

MARRIAGE AND THE DYNAMICS OF POWER IN LITERATURE: PERSPECTIVES FROM SASAVONA BY D.C. MARIVATE

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Abstract

The subject of forced marriage is an issue of concern in public debates, media, policy matters and research projects in different parts of the world. The Oxford English Dictionary (2009) defines forced marriage as a marriage in which the parents choose the husband or wife for their child. Forced marriage is one of the social issues that involves a range of factors such as culture, gender, power and agency (Chantler, 2020). It is an old practice that has remained unresolved even after the advent of democracy due to inequality, poverty and power imbalances. This article therefore aims to examine and expose forced marriage in the Xitsonga novel, *Sasavona* by DC Marivate. Forced marriage is normally displayed by different cultures as cultural rights of parents upon their children. In most of Xitsonga literature, forced marriage is depicted by the way in which authors craft characters' marriage endeavors. Generally speaking, the establishment of traditional families in Xitsonga literature indicates the initiative by parents, aunts or close relatives to scout out wives or husbands for their children by arranged marriages or forced marriages. Literature preserves a rich body of values and cultural practices that are normally transcended from one generation to the next generation. The researcher will employ a qualitative research approach in collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand the written experiences or opinions and the concept knowledge of forced marriage. Purposive sampling has been used in this study to choose a specific text, *Sasavona* by D. C. Marivate to help meet the goal of the study. The researcher will perform a narrative data analysis to analyze the study content. The researcher bases the study on social exchange theory, where a forced marriage is understood as a coercive exchange in which one party is forced into a relationship against their will due to elements of inequality, pursuit of rewards, avoidance of costs and power imbalances which exist in parent-child relationships.

Keywords: Culture, Gender, Forced marriage, Arranged Marriage, Generation, Inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Forced marriage, a deeply rooted social issue, transcends cultural boundaries and persists as a grave violation of human rights. This article explores the challenges of forced marriage within the Vatsonga speaking group of people in South Africa using the novel, *Sasavona* by D.C. Marivate as a lens to expose intricate dynamics at play. By opposing cultural nuances, gender imbalances, arranged marriages, generational influences and inequality, the researcher aims at exposing the complex web of factors contributing to the perpetuation of forced marriage unions. As it stands, forced marriage remains a distressing worldwide concern that transcends cultural, geographical and socio-economic boundaries. Stafford country council (1999:26) defines forced marriage as a

marriage which is conducted without the full consent of both parties. Forced marriage is often practiced as a result of underlying power imbalances between individuals, groups and social structures. The practice is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and norms and is perpetuated by gender inequality and generations of traditions that uphold patriarchal values.

Forced marriage is a cruel tradition whose grip is felt. It is often arranged without the knowledge of both parties as stated by Villant and Harrant (2008:657) that families take a role in choosing and introducing the marriage partners. It steals individuals' future and innocence. This practice violates human rights and undermines the principle of consent, autonomy and equality. It tramples upon individual rights, denies individual choices and shatter youthful dreams. It inflicts harm upon individuals, predominantly affecting young girls and women, although boys can also be victims. The practice often involves coercion, emotional manipulation, threats and physical violence, perpetuating abuse that chokes the potential and aspirations of countless individuals.

Forced marriage is concerning due to its multifaceted consequences on individuals. Victims experience immense psychological trauma and denied agency over their lives. It disrupts educational and career pursuits for school going adolescents and perpetuates a cycle of generational poverty. It is sometimes perpetuated by family authorities which are driven by societal norms and patriarchy that view women as commodities to be traded. The global nature of the problem of forced marriage calls for comprehensive efforts, combining legal measures, awareness campaigns and community engagements to effect lasting changes. Collaborative efforts on local, national and international levels are necessary to provide support for the victims to change the cultural narratives that allow forced marriage to thrive.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a review of the literature on forced marriage as researched by other scholars. The concept literature review refers to the review of existing or available body of knowledge, and to learn how other scholars have investigated a particular problem (Mouton, 2002). Scholars of literature in African countries and the world have studied and researched about forced marriage in their literature but there is scarcely no Xitsonga literature that talks to forced marriage as a study exposing the challenges of forced marriages within the Vatsonga group of people. Statistical reports of forced marriage in South Africa, Africa and the world have been published, showing alarming percentages and experiences of victims of the plight of forced marriage.

Forced marriage in South Africa

Statistics regarding child marriage in South Africa estimates that 6% of girls marry before the age of 18 years, and 1% by the age of 15 years (Mwambene and Sloth-Nielsen, 2011). A research has been conducted by Machaka (2019) that exposes a practice called *ukuthwala* in some parts of South Africa. *Ukuthwala* is a form of forced marriage. This cultural practice of *ukuthwala* (Machaka, 2019) relates to child and forced marriages of children in Eastern Cape of South Africa. The practice of forced marriage is among many of the cultural practices in South Africa. It is commonly practiced in the rural parts of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. In 2009 at Lusikisiki, there were instances of young girls from orphanages being forced into marriages to older men. There has been instances of young girls being forced into illegal marriages to old widowed men (about 55 to 70 years). However, there is a general misconception that forced marriages do not exist in South Africa. This assertion is based on the views that forced marriage laws and prohibition are under law enforcement agencies.

Media and other reports reveal numerous factors that lead to a culture that accepts and encourages forced marriage worldwide as follows: the strengthening of family links, control of unwanted behaviour and sexuality, the prevention of 'unsuitable' relationships, the protection of and abiding by cultural values, keeping wealth in the extended family, dealing with the consequences of pregnancy out-of-wedlock, considering the contracting of marriage as a duty of parents, obtaining a guarantee against poverty and aiding immigration (Sisters , 2011). Forced marriage may take different forms of abuse in different names, including marriage by abduction, bride kidnapping, money marriage, shotgun wedding and child marriages.(Bates , 2011) In South Africa, forced marriage is practiced by different cultures using different terminologies to mean the same act. In isiZulu it is called 'ukuganisela', in isiXhosa it is called 'ukuthwala' and in Sepedi it is called 'go thiba difate' (Mtshali, 2014). These concepts appear to be culturally acceptable because in customary marriages, the family groups of the prospective parties give consent to their daughters to get married.

Forced marriage in Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that 39% of girls are married before their 18th birthday, while 13% are married by their 15th birthday (Mwambene and Sloth-Nielsen, 2011). Girls Not Brides estimates that 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriages in the world come from Africa. Among other factors, child marriages in Africa have been linked to harmful practices that are embedded in culture (Mwambene and Sloth-Nielsen, 2011). There is literary evidence by scholars that forced marriage is practiced in countries of Africa such as Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Somalia and other countries. UNICEF reports that girls as young as age twelve are being forced into child marriage at an alarming rate in the Horn of Africa. It is reported that in some parts of Ethiopia, the child marriage rates from January through April 2022 more than doubled on average, when compared to the same period in 2021. The number of children at risk of dropping out of schools across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia has tripled in just three months. The report by UNICEF shows that more girls in drought-impacted areas are being subjected to female genital mutilation, which is a cruel practice that is said to be a prerequisite in some communities for girls to marry. The practice is done by destitute parents. It is reported that child marriage is a relief of a burden for them for less mouth to feed or to have a chance of a better life. The UNICEF Regional Child Protection Advisor for the Southern and Eastern Africa reported that what is happening in the Horn of Africa is that destitute families arrange and marry off girls as young as twelve to men more than five times their age.

Forced marriage in the world

The 2021 Global Estimates indicate that 49.6 million people are in modern slavery on any given day, either forced to work against their will or in a marriage that they were forced into. Forced marriage accounts for 22 million out of the 49.6 million. This shows an alarming figure of the prevalence of forced marriage in modern day society of human rights era. However, several international instruments set standards for the protection of human rights that include the prevention of early and forced child marriages. In the case of forced early child marriages, the Joint General Recommendation/General Comment 31 of the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee and the General Comment 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Harmful Practices (2014) have spelt out their position on issues of early or child forced marriages. These committees regard early or child marriages as forced marriages.

According to the General Recommendation/General Comment, forced marriage includes situations where one or both parties to marriage have not personally expressed their full and free consent through for example, marrying girls too young, marriage of girls by armed forces, in conflict situations, payment of dowry and bride price, which increase the vulnerability of women and girls to violence, situations where families will agree to temporary marriage of their daughter in exchange of financial gain, and allowing rapists to escape criminal sanctions by marrying the victim as observed by Sloth-Nielsen and Kachika (2014).

These traditional cultural practices of early marriages and forced marriages are practices that have become harmful to a specific group of people such as women because they are not questioned (Maluleke, 2012). Bila (2014), acknowledges that in Vatsonga culture, forced marriage does occur and is practiced as an acceptable culture of the Vatsonga people. There is no mention of the condemnation of the practice. Mtshali (2014), in 'Forced child marriage practiced under the pretext of customary marriage in South Africa' acknowledges that forced marriage is practiced in South Africa. The practice of forced marriage seems to be condoned as culture. Culture in this sense regarded as an umbrella under which some people like to hide from rain, and also to shade themselves from the sun (Maluleke, 2012)

Machaka (2019) in 'The cultural Practice of Ukuthwala in South Africa', acknowledges that forced marriage is practiced as a cultural norm amongst the isiXhosa group of people in Southern Africa. Despite the harmful nature of forced marriage, fondly named as a cultural practice of 'ukuthwala' these practices persist because they are not challenged as they are said to reflect the values and beliefs of certain groups of people. The prevalent evidence of the practice of early and forced marriages requires, questioning, exposure and discouragement by all members of society. This article therefore aims at exposing forced marriage through the lens of Sasavona, the novel by D.C. Marivate.

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Social exchange theory was developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). A social exchange is an exchange between two or more actors (in communication or any other relational situation) where each actor offers some goods or outcomes the other actor values (Lawler et al., 2000; Okpobiri & Nwosu, 2016). The theory examines the interplay and balance between the rewards an individual receives from a certain relationship. The implication of basing this study to the social exchange theory is that it gives the central form of the forced marriage that is practiced in the novel, Sasavona by D.C. Marivate. In line with social exchange theory, individuals who engage in social transactions have the expectation of receiving some form of benefit. It provides a lens through which we can analyze the dynamics within relationships. According to this theory individuals engage in relationships where the perceived rewards outweigh the perceived costs. The theory helps us understand the power dynamics at play between individuals and other social structures that may enforce or enable the practice. In the context of forced marriage those orchestrating the unions often derive benefits such as economic gain, social status or consolidation of power, while the victims experience immense costs in terms of loss of agency, emotional well-being, and personal freedom. In line with social theory individuals sometimes give in to forced marriages due to family honor, or religious conformity. The theory also sheds light on the role of power dynamics in forced marriage. Those with greater social, economic, or familial authority hold the upper hand in determining the union. Perpetrators of forced marriage might use their position to manipulate the victims into compliance.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study is meant to examine a social issue of forced marriage in a novel, Sasavona. The most effective way to put across the researcher's examination of the novel is through qualitative research methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as a multi perspective approach (utilizing different qualitative techniques and data collection method) to social interaction, aimed at describing, making sense of, interpreting of or reconstruction of the interaction in terms of meanings that the subjects attach to. This method allows a subjective approach to describe life experiences and give them meaning. Kumar (2011:15) declares that, A study is classified as qualitative if its purpose is primarily to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem or event; the description of an observed situation, the historical enumeration of events, an account of different opinions people have about an issue, and a description of the living conditions of a community are examples of a qualitative research. The researcher adopted a purposive sampling to focus only on Sasavona, a novel by D.C. Marivate. Alvi (2016:30) advanced the idea that in purposive sampling the sampling is approached having a prior purpose obtaining the needed information regarding the study, which is in this case forced marriage. The text by D.C. Marivate has been purposely sampled for the only purpose of the subject of forced marriage. By employing qualitative research method, we gain a deeper understanding of character's motivations and the broader societal influences that shape their decisions. Through such analyses, we can foster awareness, stimulate dialogue and work towards dismantling the deeply rooted structures that perpetuate forced marriages within communities.

5. TEXTUAL SUMMARY

Sasavona which can be narrated as a moral story of a village dependent on subsistence farming is both the title and the main character of the book. The village is sieged by a severe draught and locust plague that drive men to seek work in urban areas. Within this village two neighboring families, George Ntavasi's and Midlayi -N'wa-Valoyi's, exemplify contradictory lifestyles. George is a responsible husband, providing for his family despite the community challenges. However, his wife, Sasavona, is a slob and an alcoholic who misuses the money meant for the family's welfare, neglecting their children's needs and education. Sasavona coerces Risimati into an unwanted relationship with Ntlholameri, her daughter. She also borrows money from families of (Xigivagiva, Mbhayimbhayi, Xikolokolo and Nghalalume) making promises to marry off Mhlava, her first daughter for debt repayment without her consent. Sasavona's lifestyle influences the relationship between Mhlava and Riburantani for offering meat and alcohol. Mhlava elopes with Riburantani to Messina, causing distress to her father upon discovery. Sasavona goes to Messina to find her daughter and she is forced to marry Riburantani, who later kills Mhlava with a knife and hides her body under a bed for not giving him concession to marry her mother.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

The process of transforming data into evidence or information is illustrated in the statement by Hofstee (2006: 117), emphasizing the need for analysis once data is obtained. The narrative of the story brings to light the intricate aspects of forced marriage, aligning with the principles of social exchange theory. This theoretical framework elucidates forced marriage as a multifaceted interplay involving costs, benefits, and power dynamics within relationships. The narrative depicts Sasavona coercing Risimati into marrying Ntlholameri, exploiting her position as Ntlholameri's mother.

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Ntlholameri is treated as a commodity, traded in exchange for borrowed money. Sasavona, occupying a position of familial authority, exercises her power over her daughters in this act. The absence of seeking consent stems from the unequal mother-daughter relationship that shows inequality of power. This attests to what Maluleke (2012) says, that it is because of cultural resilience that numerous girls' rights have been violated.

Sasavona extends her promises to other social units (families) to arrange marriages for her daughter Mhlava against her will and knowledge. The author makes this clear in the ensuing citation:

Sasavona a lavalava tiko hinkwaro ...Kutani mali leyi a nga lomba ka Xgivagiva a hi yona ntsena. Eka Mbhayimbhayi a dyile nandzu wa R6.00. Eka Xikolokolo u na nandzu wa R2.00. Eka Nghalalume wa R10.00, hinkwavo va tshembisiwa ye Mhlava. (p. 11) (Sasavona searched across the board...she did not only borrow money from Xigivagiva. She owed Mbhayimbhayi R6.00. She owed Xikolokolo R2.00. From Nghalalume she had borrowed R10.00, all being promised Mhlava.)

These orchestrated unions are pursued solely for personal gain, particularly centered on alcohol consumption. Social exchange theory suggests that those orchestrating forced marriages might be driven by motives like cultural norms and the desire to uphold social standing. Sasavona exemplifies the role of a perpetrator in orchestrating forced marriage, aligning with the traditional cultural practice of parents making decisions on behalf of their children. Within the framework of Social exchange theory, these perpetrators assume a dominant role. Riburantani exercises his dominant power and male gender to compel Sasavona into marriage (p.13), showcasing the dynamics of power and control. The narrative intricately weaves together poverty, substance abuse and societal expectations, offering poignant commentary on the dire consequence of forced marriages. Sasavona's actions are driven by desperation and societal pressure. The novel prompts reflection on the power dynamics that perpetuate forced marriages, questioning societal norms and the role of individuals within these structures.

Sasavona serves as a powerful lens through which we analyse the complex interplay of social, economic and cultural factors contributing to forced marriages. The concept of forced marriage is evident in the text through the actions of Sasavona. Sasavona is the name of the main character and the title of the novel by D.C. Marivate. The novel explores the theme of forced marriage and its consequences for the characters involved. It is evident that Sasavona tries to arrange a marriage for her daughter Ntlholameri with Risimati and coerces Risimati into marrying Ntlholameri, but he refuses to marry her. Despite Risimati reluctance to involve himself in the relationship due to Ntlholameri's eyes condition, it is clear that Sasavona manipulates the situation to force the union.

Additionally, Sasavona's influence to marry off her other daughter, Mhlava, to Riburantani in exchange for benefits also raises concerns about potential coercion. Sasavona also faces a forced marriage from Riburantani. This is revealed in the following way:

Loko a fika le, Riburantani ri ku "A ha! hi nga lavi teto, na wena u nsati wa mina!" Yena u te wa ringeta ku kalakala leswi a nga mana wa nsati, va ku: "kwihi!"(p. 13) (when she got there, the Blantyan said, "Yeah! It's not like that, you are also my wife!" when she tried to reject him as the mother to his wife, they maintained their position)

The citation embodies a grotesque scenario in which a stranger introduces alien practices of proposing and enforcing marital affairs from a mother-in-law. This exposes the issue of inequality,

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power imbalance, and cultural conflict in the Vatsonga society. Sasavona, the novel shows that forced marriage is a prevalent practice in Vatsonga culture as put by Webster (1986) in saying that authors usually express burning issues of the time in their literature. In her dissertation Bila (2014) acknowledges the practice of forced marriage as occurring in Vatsonga group of people. The novel also exposes the malicious consequences of forced marital relationships through the death of Mhlava thus:

U te a ku hlome, ehansi ka mubedwa, o kuma Mhlava u lo lulalula! Va n'wi hingakanyile hi mukwana va suka va famba. (p.13) (when she looked under the bed, she saw Mhlava who was dead. They killed her by a knife and left.)

The scene unveils the extent of evil that the stranger was. It also reflects how the actions of Sasavona who believed that she could gain material wealth through her daughters was wrong. Thus, the novel gives a juxtaposition of the old style of living among the Vatsonga, that has been worsened by the colonial ills of the day and the modern advocacy for human rights. It is clear that the commercialization of girl children is a ruthless practice by parents. Therefore the researcher found that in the novel Sasavona, there are instances of forced marriage.

7. CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes that it is only through a collaborative and sustained action that people can hope to eradicate the plight of forced marriages in our cultures and communities to ensure a world where individual's right to choose their own path is respected. While progress is being made to fight forced marriages, the battle is far from over due to ongoing poverty, lack of employment and the gap between the rich and the poor. To dismantle harmful cultures and traditions of forced marriages, it requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legislative measures, public awareness campaigns and implementation of comprehensive policies that empower individuals with knowledge of their rights and support avenues. Governments must also strengthen their legal frameworks to criminalize and penalize the perpetrators of forced marriage.

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