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Identifying Perceived Patriarchal Practices Perpetrated by Female Characters in Sesotho sa Leboa's Two Novels: A Liberal Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

African patriarchal culture traditionally dictates gender roles, often positioning women as subordinate and lacking autonomy. This paper argues that in response to these constraints, African women in contemporary literature adopt imported practices, sometimes resulting in a reversal of oppression. Specifically, this paper's analysis explored the patriarchal practices perpetrated by female protagonists in two Sesotho sa Leboa novels, Ke Nako Ya Ka and Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye! Employing a feminist research methodology, this paper used liberal feminism as its analytical framework to analyse how these characters negotiate power. The existing literature confirmed that patriarchal norms are well-documented in Sesotho sa Leboa and neighbouring African-language literatures, and that liberal feminism, while established, remained an underexplored lens in Sesotho sa Leboa literature. In essence, no previous study has traced how liberated female characters in these specific novels reproduce patriarchal oppression against their own husbands, a gap this paper addresses. The findings revealed that the protagonists' pursuit of freedom is openly articulated and, within the narrative, appears to achieve its stated objectives. However, this pursuit is narratively complicated by the marginalisation and alienation of their male counterparts. This dynamic raises questions about whether liberal feminism's aspiration to balanced equality is fully realised in these texts, a consideration this paper explores in alignment with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 5. By exposing this contradictory reproduction of subjugation, this paper contributes critical insights to ongoing debates on women's marginalisation and empowerment, complicating the assumption that female liberation in literary representation is necessarily synonymous with equitable social transformation.

Keywords Patriarchy; female characters; Sesotho sa Leboa; novels; liberal feminism

1. Introduction

It is widely presumed that African culture perceives women as inferior beings who must be controlled by men, who lack autonomy, and who hold little status in society. Culture is understood to dictate how men and women are expected to live and interact with one another,

prescribing particular ways of being and relating within a given society. Building on this premise, this paper argues that African writers, through their female characters, have progressively depicted women abandoning indigenous cultural norms in favour of ostensibly more contemporary, imported practices of self-assertion.

Against this background, the paper identifies and interrogates perceived patriarchal practices perpetrated by female protagonists in two Sesotho sa Leboa novels: *Ke Nako Ya Ka* by Molefe (2001) and *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* by Mabye & Makobe (2009). The two texts are read through Diphereferе and Julia, their respective central female characters, whose conduct in the domestic, occupational, and political spheres is examined against the tenets of liberal feminism. The paper's central argument is that, although both characters set out to claim the freedoms that liberal feminism promises, the manner in which they pursue those freedoms reproduces, rather than dismantles, oppression, this time directed at their own husbands.

The paper proceeds as follows: it first outlines feminist theory in general and liberal feminism in particular, together with the latter's historical background. It then presents the paper's methodology before discussing how Diphereferе and Julia exercise their rights, employment and political participation, and how, within the narrative framework, these assertions of agency coexist with actions that marginalise, dehumanise and subject their husbands to various forms of control. The paper closes with a consolidating discussion that acknowledges the narrative complexity of these representations, and a conclusion that reflects on the implications of these findings for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality.

1.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist activists commonly describe feminism as a movement that, like the tides of the ocean, rises, recedes, and rises again. Feminist theory was developed to critique social inequality and to provide a means of challenging neoliberalism and patriarchy (Vivaldi and Barbara, 2021). It remains a significant and evolving movement: in 2018, for example, women in Chile drew on feminist organising to advocate for free and safe abortion.

Although feminism as an organised movement was publicised in the United States of America in the 1960s, its intellectual roots reach back to the late eighteenth century, where they are connected to the social ideologies expressed in the writing and public life of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), an English writer who advocated for women's equal access to education and for women's rights more broadly. Feminism, as an organised response, developed years after women's oppression and the entrenchment of unequal legal and social structures; it was subsequently propelled by members of the Women's Liberation Movement, who set out to liberate women and to fight for their rights in pursuit of gender equality. Liberal feminism is one strand within this broader feminist tradition, and it is the strand upon which the present paper's analytical framework is built.

1.2 Liberal Feminism Defined

Enyew & Mihrete (2018: 59) describe liberal feminism as "a type of gender reform feminism that emanates from liberal thought." It strongly emphasises policy and legal reform as the route to eradicating gender inequalities (Arat, 2015; Whalley & Hackett, 2017), and it promotes a social justice agenda that embraces diversity, equality of opportunity and meritocracy within the existing system (Evans, 2009). Anggraeni & Sari (2025) add that liberal feminism emphasises a freedom between men and women that is balanced, equal and free of oppression, while Frieslaar & Masango (2021) describe it as an ideology concerned

with balancing power between men and women, hence its characterisation as an "ideology of equality" (Axtmann, 2003).

Liberal feminism's key principle, therefore, is equality achieved through legal reform rather than revolution (Samkange, 2015). Within this framework, women are viewed as rational beings possessed of freedom of choice and the right to exercise personal and socio-political autonomy. It is against this principle of equality, pursued through legitimate, reformist and, by implication, amicable means, that the conduct of female characters Diphererefere and Julia is evaluated in this paper.

1.3 Historical Background of Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism originates in the liberal political philosophy of the Enlightenment era, spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Tong, 2009). Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argued that women should be educated as men are, so that they might grow into moral and autonomous individuals; in the nineteenth century, Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill wrote in favour of women's fuller social involvement and their access to work outside the home. Liberal feminism is accordingly linked to the liberal women's rights movement and to early first-wave feminism (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005).

In the United States, the 1960s saw renewed organising through groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) and the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL). A parallel and equally significant historical moment is South Africa's own 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings, led by Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, in which more than 20 000 women of all races gathered to protest against the extension of apartheid pass laws to women. Liberal feminism, in both its international and South African articulations, remains a relevant and evolving ideology today (Tong, 2009; Sangeetha, Mohan & Kannan, 2022).

1.4 Literature Review

Having traced the historical development of liberal feminism, this review now examines the existing scholarship on gender representation in African-language literature, identifying the gap that this paper seeks to address.

A considerable body of scholarship has studied how female characters are portrayed in African-language literature, and the constant finding is that women are portrayed as objects rather than agents of oppression. Mawela (1994) compares female characters across several Tshivenda novels and finds that male authors consistently expect women to be submissive, branding those who resist as "bad mothers", while Mereeotlhe (1998) reaches a similar conclusion for Setswana literature, calling for the liberation of both female characters and the male authors who create them. Within Sesotho sa Leboa specifically, Mokgwakgwa (2000) analyses Serudu's drama series and shows that female characters are depicted enduring tragic circumstances that reduce them to compassion and fear rather than agency. It is, as this body of work makes clear, comparatively rare for female characters to be portrayed as oppressors or as power-abusive. Therefore, the two selected novels under examination in this paper break away from such traditional representations.

Recent scholarship on Sesotho sa Leboa literary discourse has extended this line of research. Kanyane (2026), applying critical discourse analysis to O.K. Matsepe's *Megokgo ya Bjoko*, demonstrates how the character Leilane produces and sustains dominance through language and interaction across domestic, communal and institutional spheres. The study shows that

patriarchal power in Sesotho sa Leboa literature is maintained not only through physical force but also through "the management of meaning, accountability and legitimacy" (Kanyane, 2026: 3). This finding is significant for the present paper, as it establishes that patriarchal practices in Sesotho sa Leboa literary texts operate through discursive control, a dynamic that, as this paper will demonstrate, is replicated by female characters against their own husbands.

Alongside liberal feminism, African feminism offers a distinct, and in some respects competing, lens on gender in African contexts. Bádéjo (1998: 94) characterises African feminism by its emphasis on femininity, power and harmony, situating gender equality within a broader framework of social balance between women and men rather than within a rights-based, legal-reform paradigm. Serudu (2007) similarly argues that African women writers have moved out of isolation to challenge centuries of male domination in literature and in political, social and domestic life. These African feminist accounts foreground harmony and complementarity between the sexes, whereas the present paper's liberal feminist framework foregrounds individual rights and legal-reformist equality; it is against this latter, rights-based standard rather than an ideal of harmony that female characters Diphérefere's and Julia's conduct is evaluated.

Womanism, as articulated by African and African-American scholars, offers a further corrective to Western feminist frameworks. Pewissi (2019) critiques both Western and African feminisms as political reactions against patriarchy that remain "one-dimensional and cater just for the needs of one gender to the detriment of the other half of humanity, the male gender" (p.207). He further observes that feminism "does not accommodate all women since the birthing of African Feminism is as a result of the discriminatory racist nature of Western Feminism which does not account for the needs and experiences of women of colour." Essentially, Pewissi (*ibid*: 209) argues that feminism is "similar to patriarchy": using examples from Achebe's early novels (which poorly portray female characters) compared with Nwapa's and Emecheta's novels (which portray men as irresponsible failures), he contends that "if patriarchy is male-dominated rule, Feminism represents female dominance" and that "to empower the victim of yesterday to fight back to disarm the powerful is a perpetual way of raising violence" (p.71). This critique is directly relevant to the present paper's findings, which show Diphérefere and Julia reproducing patriarchal dominance rather than dismantling it.

Mateveke et al. (2025) spread a related argument through the perspective of Africana Womanism, contending that European gender and sexuality theories, including liberal feminism, radical feminism, postmodern feminism and queer theory represent "discursive constructs inadequate to capture the essence of African male-female relations" (p.39). They argue that the "prominent infiltration and imposition of Eurocentric models and theories have created perplexities in Africa's conception of male-female relations" and that such theories, "when not used with careful consideration, can be culturally annihilative" (p.40). This critique of liberal feminism's potential cultural inapplicability does not invalidate its use as an analytical framework in the present paper, but it does stress the need for reflexivity regarding the framework's Western origins and limitations.

Liberal feminism has attracted substantial critique from scholars who argue that its emphasis on legal reform and equal opportunity within existing structures fails to address the root causes of gender inequality. ScienceDirect (2023) notes that liberal feminism has been regularly challenged by Third World feminists, whether in the South or in diasporic communities in the North (ScienceDirect, *ibid*.), for its Western-centric assumptions about gender equality. The framework's tendency to measure gender equality according to western

ways of knowing has been critiqued as serving to "legitimise neo-colonial forms of domination" (Makama, et al., 2019). Makama et al. (2019) argue that "a western-centric, universalist feminism has resulted in a rigid understanding of hegemonic masculinity that is situated within a moralistic binary of victim and villain" (p.63). This binary is precisely what the present paper's analysis seeks to complicate: Dipherefere and Julia, while claiming the status of "liberated" women, become villains in their domestic spheres, and their husbands, though allegedly the patriarchal oppressors, become victims of gender-based violence.

The intersection of genders with other axes of identity and oppression further complicates liberal feminism's singular focus on gender inequality. While intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is often associated with Black feminist thought, it has been less thoroughly applied to African-language literary analysis. Blume Oeur & Grundy (2021) explore the antagonism between Black feminism and the New Black Masculinities movement, arguing that "Black male aggrievement" has been "nurtured by a neoliberal academy that delegitimizes critical scholarship and takes delight in conflict between progressive movements" (p.2). Their analysis demonstrates that "NBM rehearses Black male aggrievement, an ideology that anchors conservative gender politics to its anti-racist motivations and claims injury at the hands of Black feminism as a field, and Black women in particular" (p.1). While their focus is on American Black masculinities, the dynamic they identify whereby progressive gender politics can unintentionally reproduce conservative gender hierarchies that resonates with the present paper's findings about Sesotho sa Leboa female protagonists.

The assumption that African culture positions men as heads of the household finds support in studies of cultural discourse. Mojalefa & Makgato (2007: 155) show, through Setswana proverbial expression, that traditional norms portray the husband as "the head and leader of his family" and grant him authority to discipline his wife, who is expected to submit and endure. Writing on African culture more broadly, Zuma (2009) similarly holds that culture promotes patriarchy and suppresses women. These accounts of patriarchal cultural expectation supply the background against which the reversal passed by characters Dipherefere and Julia becomes noticeable; rather than dismantling the patriarchal pattern the reviewed scholars describe, both characters (Dipherefere and Julia) reproduce it against their own husbands.

The question of male victimhood within patriarchal systems has received increasing scholarly attention. Gender-based violence against men, long neglected in both academic and policy discourse, is addressed by a study on Molefe's *Ke Nako Ya Ka* which aims to point out the missing link in the GBV engagements and bring to the public interest the seemingly muted cry of men (Chokoe & Montle, 2025). The institutionalised traditional perceptions of femininity and masculinity subject men to a fallacious immunity against GBV as they are culturally perceived as stronger vessels and women as weaker ones (Mnisi & Thete, 2025). This paper's analysis of Dipherefere's violence against Boleta contributes to filling this gap in the GBV discourse, demonstrating that male victimisation, though underrepresented, is documented in Sesotho sa Leboa literature.

Recent African literary scholarship has extended the conversation on masculinities. Shabalala (2024), in a masculinist critique of images of men in the isiZulu novel *Izibi zaseThekwini*, illustrates that "isiZulu literary texts in general portray men as tough, authoritative, wealthy, heterosexual, homophobic, independent, uncaring, fearless, and oppressive towards women and other weak men." Similarly, Masuku (2024) explores how isiZulu folktales depict boys as heroes and strong individuals, sending a message of what is expected behaviour from boys and the kind of masculinity that is rewarded. While these studies focus on Zulu literature, they are relevant to the Sesotho sa Leboa context as they demonstrate how African literary

traditions construct masculinity in ways that are both prescriptive and limiting. The present paper contributes to this body of scholarship by examining how female characters, in their pursuit of liberation, reproduce the very patterns of dominance and dehumanisation that characterise hegemonic masculinity.

A growing number of studies have applied liberal feminism specifically to literary and audiovisual texts, though almost always to trace women's progress toward freedom rather than any resulting misconduct. Cloete (1998) shows how two African writers use womanist themes to portray liberated women pursuing sexual and racial freedom, while Musgrave (2003) traces how liberal feminist aesthetics reshaped attitudes to women's access to artistic production. Miskiyah & Akhmad (2022) find that the female protagonists of the film *Brave* embody liberal feminist androgyny by freeing themselves from their surroundings' patriarchal expectations, and Herouach (2019) reports that Moroccan university students increasingly regard women's social status as improving, if only semi-liberal. Sari et al., (2023) and Tambotto (2023) both use liberal feminist theory and characterisation analysis to trace protagonists' pursuit of education, intelligence and independence. Taken together, these studies confirm liberal feminism's usefulness as an analytical lens for literary and filmic characterisation, but their consistent focus on women's liberation leaves unexamined what happens once that freedom is claimed, specifically, whether its pursuit remains consistent with liberal feminism's own commitment to equality rather than domination. This is precisely the question that the present paper poses of Diphere fere and Julia.

African women's writing beyond Southern Africa has engaged with similar themes. Kyoore (2024), examining Gabonese writer Sylvie Ntsame's novels, demonstrates how Ntsame utilises her novels to question certain patriarchal traditions and practices in African society (such as polygyny) that, in certain contexts, tend to silence the voice of the female. Ntsame's novel *Femme libérée battue* (literally "liberated beaten woman") explores the paradox of a woman who achieves liberation only to experience victimisation, a theme that resonates with the present paper's exploration of how liberation can be pursued at the expense of mutual respect. A comparative Francophone study that illustrates how the woman is subjugated by customary and cultural habits in postcolonial Africa addressing levirate, excision and polygamy as patriarchal practices. These studies demonstrate that the questions this paper poses, about the relationship between female liberation and patriarchal reproduction are of concern across African-language literary traditions.

More directly relevant are studies undertaken on the same or closely related Sesotho sa Leboa texts. Moeti (2012) applies feminist literary criticism to *Nonyana ya Tokologo* and credits the novel with depicting female oppression under patriarchy and women's subsequent liberation, though he also observes that the text ultimately returns its female characters to their oppressors. Mabiletja (2013), working across three Sesotho sa Leboa novels including *Ke Nako Ya Ka*, documents the abuse of men by "liberated" female characters and argues that such male abuse is systematically under-reported and neglected, including by the South African Police Service, where the true victim risks being treated as the perpetrator. Thete (2023) examines the cover page of *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* through semiotics and stylistics, showing that its title, graphics and colours anticipate the novel's content. None of these studies, however, undertakes a sustained, liberal feminist reading of how the two selected novels' female protagonists exercise their rights, employment, and political participation while simultaneously oppressing their husbands, and this is the gap this paper addresses.

While scholarship on gender in African-language literature has extensively documented patriarchal oppression of women, and while critiques of liberal feminism's Western-centric assumptions have grown increasingly studied, no study has yet explored how female

characters in Sesotho sa Leboa novels reproduce patriarchal practices against their husbands through the framework of liberal feminism. This paper addresses this gap, contributing both to feminist literary criticism and to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality.

2. Body of Paper

2.1 Methodology

This paper employs the feminist method as its research methodology, since its central objective is centred on women and on how women, as literary characters, exercise power in relation to men. The feminist research method enables researchers to view the social world through the prism of gender. Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002: 10) state: "Feminist methodology is one set of approaches to the problems of producing justifiable knowledge of gender relations." The feminist research method creates spaces and opportunities to discover the lived realities of power inequalities and provides evidence to work towards addressing these deep-rooted inequalities (Jenkins, Narayanaswamy, & Sweetman, 2019: 414). This method is selected because it is a feminist research approach that centers on women.

2.1.1 Sampling Rationale and Selection Criteria

The two Sesotho sa Leboa novels under exploration in this paper *Ke Nako Ya Ka* (Molefe, 2001) and *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* (Mabye & Makobe, 2009) are selected through purposive sampling, a strategy appropriate for qualitative research that seeks information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling is deemed suitable because the paper's objective is not statistical generalisation but rather analytical depth and theoretical illumination of a specific phenomenon: the portrayal of liberated female characters who perpetuate patriarchal practices.

The selection criteria are threefold. First, both novels have to feature female protagonists who are clearly depicted as asserting agency and challenging traditional gender roles, thereby offering textual evidence of liberal feminist aspirations. Second, the novels have to depict these female characters' conduct in domestic, occupational, and/or political spheres in sufficient narrative detail to permit sustained qualitative analysis. Third, the novels have to be representative of contemporary Sesotho sa Leboa literature, published within a timeframe (2001 - 2009) that reflects post-apartheid South African society and its evolving gender dynamics.

Ke Nako Ya Ka by Molefe (2001) is selected because its protagonist, Diphérefere, repeatedly invokes rights-based discourse (e.g., "*ke nako ya ka*" [it is my time]) and explicitly challenges patriarchal authority in the domestic sphere, making it a representative text for exploring liberal feminist themes. *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* By Mabye & Makobe (2009) was selected because its protagonist, Julia, transitions from employee to business owner while progressively subjugating her husband, providing a complementary case that illustrates how economic empowerment can intersect with domestic oppression. Together, the two novels offer contrasting yet convergent depictions of liberated women, enabling comparative analysis of how female agency is narrativised in Sesotho sa Leboa literature.

While these selected novels cannot be considered statistically representative of all Sesotho sa Leboa literature, they were chosen as illustrative cases that demonstrate the phenomenon under exploration, namely, the reproduction of patriarchal oppression by female characters. The findings are therefore intended to be transferable to similar literary contexts rather than generalisable to the entire corpus of Sesotho sa Leboa novels.

2.1.2 Analytic Procedure

The analysis progressed through a systematic qualitative close reading of the two texts, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework adapted for literary analysis. The procedure comprised various phases. First, the researcher conducted multiple readings of both novels to achieve comprehensive familiarity with the narrative content, character development, and plot progression. Second, passages involving the female protagonists' interactions with male characters particularly their husbands, were identified and extracted. Third, these passages were coded using a deductive coding framework derived from liberal feminist principles. The coding categories are organized as follows:

Exercise of liberal feminist rights as positive indicators, where female characters clearly assert their rights, autonomy, or equality as Diphereferе often cites "*ditokelo*" (rights) and "*fifty-fifty*" (equality), employment and economic participation as the texts references formal employment, business ownership, or economic independence, and political participation where female characters are involved in organisations, leadership roles and public advocacy. Lastly, perpetration of patriarchal practices as a negative indicator, where there are instances where female characters are dictating household labour division, controlling domestic arrangements and imposing will on family members, verbal abuse, name-calling, insults and language that strips the husband of dignity as they are compared to animals. The perpetuation of physical aggression, threats and intimidation, enslavement and servitude where female characters engaged their male-counterparts into forced labour, unpaid work and treatment of the husband as property, and erasure of personal identity or denial of personhood caused by renaming.

The coding framework allows the researcher to analyse how the same characters simultaneously pursued liberal feminist goals and reproduced oppressive behaviours. Fourth, the coded passages were subjected to interpretive analysis, exploring how each instance relates to liberal feminist principles of equality, autonomy, and mutual respect. The findings were synthesised across both novels to identify patterns, contrasts, and implications.

To enhance analytical rigour, the researcher engages in reflexivity throughout the process, acknowledging that her own feminist commitments and positionality as a Sesotho sa Leboa scholar might influence interpretation. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings with existing scholarship on the same novels (Mabiletja, 2013; Moeti, 2012) and by subjecting the analysis to peer debriefing with colleagues specialising in African-language literature.

2.1.3 Translation Strategy

All textual evidence presented in this paper appears in the original Sesotho sa Leboa, accompanied by the researcher's English translation. The translation strategy is guided by the principle of functional equivalence (Nida & Taber, 1969), which prioritises conveying the meaning, tone, and pragmatic force of the source text rather than producing a literal word-for-word rendering. This approach is viewed appropriate because the paper's analysis is concerned with the sociolinguistic and discursive significance of characters' utterances, their aggression, assertion, dehumanization rather than purely grammatical or lexical precision.

The translations are presented by the researcher, who is a native speaker of Sesotho sa Leboa and holds advanced qualifications in African-language studies. To ensure fidelity, the following procedures are adopted: all translations are reviewed against the source text to verify accuracy and completeness, culturally specific expressions (e.g., "*mpša*" [dog], "*mogarigašana*" [lizard]) are translated with attention to their derogatory force within Sesotho sa Leboa cultural context, where animal comparisons are strong insults that strip the

target of human dignity. Third, idiomatic expressions (e.g., "*ke nako ya ka*" [it is my time]) are rendered in a way that conveys their assertive, self-empowering function and where the original contained emphatic or emotionally charged language (e.g., "*Aowaowaa*," "*Sis*!"), the translations sought to preserve the affective intensity of the utterance. Therefore, the researcher acknowledges the natural challenges of translation, particularly the risk of losing tone or imposing Anglophone interpretive frameworks onto Sesotho sa Leboa discourse. To mitigate this risk, the original Sesotho sa Leboa text is always presented alongside the translation, enabling readers familiar with the language to verify the translation and independently assess its fidelity.

2.1.4 Criteria for Identifying "Patriarchal Practices"

An analytical task of this paper is to identify "perceived patriarchal practices perpetrated by female characters." The criteria for identifying such practices are derived from both liberal feminist theory and existing scholarship on patriarchy in African contexts. Following liberal feminism's emphasis on equality, autonomy, and mutual respect (Enyew & Mihrete, 2018; Anggraeni & Sari, 2025), the paper identifies as patriarchal any practice that imposes one party's will over another's without reciprocal negotiation, restricting the other person's freedom of choice, movement, and self-determination. Subject others to verbal abuse, dehuminisation and degradation, employs physical violence, threats, intimidation to achieve compliance and subjecting the other to forced labour, unpaid work or treatment as property.

The paper draws on African feminist scholarship (Bádéjo, 1998; Serudu, 2007) and cultural studies of patriarchy (Mojalefa & Makgato, 2007; Zuma, 2009) to contextualise these practices within Sesotho sa Leboa cultural frameworks. In this cultural context, the husband is traditionally regarded as "the head and leader of his family" (Mojalefa & Makgato, 2007: 155), and conduct that reverses this hierarchy while not patriarchal in liberal feminist terms can be read as patriarchal when it replicates the same dynamics of domination, control, and disrespect that characterise traditional patriarchy, only with the roles reversed. The paper therefore treats "patriarchal practices" not as practices exclusive to men, but as practices that perpetuate structures of domination and subordination, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator. The identification of such practices in the selected novels is guided by close attention to narrative descriptions of character behaviour, dialogue, and narrative commentary. Specific textual indicators included: commands issued without negotiation; terms of address that humiliate or animalise; depictions of physical aggression; narrative descriptions of the husband's fear, despair, or submission; and clear statements by characters asserting their right to dominate others.

Liberal feminism, as outlined above, constitutes the paper's underpinning analytical framework. Two Sesotho sa Leboa novels are purposively selected for their explicit engagement with liberated, assertive female characters: *Ke Nako Ya Ka* by Molefe (2001) and *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* by Mabye & Makobe (2009). The analysis proceeds through a close, qualitative reading of the two texts, focusing on Dipherefere in *Ke Nako Ya Ka* and Julia, *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* as the central female protagonists, and it is organised around the analytical categories of women's rights, employment, political participation, domestic oppression, dehumanisation and violence.

The analysis in this paper is concerned with textual representation rather than authorial intention. Following the principles of literary hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981), the focus is on the meanings that emerge from the text itself; narrative patterns, character actions, dialogue, and the interpretive possibilities they afford rather than on what Molefe, Mabye & Makobe may have consciously intended. This is not to dismiss authorial intent as irrelevant, but to acknowledge that literary texts generate meanings that may exceed, complicate, or even

contradict their authors stated or presumed intentions. The findings of this paper are therefore offered as one possible reading among several, grounded in the liberal feminist framework, rather than as definitive pronouncements on what the novels really mean.

The reader, moreover, plays an active role in meaning-making (Iser, 1978). Different readers positioned differently in terms of gender, culture, and theoretical commitments may well arrive at alternative interpretations of Diphererefere's and Julia's conduct. A reader sympathetic to radical feminism, for instance, might read the protagonists' aggression as justified resistance to deep-rooted patriarchal structures, while a reader informed by African feminist thought might interpret their actions as a troubling departure from communitarian values of balance and harmony. The present reading, grounded in liberal feminism's emphasis on equality and mutual respect, is not presented as the only valid interpretation, but as a theoretically coherent contribution to scholarly debate.

Furthermore, textual context is essential to interpretation. Both novels are works of fiction, not sociological case studies or policy documents. The events, characters, and relationships they depict are constructed for narrative effects for drama, irony, social commentary, or entertainment. Diphererefere's and Julia's conduct may be read as exaggerations, serving to critique rather than endorse the behaviour they depict. It is possible, for instance, that Molefe and Mabye & Makobe are satirising the excesses of a certain kind of liberal individualism, warning against the abandonment of relational values in the pursuit of personal freedom. The present analysis, while noting this possibility, focuses on the textual evidence of patriarchal practices perpetrated by female characters, regardless of whether the authors intended such practices to be read as condemnatory, cautionary, or merely dramatic.

2.2 Results

Diphererefere (Wife) as Oppressor of Boleta (Husband): *Ke Nako Ya Ka*

In Molefe's (2001) *Ke Nako Ya Ka*, Diphererefere seeks liberation from what she perceives as patriarchal chains, fighting for her rights and for equal footing with her husband, Boleta. Her conduct is examined below across five features of liberal feminism: women's rights, employment, political participation, domestic oppression and dehumanisation, and violence.

2.2.1 Women's Rights

Diphererefere's insistence on equal standing at home is captured in a conversation with her friend Makuba:

> *Mogwera re lapišitšwe ke go hlwa re bušwa ke banna. Matšatši a lehono, ka mo lapeng ke fifty-fifty. Mosadi le yena o na le taolo. Ga go sa na lapa la monna, mme mosadi a ba ka fase ga gagwe.*
>
> *(Friend, we are tired of being ruled by men. These days, in a family, it's fifty-fifty. The woman also has control. There is no man's family anymore, where a woman submits to him.)*
>
> (Molefe, 2001: 9)

Diphererefere repeats variations of the phrase "*ke nako ya ka*" (it is my time) at several points across the novel, and the narrator remarks that she "had even bitten her upper and lower teeth" while asserting this position (Molefe, 2001: 9), an image that signals her aggressiveness and her unwillingness to entertain contrary advice. When her son questions her refusal to perform household duties, she responds:

> *Bona mo mošaa! Nna nka se di hlatswe re a kwana? Ke na le ditokelo tša go se dire seo ke se ratago, le gona ka nako yeo e ratwago ke nna. Bjale tseba, ga go mang yo a kago tla mo, mme a mpegela go dira tšeo ke sa di ratego. Le wena, o a tseba ka semolao, ke na le toka ya go dira seo. Naa kganthe ge ke be ke re ke nako ya ka, le re ke be ke šupa eng?*
>
> *(Look here, boy! I cannot wash them, okay? I have the right not to do what I don't like, and at the time I like. Now, know that no one can come here and tell me to do what I do not want to do. And you, you know, legally, I have the right to do that. What do you think I meant when I said it is my time?)*
>
> (Molefe, 2001: 46)

She continues, more aggressively still: "*Aowaowaa, ge e le yeo nka se e dumele… Ka tla ka namelwa le bile ke fologwa ke monna mola ke na le ditokelo tša bolokologi?"* (No, I would disagree with that… Should I be pestered by a man when I have free rights?) (Molefe, 2001: 47). These utterances suggest a fierce assertion of independence and self-defence, reflecting a woman's right to express her agency and to stand up for herself. There is nothing wrong in fighting for what belongs to one, whether by privilege or by law, but it must be done amicably: women's rights promote equality, autonomy and dignity, but, like human rights generally, they do not condone aggression and disrespect. Mutual respect and peace remain significant values in any society that seeks genuine equality.

Diphereferе's language while aggressive, represents an understandable, perhaps necessary, response to generations of patriarchal subordination. Her assertion of rights may be read as a rhetorical strategy designed to break through the silence historically imposed on women. From the textual evidence, however, the manner in which these rights are claimed through dismissive language, public confrontation, and the invocation of legal discourse to override family norms, also serves to marginalise her husband. This does not diminish the legitimacy of her claim to rights but rather complicates the liberal feminist assumption that the exercise of individual rights necessarily produces equitable outcomes for all parties. A reader of liberal feminist persuasion might argue that Diphereferе's bluntness reflects the internalised frustration of long oppression; alternatively, a reading informed by African feminist thought might regard her approach as a disagreeing import that undermines relational harmony. The text itself does not adjudicate between these possibilities, and the present analysis does not presume doing so.

2.2.2 Employment

Diphereferе gains access to formal employment as a matron at Seshego Hospital, and she also holds a high societal position as president of a women's league. Access of this kind is, in principle, consistent with liberal feminism, which holds that although women and men may be intrinsically different in some respects, difference does not imply inferiority (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). However, Diphereferе conducts herself however she desires at work and in society, returning home whenever she pleases and disregarding her husband in the process. Her friend Makuba, who is likewise employed, offers a counter-example: rather than allowing her position to encourage mistreatment of others, Makuba sticks to what is right and advises Diphereferе against letting the women's league get into her head and disrespect her home. The inclusion of Makuba as a foil suggests that the author or at least the narration do not endorse Diphereferе's conduct uniformly; Makuba's moderating voice provides an internal textual check on the protagonist's excesses. Employment access, in other words, does not by itself guarantee ethical conduct; in Diphereferе's case, it appears instead to feed a sense of unaccountable power.

2.2.3 Political Participation

Diphereferé is elected president of a women's league whose stated objective is to fight for women's rights and for equal footing in the private and public spheres. She uses this political platform, however, to drive a personal mandate, protesting and resisting patriarchy under the banner of "fifty-fifty" equality. Her hunger for power drives her astray: she recklessly uses her presidential position to influence other women not to listen to their husbands, an influence that disrupts familial structures. This is evident when Diphereferé's sister remarks to Boleta:

> *Le gona sa go se leše di theogela, ke go re khuduthamaga ya liki ya bona basatšana ba ba dinokwane, e thupeletšwa ke basadi bao bontši bo se nago banna… Go bolela therešo, ga a gona monna yo a kago dumela mosadi a ikgapa a ikgoroša…*
>
> *(Worse, something that unsettles one is that the executive of this league of rogue so-called women is dominated by women who are mostly single… In fact, no man would allow a woman to control herself excessively.)*
>
> (Molefe, 2001: 28)

From Diphereferé's sister's perspective, the women's league is disruptive, and its members are described in derogatory terms; however, this perspective is itself shaped by patriarchal assumptions about women's proper place. The narration does not definitely endorse the sister's view; it simply presents it as one character's opinion. What the textual evidence does show is that Diphereferé's political platform, once presented, appears to mirror the authoritarian tendencies of patriarchal structures rather than replacing them with collaborative, egalitarian relationships. While liberal feminism advocates for women's access to political involvement, it does not prescribe how women should conduct themselves once they occupy such positions. Diphereferé's conduct suggests that access to political power, unaccompanied by accountability, can shade into the very domination that liberal feminism sets out to dismantle. This is not to suggest that women's political participation is inherently problematic, but rather to observe that the exercise of power, regardless of the gender of the power-holder, invites scrutiny.

2.2.4 Domestic Oppression and Dehumanisation

Diphereferé orders Boleta to perform all household chores: "*O swanetše go apea bjalo ka ge o dirile, o hlatswe diaparo, dibjana, go hlwekiša eng kapa eng… goba o a rata goba ga o rate*" (You have to cook as you did, wash clothes and dishes, clean whatever… whether you like it or not) (Molefe, 2001: 17). This reversal of the traditionally gendered division of household labour is compounded by verbal dehumanisation. When Boleta invites her family to intervene in their marital conflict, Diphereferé retaliates in front of her mother, father and sister:

> *E le gore leswa le bešola eng? Kgaoganang le nna, re a kwana? Wena o itirile mogarigašana o tšwa go nthapela tšhabana se, o dio ba setlatla eye! Sis!*
>
> *(So, what is the new one breaking? Leave me alone, do you understand? You turned yourself into a mere lizard and went to call this nation for me, you are just a fool, sies!)*
>
> (Molefe, 2001: 38)

She goes further, calling Boleta "*mpša*" (a dog) for inviting her family: "*ke wena mpša o tšwago o nthapela lešaba le la gago*" (Molefe, 2001: 39). The descriptions used here, lizard, fool, dog have specific cultural weight. In Sesotho sa Leboa cultural context, animal comparisons are among the strongest insults, stripping the target of human dignity and social standing. Reducing her husband to a lizard, an imbecile, and a domestic animal strip him of

the dignity that the South African Bill of Rights guarantees to every person, and it inverts the very ideal of mutual respect required for equitable relationships. This is not to claim that such language is unique to Diphere fere, or that men in Sesotho sa Leboa literature never use comparable language toward women. Rather, the textual evidence shows a gendered reversal in which a female character, newly empowered, employs the very language of domination historically used to subordinate women.

2.2.5 Violence

Diphere fere's dehumanisation of Boleta escalates into physical violence. She pokes him on the forehead to assert her authority (Molefe, 2001: 17–18), and when he calls on her family to help reprimand her, she smacks him in their presence: "*Diphere fere ke go tabogela Boleta a mo latswa ka ntahle le bile a re: Ke wena mpša o tšwago o nthapela lešaba le la gago*" (Diphere fere runs to Boleta, smacks him, and says: is it you, dog, who went to get this nation of yours) (Molefe, 2001: 39). Sepeng et al. (2022: 187) note that African societies often lack a common term for domestic violence because the term itself carries colonial connotations, and that such violence has traditionally been resolved within the family rather than named as "domestic violence." From a cultural perspective, Diphere fere's aggression, particularly in the presence of her family, transgresses not only norms of spousal respect but also norms of familial honour. By hitting Boleta in front of her parents and sister, she publicly dishonours him and, by extension, undermines the ancestral union their marriage represents. This is not to suggest that violence within marriage is acceptable under any circumstances, but rather to note that the text presents Diphere fere's conduct as excessive and transgressive within its own cultural frame.

A different interpretation might argue that Diphere fere's violence, however regrettable, is a dramatic representation of the difficulty of dismantling deeply rooted power structures. The psychological damage of patriarchal subordination does not simply disappear when power dynamics shift; it may manifest in aggression, particularly in characters who have been denied agency for prolonged periods. Diphere fere's violence toward Boleta could be read not as an endorsement of domination, but as a narrative exploration of the collateral damage of liberation a cautionary tale about the dangers of reproducing oppression in the process of overthrowing it. This reading does not excuse her conduct, but it situates it within a more complex understanding of how structural violence operates and perpetuates itself.

2.3 Julia (Wife) as Oppressor of Senkgopole (Husband): *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!*

In Mabye & Makobe's (2009) *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* Julia's trajectory from employee to business owner is accompanied by the progressive subjugation of her husband, Senkgopole. Her conduct is examined below through employment, enslavement, loss of identity, and violence.

2.3.1 Employment

Julia begins as a cashier in a family business before establishing her own enterprise, with Senkgopole initially her partner. Once the business succeeds, however, she drives Senkgopole out as co-owner and assumes full ownership, subsequently commanding him to work at the establishment without pay while also performing house chores. Employment, which liberal feminism regards as a route to women's economic independence, here becomes the very instrument through which Julia entrenches her husband's subordination.

2.3.2 Enslavement

Julia's domination of Senkgopole is narrated in terms that evoke slavery. He is made to wash dishes and cook under her watchful, punitive gaze:

> *Senkgopole o ile a inama sa mo tshela… O lebile dipitšeng ka pelo ya boima, a di hlatswa a be a di thelega setofong a hlephile moko… Nakong ye ka moka o be a dutše a ngwadile nne godimo ga setulo sa mabusebuse gomme a mo hlapeditše bjalo ka morutiši ge a hlapetša barutwana bao ba filwego kahlolo.*
>
> *(Senkgopole bent down, and it crossed him… He headed for the pots with a heavy heart, washed them, and put them onto the stove in despair… All this time she had been sitting on a luxury chair, watching him like a teacher watching learners who had been punished.)*
>
> (Mabye & Makobe, 2009: 80)

Julia later instructs Senkgopole to sell bottled goods and to hand over all proceeds to her on her return (Mabye & Makobe, 2009: 81), subjecting him to unpaid, forced labour. Section 13 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, provides that "no one may be subjected to slavery, servitude or forced labour," yet Julia's treatment of Senkgopole as her property directly contravenes this constitutional guarantee, exposing a contradiction between her claim to liberated womanhood and the oppressive means by which she exercises it.

2.3.3 Loss of Identity

Senkgopole is further stripped of his name. Mabye & Makobe (2009) narrate that "*a fetošwa lekgoba ka lapeng la gagwe gomme le leina a se hlwe a bitšwa Senkgopole goba Hlabirwa bjalo ka maabane le maloba, eupša Hlasco*" (he was enslaved in his household and was no longer called Senkgopole or Hlabirwa as before, but Hlasco). This act of renaming echoes the practice, historically imposed on enslaved people during the colonial period, of stripping individuals of their given names as a marker of ownership. That a female character adopts this practice against her own husband underscores how thoroughly the novel inverts, rather than resolves, the power imbalance that liberal feminism seeks to correct.

2.3.4 Violence

Julia also perpetuates physical violence against Senkgopole whenever she is at home, such that he "only finds peace of mind when she is away":

> *Le ge monna a ka se dule ka marago a mabedi tlhenkge ge mosadi wa gagwe a dira tše bjalo, go Senkgopole go be go se bjalo ka gore bjona bohloko bjo bjalo ke bjona bo bego bo mo tlišetša tokologo ya gore a kgone go iketla moyeng le mmeleng.*
>
> *(While a man would not sit still when his wife did such things, for Senkgopole it was such pain that brought him the freedom to relax spiritually and physically, only when Julia was away from home.)*
>
> (Mabye & Makobe, 2009: 82)

Julia, as a "modern woman," prioritises her business over the nurturing of a family structure, and her husband, financially dependent on her, is unable to defend himself or to resist her mistreatment.

2.4 Discussion

The textual analysis reveals that Diphereferе and Julia, while articulating aspirations consistent with liberal feminism's emphasis on individual rights, economic independence, and political participation, also exercise forms of power over their husbands that mirror patriarchal domination. Both characters act in ways that structurally resemble what is traditionally attributed to patriarchal systems, only with the roles reversed. This observation invites careful interpretation rather than simple condemnation. The findings do not suggest that female liberation is naturally problematic, nor that the pursuit of gender equality should be abandoned. Rather, the analysis points to a more refined concern: the liberal feminist emphasis on individual rights and legal reform, while valuable, may be insufficient when abstracted from the relational and communitarian contexts in which gender dynamics are embedded. Diphereferе's request of "*ditokelo*" (rights) and "*fifty-fifty*" equality, and Julia's pursuit of economic independence, are not themselves problematic. What the textual evidence complicates is the assumption that the exercise of individual rights particularly when pursued through aggressive, dismissive, or coercive means automatically produces equitable outcomes.

Tugume (2022: 3) argues that family life requires a division of labour in which no one carries the power to dictate to another, but duties are subject to equal distribution. Diphereferе and Julia, as "liberated" women characters, fail to uphold this ideal. However, it is worth considering whether the novels intend to depict this failure as a cautionary critique of liberal individualism, or whether the protagonists' excesses are simply narrative devices for generating drama and social commentary. The presence of Makuba as a moderating voice in *Ke Nako Ya Ka*, and the simply exaggerated subjugation of Senkgopole in *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* both suggest that the authors or the narration itself may be signalling that Diphereferе and Julia have gone too far. This narrative self-awareness complicates any straightforward reading of the novels as approvals of patriarchal role-reversal.

The fight for freedom that both characters earn is clear, visible and, in the narrative, appears to achieve its stated goals. Yet the manner in which that freedom is claimed through aggression, dehumanisation, and coercion raises questions about whether it is consistent with liberal feminism's aspiration to a freedom that is "balanced, equal and free of oppression for both men and women" (Anggraeni & Sari, 2025: 3). It may be that the novels are not critiquing feminism *per se*, but rather a particular version of feminism one that imports Western individualist assumptions without attending to the relational and cultural contexts in which equality must be negotiated. Alternatively, the novels may be doing something more conservative: warning against the dangers of female empowerment altogether. The textual evidence, read in context, permits either interpretation, or the present analysis does not claim to adjudicate definitively between them.

What the textual evidence clearly demonstrates is that Diphereferе and Julia, in achieving their liberation, achieve it in part through the marginalisation and alienation of their male counterparts. This is not to say that the marginalisation of men is equivalent to the historical marginalisation of women under patriarchy, a claim no liberal feminist would endorse. However, it is to observe that the narrative structure of these novels presents a reversal rather than a transformation of gendered power relations. The two female protagonists succeed in coming out of marginalisation and alienation, but only at the expense of putting their male counterparts into that same marginalisation and alienation. Whether this is read as critique, cautionary tale, or dramatic excess depends on the interpretive framework brought to the text.

3. Conclusion

This paper set out identify perceived patriarchal practices perpetrated by female characters in two Sesotho sa Leboa novels, *Ke Nako Ya Ka* (Molefe, 2001) and *Ra tla ra Lokologa, Eye!* (Mabye & Makobe, 2009), read through the lens of liberal feminism. It defined liberal feminism and outlined its historical background before examining how Diphere fere and Julia exercise women's rights, employment and political participation, and how they simultaneously marginalise, dehumanise and act coercively toward their husbands, Boleta and Senkgopole respectively. The analysis found that the authors introduce female characters who represent liberal feminist ideas taken to an extreme that may, depending on the reading, be read as critique, cautionary tale, or dramatic hyperbole. The fight for freedom is clear and visible, and it appears to take full control of the characters' domestic worlds; however, this is achieved by putting male counterparts into the very marginalisation and alienation from which the female protagonists sought to free themselves. This is not to equate the marginalisation of men with the historical marginalisation of women under patriarchy, the two are not equivalent in scope, duration, or severity. Rather, the findings suggest that the pursuit of gender equality, if it merely overturns rather than dismantles oppressive structures, does not fulfil liberal feminism's own aspiration to a freedom that is balanced, equal and free of oppression for both men and women.

Importantly, the paper acknowledges that this reading is situated and partial. The novels may equally be read as satirical commentaries on the excesses of individualism, as dramatic explorations of the psychological consequences of oppression, or as narratives that ultimately critique rather than celebrate their protagonists' conduct. The presence of foil characters, the exaggerated nature of the protagonists' behaviour, and the cultural norms referenced within the texts all suggest that the authors may intend to distance themselves from the characters they create. The present analysis does not claim to capture authorial intent, but rather to offer a theoretically consistent reading grounded in liberal feminist principles. In this case, the paper contributes to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, by illustrating that genuine equality between men and women cannot be reduced to a reversal of roles, but requires mutual respect, dialogue and the equitable distribution of duties within the family. The paper further contributes to critical debates around women's marginalisation and empowerment in African literature by demonstrating the value of reading feminist literary texts with attention to complexity, contradiction, and the possibility of unintended outcomes. It recommends that future research extend this analysis by sampling similar Sesotho sa Leboa texts, and by examining how male characters respond to the conduct analysed in these female characters, as well as by exploring alternative theoretical frameworks, including African feminism, womanism, and ubuntu-oriented humanism that may yield different interpretive insights.

Lastly, the paper acknowledges the limitations of its own analysis. The focus on two novels, the use of a single theoretical framework, and the reliance on a close reading of textual evidence rather than empirical audience reception all restrict the scope of the findings. Future research might investigate how readers of Sesotho sa Leboa literature male and female, urban and rural, different generations actually interpret Diphere fere's and Julia's conduct. Such reception studies would complement the textual analysis offered here and deepen our understanding of how African literature engages with gender, power, and liberation.

4. Implications

The findings of this paper carry several concrete implications for practice across educational, policy, and programmatic domains. Sesotho sa Leboa literary texts are taught in South

African schools and universities, yet pedagogical approaches often treat gender dynamics uncritically. This paper's findings suggest that curricula should move beyond identifying "oppressed women" and "oppressive men" as static categories. Educators should design lessons that: encourage students to identify how female characters reproduce domination, fostering complex discussion of how resistance to oppression can mistakeably replicate it, have learners/students read the same novel through liberal feminist, African feminist, and ubuntu frameworks, enabling them to evaluate how interpretive choices shape meaning and address gender-based violence against men in literary analysis, countering the assumption that GBV is exclusively female victimization. For example, a lesson on Diphereferе's treatment of Boleta could ask: Does Diphereferе's assertion of rights justify her dehumanisation of her husband? What alternative responses to patriarchy might the novel suggest?

Readers' gendered positions shape their interpretation of texts. This paper's findings imply that literature classrooms should: have male and female learners/students articulate their responses to Diphereferе's and Julia's conduct, covering how gender, culture, and personal experience inform reading, ask learners/students to argue for interpretations that differ from the paper's analysis, developing critical literacy skills, and encourage students to discuss how the novels' gender dynamics resonate with or deviate from their own communities, without reducing literature to sociology. Such pedagogy aligns with the principles of critical literacy and participatory learning, equipping learners/students to read not only for comprehension but for interrogation.

Furthermore, the paper's documentation of male victimisation in Sesotho sa Leboa literature highlights a gap in real-world GBV interventions: GBV awareness campaigns and support services should not assume victims are exclusively women. The findings suggest that male emotional and physical abuse, while underreported, is a concern that programming should acknowledge (Mnisi & Thete, 2025). Police, social workers, and healthcare professionals trained through GBV programmes should receive guidance on recognising male victimisation, avoiding the assumption that men are always perpetrators. The paper's findings could inform public awareness campaigns that use literary extracts to inspire discussion about equitable, non-violent relationships. This does not reduce the priority of addressing violence against women which remains a crisis in South Africa but addresses the "missing link" (Chokoe & Montle, 2025) in current GBV discourse.

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