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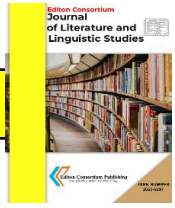

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Resisting politics of male control and gender-based violence in the Borana girls' song

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the songs of girls that contest this marginalised position by questioning the authorities of parents, brothers, husbands and mothers-in-law. It documents, analyses and teases out the meaning of these oral songs within a theoretical framework of feminist orientation. The girls' song was collected from Sololo Division, Moyale District. The Borana songs by girls were collected in situ. The paper also drew the library research for purposes of theoretical grounding, literature review and profundity in data analysis and interpretation. A focused group discussion was also held with some informants who demonstrated their knowledge of these songs and the culture of the Borana community in general. Finally, the collected data were analysed for their contents. These were texts of the songs, field notes for the critical responses from the audience in the form of condemnation or commendation, and cultural contexts of the performances. Singers who invoke alternative viewpoints contest the very instruments of power such as culture, tradition, religion, age and gender used by patriarchy to legitimise its practice of marginalisation of and control over girls. As a result, a fresh dimension of social transformation emerges. The paper argues that the girls have a collective desire to be part of the Borana community without being subjected to gender-based discrimination. It concludes that the songs are used as sites of contestation that invoice the rejection of these discriminations and reaffirm their belongingness to mainstream society.

Key words: Contestation, girls, marginality, orality, patriarchy, song.

INTRODUCTION

The growth and development of African literature have been seen in gender studies and by feminist practitioners in its problematic construction and interrogation of gender relations. This specifically springs from the fact that masculinity is highly valued in most African societies. Consequently, patriarchy, the institutionalisation of male authority, has emerged as a central concept in contemporary literary and cultural theorisation, for it has created discourse in communities that appropriate and own power (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Moreover, because patriarchy as a system of rule ensures men's dominance and women's subservience, the relations between the sexes are not just personal but political. Contestation of patriarchy through songs is thus an attempt at shifting the power base presided over by men to a more neutral location where it is less oppressive. This paper is an attempt to document one such contestation by girls from the Borana community in Northern Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional insight of African women is that they struggle day and night amidst grinding poverty while facing harsh traditional, cultural and social prejudices (Burnet et al., 2007). This situation still obtains in contemporary societies. Among the Borana, women occupy marginal space within the society that subordinates them to male dominance. Feminist literature defines male dominance as the manifestation of the exclusion of women from political and economic decision-making. It shows itself through social expectations and stereotypical assumptions that males should be tough, brave and aggressive. The stereotype is evidenced through frequent quarrelling, fighting, wife beating and institutionalised or regular occurrence of rape and elopement (Peggy, 1981, p. 164).

The Borana popular girls' songs affirm the existence of these oppressive structures and contest them. Because of the peripheral space they occupy, the girls are speaking from the margins. The concept of marginalisation adopted here is that espoused by Shields (1991), that views marginality as "being the other to a great cultural centre". In this case, the girls are authorised by the male and female adults who decide their fate on their behalf by excluding them from important personal and social decisions. The politics of this symbolic exclusion is a consequence of what Edward Said has called positional superiority. The social "other" is despised and reviled in the official discourse of dominant culture and central power. The central underpinning notion is that of the dichotomies of high/low, central/marginal and them/us.

For the Borana girls as a social category, because of their dependence on parental power and privilege, they are "bothered" when those powers are exercised in their disfavour. They are marginalised as females first and second girls since mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, and all male relatives have unbridled powers over them. They speak from the margins to contest these power relations. By speaking against these power imbalances and subjugation, the girls are engaged in voicing an alternative power structure that is less oppressive. Theirs is part of the multiple voices that reject the monolithic authority that relegates them to a secondary position. This authority derives from a patriarchal culture organised in favour of men's interests. For the girls, the songs are acts of mustering a voice of their own, a way of breaking the silence.

Academic writings on popular songs among the Borana are few and far between. However, some illuminating works in African orality are pertinent to this discussion. Wako (2003) examines how women contest gender subservience and domination through a jocular song among the Borana. The song serves to invoke social pressure for change and solicit support for women performers. Vail and White (1997) write a song about a plantation protest in Mozambique. The song is about a plantation owner for whom people composed a satirical song that is an attack on the inequalities brought to the area by the monopolist company system. It denounces the pain and grief visited on the people by the imperialist exploiter. Copland (1997) writes about Lesotho migrants' songs in an interesting way. For him, the Basotho male migrants and their women compose lengthy texts in a musical performance that serves as reflective and aesthetically intensified signification of experiences. Finally, Lwanda (2003) studied Mbumba political music appropriated from rural women. He argues that female music serves as an outlet for women's negative emotions and positive aspirations. In these studies, the song is a medium of capturing and articulating painful issues suffered by the singers at the hands of perpetrators with the intention of righting the wrong.

This paper focuses on the song genre sung by girls. The song as an oral genre and the act of singing is central to

people's worldview. Although singing and speaking through songs have been an integral part of the Borana oral tradition, no study has been dedicated to collecting and analysing popular songs among girls in this community to discuss and document the pertinent socio-cultural issues inherent in them. Dominant among these issues are notions of gender, identity, power and marginality. Singing is a site of mediating parental authority for girls contesting early marriage and eventual subjugation at the hands of egoistic husbands. As Gunner (2006:88) argues elsewhere, popular culture in the African context often holds the expression of a deep desire for a better life. The performers sing about pressing social concerns they are confronted with. The space of song becomes a means of participating in the public sphere and passing messages to the powerful (Gunner, 2006, p. 87). The songs that form the basis of this paper address a wide range of contemporary issues, such as gender relations, power relations, masculinity, femininity and marginality that contribute to how girls construct meaning and identity for themselves in a fluid and changing social space.

The dire lack of a focused study on these current and topical questions raised and problematised by the singers has devalued these songs' aesthetic and functional roles. These songs are a privileged site of dialoguing within the Borana society in particular and the northern Kenya communities in general. The songs are reflective of the socio-cultural environment of the girls' lives and are part of their response to harsh everyday experiences to which they are subjected. In terms of the subject matter, the girls lament the loss of freedom and question the parental authority to sell them off at a tender age. They castigate harsh mothers-in-law and anticipate the hardship and ill-treatment that awaits them at their nuptial homes. The girls contest this unfair dislodging from their parental homes in the name of marriage that society encourages and practices. As observed elsewhere, gender norms and lower parental education levels in rural areas could have led to more gender discrimination (Chandrashekarappa, 2018). In allusion to the brutality of mothers-in-law who are said to "swallow and ingest" daughters-in-law, the performers highlight the conspiracy that has resulted in the girls being ejected from familial warmth to an alien home which regards them as beastly. The songs extol the beauty of young girls, their moral uprightness in their homes, and the corruption, physical abuse, and degeneration at the husband's homes. They resent their subordination to the whims of overbearing mothers-in-law and unsympathetic husbands.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Themes of Resistance to Male Control in the Girls in the Songs

Girls' song, also known as *faruu dubra*, has a starting formula: *Bor Gaalle tiya, Bor Maalle tiya, my Bor Gaalle, My Bor Maalle*. Two names are important in this line, Bor Gaalle and Bor Maalle. In the Borana oral tradition, these two girls left behind a certain legacy because of the life they lived. It was said that Bor Gaalle lived without being married and died as a spinster at the age of 117. She stated her wish in a poetic form when she was on her deathbed. She said:

Gaana 117 tahe,
Aggi gudina hinhamne,
Gaameen due,
Aggi ijjolluma hinhamne,
Woma dhale gubaa hinqabu
Yo faruu dubra fudhani
Maaqa kiyya kesa dhabu himalle,
I lived for 117 years,
That indicates ripe old age,
I died without getting married,
That indicates youthful age,
I have not left behind a progeny
When girls sing,
Let my name not miss out

In honour of her request, every time girls engage in *faruu dubra* (girls' song), they begin by praising Bor Gaalle. The other one, called Bor Maalle, also stayed as an unmarried virgin until she was married at 96. She died five years later. She was also honoured for her endurance of sexual abstinence without shaming her people, which essentially is an act of self-sacrifice not to dishonour herself for bodily desires. Unlike these two girls, legend has it that a girl by the name of Bochol Qabbe became the first Borana girl to be impregnated before marriage. The community could not tolerate this act of disgrace, according to them, and she had to suffer certain dire consequences. She was outcasted and disposed of to the Somali community for free. Other renowned women personalities of old among the Borana are lauded and respected for their various positive roles in society. Prominent among them was Habanoyye, a woman who led the Borana for a long time. However, the men claimed her rule was tyrannical and plotted against her, and she was overthrown. But she left behind

an enduring legacy of resisting patriarchy, which she bequeathed womenfolk.

The subject matter of the song can be categorised into several thematic areas. These are the praise of age-mates and their beauty, nostalgia and emotional attachment, advice and acceptance of nonconsensual marital status, the brutality of mother-in-law and husband, the cruelty of brothers, generosity, love and nurture of parents. These themes speak to the girl child from several perspectives, address her plight, and air the downtrodden girls' views to the general Borana community.

The song focuses on the personal praises of the girls by referring to their beauty. The girls sing about the beauty of their age mates by referring to each other with descriptive names like *chole* (foal), young one of a horse and *dansa,* literally meaning good. The body parts that are alluded to as indicators of beauty are the mouth, gum, teeth, waist and hair. The beauty of the mouth, lips, gum and pupil of the eye is alluded in order to tease out the admirations they have for one another. Regarding the mouth, they liken it to a shade of blue-black colour in *"holan tumalesa/afan gubalesa."* (Ram is castrated/mouth is blue-black). The use of the ram is to get a rhyming word for *tumalesa*, which is *gubalesa.* The gum is said to be of the same blue-black colour using a local image of *dabobessa* fruits that are like plums with smaller seeds. The teeth are compared to the whiteness of camel milk or, at other times to sunshine. The gap in the teeth is also likened to that of a camel calf. The waist is that of a wasp, which has proverbially thin, and lean. At times in the song, the girls talk of *"idhan dubra maale, sonsat ollin galle,* (the waist meant for girls, and wasp went up with it). These are desirous features, which are instruments of admiration girls deserve, and hence lamenting that these features have gone to the wrong animals. Beautiful girls' hair is compared to long grass that sways in the wind, and figurative words like 'hair dozing' are used to articulate the powerful imagery. The imagery is particularly localised.

The Borana have clear notions of beauty in women, some of which girls' song faithfully describes. These are lean waist and fingers, thick behind and ankles, blue-black gum and mouth, white teeth and nails, and long hair and neck. Very few women can achieve all these at once. Legend has it that Masule Saaqo, who was the wife of a gada leader by the name of Saaqo Dhadacha, was the cleanest and most beautiful woman who ever lived in Borana land. By praising the beauty of the girls, the singers lay ground for their importance in society and contrast it with the brutality with which those who marry them treat them in marriage. They praise not only the physical beauty but also the moral beauty of the polite ones and the ones who keep secrets. The line *hariin tiyyon dhibbaa, odesittu jibba* (my age mates are hundred, and I hate the one who leaks information) is indicative of the comradeship and the ethos that regulates it.

In the song performance, contrary to the general view, the brother (male) is regarded as an enemy. He is inimical to the achievement of fairness for the girl. The girls' complaint about the brother has mainly to do with the brother's desire to have them married off so that he benefits from the dowry accruing from the marriage. Actually, in the Borana social organisation, girls belong to their brothers. The cows accruing from the dowry of a particular girl will be given to particular boys, who will then use them to acquire wives for themselves. It is, therefore, in his interest that sisters get married as soon as possible. He is unsympathetic to her plight, and thus the girls label him as an enemy. Even those who are from the same mother can only part with "a weak calf which girls pray to God that somewhat, the weak calf may prosper." Girls with egalitarian gender attitudes were more likely to perceive gender discrimination than their peers (Spears & Bigler, 2004). In contrast, the father gives "a cow about to calve", which is a precious gift by the Borana standards.

Marriage is also regarded as an unpleasant venture where girls are 'stalked'. When a girl has grown to the age of fifteen or sixteen, men follow her with the interest of waylaying and marrying her by force. This forced marriage is so brutal that girls abhor it for its far-reaching implications. Even when such forced marriages do not have the consent of the girl, it is regarded as legitimate once the girl has been made to go through a ritual that entails the slaughter of livestock where the girl is made to wear a skin bracelet of the animal thus slaughtered. Thus, such a mode of marriage doubly exposes the girl to the risk of being married by someone she does not know or like. This marriage by force instils a lot of fear in them, and to protect themselves from the marauding male youth, girls walk together in the company of girls. Their freedom to go about their

business without fear is curtailed, a thing the song condemns.

In patriarchal culture, gender discrimination experienced by a woman is not only caused by gender but also caused by social class or segregation (Rosida & Rejeki, 2017). Because the marriage among the Borana mostly involves young girls unwilling to get married, their mothers cajole the girls into doing so. She is deceived into accepting the marriage by shaving the top of her hair in readiness for the marriage, as the songs attest to 'your hair is parted. Even though her mother is complacent to this 'deceit', the centrality of the mother to the well-being of the girl is crucial. Where the mother is not present, the girl's fate is entrusted to the deities who will protect her by extending a helping hand.

Their age-mates admonish those who willingly marry and move to faraway places are rhetorical question, "what has my age-mate missed that she resides with the aliens" this is typical of the feelings of others who would not want to leave the warmth of home for their husband's unwelcoming home. In these circumstances, the newlywed girls feel nostalgic and feel a sense of displacement being in faraway land among aliens or outsiders, *orma*, enemies. Therefore, in a rhetorical question, their friends ask why they have married far away in Nairobi or places they consider as enemy territory like Saku. When no answer is forthcoming, the singer commits the safety and well-being of her compatriot to her mother and god's care. But as the Borana proverb on the girl's ambiguous feeling on marriage states, *fudhaa boote, fuunan boote* (she cries for marriage and she cries when being married) or its other version, *fuudhalle infedha, baada ayyolle infedha* (I like marriage, and I like my mother's house too), there may be a mixed feeling on the girl's part. These proverbs show the dilemmas girls go through in wishing to be married and desiring to be single in the care of their mothers. Girls would have wished for both statuses. However, this, of course, is not possible. Therefore, she has to relinquish one for the other with varying consequences.

In most cases, the girl is not consulted about whether she wishes to get married or not. A line like *"mariin nuullee hingenne* (the consultation did not reach us) is a typical lament by the girls that they have neglected in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. Female characters are enclosed in the restricted spheres of the behaviour of stereotypes of the male tradition, their human potential buried in shallow definitions of their sex (Stratton, 2008). In the song, the male members of the family, like the father and elder brother, are regarded as greedy people who engage in the transaction of "selling the girl". It is imperative to note that the adjective used even in Borana is *'gurguuree',* which means 'sell', just as the term used for other merchandise or products to be sold in the market. The girls describe marriage as a willing buyer, willing seller kind of engagement presided over by the male members of both families. The transaction involves the exchange of a human being (girl) and cattle and clothes and other goods ostensibly to cement the relationship between the two families. The forceful venture that is entered on behalf of the girl brings misery rather than joy, and the line "the heart cries and cries" indicates the predicament and sorrowful state of affairs on the girl's part. This, however, is sometimes rationalised as *jibaa siingurgure, adda tetu tana* (we have not sold you for hate, it is the custom). In the proverb, the speaker absolves himself from any wrongdoing by drawing on the societal norm that girls are supposed to be married and the parental role in choosing the family to which she will be entrusted.

The girls have a way of advising one another. The husband and his family are regarded as 'alien' or 'enemy' without sympathy. The newly married girl is being requested to be cautious about the family. She should not expect much generosity; instead, she is being warned that the enemy, particularly the man, is merciless. He is said to have "no regard for her, he does not mind where he hits you" in relation to wife battering. One reason the girls give for this lack of mercy is the fact that he has paid animals in the form of the bride price for her. He is said to have boasted about this fact and could go to all lengths to harm her. But unlike the husband, the father still displays some kind heart and seeks to reconcile with her by asking the girl to be brought to him. Nevertheless, not so her brother, who is described as having directed the husband to "tie and take her away", an instruction that earns him the "enemy" label.

In the Borana traditional mythology, it is believed that girls have three horns. This is a symbolic reference to their presumed arrogance, wildness and the need to tame and subdue them. In the myth, it is said that the mother shall dehorn the first horn as a first disciplinarian and

authority over the girl. The mother's disciplinary roles entail rebuke, caning, caution and warning in the way she is supposed to carry herself in society. This, in most instances, is about shaping her character into a model of a good wife in the standard of society. She is expected to obey her husband and tolerate his people as a measure of a good wife. The husband, who gets the mother's authority transferred to him symbolically as the girl is transferred to his custody through marriage, shall break the second horn. The husband his role is more austere. On the wedding day, he is given the authority to do as he pleases with her, including but not limited to insulting, loving, caring, beating and all other matters if he should not break her bones or gorge her eyes, in addition to not insulting her parents. Masculinity imposed a taxing role on men wherein they perceived themselves as victims of a traditional culture where norms grant men control and power over women (Usta et al., 2015).

The girls also describe vividly the kind of suffering they endure at their husband's homes. The torturous instrument that afflicts pain is "the bad stick of metal", literally put, or metal rods with which they are battered. They also enumerate tough indigenous trees from which canes are obtained to brutalise them. Some of the sticks are non-brittle, and others are rough and are meant to cause pain and suffering. In addition, the husbands use fire, "the bad enemy burned us," as found in some of the lines. Name-calling is also another tool for the molestation of girls. They fall under what the girls have termed "the bad speech of harassment", which hurts even more than the physical torture. Finally, they contrast how their people refer to them with the names the husbands' people confer on them, which insinuates that they are not wanted. Names such as 'lion' and 'dog', in contrast to 'loved one' and 'dear one', respectively, carry the negative connotation they are regarded with. These insulting allusions are meant to portray the girl as gluttonous, beastly in the case of a lion, inferior, and good for nothing in the case of a dog.

Sometimes because of the frequent elopement of the girls or forced marriage, the girls have not given marriage a thought. The abrupt nature of marriage meant that proper advice had not been forthcoming from the age-mates. Much-cherished advice from the girlfriends is to be obedient and tolerant. They impart some critical virtues of perseverance so that whatever hardship she is subjected to, she may overcome them. In spite of the song that seems to thematise the tortures girls undergo at the hands of their husbands, the overall didactic message for them is that she should "do what you are asked" and "persevere whatever is done to you". This, overall, seems to be the virtue that most women have internalised and live by as a philosophy in marital life. Women in this society do not run away to their people on flimsy grounds because they know the society does not entertain petty issues from them. Although what constitutes petty issues is subject to interpretations, the majority of women seem to have accepted that beating and other forms of harassment at the hands of men is apparently their fate which society has bestowed on them.

The mother-in-law theme is also very crucial in this song as a way of naming the perpetrators of the violence on the girls and as a way of condemning them. From the onset, she is contrasted with the girl's mother. While the mother is a sympathetic caregiver, such as plaiting the hair for the girls, the mother-in-law specialises in name-calling. She imposes the label of a thief on the girls and insinuates that she is an evil-eyed one (*buddaa*) when she is born clean (*balchaa*). She imputes improper motives on the girl, claiming that as a thief, she steals from them and as *buddaa*, she casts an evil eye on their things and brings into their otherwise clean family an evil tag wholly condemnable in this society. Mother-in-law is said to backbite from front and back, colloquially said to "eat and ingest" the girl, unlike her mother, who carries her on her back. In this instance, the double meaning of 'back' literally and metaphorically implying when one is absent, as in behind their back, is fully utilised in the song. Even in the manner of disciplining the girl, the type of cane used is contrastable. The girl's mother uses a beating stick slender with leaves, while the one from the husband is a huge dry stick that burns the back, thus illustrating the brutality of the spouse.

CONCLUSIONS

Marriage is a form of loss for the girl in many respects. They, for example, join a strange family, which, in most cases, does not pretend to be extending warmth and friendship to them. They are also plucked from among the collegiality of their age-mates for which "the heart cries". The physical and moral beauty of age-mates is a subject of praise in this song. They refer to gaps in the teeth, long hair, the slender waist and long neck and the height of the girl to praise her beauty. These praises cement a collegial relationship between the girls as a group. It is the loss of this unity occasioned by marriage

that the song thematise. The separation stirs nostalgic feelings in them. They sing in memory of those who have moved to far places, which in the songs is referred to as the "soil of the enemy" *(biyye nyaapa).* These places are named Kenya, Nairobi and Saku /Marsabit. The physical separation makes them long for their age-mates and their mothers, which is often captured in the song. They also safeguard their unity, and anyone among them who tries to leak their secrets is castigated. In case of misunderstandings, it is quickly sorted out through reconciliation. The song captures the need to reconcile them quickly. The unwritten rules that govern their relationships lead to some girls antagonising each other in their daily activities. Even in such conflicting situations, they take recourse to reconciliation with words like *hameem gaara inqorana kota* (let us settle the feelings in the heart that hurts us). It is important that they reconcile to get rid of deep-seated feelings that may cause disharmony and disintegration among them to survive as a social category repressed by patriarchy

Figure 1: One of the Newly Married Girls in the Maddo Addi Village with her Husband I Talked to During Fieldwork (Author, 2007)

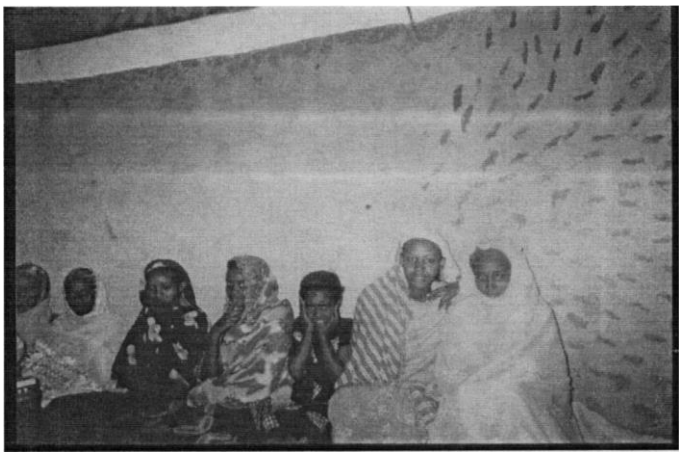

Figure 2: Young Girls Pose for a Photo after Performance after much Persuasion during Fieldwork (Author, 2007)

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