Reed

Fekisi was told that he should search for God in the direction of the East, at the place where the sun rises, and the name of the place is Ntswana-tsatsi. It is evident that there is a conflict in Mofolo. He is a Christian but at the same time talks about Ntswana-tsatsi which is the place that serves as the custodian of Basotho traditions and customs. Basotho have a strong belief that Ntswanatsatsi is a place whose surface is covered by water. This water is surrounded by reeds. It is the place from where Mopeli-Moholo, the first Mosotho emerged (Guma 1982:4).

When the child is born, it is a common practice amongst the Basotho to place a reed outside the house. The aim is to signify the arrival of the new one, and that those who are polluted should not come nearer the house. Mofolo was socialised in the Basotho tradition, hence he mentioned the power of the reed in the novel. The reed is the symbol of protection from the ancestors. Once more, it is mentioned in the book of Exodus 2: 2 -3, that Pharaoh gave a directive that all male children should be killed, and Jochebed placed her son, Moses, in a papyrus basket coated with tar and pitch and hid him among the reeds along the river banks. The preceding postulation implies that when Mofolo wrote *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, he was unconsciously quoting what was written long time ago, but interpreted it in the manner that would suit his works of art. According to African tradition and Christianity, a reed is a symbol of cleanliness, and it is always found at holy place where there is a protection of the gods and God.

2. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the novel, *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, is part of the texts which were written before it. It is part of intertextuality. Mofolo quoted many incidents from the Bible because he was greatly influenced by the word of God. He was writing according to the manner in which he understood the Bible. History is also clearly reflected in *Moeti wa Botjhabela* because we are reminded of the Dark African continent which was characterised by famine and inter-racial wars. In this novel, Mofolo peeped from time to time into the customs and traditions of Africans. These customs and traditions are embedded in the Basotho folklore. This implies that the novel was constructed as mixtures of citations as it soaked up and transformed other texts. The existence of other texts in *Moeti wa Botjhabela*, is not there as a starting point, but as a base of comprehensibility and complementary information to the ideas of Mofolo.

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