

Book Review

Navigating Womanhood in Contemporary Botswana

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Stephanie S. Starling's book is a timely, significant contribution to academic and social discourse, especially given how Covid and 'post-Covid' society has sharpened the contradictions between various socio-political binaries, be it right wing versus left wing, elite versus poor, indigenous people versus colonial/ neo-colonial invasions, capitalists versus workers and so on. Starling's book shows the contradictions embedded in different local and global efforts that claim to be working towards empowering women. While her work focuses on Botswana and, to some extent, the African continent as a whole, she is still able at times to show the continued colonial, Western influence of the challenges and experiences faced by African women. The Covid and 'post-Covid' world has revealed the profound social, racial and gender inequalities that characterise our society. It has shown that the pre-Covid ideals around equality have been, at best, a crumbling, failing façade or, at worst, a manipulation and conjured up by the world's powerful, a lie they could not be bothered to continue when the world was hit by the Covid-19 global pandemic. The ruse died a quick death during this period; this is evident in South Africa's increase in violence and abuse against women and children, which overwhelmed the police and the already burdened hospitals and society as a whole during the pandemic. President Cyril Ramaphosa labelled gender-based violence, South Africa's second pandemic (Shota, 2020). In the USA, it was the 2022 overturning of Roe versus Wade, a Supreme Court ruling which gave women autonomy over their bodies and granted them the right to have an abortion. The overturned judgement has had devastating impacts on women and their ability to access adequate healthcare; it will continue to have a long-lasting impact on the socioeconomic challenges faced by individuals and groups (Levinson-King, 2023). Similarly, Starling explores the various ways women are underrepresented and their rights ignored or made secondary in diverse social spaces in Botswana, from the home to places of work, leadership, healthcare, education, legal and traditional systems and many others. She adds:

The women's movement was at its height in Botswana in the 1980s and 1990s (Bauer, 2011), but as it began to weaken the proportion of women MPs fell from 17 per cent in 2000 to 8 per cent in 2009 (World Bank, 2022). By 2019 this had risen again to 11 per cent. (2023: 133).

These figures, and the global general disregard for women is a confusing and scary reality, given that so many of the world's problems are experienced by women, who every day find ways to survive poverty, violence, inequality, unemployment, and climate change. Such problems are often created by patriarchy and other intersecting systems like racism; despite women's resilience and ability to survive these harsh realities, patriarchy still keeps them out of

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any meaningful strategic development or leadership roles. This is presented in the second important aspect of this book. The author, in the care she takes in narrating these women's stories, also illustrates how they find ways to survive, even in circumstances that were built to push them to complete erasure, they still survive. It is motivational text that still maintains its academic rigours and is an important feminist reminder of our different challenges across the globe, it shows the ways these challenges connect us and is a reminder of our strength and resilience as women.

This book is separated into six different chapters. In Chapter 1, the reader is introduced to the general topic of the book, womanhood in Botswana. The inequalities between men and women are made clear very early on. Women's perceived inferiority to men is evident in the name of the introductory chapter; "That's how it is here. Men do what they want": Women in Botswana'. This chapter also introduces us to contemporary Botswana and its challenges, especially in relation to education, law, healthcare and poverty. Throughout the discussion, one can see a constant tension between African traditions and modernity, mostly brought on by Western culture and the history of colonialism. It would have been important for the author to have this discussion more explicitly, given Africa's history with colonialism and neo-colonialisms and the tensions and crippling effects this system has in almost every dimension of African social life. Starling tries to have a similar discussion in part, when she looks at the law, which exists in a binary of traditional customary law and Common law of the Roman-Dutch tradition. In this discussion, Starling sets the tone for the constant double patriarchy African women are faced with, by illustrating that both systems fail to protect women adequately.

Chapter 2 deals with research methodology and ethics. Starling details her research journey and how her past experiences as a volunteer for over a year in Botswana were meaningful in her ability to conduct this research. She interviewed a diverse pool of 30 Botswana women, ranging from highly educated, career-driven women to women who have not gone through much formal Western education and are most primarily from rural areas. They were also diverse in age, with the youngest being 25 and the eldest being 45. Some were mothers, whereas others were not; some were married, others were single. Starling also brought up very important challenges to doing research and the ethical challenges and even dangers they bring up. She does this by narrating some of her own sexual harassment experiences and how these can be better navigated or avoided by giving researchers greater access to funding. She also spent some time discussing the ethical difficulties of being an outsider, particularly, being a white British woman documenting the experiences of black women. While Starling had some understanding of her positionality and privilege as a white woman and researcher, she at times undermined its depth and what it might mean for her participants. This was especially clear in her discussion where she suggests some of the women she encountered might have been trying to exploit her for money and other favours. In contrast, it is the research we do as scholars that is inherently exploitative in its nature, praxis and history. Regardless of the important ethical lengths we go through to ensure it is less exploitative, it still remains deeply exploitative.

Chapter 3 starts to get into the real nub of the discussion where the women start to really get into what womanhood really means to them. For most of the participants, it revolves around marriage, motherhood and the maintenance of cultural traditions and harmful patriarchal norms. Many of the women have experienced varying levels of abuse or know others who have been abused, all in an effort to maintain the patriarchal illusion that men are dominant and superior. It is only if they are able to hold onto these ideals that society and their families see them as worthy women. Some missing level of personhood, in many ways, is only reserved for men, but it is slowly instilled in women when they are able to reach these milestones or are wives or mothers.

Chapter 4 looks at how very few other achievements or contributions to society are considered when it comes to the construction of womanhood. These realities are far worse for rural women, but this is not to say these kinds of views cannot be found in the city or urban areas. Many women in Botswana straddle modern-day city life with traditional rural life. Some work in more urban areas but are from rural areas. This is the reality for much of Sub-Saharan Africa. The patriarchal norms from their rural homes follow them to the cities, where they are met with more western/ modern-based patriarchies, that create overwhelming and stifling experiences for African women. They juggle both patriarchies, sometimes in sync, often creating a double burden. Other times these patriarchies can be contradicting, creating tension and confusion. African women figure out how to climb career ladders needed to improve their social mobility and their family's quality of life. Family here often includes the extended family, sisters, aunts, parents, nephews, in laws, people they left behind in the rural areas etc. They must figure out how to do all of this while still being dutiful wives and mothers who cook, clean, raise children, please their husbands sexually, all while overlooking how little many of their partners contribute to the household labour or finances.

Chapter 5 shows the paradoxes of womanhood, where on some level, women's experiences in contemporary society, as chapter 5 also shows, they have relatively more ease entering public life and places of work, meaning they can improve theirs, their family's and but extension, their community's lives. But there are also other contradictions, like women struggling to access educational structures, making their fight against unemployment and poverty even harder. The double patriarchy sets women back instead of propelling them forward. Yet, families still insist on pushing harmful traditions, even when they cause harm not only to the women, but to the family at large. This is illustrated in many of the stories in the book. Still, one that comes to mind is a family that refuses to

have one of the participants help her unemployed partner start a business because the act of doing so is too masculine. This is one of the illustrations that patriarchy hurts everyone, even the men who, at times, fight to defend it. In this story, everyone loses; the family cannot increase their income in the long run through the potential of a successful business endeavour. The man loses because he stays emasculated, unemployed, and unable to take care of his immediate and extended family. And the woman loses because she is not able to marry her partner, something she may so deeply want, because they cannot afford the wedding and other cultural practices linked to marriage. A toxic combination of colonial disruption of the African family and crisis of masculinity has made men become more threatened by women who thrive both in the public and private sphere, has led to rising abuse, a growing number of single mothers and many other challenges. Starling (2023: 134) adds:

Though reliable historic data are hard to come by, data from recent years show an increase in the proportion of children born to single mothers from 76 per cent in 2011 (Statistics Botswana, 2014) to 84 per cent in 2019 (Statistics Botswana, 2021).

Chapter 6 is a brief Epilogue that sums up the whole discussion. Starling pulls briefly from Bessie Head's literature and life in illustrating African women's colonial and patriarchal subjugation. Head is a South African anti-apartheid activist who was exiled to Botswana and would have experienced varying levels of racism and sexism. These are also themes she frequently explores in her literature and that, in part, inspired Starling as she embarked on her journey to learn from Botswana women and their experiences.

Starling's analysis is essential and is, in many ways, true, but it shows a bleak one-dimensional side of womanhood in Botswana. Engaging a bit deeper in three aspects of African life and experiences would have been important for a more holistic and reflective picture. The three aspects are cultural traditions, colonialism and African feminism. While Starling engages with colonialism and African cultural traditions (in this case Tswana culture), she often does so in passing. These remain significant reasons why contemporary African societies organise and function the way they do and why women might construct so much of their identity around motherhood. The impact of colonialism on the African family cannot be glossed over, even in countries like Botswana, which got their independence early on, in 1966 and through more peaceful means. Colonialism gained many of its successes through the total destruction of the African family structure through slavery, land dispossession and the migrant labour system that normalised the crisis of absent fathers that so many face today. This brings me to the third aspect, which is African feminism and the desire to rebuild the family, which is an important feminist act, one that got many communities through the most brutal and violent parts of colonialism. If it were not for these actions and focus on the family by African women, then and now, the African family structure would exist only as irredeemable chaos and trauma or would not exist at all. Through motherism, African feminists, mothers and women revolutionaries created a safe space for men to feel safe enough to share in the pain of racism and emasculation and slowly start to challenge it (Shange, 2017: 61). Motherism is an African feminist theory that fights for the rights of women through pulling from African cultural ideas. Many African ideals also call for the protection and honouring of women in different ways and frequently place women in positions of importance and leadership and honours some of the precolonial (and in some cases post-colonial) matriarchies that could be found in Khoi, and San groups, which can be found across Sub Saharan Africa or the Balobedu people found in Limpopo, South Africa and many others. Motherism is not only intended for biological mothers. Instead, it is more a way of being that emphasises the importance of family, sustainability, and African philosophies around humanism. All this in an effort to rebuild, heal and grow the community and individuals who are both in service of the community while also drawing from its strength (Acholonu, 2002; Alemayehu, 2020: 63). It is true that this role taken on by women in the community and family can be extremely challenging, and men, through a combination of patriarchy and ongoing colonial traumas, have neglected their roles and fail to support women. But the sad yet empowering reality still exists; without this valuable contribution from women, African families, cultures, and futures would surely perish.

This text is a meaningful text for anyone interested in feminism or the experiences of women, especially scholars and students. It is straightforwardly written in style, which is an important feminist attribute that ensures that those who are not deeply familiar with feminist discourse can still read and understand the text. Starling avoids veiling these stories in deep, complex feminist academic jargon that would potentially exclude the kind of reader she acquired this knowledge from. This was a very important consideration given that Starling worked a lot with women with varying levels of western education, meaning that many who at least understand English would understand this text with minimal difficulty. Rural women in Botswana and the African continent are an important audience for this book, given that these are their stories, and to have them engage with this text would be an important way of carrying on the African tradition of healing, growing, resistance and knowledge production through storytelling. Policymakers and Botswana leaders, in particular, would also be an important audience, given that it is not every day they get to engage with their constituents and their realities. It is an important book for disrupting the growing, false view that gender equity is being met. It shows the weaknesses of this view by engaging

various local and global statistics and historical and contemporary experiences that, in some instances, show regressions or bittersweet wins. Leaders, at varying levels and in different contexts, must engage text like this as a way of taking stock of whether their efforts are being felt by the most marginalised members of society.

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