

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
THE SECOND LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL OK MATSEPE LECTURE
“LIVING, BREATHING AND PRACTISING HUMANITY, DIGNITY AND
RESPECT BY STANDING AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:
CELEBRATING 88 YEARS OF OK MATSEPE LEGACY”

POLOKWANE

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Programme Director, let me express my gratitude for being afforded the opportunity to once again address this august gathering, the second provincial lecture to honour the great Sesotho sa Leboa author, Mr Oliver Kgadime Matsepe.

As the university that we are we feel proud to be again partnering with the Limpopo Provincial Government in honouring this giant of African letters.

It is also an honour to open for one of the giants of the academy in our country – a passionate African scholar who has, in his own right, paved many paths for us as the still restless African intellectuals – Professor Malegapuru Makgoba. In approaching this year’s lecture, I wish to start off where I concluded last year. Those of you who attended the lecture given by Professor Maje Serudu may recall that one of the challenges that I posed for the audience and our scholars was to free

the scholarship of OK Matsepe from the confines of literary studies. His was a body of work that contained profound lessons about social and political challenges of his time.

As I hope to demonstrate in the few minutes that I have, Matsepe's work reflects on the challenges that we face today. I tried to demonstrate last year how multi-layered and complex the work of Matsepe was, even as he practised his craft at the time when writers, particularly black writers, were not able to freely express themselves and articulate their worldviews.

In trying to understand Matsepe I located him within his place of birth, Ga-Sekhukhune, his schooling by Christian missionaries, his own African religion and customs, and his brief work as a clerk of the court.¹ I argued therefore, drawing from Serudu and Grobler, that Matsepe straddled two worlds; that of African religion on the one hand, and Christian influences on the other.

As Serudu further argues, the characters in Matsepe's work mirror real life characters of traditional leaders and warriors.² On the other hand, Grobler speculates that in the novel *Lešitaphiri* (1963), Matsepe might

¹ Serudu, S.M. & Grobler, G.M.M., 1995. The Novels of O.K. Matsepe. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 15(1), pp. 135–140.

² Serudu, S.M., 1982. Towards an Understanding of Matsepe's Character Delineation. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 2(3), pp. 71–89.

have been reflecting on the national strife that resulted from the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, the subsequent banning of the liberation movement, the founding of uMkhonto we Sizwe, and the “declaration of independence” for the Transkei.³

From this brief look at the period and developments that seem to emerge in the scholarship of Matsepe, we can agree that he was a product of his context, shaped by it and, in turn, shaping it; by bringing it to life.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o notes: “The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and space. As a member of society, he belongs to a certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the class struggles of his times”.⁴

As we reflect on the life of Matsepe, especially as scholars on a continent whose history, traditions, customs, and even scholarship continues to be undermined, we are faced with the difficulty of having to avoid two extremes. The first is to adopt a hagiographical approach to our leaders and intellectuals, where we give them undue reverence as if they were saints.

³ Grobler, G.M.M., 1993. Solving the Insoluble: O.K. Matsepe's *Lešitaphiri* and the Signs of our Times. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 13(2), pp. 44–47.

⁴ wa Thiong’o, N., 1981. *Writers in Politics*. London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 72.

The other extreme is to be dismissive of our leaders and writers as displaying backward tendencies in their pronouncements and writings, measuring them against the strictures of colonial modernity. The challenge facing us is to unravel the complexity that is hidden in the writings of Matsepe – and to do so with respect.

As Serudu and Grobler argue further, Matsepe was a complex writer whose novels “demand from the reader a total commitment and active participation if he wishes to unravel their complete plots and make sense of their significant universal messages”.⁵

His writings were both complex and disruptive, breaking the mould of African writers before his time by producing themes from the Bible, thus adopting a moralisation trajectory. As I shall demonstrate later, this moralisation was borne out of a concern for some of the social developments that he observed around him.

On the other hand, he disrupted the chronological writing style, adopting instead the achronological style; manipulating time order and “altering the sequence of events”. Apart from disrupting temporal order and rendering his narrative to become timeless, Matsepe used

⁵ Serudu, S. M. & Grobler, G.M.M., 1995. The Novels of O.K. Matsepe. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 15(1), pp. 135–140

symbolism to tell his story. In *Lešitaphiri*, Matsepe uses the symbol of the river as a source of unity and coherence between two warring factions.⁶ Here we find concern for unity amongst his people, who at the time and as we know, were divided by colonial regimes.

Contrast this symbol of a river as a symbol of unity to the one in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), where the river is a symbol of division and neocolonialism.⁷ Thus, Matsepe is part of the common cry by African writers for unity amongst their people.

Another area that emerges in the writings of Matsepe is his strong philosophical worldview.

As argued earlier, Matsepe was a product of his "time and space". And, as argued again by Ngũgĩ, it is unavoidable that writers, especially in Africa, should comment or insert their views into the text, even if they may choose not to become political activists.⁸ Or, in Matsepe's case, even if their work may not be expressly political, as opposed to, say, someone like Ngũgĩ, whose radical political views are well known.

⁶ Grobler, G.M.M., 1998. And the River Runs on...: Symbolism in Two African Novels. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 18(3), pp. 65–67

⁷ wa Thiong'o, N., 1965. *The River Between*. London: Heinemann

⁸ wa Thiong'o, N., 1981. *Writers in Politics*. London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, p. 73

Matsepe seems to have developed a pessimistic view of society. As Serudu notes: “To him the world is full of evil, corruption and greed. Man has lost his sense of good and evil. Unless man is prepared to live peacefully with his fellow men, there is no hope for harmony in this world”.⁹

Let’s listen to Serudu reflecting on Matsepe’s worldview:

It is these views to my mind that make him (Matsepe)¹⁰ one of the best African writers of our time. His views on man and humanity as a whole are so comprehensive that an article of this nature cannot embrace them all. Of interest is the fact that Matsepe's focus in his works was on his own Kopa community, yet there is no doubt that these views are universally applicable. In this article I confine myself to Matsepe's views on the relationship between God and gods; the king and his subjects; the nature of man and his fellow men; life and death: and marriage and divorce. Hopefully this will remove the old fallacy that says African languages have no literature.¹¹

⁹ Serudu, S.M., 1990. O.K. Matsepe's Worldview: An Appraisal. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 10(2), pp. 41–51.

¹⁰ Emphasis in parenthesis added for clarity

¹¹ Serudu, S.M., 1990. O.K. Matsepe's Worldview: An Appraisal. *South African Journal of African Languages*, 10(2), p. 41–51.

It is worth noting that Serudu made this observation about Matsepe in 1990; about a man who wrote between 1954 and 1974. How profound were those original views, and how relevant they are for us today!

Whereas Matsepe developed this pessimism in the 1950s, up to the 1970s, Serudu analysed those views in 1990, at the time when the country was on the verge of freedom. Matsepe expressed his pessimism at the time when the people were articulating the vision of a better future, when women were marching at the Union Buildings, shouting: “*Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo!*”

Serudu wrote at a time when hopes were high that “freedom was around the corner”, and indeed all would be free.

This brings me to the theme of this lecture, which Professor Makgoba will elaborate on: *Living, Breathing and Practicing Humanity, Dignity and Respect by Standing Against Gender Based Violence: Celebrating 88 Years of OK Matsepe Legacy.*

Like all writers, Matsepe developed and refined his social views over time. While he might have struggled with a negative portrayal of women in his earlier novels, in *Kgati ya Moditi* (1974), a woman, Mmatshepho, is portrayed as a strong claimant to a leadership role –

the chieftaincy. Thus, at the close of his writing career and indeed his life, Matsepe can be said to have started a new chapter; that of confronting prejudice and discrimination.

This turn in Matsepe's character formation and their portrayal is shown in the same novel where he confronts the stereotype against women – *Kgati ya Moditi* – when he challenges the stereotype around albinism. What Matsepe demonstrated in his later works was the unlimited potential of humanity to confront those practices that depicts the worst of our nature.

We live at the time when the dreams of our mothers, the Marching Women of 1956, are being trampled on by the rampant scourge of male chauvinism and patriarchy that manifest in the form of gender-based violence, mainly against women.

Programme Director, we read with pain and shame over the weekend about how 22-year old Kutlwano Masilo, a rape victim, was shot eight times in front of her family in Etwatwa, Gauteng. The motive clearly was to silence her from giving evidence at the trial of those accused of raping her. Hers is one of the many stories, some reported but many others unreported, of women who suffer at the hands of men.

This reversal and assault of the gains of our freedom is an ugly dent on the face of what should be a beautiful country. The condition of women in this country, and the feeling that one experiences when reading, listening and reflecting about this scourge, can produce the kind of pessimism that Matsepe felt against the corruption of morality that he observed even at that time.

We are sad witnesses to the breakdown of whatever was left of the fibre of morality and *Ubuntu* that we pride ourselves with as a people. How can we talk about our Philosophy of *Ubuntu* when our mothers, sisters and girl children cannot be safe, do not feel safe, and live with fear?

Yet, just like during our struggle for liberation from apartheid, we should not tire from fighting for the rehumanisation of our society. We should rise against any form of oppression, exploitation, prejudice and bigotry.

Like Matsepe in *Kgati ya Moditi*, we should rise and support the many Mmatshephos, our sisters and daughters who are asserting their right to equality; to be protected.

Ours should be a programme that is aimed at restoring the *Ubuntu* for everyone. We at Unisa have embarked on a programme to resolutely deal with the scourge of gender-based violence. One of the

programmes that we are currently engaged in is the finalisation and hopefully, adoption by the University Council of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy. This comprehensive policy, the most extensive of any institution of higher learning in the country, is an expression of our practical resolve to combat gender-based violence.

At the same time as we are finalising the Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy, we are reviewing all institutional policies, with a view to formulating more coherent and broader policies that will enable us to pointedly fight and ultimately root out any form of gender-based violence.

But we know that policies without a designated structure mean nothing. It is for that reason that we have also started processes to establish the Division for Gender Equality, which will be based in the Office of the Vice Chancellor. This Office, which will undertake research, policy advocacy, interventions to protect victims, and counselling, will work closely with the Commission for Gender Equality.

It is our hope that these interventions will give practical and demonstrable meaning to our commitment to fight against gender-based violence. In that way, we will be joining many others in

honouring the legacy of Matsepe; to confront oppression, exploitation, prejudice and bigotry.

It is my hope that as we gather here today we will learn from the legacy of Matsepe and commit ourselves to continuing and living it.

I also hope that we will learn from the wisdom of Professor Makgoba as he addresses us on the theme for tonight's lecture.

Thank you!