



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
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YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**(Re)-Construction of womanhood in Lesotho: Narratives of ‘Unmarried’  
Basotho women (*Methepa*).**

By

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Declaration**

I, **Neo Mohlabane**, declare that this thesis is my own unaided work, both in conception and execution. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other university.

Neo Mohlabane

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Pretoria, January 2020

# **Dedication**

To all the phenomenal women in Lesotho

## Acknowledgements

*It is not the length of time spent in the liberation movement that is the true measure of a revolutionary. Time is not the measure. It is the sum total of all the contributions, the assets and liabilities that he or she brings to bear.* **Vusi Mavimbela**

And indeed, after the long distances travelled, many interviews, copious amounts of coffee, warm embraces, sleepless nights, emotional turmoil and struggles, sobs of despair, missed kids' birthday parties, wedding lunches, funerals, music shows by my favourite artists – to mention a few – not once did I feel like I was alone despite embarking on this lonely journey.

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## Abstract

By posing a provocative question, “What is a Woman?” this thesis intended to deconstruct normative conceptions of womanhood which are essentialised to marriage. To achieve these ends, I located the key questions of this thesis within intersecting theoretical premises of decolonial, African and Black feminisms. Intersectionality augmented by the framework of *uMakhulu*<sup>1</sup>, that privileges the indigenous world-senses, are the tools of analysis to achieve better insight into how notions of womanhood bear multiplicities, complexities and ambiguities. Through the narrated life-stories of twenty ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*), I explored re-constructions of womanhood and the role of women’s agency in this process. Through these ‘invisibilised’ narratives, it is established that womanhood and the meanings thereof are located within a messy terrain of intersecting religio-socio-cultural and indigenous forces. I argued that these beg unpacking in identity re-construction to reveal multidimensional and complex constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood. Untangling these intricacies provides an anchor for deconstructing, and finally debasing, colonial hetero-patriarchal<sup>2</sup> eurocentric universalism that plagues contemporary constructions of womanhood essentialised to marriage. At the core of this thesis lies the contention that ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*) are agents who are aware of the gendered social, cultural, religious terrain that necessitates marriage; which in turn, shapes their constructions of womanhood and agency. Unstructured interviews on past lived experiences of childhood and adulthood reveal self-definition characteristic to ‘unmarried’ Basotho women’s (*Methepa*) agency constructed and enacted within the locus of marginality. Within the analytic chapters titled ‘(Re)construction of womanhood’ is an appreciation of how women’s agency and their re-constructions of womanhood are shaped by childhood experiences of ‘becoming’ Woman as reflected upon in the chapter titled ‘The young *Mosotho* girl’. These chapters reflect the continuities of time; ‘then-now’ and space; ‘there-here’, to illustrate how ‘unmarried’ women’s senses of self and subjectivities are located in intersecting ‘modern’ Christianised and ‘indigenous’ terrains. Moreover, the findings reveal multiple reconfigurations of womanhood characterised by a complex, contradictory and convoluted enmeshment of multiple forces borne out of the world-

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<sup>1</sup> *Makhulu* is a isiXhosa translation of grandmother. According Babalwa Magoqwana (2018) *uMakhulu* is theoretical framework to prioritises the indigenous matriarchal values of communality, collectivity - that are detailed in chapter 2

<sup>2</sup> I draw the concept of ‘heteropatriarchy’ from M. Jacqui Alexander’s usage to describe the link of heterosexualisation with patriarchal power in the constructions of many postcolonial nationalist imaginaries. I use it to illustrate a climate wherein gender identity is constructed in normative terms that are prescriptive and exclusory.

senses of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*). My conclusion is, partly that ‘unmarried’ Basotho women’s (*Methepa*) constructions of womanhood deconstruct the hegemonic constructions of womanhood. Therefore, not only does the analysis achieve epistemic redress by giving voice to historically silenced and subordinated knowledges, but it also places as central the indigenous African world-senses as the new anchor of African women’s identity and agency.

## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

DHS	Demographic Health Survey
GOL	Government of Lesotho
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
LCN	Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental-Organisations
MoHSW	Ministry of Health and Social Welfare
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
MoTI	Ministry of Trade and Industry
ILO	International Labour Organisation
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa,
WHO	World Health Organization



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

My inspiration to question the notion of womanhood is tied to my childhood experience when my paternal grandmother yelled: ‘*O mosali! o mosali*<sup>3</sup>!’ While my brother and I, at the tender ages of seven and ten years respectively, had been playing in the courtyard my grandmother called to me to come inside the house and clean the kitchen. When I protested her perceived unfairness in not calling my brother to do the same, she furiously shouted ‘*O mosali! o mosali*’ whilst also pointing between my legs. I wept bitterly when she forced me to go down on my knees to scrub the kitchen floor. This childhood incident provoked questions on whether my female body was ‘problematically’ different compared to that of my younger brother. At such a tender age, I did not fully understand what grandmother meant then, but as a grown up and also as a feminist researcher now, it becomes apparent that my grandmother’s statement was loaded with nuanced gendered norms. I must admit I have been left haunted by the question, ‘*Mosali ke eng?*<sup>4</sup>’ for which I have never been able to provide clear answers. The irony of this narrative is that when I had come of the ‘golden’ marriageable age of 20 or so, my grandmother openly instructed me not to marry but rather to focus on getting a good education. Reflecting on this experience has me believe that *mosali* for my grandmother had nothing to do with marriage. Instead, a functional, independent and intelligent ideal was the *mosali* that she had envisioned me to be.

In 2014, my reservations about *mosali* resurfaced when I enrolled for an honours degree in gender studies, part of which was a research project (Mohlalane, 2014) which explored the practice of *chobeliso*<sup>5</sup> amongst the Basotho. While I had assumed that *chobeliso* of young girls would be viewed as constitutive of ‘violence against women’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I was astonished that, instead, it was believed to be a means to a desired outcome - marriage. While I had not initially linked my own childhood experience and this research finding then, exposure to more discourses at a more senior postgraduate level has pried open the need for exploring the notion of *mosali*. Woven together, these past experiences underpin this thesis, which seeks to explore re-

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<sup>3</sup> Direct translation: You are a woman! You are a woman!

<sup>4</sup> “What is a woman?”

<sup>5</sup> Abduction marriage

constructions of womanhood, and the contradictions thereof, by ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*) in modern-day Lesotho.

My interests in exploring the taken-for-granted - and thus, understudied - notion of womanhood at doctoral level, focusing on an under-researched group of women (‘unmarried’ women), first and foremost is confrontational. In this study, my intent is to confront and interrogate normalised hetero-patriarchal constructions of womanhood for their tendency of being prescriptive and thus greatly limiting of the choices of women. Moreover, the norms that necessitate marriage as a fundamental aspect of womanhood tend to be exclusionary of those not befitting their demands – as in the case of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*). Secondly, the thesis seeks to address a knowledge gap on the topic of womanhood and singleness in the context of Lesotho. Definitions of what constitutes womanhood within patriarchal societies have predominantly been influenced by the perspectives and experiences of women in western developed contexts. In addition, research focusing on singleness has mostly been conducted in the western developed world and none thus far in the context of Lesotho. Consequently, it remains unknown how womanhood and singleness are defined and experienced in non-western contexts such as Lesotho. This study thus, seeks to draw in the perspectives of Basotho women on what it means to be an ‘unmarried’ woman in a patriarchal context where womanhood is affirmed only through marriage. It also gives priority to ‘unmarried’ Basotho women’s (*Methepa*) constructions of womanhood within this context. In so doing, it contributes to feminist theory how differently bodied and located women articulate and construct womanhood.

My confrontational engagement with the question of womanhood is, however, not new. The notion of womanhood has been a corpus of controversy for feminist theorists from as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In striving to eradicate women’s oppression, western feminists<sup>6</sup> engaged critically with and contested patriarchal constructions of womanhood that essentialised specific attributes such as marriage and childbearing to women’s female bodies. In view of this, western feminist scholarship toiled to deconstruct normative conceptions of ‘Woman<sup>7</sup>’ and what constitutes a woman. In the current thesis, which seeks to interrogate normative constructions of womanhood

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this chapter I refer to ‘feminists’, ‘western feminists’ and Euro/Anglo-American feminisms interchangeably without necessarily homogenising the waves and strands of feminisms. (first, second and third waves, and radical, liberal, and socialist strands).

<sup>7</sup> I have capitalised ‘Woman’ here and elsewhere in this chapter to emphasise that it is a socio-cultural prescription that women are expected to embody, rather than a description of a biological category – as I will discuss below

that essentialise marriage, I re-iterate a provocative question posed by the French existential phenomenologist, Simone de Beauvoir: “What is a Woman?” (de Beauvoir, 2009, p. 23). In this, de Beauvoir (2009) sought to highlight the complexity and ambiguity of the gender identity of ‘Woman’ and thus deconstruct normalised assumptions of womanhood pinned to specific attributes, such as marriage. It is within this interrogative frame that the thesis is located. Normativity undergirding constructions of womanhood begs unpacking to fully understand its critical role in informing and fuelling the marginalisation of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*).

Butler (2004) explains the notion of ‘normativity’ to help us understand, and thus challenge, the biases inherent to the identity, Woman. Butler (2004, p. 42) argues that norms should not be reduced to mere rules but instead understood as that which “governs intelligibility ... [and] operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*”. Furthermore, Butler (2004, p. 42) explains that by “defining the parameters of what will and what will not appear” as acceptable or not, norms manifest as regulatory and exclusionary measures in the patriarchal social sphere. This explains how the pro-marital norms that undergird the notion of Woman go unchallenged; and instead, are replicated over generations such that Woman - defined in marital terms - seems ‘natural’ to femaleness. Considering this, ‘unmarried’ women challenge the marital norm and as such are problematised and marginalised. In addition, ‘normativity’ is reflected in western constructions of ‘Woman’ which tend to be exclusionary of differently bodied women of which Basotho women are part. In the context of this thesis, normativity, normalcy and normalisation are used interchangeably in reference to the taken-for-granted assumptions of womanhood - tied to marriage - that posit the ‘unmarried’ Mosotho woman as the marginal ‘Other’. The thesis thus, contends that normative and particularistic constructions of womanhood that essentialise marriage ought to be interrogated and deconstructed. In so doing, the thesis intends to reveal and challenge their prescriptive and exclusionary tendencies in the context of hetero-patriarchal Lesotho.

Given the deep-rootedness of hetero-patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs governing normative constructions of womanhood, it goes without saying that non-conformers such as ‘unmarried’ women are considered to be problematic and thus stigmatised. ‘Unmarried’ women are often subjected to social stigma which is characterised by derogatory name calling, ‘othering’ and marginalisation within their communities and society at large. Traditionally, they are stigmatised

on the basis of being out of synchrony with their peers (that the majority of their peers are married) as opposed to chronological age. This then subjects them to public scrutiny, and therefore *lefetoa*<sup>8</sup> is a derogatory label for a girl who, in relation to her peers, remains ‘unmarried’ (personal discussion with M. Mahloane). Similarly, women who have children out of wedlock are referred to as ‘*o senyehile*<sup>9</sup>’ meaning that they are perhaps no longer suitable for marriage (Mturi & Moerane, 2001). In Sesotho, both these terms carry negative connotations and are used to belittle and humiliate women who are not married. This is reflective of the deep-rootedness of hetero-patriarchal ideologies that tie notions of ideal womanhood to marriage – a key aspect that this thesis seeks to problematise and deconstruct.

Unlike in other sub-Saharan societies, such as Botswana (see Mokomane, 2006) and South Africa (see Rudwick & Posel, 2015), marriage patterns of Basotho women have remained high. For Basotho women, marriage enabled a girl to “break from childhood dependence, *be respected as a woman*, and obtain rights to obtain lifelong rights to a homestead ...labour and cash support of a man” (Gay, 1980, p. 45 emphasis added). In other words, wifhood was the only viable means through which Basotho women gained, not only the means for livelihood, but also their social respectability as women. Interestingly, this pro-marital narrative continues to be reflected in recent studies (Harrison, Short, & Tuoane-Nkhasi, 2014; Khau, 2012b; Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2019) conducted amongst Basotho. Harrison et al. (2014, p. 2) confirm that “marriage and motherhood are near-universal experiences among women in Lesotho”. While the marriage institution may somewhat have changed over time, pro-marital ideologies continue to mark marriage as highly prized for the Mosotho woman.

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<sup>8</sup> A girl who is ‘unmarried’ in relation to her peers or younger siblings is negatively labeled as ‘*lefetoa*’ to emphasise the peculiarity and strangeness that marks her as flawed. Numerous meanings are attached to this predicament which symbolises misfortune; thus, should the girl marry one day, it is believed that she will endure hardship and physical trauma. With regard to how single women are perceived other than being labelled as *lefetoa*, there are certain proverbs that refer to ‘unmarried’ women, implying that they are not grounded but free-floating individuals whose sexuality is not controlled in the same fashion as married women. Therefore, the proverb, *ke mosali h’a nyaloa* (an ‘unmarried’ woman) is typically used in relation to anything that is peculiar and questionable, in the same way that an ‘unmarried’ woman is regarded in this context. Although there is a male version (*Mankabaea*) that refers to an ‘unmarried’ man, it is not as popular as *lefetoa*, which is a long-standing label that is well known amongst Basotho.

<sup>9</sup> *O senyehile* - This concept is loaded with multiple nuances to refer to a girl who has fallen pregnant out of wedlock. It is however explained in many ways which essentially imply transgression from the prescribed or the permissible. One interesting analogy is reference to *ho senya* (to spoil or ruin) - when cattle have entered a restricted field and destroyed crops in that field. In the same way, a boy who has engaged in sexual intercourse with a girl has invaded a restricted area. Moreover, a girl who has become pregnant from engaging in impermissible terrain - pre-marital sex - has transgressed the rules and thus requires punishment and shaming (personal conversation with Dr Mohlakoana). *Ho robeha lengoele* (to break your knee) also labels a girl who has engaged in sexual intercourse and has fallen pregnant. Traditionally elders checked the muscle behind the knee as a form of virginity testing, believing they were thus able to tell when a girl was no longer intact and pure (personal discussion with Dr Possa).



This value that is attached to marriage in Lesotho is also reflected in recent statistical reports revealing high marriage rates among Basotho women compared to men. For instance, in 2014, 52% of the women aged between 20 to 24 years reported being married compared to only 15% of their male counterparts. Additionally, the mean age at first marriage of 20.9 years for women and 25.9 years for men also indicates that females enter into marriage at a much younger age than men. Further, 72% of women aged 35 to 39 years were married compared to only 7% who had never married in the same age cohort (Ministry of Health Social Welfare Lesotho- Bureau of Statistics/ORC Macro, 2014). Indeed for a country that is deeply entrenched in religious and cultural ideologies that value marriage (Khau, 2012d; Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2019; Mokobocho-Mohlakoana, 2005; Morojele, 2010), these recent figures are reflective of the lived realities of the young Mosotho woman in postcolonial Lesotho. Therefore, in such a context, failure to contract a marriage means failure to comply with one of the socially-established requirements of ‘real’ womanhood, which results in social stigma (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Plank, 2018). This hetero-patriarchal normalcy of the embodied need to affirm womanhood through marriage and the ‘other-ness’ of ‘unmarried’ identity calls for an exploration of identity re-construction by ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*).

‘Unmarried’ women are debarred from normative constructions of womanhood that are essentialised to marriage; and it is this ‘problem’ that this qualitative study seeks to explore. The intention is to explore constructions of womanhood from the vantage point of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*). In so doing, the thesis aims to shed light on how ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*) who do not fit these dominant conceptions locate themselves and redefine womanhood in hetero-patriarchal contexts that essentialise marriage. Additionally, the thesis explores the role that women’s agency plays in this process. The thesis draws on decolonial feminist approaches and makes use of a narrative analytic framework for the analysis of the life histories of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*).

## 1.2. The parameters of womanhood, marriage and ‘singleness’ in Africa<sup>10</sup>

In many contexts, ‘proper’ womanhood is tied to marriage and motherhood (Akujobi, 2011; Jaji, 2015; Van Vlaenderen & Cakwe, 2003). Mohlabane, Gumede, and Mokomane (2019, p. 158) confirm that “traditionally, marriage has been regarded as a prescription for women in particular” as a means through which they get, amongst other benefits, rights for childbearing and forming legitimate families. Thus, as has been acknowledged by Singh (2013, p. 22), marriage is “a legal, social, religious and cultural obligation within which children are raised”. As such, African scholars point out that wifhood primarily enables an African woman to gain social respectability for having attained ‘proper’ *African* womanhood (Chisale, 2017; Jaji, 2015; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Rudwick & Shange, 2009; Sofola, 1992). To affirm this mandate, from a young age, the girl-child is taught attributes of ‘proper’ womanhood - as reflected in my own childhood experience narrated above. Brown (2004) also reports that among the Chewa people in Malawi, colourful beads are placed around a young girl’s waist to promote fertility. This practice speaks to a predetermined assumption that she will become a ‘woman’ through wifhood, then motherhood, as required by hetero-patriarchal contexts. This implies that women are forced to achieve a socially established goal within a specified time limit; otherwise they forfeit the respectability afforded to women through marriage - the anchor of respectable womanhood. Undoubtedly, the implications of the requisite of wifhood for ‘unmarried’ women are dire.

Locating singleness within the discourse of womanhood defined in marital terms not only marks the ‘unmarried’ woman as problematic but reveals the normalcy with which these dominant pro-marital discourses are regarded (Byrne, 2000, 2008). Recent scholarship on singleness points out that failure to marry is “a problem in the eyes of society” (Lahad, 2017, p. 3); and thus, ‘unmarried’ women are problematised and marginalised in hetero-patriarchal contexts (Lahad, 2017; Lahad & Hazan, 2014; Lesch & van der Watt, 2018; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Plank, 2018). By failing to marry, ‘unmarried’ women digress from a heteronormative route towards attainment of respectable womanhood. Therefore ‘unmarried’ women are constantly stigmatised as not being

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<sup>10</sup> Jane Bennette (2011, p.79) cautions about language usage and prompts us to be mindful in our reference to ‘Africa’. For “The term Africa has a fraught history” therefore it is critical “to recognise ... that it is impossible to speak of Africa as a generalisation without erasing complexity, nuance and difference. The continent is vast, and its civilisations, peoples, languages and histories are extremely rich”. Therefore, in this entire thesis I do not espouse to use the terms, ‘Africa’, ‘African’, ‘Lesotho’, ‘Basotho’ unproblematically. I take heed to the richness and complexity embodied by these contexts and use the terms to merely refer to and make connections between African based events, peoples including practices in relation to conceptions of womanhood. I do this whilst exercising caution to avoid gross homogenization.

‘woman enough’ in their failure to get married. Amenga-Etego (2013) opines that in contexts where marriage has long been regarded as a fundamental aspect of gender identity, being ‘unmarried’ can be detrimental to one’s social status. Therefore, marriage in this context is a source of pride for some and a source of shame for others.

This ‘shame’ is reflected through derogatory name-calling: “left-over” women (Gaetano, 2014; To, 2013) and *lefetwa*<sup>11</sup> (Plank, 2018). It is also reflected in the association of single women with terminologies of ‘lack’ (Van der Watt, 2015), which are characteristic of the lived experiences of single women in many contexts. Accordingly, scholarship acknowledges the indisputable notion of singleness as the marginal ‘other’ of hetero-patriarchal contexts. However, I posit that singleness not be equated with victimhood (Dales, 2014). Instead, I acknowledge marginality as relational and therefore seek to give voice to single women’s negotiations and contestations from their positions of marginality - notwithstanding the paucity of such scholarship. However, notably, the paucity of African-based scholarship on single identity raises questions that I seek to address in this thesis. Firstly, what would a brief glance at the historical trajectory of the continent reveal about singleness in relation to *African* womanhood and the negativity with which it is regarded, particularly in Africa? Secondly, could this paucity perhaps be linked to this history wherein the pro-marital discourse in relation to *African* womanhood bears colonial notions of the ideal ‘Woman’? These are key questions that are expatiated in the next sections, which map the thesis’ focus.

### **1.3. Thesis focus**

This thesis raises both ideological and conceptual concerns around the notion of *Mosotho* womanhood. Firstly, it seeks to interrogate hetero-patriarchal notions that define marriage as a key aspect of womanhood in Lesotho; and which, in turn, marginalise ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*). Wifehood is constructed as the ideal identity of a *Mosotho* woman – which is referred to as *mosali* in this thesis. This creates tensions and unfavourable conditions for women who do not fit these socially-established definitions as in the case of ‘unmarried’ women – who are then disqualified from being identified as *Mosotho* woman. This is precipitated by the fact that there is

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<sup>11</sup> Lefetwa is derogatory label used for single women. This northern Sotho term like lefetoa (Southern Sotho) can be loosely translated as ‘spinster’ or ‘old maid’ in English. In the context of this study I employ ‘lefetoa’ in reference to the colloquial Sesotho term

a lack of scholarly work on ‘unmarried-ness’ in Lesotho. Given the normalcy with which womanhood is regarded as tied to marriage, the abundance of research studies conducted in Lesotho embodies a taken-for-granted assumption that ‘*Mosotho* woman’ is a married woman. For this reason, our understanding of being ‘unmarried’ in a context that defines womanhood in marital terms is still lacking. In other words, literature is silent on ‘unmarried’ identities in Lesotho let alone how ‘unmarried’ women locate and make meaning of their identities in a hetero-patriarchal context of Lesotho. In spite of a call for the emancipation of Basotho women, ‘unmarried’ women in Lesotho remain on the margins for being ‘unmarried’ and are thus deemed voiceless and invisibilised both in society and scholarly work. I posit that acknowledging and giving voice to the ‘unmarried’ has the potential to disrupt the normalcy and naturalness with which marriage is regarded as a key aspect of ‘real’ womanhood. To re-invoke the deconstructive voice embodied by this thesis I also raise issue with the concept, ‘singleness’.

De Paulo and Morris point out that the choice of language used to describe and define the state of ‘non-marriage’ is undergirded by the different positionalities towards the notion that regards heterosexual marriage still as “a step along the normative life path” (2005, p. 57). In hetero-patriarchal contexts, marriage is regarded as a woman’s natural and normative life trajectory as mentioned earlier. Therefore, ‘single’ women in relation to married women are considered to be profoundly ‘different’ hence their marginalisation and exclusion in patriarchal contexts. In this light, Gordon confirms that “[o]ur language further functions to enhance stigma in that people are referred to as *unmarried* or *never-married*; these terms have a negative connotation implying a state of lacking” (2003, p. 34 emphasis in original). For instance, Bernroider (2018) and Çelik (2018) make reference to ‘unmarried’ women, which in the view of these scholars is profoundly flawed and marginalising. Ibrahim (2016) also cautions that such terms conjure biases resulting from their juxtaposition with ‘married’, and thus fail to acknowledge the autonomy and independence that characterises ‘single’ women’s existences in modern contexts. I take very seriously, the complexities revealed by the debates on labelling and definition of ‘single’. In this study, my aim is to problematise and deconstruct patriarchal ideology that normalises marriage as a central aspect of womanhood.

Therefore, as part of that endeavour, I have opted to draw on the Sesotho language as a way of furthering the decolonial project central to this thesis. In my reading of the concepts ‘single’,

‘singlehood’, ‘singleness’ the normalcy of heterosexual coupledness remains palpable. Moreover, these concepts reinforce the binarized and hierarchised logic that pits ‘singleness’ against heterosexual marriage in oppositional terms. I therefore find this labelling to be limiting considering Basotho women’s assumption of multiple roles in society and their embodiment of multiple and fluid identities – as acknowledged by African feminist, Naira Sudarkasa (1986). In this light, I opt to use the Sesotho term – *Methepa*<sup>12</sup> to refer to the participants of this study. *Methepa* refers to female persons regardless of marital status and accounts for Basotho women’s assumption of multiple roles and embodiment of multiple identities - other than marriage. Moreover, it accounts for Basotho women’s identities as members of their communities. This conceptualisation of women’s identities de-centres the heterosexual marital norm – a fundamental force upon which the marginalisation of ‘never-married’ women is pinned – in accord with the deconstructive stance of this thesis. Thus, this study gives voice to the *Methepa* in Lesotho by enabling them to narrate their constructions and reconstructions of womanhood. Relatedly, I give voice to how they deploy agency in the process of re-constructing womanhood.

This claim does not, in any way, underestimate the contributory works on gender issues in postcolonial Lesotho by Basotho gender scholars such as Pule and Matlosa (2000), Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2005, 2008), Khau (2012c, 2016), Morojele (2011b), Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2019), and Ntimo-Makara (2009), who I draw on in this thesis. I acknowledge the contribution of this body of work in revealing the intersections of gender as deeply embedded in the hetero-patriarchal socio-cultural, political and religious milieu of postcolonial Lesotho that shapes the lived realities of Basotho women and girls. Moreover, scholars such as Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2005); Ntimo-Makara (2009) historicise gender relations by exploring the colonial mission realities of Lesotho, and thus provide a valuable frame within which to explore the historicity of the notion of *Mosotho* womanhood, which is tightly woven with marriage amongst the Basotho.

Notably, in postcolonial African contexts, these ideas are rooted in the historical trajectory of colonisation in Africa which continues to shape definitions of womanhood in many African societies (Amadiume, 2002; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003a; Batisai, 2013; Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018; Jaji, 2015; Kanogo, 2005). Colonisation and its aftermath – coloniality – remain palpable in the conceptions of womanhood as acknowledged by these African feminist scholars. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> *Methepa* is the plural for *Mothepe*. I use both these terms to refer to the women in this thesis.

any attempt to begin to understand present day constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood would be superficial without historicizing the key constructs: womanhood, sexuality, agency, and ‘unmarriedness’. This historical frame expands my interrogations and understanding of the ‘naturalised’ and authoritative tone through which normative constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood are conveyed and articulated in hetero-patriarchal postcolonial Lesotho.

Owing to the dynamics of the colonial mission context, historicizing constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood allows consideration of how, through the processes undergirding this epoch, a particular image of ideal ‘womanhood’ was created in Lesotho (Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980). However, at the same time Kanago (2005, p. 2) observed that “‘womanhood’ thus became a battleground where issues of modernization, tradition, change and personal identity were fought” to acknowledge how these ideals were undermined and negotiated by African women. Therefore, this historical trajectory points to how constructions of womanhood shifted over time through active dismantling of dominant notions of ‘ideal’ womanhood and redefinition thereof by Basotho women, both during and after the colonial mission epoch. By extension, this provides me an opportunity to appreciate how Basotho women contested and negotiated colonially racialised and gendered boundaries (Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980; Maloka, 1997; Phohlo, 2011), thus revealing agentic forms of *Mosotho* feminine identity.

The thesis, therefore, argues that the historicity of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency, in itself, deconstructs and redefines metanarratives of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency in complex ways. Notably, for this thesis, it bears implications for the questions that are posed and addressed regarding the complex enmeshment of womanhood and agency with the broader structures that shape the daily realities of the *Methepa* in postcolonial Lesotho. Therefore, while I acknowledge the African feminist contention that *African* womanhood is a colonial construct, my point of departure is that *African* womanhood is agentic. Hence, my key concern is exploring how the *Methepa* re-construct *Mosotho* womanhood in postcolonial Lesotho and how agency is used in this process.

In an effort to unscramble the complexities of postcolonial constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood, I heed feminists of the Global South who, long ago, pointed to the inadequacy of contemporary western feminisms’ constructions of womanhood and how they continue to be plagued by colonial biases. Accordingly, the exclusivity and superiority harboured by the western feminist construct

of ‘Woman’<sup>13</sup> prompts the deconstructive stance which is central in this thesis. To achieve this, I draw on the theoretical support of intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminisms for a decolonial deconstructive feminist approach to reveal and address the coloniality that plagues constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency. Through this theoretical framework, I raise conceptual concerns against the hierarchical and oppositional binaries characteristic of colonial constructions of woman/not woman, human/not human, modern/backward, civilised/not civilised, agentic/not agentic that persist in feminist constructions of womanhood and agency.

African feminist, Oyěwùmí’s (1997) contention against the imposition of a ‘gendered’ construct, ‘Woman’ is critical to how I engage with the notion of womanhood in this thesis, namely, historicising and indigenising it. Accordingly, Oyěwùmí argues that in western culture, “a person’s biology determines [their] social position and status, so that bodily differences are used to set up social hierarchies” (Coetzee, 2017, p. 28). Thus, Woman regarded as essentially inferiorised and oppositional to ‘man’ is based on this western “bio-logic” (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. xii). Oyěwùmí (1997) argued that conceptualising ‘gender’ – Woman – in hierarchical and oppositional terms reiterates colonial ideologies in which African women were reduced to something less than human as the negative ‘Other’ in relation to the Western ideal ‘man of reason’. Accordingly, the imposition of ‘gender’ to African societies resulted in the distortion of fluid and relational subjectivities borne out of the indigenous African world-senses. Thus, this thesis is reluctant to adopt, uncritically, western feminist conceptions of womanhood that fail to account for the realities of the *Methepa*. I employ the concepts, *mosali oa Mosotho* and *bosali* interchangeably rather than Woman. I argue that the former embodies the complexities of the Sesotho world-senses and thus opens room for a multidimensional view on how the *Methepa* construct and reconstruct *bosali*.

However, an analysis of womanhood that accounts for the African context and its unique complexities is not new. African feminists, Masenya (2005), Mothoagae (2015) and Katide (2017)

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Woman’, womanhood, women, *African* woman, *Mosotho* woman, are not merely descriptive gendered constructs exemplifying notions of ‘womanhood’ tied to various contexts. Instead, they bear conceptual nuances; my reference to ‘Woman’ capitalised seeks to problematise the socio-cultural construct that is normalised to ideal womanhood defined in specific terms. Woman refers to a dominant patriarchal standard against which all women are judged. Thus, womanhood here is a gender identity/norm that I use interchangeably with Woman. ‘Women’ refers to a material category embodying the lived experiences of having to embody Woman/womanhood. Considering the problematic eurocentric discourses and analytic concepts characterised by binary oppositions such as Woman/not Woman, First-world Woman/Third-world Woman, central to western feminism and tied to the historical trajectory of colonisation in Africa, I problematise *Mosotho* woman/womanhood. Accordingly, these concepts captured in italics are problematised constructs upon which I pose a level of doubt and unease given their linkage to coloniality. Thus, I consider *Mosotho* ‘woman’ to be a construct tainted through colonial contact in Lesotho.

proposed African centered methodological approaches that account for the historical and socio-cultural complexities of the African context. Thus, in view of the complicated ways in which this context shapes constructions of womanhood, and in striving to name and define African women “appropriately” (Masenya, 2005, p. 744) the authors proposed the construct of *bosadi*. This also allows for redefined interpretations of African womanhood. In light of this, it is here where I insert the concepts of *mosali* and *bosali* – drawn from the voices of the *Methepa* as representation of their unique intricacies and complexities typifying their constructions of womanhood. Therefore, while my propositions are not new in this regard, to my knowledge it is for the first time that an analysis of womanhood is linked to ‘unmarried-ness’ pertaining to the African context. In particular, an in-depth exploration of *Methepa*’s re-constructions of womanhood linked to women’s agency contributes new knowledge to conceptualisations of womanhood and agency in the African world-senses.

Speaking of agency, historically, the African woman has consistently been portrayed as a victim in the face of patriarchal oppression. She is typically portrayed as “downtrodden, abused, overworked, violated, disempowered, disadvantaged and poor” (Hingston, 2016, p. 7284). African women are, thus, deemed ‘voiceless’, devoid of agency and in need of salvation. These discourses, which were central to development scholarship,<sup>14</sup> were contested by African feminists who insisted that African women are agents in “transforming their societies, states and economies” within their own specific contexts (Osirim, Beoku-Betts, & Ampofo, 2008, p. 2). Further, acknowledging this agency, Kapsula (2008, p. 1) writes that “African women are not only capable of mapping their own diverse ways of addressing their oppression in various spaces, they continue to visibly display remarkable anti-patriarchy feminist agency.” Thus, in striving to affirm the existence of ‘voice’ for the subaltern African woman – a concern that is central to this thesis – African scholars have continuously contested the victimhood state in which African women have been portrayed and represented in western literature.

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<sup>14</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s insights from western feminisms informed the practice of development aid in developing countries. Initially WIN (women-in-development) programmes which later became GAD (gender-and-development) approaches were aimed at addressing the basic needs of women. A vast scholarship that details the impact of development policies on women in the third world exists (Mohanty, 1988). However, what seemed to be success stories of empowerment of the ‘Third World woman’ amidst debilitating poverty and oppressive cultural practices such as FGM, this scholarship bears reductionist, Eurocentric biases that posited a monolithic, overly oppressed Third World woman in need of western salvation. Issues raised against this scholarship include its obliteration of the differences and complexities that characterise the lives of women, shaped by class, religion, nationality for instance.



African feminists' representations of African women as agents are closely resonant with Spivak's (1985) question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which sought to dispel the misrepresentation of the subaltern woman within eurocentric feminist texts. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'subaltern classes' in reference to oppressed subjects, Spivak (1985) criticises the tendencies of western academia for speaking 'for' and distorting the realities of the subaltern woman. Following an interrogation of the complex relationship between the 'expert' researcher and the 'ignorant' subaltern woman upon whom research is done, Spivak concludes that women's voices are repressed, and thus silenced, through research. Thus, contending against the portrayal of African women as lacking agency, African feminists cite the African woman's agency as typically public and enacted against oppressive political, economic, social globalised structures. In other instances, feminists rightfully historicise women's agency, feminist or not, in the face of political struggle for liberation during colonisation (Amadiume, 2002; Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Osirim et al., 2008; Steady, 2011) and apartheid (Gasa, 2007). However, despite their rhetorical statements, African feminists have not demonstrated, empirically nor theoretically, how African women are agents in their personal lives – a gap that this thesis seeks to address with its focus on the *Methepa*. This thesis displays the *Methepa* as agents despite being cast to the margins of a pro-marital Basotho society.

The convergence of decolonial, African and Black feminisms around the agency of the marginalised subaltern woman is vital for deconstruction of taken-for-granted eurocentric colonial categories and cultural forces that 'de-womanise' and rid the *Mosotho* woman of her agency. Notably, this theoretical body takes very seriously the contention that, from within the locus of marginality, the subaltern woman 'speaks' in various ways. However, to assume that 'agency' is self-explanatory, a timeless or a homogenous concept would be misleading because feminisms' definitions of agency are not unitary. Instead, according to Third world feminisms, the broader understanding of women's empowerment and agency are "contextually specific and situationally dependent" (Bawa, 2018, p. 10). Drawing on the Black feminist theory of agency - self-definition - this thesis reveals the inherent ambiguities and ambivalences of subaltern agency in the face of hegemonic social formations that essentialise womanhood to marriage. Yet, at the same time, without necessarily romanticising and homogenising it, configurations of agency of the subaltern *Mothepe* ought to be imagined and conceptualised in ways that account for the historical, social and cultural structures within which it is housed.

In light of this, central to women's constructions of girlhood, womanhood, motherhood are the intersecting concepts of time and space. Wilson's (2015) reflection on this phenomenon in *Here and now, there and then: Nostalgia as a time and space phenomenon*, elucidates how intersecting time and space characterise the recollection of past experiences as, 'then – there' informing the present, 'now – here'. Emerging from the women's narrated life stories is a reflection of not only 'passage of time' (Batisai, 2013) but also spatial and ideological aspects that shape constructions of identity in postcolonial Lesotho. Moreover, this phenomenon also characterised reflections on discernible differences between rural and urban spaces, in which shifts in time within both spaces informed what it means to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho*<sup>15</sup> in contradistinction from the notion of Christian girlhood. While this time-space complex was characteristic to constructions of identity during childhood as well as adulthood, it concomitantly informed constructions of agency. The interconnectedness of space and time; having been 'there' 'then' informed meanings attached to identities and agencies constructed 'here' 'now'. This implies that constructions of agency in the form of self-definition were always located within and around intertwined past and present, and thus constantly negotiated within broader historical, social and cultural landscape of postcolonial Lesotho.

In proposing an innovative analytic direction that 'rejects binary thinking' and instead prioritises the intersectional and indigenous view through the frame of *uMakhulu* (Magoqwana, 2018b) this thesis reveals new ways through which identity and agency can be re-imagined in postcolonial Lesotho. Relatedly, the thesis acknowledges African feminist Nnaemeka's (2004, p. 361) plea for "building on the indigenous", in which she advocates for "our investment in our African" inspired ways of conceptualising and theorising. Nnaemeka (2004, p. 369) insists that "African worldviews and thought are capable of providing the theoretical rack on which to hang African literature" to corroborate the idea that analyses of African realities be rooted in the indigenous. For Nnaemeka (2004, p. 377), indigenous "refers to whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves". In this thesis, I draw on this explanation that foregrounds the people's world-senses; be it in terms of knowledges, cultures, beliefs, values, norms that in turn shape the women's constructions of agency and womanhood. I

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<sup>15</sup> *Ngoanana oa Mosotho* is loosely translates as Mosotho girl, the plural thereof is *banana ba Basotho*

also use the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘indigenous’ interchangeably as well as religio-socio-cultural in reference to the ‘modern’ borne out of colonial-mission confluence in Lesotho.

A refocus on the indigenous resonates with Collins’ idea of analysing women’s lived realities through a view ‘from the ground up’ that reveals nuanced forms of agency that are otherwise invisible to the trained eurocentric eye’s “normal and ‘right’ way of seeing” (Burney, 2012, p. 144). For Oyěwùní (1997, p. 3) the eurocentric term ‘worldview’ is problematic and as such she prefers “worldsense”. Her rejection of the term ‘worldview’ is based on its western privileging of the visual senses over other senses, and as such she argues, is reflective of eurocentrism. By contrast, the concept “worldsense” is a more inclusive way of conceptualising realities of the world by different cultural groups who might prioritise multiple senses including the symbolic aspects. In this thesis, I adapted the concept to represent the indigenous Sesotho aspects that inform and anchor constructions of womanhood – *bosali*. Moreover, I use the term to emphasise the ‘standpoint’ of the *Methepa* as a basis of their articulations of *bosali*. In addition, I anchor their agency – shaped by a myriad of factors – upon their world-senses in lieu of what has historically been imposed as ‘truth’ in relation to womanhood and agency.

In the analytic chapters of this thesis, I expand on how *Methepa* draw on the Sesotho world-senses to affirm themselves as *basali*<sup>16</sup>. Women’s conformity to indigenous aspects learned through their grooming as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* such as *boithlompho* (self-respect), *botho* (personhood), *bosali ba m’ankhonthe* (perseverance and resilience), as well as sexuality and mothering as empowering – were anchors for their self-affirmation as *mosali*. Thus, *bosali* constructed from the world-senses of the *Methepa* is tied to these socio-cultural and personal aspects. Ironically, the notion of *mosali* is reflective of their striving to belong to the collective, yet it is also distinguishable from the socio-cultural construct of *mosali oa Mosotho* – tied to the marital norm – from which they are debarred for being unmarried. In the thesis, I use the latter in reference to the hetero-patriarchal construct that centres around marriage and the former in reference to the women’s representations of *mosali* that de-center marriage.

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<sup>16</sup> *Mosali* translated in simple terms is woman, *Mosali oa Mosotho* is Mosotho woman, *basali* is the plural of *mosali*, *bosali* is womanhood. However as mentioned earlier in the context of these analyses it bears significantly more meaning than the western notion of woman can offer. Therefore, I opt to use *mosali-bosali* throughout to capture its socio-cultural, symbolic and personal significance for Basotho women

Relatedly, *botho* (personhood) is central to the women's constructions of identity. The works of African feminists are critical to how I conceptualise 'personhood' that pins the women's deconstructive tone as they de-center gendered and hierarchised ways of self-identification. As part of her contention against universalised gendered conceptions, African feminist Amadiume (2002, p. 43) foregrounds the concept of *Nmadu*. This is "a genderless word meaning person/human...based on non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism, as a unifying moral code and culture". In this, I read emphasis on 'the person' – regardless of gender – as a moral being whose existence is centered around compassion, collectivity and communalism as the underpinning for social harmony in African communities. Relatedly, African philosopher Letseka (2013) points out personhood to be the underpinning of African enculturation processes that groom younger generations, regardless of gender, to become socially acceptable persons and community members. In this thesis, I draw on this conceptualisation of personhood to give voice to women's self-identifications that mark them as worthy of respect as persons, rather than the gendered conjugal *mosali oa Mosotho* – from which they are debarred for being unmarried. Giving priority to these representations that are linked to Sesotho world-senses not only informs their configurations of identity, but it also informs their agency. I argue that these constructions of *bosali*, *botho* and agency tied to the Sesotho world-senses have been concealed and submerged through the eurocentric discourses that have been centralised as the 'alpha and omega' of womanhood and agency. The multiplicity and diversity borne out of the Sesotho world-senses dispels universality and thus contributes to pluriversal knowledge production purported by decoloniality.

This thesis is conducted as a response to the mandate to dismantle the myths and stereotypes that are infused into Basotho culture, language and discourse (Morojele, 2013) that continue to marginalise 'unmarried' women. There is a need to re-define *Mosotho* womanhood and the meanings thereof in ways that consider and support the active and assertive roles required of Basotho women in modern Lesotho society (Morojele, 2013). However, this may not take place in isolation. It requires us to interrogate the hetero-patriarchal milieu which shapes these conceptions. Moreover, heeding that the hetero-patriarchal milieu that shapes Basotho women's lived experiences in postcolonial Lesotho is first and foremost governed by colonial forces, this thesis responds to the call to reveal, resist and destroy coloniality (Magoqwana, 2018a; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013b) in all facets of Basotho society. Therefore, this thesis does not only respond to the call to

give ‘voice’ to previously marginalised voices (Chiumbu, 2016, p. 417), but it also opens room for fostering subjectivities infused with ‘new’ meanings foregrounding human dignity. This serves as a springboard to shift notions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency beyond racialised, gendered, hierarchical competitive binaries (upon which the marginal state of the *Methepa* is anchored) and instead affirms ‘pluriversal’ constructions of identity.

This study seeks to explore, from the perspectives of ‘never-married’ *Methepa*, constructions and reconstructions of womanhood. In other words, how is womanhood expressed and reconstructed by the *Methepa* in modern hetero-patriarchal Lesotho? I argue that gender re-construction in this context, to some extent, bears an important question of agency as women make meaning of their ‘unmarried’ identities. Therefore, this thesis contributes new knowledge on how women’s agency is used in the re-construction of womanhood within a hetero-patriarchal context. Moreover, through theoretical analytic lenses that prioritise the African world-senses, this thesis re-visibilitys African women’s agency tied to the indigenous African customary structures. Furthermore, by drawing from the lived experiences of the *Methepa* within a hetero-patriarchal context, the thesis theoretically and empirically analyses the complexities of womanhood and agency underpinned by intersecting gendered subalternity, indigeneity, and modernity in postcolonial Africa. By so doing, this thesis therefore becomes an anchor for understanding and critiquing hegemonic structures of domination in the pursuit of emancipatory politics through knowledge production.

#### **1.4. Research questions**

The main questions that this thesis seeks to address are: how is womanhood constructed from the perspectives of the *Methepa*? Subsequently, how do the *Methepa* reconstruct normative definitions of womanhood essentialised to marriage and what is the role of women’s agency in this process?

To achieve these ends, the following sub-questions are explored:

1. What historical, socio-cultural factors shape the *Methepa*’s perceptions on womanhood in modern Lesotho?
2. What are the lived experiences of the *Methepa* in rural and urban contexts of modern Lesotho?
3. How do the *Methepa* draw from agency to reconstruct womanhood in modern Lesotho?

## 1.5. Rationale for the study

This thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the constructions of womanhood in Lesotho and provide an in-depth empirical and theoretical understanding of ‘unmarriedness’ and women’s agency in Lesotho. The majority of research studies on singleness<sup>17</sup> (Byrne, 2008; Gaetano, 2014; Lahad, 2017; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007) have been conducted in the developed world. The few that are conducted in the African context (Lesch & van der Watt, 2018; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Plank, 2018; Van der Watt, 2015) have also discussed it without reference to the historical hetero-patriarchal structures that shape constructions of womanhood. ‘Unmarried’ identity is a non-conforming identity within patriarchal contexts; and therefore, by locating it within the broader framework of womanhood, this study aims to bring forth an in-depth empirical understanding of how non-conforming identities are negotiated and located within hetero-patriarchal power structures in the context of Lesotho. Scholarship on singleness has successfully contributed to giving ‘voice’ to the experiences of a silenced class: single women in the respective contexts. However, critical questions remain unaddressed around single identity and its implications for women’s sense of womanhood. In other words, what remains silenced in these critical works is how single women negotiate womanhood and locate their marginalised identities within a context that necessitates marriage as a fundamental aspect of womanhood. Moreover, this scholarship has predominantly focused on a single class of women; white or black middle-class, urban-located, and heterosexual women, thus leaving a lacuna around how differently bodied women articulate unmarried identities in relation to ‘normative’ constructions of womanhood.

By interrogating the ‘ordinariness’ and ‘normalcy’ of gender identity that essentialises marriage, this study responds to the feminist “challenge of re-politicising gender as a transformational thinking tool and human relational space” (McFadden, 2000, p. n.p). I stand alongside (to borrow the words of African feminist Pat McFadden) “all those [African] fore-mothers and sisters whose courage has moved the great stone of oppression and exclusion, so that change would come for all of us” (McFadden, 2000, p. n.p). Apart from the aforementioned Basotho gender scholars, African female literary writers have long challenged androcentric constructions of gender that justify

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<sup>17</sup> My use of ‘singleness’ is in reference to literature on the subject area of interest, whereas when I refer to the questions raised by this thesis I use ‘unmarried’ identity’, ‘unmarriedness’ and ‘unmarried’ woman’ interchangeably.

gender inequality in postcolonial Africa. Therefore, to challenge and transform hetero-patriarchal metanarratives of *African* womanhood, several African female writers across Africa, such as Buchi Emecheta (1977, 1994), Flora Nwapa (1966) and recently Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2012) in West Africa, Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988) in Southern Africa and Nawāl El Sa‘dāwī (1999) in North Africa, to mention a few, have written about the experiences of African women within a globalised racist, hetero-patriarchal world. These writers presented alternative conceptions of *African* womanhood that are outside the hegemonic discourses such as those necessitating marriage. These texts, although literary in nature, play a significant role in interrogating the taken-for-granted notions of *African* womanhood within those communities in which they are produced during the specific time periods. However, the persistence of hetero-patriarchal ideologies that shape constructions of *African* womanhood, exemplified by paucity of African scholarship on singleness, is very concerning. Considering this, there remains a lacuna regarding how ‘singleness’ potentially transforms dominant discourses of *African* womanhood tied to marriage - a key question that this thesis seeks to address.

In addition, the lack of critical scholarly engagement, let alone theoretical analyses, developed from the assertions by African feminists that African women are ‘agents in their lives’ Kolawole (1997) - is another gap that is addressed by this thesis. This thesis draws from intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminisms to provide a decolonial theoretical analysis of gender identity re-construction within hetero-patriarchal Lesotho context. In addition, it will innovatively contribute a decolonial theoretical analysis of Basotho women’s agency to gender identity re-construction in postcolonial Basotho context. In so doing, it aims to provide an African perspective of women’s agency and expand African feminist theory in this regard.

At the core of this thesis is that, while colonial, mission and indigenous forces functioned in tandem to construct specific forms of ‘Woman’ identities during the colonial era, there were obvious distortions to indigenous components that were introduced by foreign forces. Moreover, in spite of the changing milieu - neoliberalism, globalisation and neo-colonialism in African contexts and Lesotho in particular - this historical background remains palpable in modern day constructions of womanhood in Lesotho. Therefore, this fuels ideologies that support and reinforce the construction of ‘unmarried’ women as ‘Other’ within a context governed by socio-cultural religious hetero-patriarchal norms. As such, it is within this socio-historical, religious and cultural context that I

locate the narratives of the *Methepa* on gender identity re-construction and their use of agency. Moreover, by engaging a decolonial feminist approach to reveal and address coloniality of gender, knowledge and being, this thesis contributes a new theoretical approach to analyses of womanhood and agency - which have not previously been explored by scholars (in Lesotho and beyond).

Finally, ‘voice’ - “meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4) is what this study aims to give to a silenced group of women in the context of Lesotho.

## **1.6. Thesis outline**

This chapter introduced the study by way of providing the research focus and motivation undergirding this study, which is my own childhood experiences. In addition, this is an extension of past research (Mohlabane, 2014). The chapter also presented the problem statement for the study, the research questions, and also justifies the need for the study. Additionally, the chapter discussed the key concepts and now provides an outline of the thesis.

Subsequently, the contextual chapter (Chapter 2) heeds African feminist scholarship whose analytic gaze illuminates the role of colonisation in Africa and how it shaped African gender relations, including constructions of womanhood in African contexts. Therefore, as an attempt to trace the historical trajectory of womanhood in Lesotho, I locate the concept *Mosotho* woman within precolonial, colonial historical epoch. A reflection on this history provides context for current articulations and invocations of *Mosotho* woman around which the experiences of ‘unmarried’ women are shaped in contemporary postcolonial Lesotho. The literature review chapter (Chapter 3) presents the conceptual underpinnings of the thesis, namely womanhood, femininity, heteronormativity, marriage and motherhood. This chapter begins with western feminist conceptions of womanhood, followed by a critique which is fashioned by feminisms of the Global South challenging eurocentrism and universality harboured by the western concept ‘Woman’. Drawing on the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and *uMakhulu*, this chapter presents scholarship that prioritizes diversity and multiplicity around the notion of *African* womanhood to deconstruct normative and universalist constructions of womanhood. The complexities embodied by the concept ‘African woman’ revealed in these discussions prepared the ground for the theoretical landscape outlined in this chapter. In response to the key contention



that *African* womanhood continues to be plagued by coloniality, this chapter presents the decolonial theoretical approach undergirding this thesis. Decolonial African and Black feminist theories are drawn upon as intersecting theoretical bodies of knowledge for a decolonial feminist approach to the analytic chapters (5 and 6) of the thesis. This theoretical framework foregrounds intersectionality, deconstruction, historicity, and agency and thus is well-suited to addressing the concerns raised by this thesis.

Chapter 4 maps the methodological trajectory of the thesis. This qualitative study adopted a decolonial feminist approach for data collection and analysis processes. Narrated life histories of the *Methepa* were analysed using narrative analysis through a process of storying stories (McCormack, 2004) to explore how the *Methepa* re-construct womanhood as well as construct and use agency in this process. This methodology chapter is well aligned to the theoretical approach delineated in Chapter 3, and thus attuned to the two subsequent analytic chapters (5 and 6). Therefore, as African feminist Jane Bennett advocated, this thesis foregrounds an imagination of the research ““field”- in an African context!” (Bennett, 2008a, p. 5); one that prioritizes African realities. Mbilinyi (1992) affords my positionality - the identities that I embody as *Mosotho*, female, African feminist - much significance in this entire research process, including the outcomes of the study. Therefore, this chapter concludes with a discussion of my positionality as the ‘research instrument’ for the study as well as the ethical considerations guiding the entire process.

The analytic chapters (5 and 6) present the verbatim transcripts of the narratives woven with scholarly literature. In so doing, I heeded Batisai’s (2013, p. 7) caution that “excessive referencing... in the analytic chapters could reduce the life stories to a mere summary”. Therefore, to avoid silencing women’s ‘voices’, I presented the rich narrated stories as direct translations of the verbatim as an attempt to retain their expressiveness and depth. For complex terms, I retained the Sesotho verbatim as well as the translations in the text and footnoted the explanation. Drawing on the narrated lived childhood experiences of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, Chapter 5 maps the historical, socio-cultural and economic landscape that shapes women’s perceptions and constructions of womanhood. Childhood experiences are located within intersecting and, at times, conflicting familial, communal and schooling spaces. By locating these lived childhood experiences within the decolonial framework of *uMakhulu* that privileges the indigenous, I attempt

to elucidate the less obvious aspects inherent to Basotho enculturation processes. I paid close attention to ‘felt’ distinctive spatial and temporal points of ‘then-now’, ‘there-here’ constructed not merely as “the present is ‘here and now’; the past, ‘then and there’” (Wilson, 2015, p. 479). Instead, there were strong interlinkages characteristic of shifts not only of ‘passage of time’ (Batisai, 2013) but also spatial and ideological aspects that shaped the construction of girlhood and womanhood. Therefore, notable is the socio-historical and economic context that characterises Lesotho that is palpable in the *Methepa*’s narrated life stories of childhood. This is suggestive that the construction of contemporary ideals of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* are deeply embedded in this history, thus confirming the main contention posited in this thesis. Overall, the narrated life stories of childhood reveal a context, constituted by tightly woven and intersecting hetero-religio-socio-cultural forces, that informs the constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and *mosali oa Mosotho* as multidimensional and complex.

Subsequently, Chapter 6 adopts intersectional lenses through which it explores the *Methepa*’s reconstructions of *mosali oa Mosotho*. I draw on their lived experiences as the ‘unmarried’ ‘Other’ to give voice to how they navigate marginalising contexts wherein *mosali oa Mosotho* is defined in marital terms. Black feminist agency theory, self-definition, discussed in Chapter 3, is the golden thread that holds the entire thesis together. Therefore, I pay close attention to how the *Methepa* draw meaning from their past personal experiences of ‘becoming’ *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to construct and reconstruct womanhood in adulthood. In particular, the *Methepa* anchor their constructions as *mosali* by transforming the meanings attached to the realms of femininity, sexuality and motherhood. I focus on how the *Methepa* narrate their self-definitions, self-descriptions and self-evaluations of what it means to be *mosali* despite being unmarried.

Lastly, the conclusion (Chapter 7) maps the entire conceptual, theoretical, empirical and methodological trajectory of this thesis. It also presents a theory-data interplay of the *Methepa*’s agency drawing on the theoretical insights of Black feminist agency. A major theoretical conclusion is that the *Methepa*’s agency, self-definitions, self-descriptions and self-evaluations of what it means to be *mosali*, bears the confluence of intersecting indigenous and ‘modern’ Christianity forces. This chapter also points to the limitations and evaluates the key contributions of the study to gender and feminist scholarship on gender identity, sexuality and agency.

## Chapter 2: Situating ‘*Mosotho Woman*’ in Precolonial and Colonial Lesotho

### 2.1. Introduction

In this contextual chapter, I historicise the concept ‘*Mosotho Woman*’ with the intention of supporting the argument that ‘*Mosotho Woman*’ is a colonial construct. In particular, Bawa and Ogunyankin point out that “[a]nalyzing women’s identity, desires and sexuality on the [African] continent entails a rigorous process of engaging the legacies of colonialism in the present in order to deconstruct essentialist, binary and totalizing claims on women’s subjectivities on the continent” (2018, p. 6). These scholars illuminate the significance of the historical background of colonisation in Lesotho for understanding ‘*Mosotho Woman*’ as a historical, religio-cultural and social construct. Relatedly, this will reveal the diversities, complexities and multiplicities embodied by the construct, ‘*Mosotho Woman*’. Problematising the concept of ‘Woman’ and redefining it as historically and spatially context specific is, I argue, particularly relevant for rethinking the ways in which differently bodied women contest normative and fixed patriarchal conceptions of Woman.

In this contextual chapter, I seek to firstly review the decades-long historical debates pertaining to gender relations in the nineteenth century Lesotho with the intention of making an original contribution to the historiography of womanhood in Lesotho. I draw mainly on those ‘herstories’ of African women purporting their assumption of influential positions within their various societies to suggest that they reflect precolonial constructions of womanhood in Africa, including Lesotho. Secondly, I engage with the themes, missionary ‘civilisation’ endeavours, mine migrancy, intersecting colonial and African patriarchal forces, and women’s resistances – to put forth an argument that through these colonial processes a particularistic image of *Mosotho* woman was constructed. The colonial/mission project, in tandem with indigenous patriarchies, sought to enforce restraint over Basotho women in a myriad of ways. This was enforced and reinforced through legal structures and religious prescripts as well as physical, cultural, economic and social boundaries established to retain Basotho women under male domination. This chapter also explores some of the ways in which women took advantage of this restrictive system, accessed restricted spaces, undermined gendered norms and embodied contradictory identities. Therefore,

while I focus on how this shaped constructions of respectable, civilised ideal womanhood in Lesotho, I augment my discussion by drawing on the historical overviews constructed in other African contexts. Thereafter, I outline important colonial influences that, I argue, have a bearing for *Mosotho* Woman as we know it to be today in 21<sup>st</sup> century Lesotho. I piece together these pertinent aspects as a basis for my contention that *Mosotho* Woman is a colonial construct and thus warrants an analytic lens that will reveal and debase its inherent colonial biases.

## **2.2. Locating *Mosotho* Woman in history**

The details of precolonial<sup>18</sup> gender relations in Africa and the notion of Woman have often been deemed unreliable and riddled with biases given that they are produced by the coloniser and his descendants. In particular, scholars take issue with the primary sources that bear inherent imperialist biases which therefore, make them unreliable (Epprecht, 1996; Jaji, 2015; McClintock, 1995; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Moreover, Jaji (2015) points out that, given this predicament, it is difficult to draw distinctions between precolonial and colonial femininities and masculinities. In other words, much of what we know of precolonial ‘gender’ arrangements - written by missionaries and colonialists - is itself unreliable for us to make explicit observations about precolonial African womanhood. However, leaving it at this is unsettling for me, given that this is an invisibilised aspect that furthers the foreclosure of exposing racial and patriarchal biases that plague the construction of womanhood. Therefore, it requires a re-reading ‘against the grain’ of available sources on the subject that can potentially provide a glimpse on the question at hand.

Noteworthy, however, is that this ‘available’ information is significantly scant. However, Norman Etherington (2001, p. xix) reminds us of the usefulness of what he terms “‘significant anecdote’ purposed to extract a historical overview of the agency of individuals” in spite of a very limited archive. Jackson established that this entails “foregrounding the story of a particular individual with the understanding that their experience may represent a trope” (2001, p. 14). Therefore, my elevation of the ‘herstories’ of regents M’anthatsi of the Batlokwa, M’ants’ebo of the Bakoena and others including M’antsopa the prophetess, as well as Senate, the daughter of Moshoeshoe,

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<sup>18</sup> I heed Tisani Nomathamsanqa’s (2018, p. 15) concern that “Continuous use of ‘precolonial’ and its associated terms ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ for the periodisation and the defining of African pasts, is a misnomer that has to be discarded as part of new research questions and knowledge production that have to be created in African studies.” However, for lack of a better way of framing this necessary discussion, I refer to these concepts with uneasiness yet without intention of causing further harm but instead to illuminate particular pertinent dynamics of this context for this particular study.

serves as a means of flagging an exceptional narrative that deserves recognition, not as universal, but for its uniqueness. In other words, it suffices that these ‘herstories’ represent an unacknowledged and unique plot pertaining to constructions of Basotho womanhood.

Part of my aim in this thesis is to piece together fragmented bits of information with which we can at least reveal pertinent, yet undocumented, histories, from which to deduce precolonial Basotho women’s roles. This task is not only critical for substantiating my contention that what we know of constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood today is to a large extent shaped by colonial conquest in Lesotho, but also serves as a mandate to make a scholarly contribution of ‘new knowledge’ about precolonial constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood. This is a complex task that warrants further exploration in future research beyond this project. However, it suffices to regard it here as a means of the opening up of “an as yet under-researched aspect” (Jackson, 2014, p. 3) of Basotho womanhood in precolonial Lesotho.

While I do not pretend to provide an explicit answer to precolonial processes in Lesotho, for this thesis I seek to foreground a different narrative on Basotho womanhood. Gill contends that “although many commentators today consider that women were greatly oppressed in this precolonial social situation, we must carefully take into consideration the countervailing forces” (1992, p. 56). Indeed, this chapter, like the rest of the thesis, seeks to deconstruct meta-narratives by revealing the biases inherent in ‘the uncontested’ pertaining to constructions of womanhood in the African context. Essentially, I seek to move beyond the idea that scholarship on precolonial gender relations is precarious and unreliable, as it forecloses further explorations on the subject. This reinforces meta-narratives that, in turn, further invisibilise African women and thus defends patriarchal eurocentric bias.

In my reading of the ‘history’ of Lesotho, either Basotho women are absent or are portrayed in stereotypical reproductive and productive roles that have long characterised Basotho womanhood. For instance, Casalis (one of the first French missionaries to enter Lesotho), with great conviction, portrayed precolonial Basotho society in the following way: “...The sotho village is divided into two realms, that of women (the houses) and that of men (the cattle kraals/*khotla*).....woman’s realm is connected with fertility and she is not to enter the man’s realm lest she disturb it with her potency (or conversely, lest she pollute it)” (Casalis, 1997, p. 80). Undoubtedly, this familiarly represents the western image of Woman (discussed in Chapter 3) as perpetually relegated to the domestic

hearth lest her disorder destabilise the man's world. Moreover, the author adds that reproduction and domesticity are *par excellence* roles to which the *Mosotho* woman was inclined: "The house is like a womb where procreation occurs. It is the realm of woman '*par excellence*'" (Casalis, 1997, p. 80 emphasis added).

Likewise, in her foundational work, *African Women: A Modern History* (1997, p. 34), Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch picks up the baton that portrays African women as "powerful" and whose "power" is linked to their "procreative capacity and motherhood.....[with] female identity linked to fertility". This perpetuates the dominant narrative that essentialises reproduction and production to *African* women, and thus, bestows African men with natural authority over *African* women and the entire homestead. Such biases led to the reproduction and the flourishing of stereotypical images of *African* womanhood and thus, the concealment of an alternative narrative pertaining to constructions of *African* womanhood in its indigenous or contextual sense. Therefore, in this section, my intention, like that of my predecessors, is to problematise and debase these biases lest we reinforce them.

My revelation of these biases is not new. Instead, feminist scholars have revealed that in precolonial societies, African women played influential roles in religious and political governance of their societies, while some acted as regents in the absence of chiefs (Magoqwana, 2018b; Steady, 2011). I also read the works of African female scholars like Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) and Ifi Amadiume, (1987) – as representative of an alternative narrative of precolonial constructions of Nigerian womanhood. These cases are numerous across various contexts in Africa, and undoubtedly, they represent uniqueness exemplified by African women which I read as counter-narratives to the numerous misrepresentations of *African* womanhood. To be able to substantiate my argument, I acknowledge and draw on their suggested implications as I illustrate the situation of Basotho women.

Mainly, in patriarchal Lesotho, the institution of chieftaincy (*borena* or *bokhosi*), is a highly contentious matter; and it is that realm within which Basotho women's presence presents a contradictory narrative. To confirm my point, Mahao (2007, p. 207) states that the institution of chieftaincy is riddled with prescriptive norms of birth and patriarchy, meaning that it is exclusive

to a particular group. This institution is undergirded by The Laws of Lerotholi<sup>19</sup> – customary laws of the Basotho – which state that;

... the succession to the chieftainship shall be by right of birth; that is the first born male child of the first wife married: if the first wife has no male issue then the first born male child of the next wife married in succession shall be the chief; provided that if a chief dies leaving no male issue the chieftainship shall devolve upon the male following according to the succession of houses (Laws of Lerotholi, p1, s2 cited by Nyane, 2019, p. 9)

A brief overview of the institution is warranted to give a sense of its significance as a traditional model of governance chieftaincy. This is particularly important given its stringency in emphasising that succession is hereditary and follows the male lineage. For Mahao (2007), chieftaincy amongst the Basotho, as in many other contexts, is an all-encompassing institution characterised by the roles of “ruler, judge, maker and guardian of the law, repository of wealth, dispenser of gifts, leader in war, priest and magician of the people” (2007, p. 207). Undoubtedly, this spells extensive and awesome powers invested in the institution, constituted not in the individual person, but as a collective structure of authority of which one who is nominated as chief is part. Moreover, the incumbents of the chieftaincy were typically elderly, for experience and wisdom are assumed to be affiliated with age.

Nonetheless, traditionally, this structure of authority is inhabited only by Basotho men wherein important decisions on governance are made in the absence of Basotho women. Therefore, for a tightly woven patriarchal institution such as chieftaincy, any other arrangement is not only a transgression but is exceptional given its nature. However, my interest in the institution, as Ashton (1952, p. 88) points out, is that “occasionally a woman may become chief” in spite the fact that her succession is not by birth-right as stated above. Women only assumed roles in the chieftaincy through marital ties in the absence of a suitable male heir at a specific time period. Nonetheless, several examples have been cited amongst the Basotho, but as illustration of my argument I will only present the case of M’anthatisi of the Batlokoa.

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<sup>19</sup>Laws of Lerotholi constitute a customary code that was promulgated in 1903 under the reign of Paramount Chief Lerotholi. At that time there was no written customary laws, the only available document was the Cape Colony Report of the Commission on Laws and Customs of the Basotho of 1872. These laws are the main source of customary law co-existent with British common law in Lesotho today (Nyane, 2019).

M'anthatsi of the Batlokoa was a regent during the precolonial era from 1815 in the event that her son Sekonyela, the 'rightful' successor, was under age when her husband Mokotcho died (Etherington, 2001). M'anthatsi ruled and protected the Batlokoa until 1822, and while she was despised by colonial authorities, she was recognised and respected by her followers who eventually self-referenced as 'M'anthatsi'. For Etherington, the significance of this exceptional phenomenon meant that "in this era women played central roles in chiefly politics" (2001, p. 84). Indeed, the emergence of a female leader alongside male leaders such as Moshoeshe had great significance to the history of the Basotho, and more importantly, for the meanings of Basotho womanhood at the time. Likewise, scholars such as Thompson were intrigued by this unusual phenomenon wherein a female leader like M'anthatsi attracted scores of followers contrary to Basotho custom. As such, Phohlo (2011, p. 26) points out that:

M'anthatsi stands out as a symbol and witness of the presence of a consciousness that affirms women in a history that appears to be dominated by men and interpreted in masculine terms by most historians today. She challenges an assumption which excludes women by virtue of their femininity as makers of national histories and participants in public social affairs of a community.

For me, the narrative of M'anthatsi and the other remarkable women speaks to precolonial constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood and how it was characterised differently from what we are made to believe in written historical texts. Moreover, Phohlo (2011, p. 27) further attests to the characteristics that M'anthatsi embodied, which underpinned her ascendancy. He points out that she was "strong, brave and intelligent, qualities commonly associated with men of the likes of Moshoeshe". Indeed, while these are patriarchally defined as masculine, and thus, contradictory to femininity defined in patriarchal terms, I argue that these characteristics were taught as part survival and as such informed representations of womanhood at the time. In other words, M'anthatsi was not enacting masculinity as Phohlo's participants suggested that "Manthatsi[i], Senate, M'ants'ebo... are in their own way representatives of feminine masculinity" (2011, p. 48). On the contrary, I read these as representations of femininity in this context that, however, have been invisibilised through foreign conquest in Lesotho. In addition, I read them as agency characteristic to Basotho womanhood that, in turn, allowed her to command the Batlokoa in wars,



sit in court (*khotla*) to deliberate on governance matters, oversee the needs of the Batlokoa and carry out many other duties as the Batlokoa chief.

Noteworthy is that these experiences exist within a patriarchal context of chieftaincy in Lesotho, and thus the nomination of women regardless of the circumstances is a dynamic that warrants recognition. My intention is not to romanticise women's power, as many have often declared, lest they debase feminist politics based on women's perpetually subordinate state. Instead, I make a case for reviewing constructions of Basotho womanhood specifically, drawing from this history. Although it does not provide explicit answers in terms of precolonial constructions of Basotho womanhood, these unique dynamics provide a glimpse that prompts us to think differently about current constructions of Basotho womanhood.

While I heed the insightfulness of dual-sex role scholarship (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997) for debasing dominant assumptions around gender and gendered relations as universal. I do not espouse the notion that gender was non-existent in precolonial Lesotho, nor do I propose that precolonial gender relations amongst Basotho were egalitarian. I also take heed to Maqutu's (1992, p. 117) assertion that "[w]e do not know how women were treated in Basotho society in the eighteenth century..[however]..what is left of traditional African custom[s] does show a lot of good customs that enhanced the women's status existed". Therefore, while I do acknowledge that gender relations between Basotho women and men may have been complementary based on the African value system (Jaji, 2015). My suggestion does not foreclose a view that they were also hierarchical in favour of Basotho men - essentially, they were patriarchal in a context-specific way (Patil, 2013; Phohlo, 2011).

However, what I am suggesting is that the existence of female chiefs - notwithstanding the patriarchal nature of the institution - is suggestive of a different and contradictory narrative pertaining to constructions of Basotho womanhood that requires further exploration. I concur with Phohlo (2011, p. 102) when he attests that "these incidents ... are interpreted as ruptures of a gender sensitive consciousness in the history and custom of the Basotho ... [moreover they] challenge the status quo ... in as far as gender relations are concerned". I read these narratives as a reflection of certain aspects pertaining to precolonial constructions of Basotho womanhood that were far from what we have presently come to know of them in post-independence Lesotho. In other words, the positions of authority that these women occupied within a hetero-patriarchal

society, challenged the prescriptions of ideal dependent type womanhood that prevails in postcolonial Lesotho. In the following sub-section, I focus on how religio-hetero-patriarchal colonial structures enforced through mission endeavours as well as the codification of customary laws were presiding aspects that anchored the construction of a specific ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* womanhood that was to become a golden standard against which Basotho women were judged as ‘civilised’ women.

### **2.3. Colonial history and *Mosotho* Woman**

The role of colonialism in shaping the construction of ‘*Mosotho* womanhood’ cannot be understated. The historical debates tabled above as well as the colonial influences that I discuss next seek to illustrate that coloniality remains ingrained in the constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood. Drawing from the illustrations by various scholars, I also make a point that within this historical context, African women constructed as not befitting dominant definitions of Woman negotiated, contested and redefined normative colonial structures within the loci of marginality. Thus, this section not only reveals the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities that characterised colonial conquest in Africa, but also the constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood in particular. While my focus is on Lesotho, I acknowledge that the dynamics of colonisation and women’s responses to racialised patriarchal restrictions are not unique to Lesotho. Therefore, in order to augment this discussion, I will refer to other African contexts for a comprehensive picture of the entire process as it relates to the notions of *African* womanhood<sup>20</sup>. Preceding this discussion, a brief overview of the ideologies that undergirded European colonisation and how it eventually shaped the construction of a particular image of *Mosotho* woman is warranted.

#### **2.3.1. The colonial logic and underpinning ideologies**

Colonisation in Africa was undergirded by a complex racist and sexist logic which was also the underpinning logic for the construction of *African* womanhood. I use the work of the Argentinian

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<sup>20</sup> Where I draw on literature from other African countries, I refer to African womanhood, and where I refer to Lesotho specifically, I refer to *Mosotho* womanhood. My use of the two does not suggest homogeneity, instead as mentioned earlier, I take heed to the richness, complexities and diversities embodied by these contexts. Lesotho is a country within the African continent and in spite of unique contextual details, the countries on the continent share similarities in terms of colonisation and its aftermath. This extends to constructions of womanhood that are present in the postcolonial era in the different contexts. They share many aspects in spite of minor differences. These are informed by a myriad of factors including the colonial history as well as the indigenous African value systems which I argued form part of the bedrock of constructions of womanhood on the continent.

feminist philosopher Mariá Lugones, who detailed hierarchical racialised and sexist logic<sup>21</sup> underpinning colonisation. Accordingly, Lugones (2010) suggests that we analyse gender, sexuality and race as intersecting colonial forces that are linked to the construction of the categories, coloniser/colonised, human/not human and man/woman. For instance, Lugones (2010, p. 745) points out that based on this logic, “colonized woman’ [was] an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women” since only human beings were assigned gender identity. Ironically, the European ‘woman’ was not located as complementary in relation to the European ‘man’, defined as the mark of humanity, the subject heading the hierarchy. Instead, the European ‘woman’ was considered as only fit for reproducing “race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man” (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). Accordingly, the juxtaposition of the white coloniser ‘woman’ with the colonised ‘female’ is critical to understanding the constructions of *African* womanhood differently from white European womanhood. I anchor my contention upon the history that I outlined above and colonial history that I discuss below that *African* womanhood, characterised by domestication and subordination, is shaped by this historical background. The colonial logic that I alluded to above is central to the construction of oppositional, hierarchical and racialised views around sexuality and gender. It is this ideology that I consider to be intimately linked to the construction of *African* womanhood, as I illustrate in the following paragraphs.

Noteworthy is the ideology of African sexual deviance, considered to be wild and primitive, thus warranting restraint and ‘civilising’ by the coloniser (Tamale, 2011). Accordingly, since the white European ‘Woman’ was constructed as the epitome of morality<sup>22</sup> in all respects, the African female, in relation to the white European ‘Woman’ was, to borrow the words of Lugones, (2010, p. 743) considered as “promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful”. Significantly, scholars have often linked this demeaning ideology with a long-standing and concerning account about Sarah

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<sup>21</sup> This was informed by the dichotomous hierarchy between human and non-human central to the colonial logic that sustained colonialism and slavery. The distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonised in the service of the European man. The colonised, both male and female, were considered as non-human, animalist and inferior to the ‘human’ coloniser. The constructions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ served as a mark of humanness and thus civilisation. In other words, only the ‘civilised’, ‘human’ coloniser was either man or woman, while the colonised were defined in accordance with their sex as male and female. But according to hierarchical and oppositional gendered logic that differentiates between man and woman, the European man was the superior being over the European woman and the colonised male and female (Lugones, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> The construction of European women’s sexuality as pure in turn reinforced the construction of African woman as promiscuous and thus always available to fulfil the sexual needs of the slave owner and coloniser. In addition, it informed the controlling image of the African rapist (Collins, 2004).

Baartman<sup>23</sup> profiled in *Black Bodies, White Bodies*<sup>24</sup> (Gilman, 1985). Indeed, two decades ago, Zine Magubane (2001, p. 816) acknowledged that “[a]ny scholar wishing to advance an argument on gender and colonialism, gender and science, or gender and race must, it seems” quote Gilman’s work. Derogatorily named, the ‘Hottentot Venus’ exemplifies how Black female bodies were associated with heightened sexuality and sexual deviance. The Hottentot Venus, according to Gilman (1985, p. 221), represented “the essential sexualized female in the perception of the 19th Century. She is perceived as the embodiment of sexuality, disease as well as passion”. This demeaning perspective of the black female body, Gilman links to Sarah Baartman’s exposed buttocks and genitalia, considered as abnormal, hypersexual, pathologic and thus indicative of ‘difference’ from European ‘civility’. In these respects, scholars continue to realise the significance of this historical background as the basis for understanding the construction of racialised and sexualised, as well as the “‘objectification’/‘thingification’” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013a, p. 6) of, the ‘black female body’.

Mothoagae (2016, p. 62) confirms that the view of the black female body as something that “can be violated, exploited, destructed, penetrated, and subjugated to various inhumane conditions” is linked to the historical account of Sarah Baartman. This undoubtedly points to the significance of this history in shaping the derogatory ideologies with which African women’s sexuality is regarded and, linked to this, the notion of *African* womanhood. This was to be regarded as the symbol of *African* women’s sexuality always juxtaposed against white women’s sexual morality and superiority (Tamale, 2011; Tate, 2012). For instance, scholars point out that these stereotypes justified *African* women’s subjection to rape by colonisers and slave masters since they were regarded as typically ‘ever-ready’ for sex (Arnfred, 2004; Collins, 2004; Gordon-Chipembere, 2011; Tamale, 2011). Considering this, I acknowledge this historical account as the basis for the view of African women, their bodies and their sexuality as being repulsive during colonisation. This then justified the repression and extensive regulation of African women under the guise of civilising her.

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Baartman was taken from South Africa to Europe in 1810 and her body and genitalia were placed on public display as a ‘freak of nature’ for the amusement of ‘civilised’ Europeans. In particular her buttocks were considered to be abnormally “excessive” and “seen as displacement for the genitalia” [read uncivilised] and a source of amusement for the onlooking ‘civilised’ European crowd (Arnfred, 2004; Collins, 2004; Gordon-Chipembere, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> The complete title is *Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Women’s sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature*.

In order to better understand the continuities of mission influence on constructions of Basotho womanhood today, it is useful to note the circumstances that enabled the establishment of mission endeavours. In particular, noteworthy is the civilisation project amongst the Basotho that was enforced through various measures. Moreover, the civilisation project was constituted and enforced through the concerted efforts of missionaries, colonial and local patriarchies (Epprecht, 1996) to institute a specific image of a ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* woman. In other words, while I may stress the colonial missionary endeavours amongst Basotho, I do not spare the collusion of pre-existing indigenous patriarchies in this mission which were oppressive to Basotho women in themselves. Therefore, it is in this history that I anchor my argument for the mission colonial construct of a ‘civilised’, respectable, Christian *Mosotho* woman.

### **2.3.2. Constructing the civilised, respectable, Christian *Mosotho* woman**

Central to European colonisation was the mission to ‘civilise’ the ‘primitive’, and this included conversion to Christianity (Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018; Lugones, 2010; Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2019; Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018; Tamale, 2011). Ntombana and Mokotso (2018, p. 10) elaborate that “Christianisation of the indigenous peoples of the South was the main engine which enabled and sustained the colonisation and thus the westernisation efforts perpetrated against the African people by the colonial powers”. The first encounter between Basotho and Christian missionaries was in 1833<sup>25</sup>. The mission endeavours were two pronged: while they sought to Christianise the Basotho, they concomitantly spread European civilisation. This meant that the two were interdependent as many confirmed (Machobane, 2001; Phohlo, 2011; Phoofolo, 2007). The significant impact that this situation had on gender relations as well gender construction - femininity and masculinity - need not be taken for granted.

Against this background, noteworthy is that it laid the foundational religio-cultural context that prevails in Lesotho to date - a point to which I return at the end of this chapter. Moreover, its persistence, in terms of shaping constructions of ideal womanhood in postcolonial Lesotho, cannot be taken lightly. In other words, its deep entrenchment as a destructive transformational force remains palpable particularly in terms of creating the civilised, respectable, Christian *Mosotho*

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<sup>25</sup> The first missionaries to arrive in Basutoland were the Paris Evangelical Mission Society in 1833, followed by the Roman Catholic order in 1862 and finally the Anglicans in 1875. Noteworthy is that the Catholic mission has remained influential and a predominant church since their first encounter with Basotho.

woman. However, for the Christianisation-civilisation mission to succeed, it meant denigration and destruction of Sesotho cultural and social practices deemed heathen and contradictory to Christian ways.

Before detailing the mission colonial endeavours to civilise the Basotho and subsequently construct a civilised Christian ideal woman, a brief overview of some of the institutions central to Sesotho cultures which were transformed through this process is warranted. The changes carried out in these institutions bore great significance for indigenous constructions of identity as I illustrate in this section. Sesotho marriage and initiation schools (*lebollo*<sup>26</sup>) were amongst the first institutions to be targeted for “a radical change of Basotho society” (Phoofolo, 2007, p. 6) to ensure the sustained institution of European and Christian lifestyles. Amongst Basotho, the significance of marriage is premised upon the transfer of a woman’s fecundity to her marital family. Moreover, the Sesotho marriage – which is potentially polygamous – is underpinned by and legitimised through the exchange of bride price (*bohali*<sup>27</sup>) – in the form of cattle – between the families.

The centrality of the marriage institution in this respect is reflected though the establishment of alternative marriages<sup>28</sup>, for instance, levirate- (*ho kenela*), sororate- (*seantlo*) were instituted in cases where the primary marriage failed to fulfil its goal – perpetuation of patrilineage (*leloko*) (Maqutu, 1992; Letuka et al. 1998. Phoofolo, 2007). As the owners and controllers of *bohali* cattle, the elder patriarchs decided when, with whom and how the marriage would take place. This reflects the power of elder Basotho patriarchs as the beneficiaries and gatekeepers in this entire Sesotho marriage process. Moreover, it also reflects their persistent and unyielding patriarchal control over

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<sup>26</sup> *Lebollo* refers to traditional initiation school. It is worth noting that while initiation schools are meant for the young adults to ensure moral transition into adulthood, they were also a means through which boys and girls gained rights, opportunities, responsibilities and positions (statuses) in the families and communities (Matobo, Makatsa, & Obioha, 2009, p. 105). Accordingly, this process has three phases: separation, transformation and re-assimilation. Therefore, successful completion of the process meant one had transformed and thus was capable of contributing positively to community life. While it prepared Basotho girls [and boys] who had come of age for marriage, seemingly it held deeper meaning and was purposed to institute a particular type of womanhood characterised by several aspects in adulthood rather than merely wifehood.

<sup>27</sup> *Bohali* is loosely translated as bride wealth in English. Traditionally, *bohali* is said to have been more protective than oppressive to Basotho women as the mission propaganda would have us believe (Maqutu, 1992). For example, through *bohali*, a wife was protected from the shame of having engaged in extramarital affairs and subsequent illegitimate children born out of these relationships. According to Sesotho, there is no ‘illegitimate’ child, for a married woman’s children belong to the marital family regardless of who fathered them. *Bohali* also prescribed that a husband consults with his wife before undertaking any decisions over the agricultural, livestock and homestead resources. Thus, the indigenous marriage system governed by the *bohali* afforded Basotho women some level of power in contradistinction to the western marriage institution that was instituted by the missionaries.

<sup>28</sup> Sorrogate marriage (*seantlo*) was performed to substitute a deceased wife who died without children. The replacement would be the sister to the deceased wife to bear children for her sister’s husband. Likewise, levirate marriage (*kenela*) a deceased husband would be replaced by his brother in order to father children with the widow.

Basotho women as well as their fecundity. Nonetheless, *bohali* not only legitimises the offspring from the marriage and affirms their patrilineage, but ascertains that Basotho women's independence was to some extent encouraged and supportable (Epprecht, 1996; Phoofolo, 2007). For instance, the *Mosotho* husband was obliged to allocate fields and other productive resources to the wife, over which she had authority. Thus, in bid to civilise the Basotho, the Sesotho marriage system was denigrated and missionaries made attempts to replace it with a European-style nuclear family undergirded by "hetero-patriarchy" and "hetero-paternalism" (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 14). This meant that Christian converted Basotho women were forced to forego the benefits and relative autonomies enjoyed by Basotho women under the indigenous marriage system.

Notably, while indigenous and western patriarchies colluded on many aspects that sought to uphold patriarchal power over Basotho women, the prohibition of *bohali* became a source of tension within this patriarchal force. As the beneficiaries of Sesotho marriage, the elder Basotho patriarchs resisted the banning of *bohali*, polygamy and arranged marriages<sup>29</sup> (Maqutu, 1992; Phoofolo, 2007). Many of these Basotho patriarchs expressed distaste for the idealised, Christian, 'civilised' family arrangement that was characterised by an authoritative husband exercising 'natural' authority over his dependent, subordinate wife and children (McClintock, 1995; Patil, 2013). While Basotho men would retain their headship roles, within this 'new' arrangement – that was spearheaded by missionary and colonial officials – they would, however, be forced to relinquish their control over Basotho women. Nonetheless, linked to this was an ideal Christian womanhood that was suited for this new family type, which was the cornerstone of the civilisation project.

Essentially, because the missionaries posited European culture to be substantially superior to 'native' Sesotho ways of life, any culture (specifically that related to sexuality) was regarded as

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<sup>29</sup> Polygamy, and alternative marriages are no longer commonly practiced amongst the Basotho. With the ensuing mission colonial transformations, converted Basotho who married under customary law were required to register their marriages under Roman Dutch system. Under the Christian precinct of serial monogamy, those married in polygamous marriages were forced to divorce their husbands or wives. Thus, as opposed to changing the position of Basotho women, the Roman Dutch law like customary law simply retained Basotho women's control under an authoritative patriarchal head. While arranged marriages were common practice amongst the Basotho, these had to be pinned on parental consent. However, abduction marriages (*chobeliso*) although are commonly practiced in some rural parts of Lesotho, have always been illegal. Consent by parents and the marrying parties (nowadays) is mandatory in any marriage arrangement. *Chobelo* (elopement) is also common amongst dating couples, it is a means to force parental consent and hasten *bohali* negotiations. *Bohali* remains a critical part of Sesotho and church marriages inspite of mission attempts to ban it (Maqutu, 1992; Phoofolo, 2007).

“repugnant to European concepts of morality” (Schmidt, 1992, p. 623) and was thus denigrated. For example, initiation school (*lebollo*) is rite of passage that marks a Mosotho girl’s [and boy’s] transition from childhood to adulthood. During this process, within separate spaces, they are taught about various aspects including customs and traditions, morality, cultural norms, values and beliefs. In addition, sexual education was also considered to be the cornerstone of being initiated into adulthood (Seroto, 2011). The denigration of this institution led to the establishment of a ‘civilised’ Christian education system (Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018; Ross, 2017) that had a different agenda. While *lebollo* instituted an independent, resilient, sexual type of femininity. The latter enforced an image embodying a “bourgeois, Victorian sexual ethic” (Epprecht, 1996, p. 195) towards which the converted *Mosotho* girl-child was made to strive in preparation for ‘civilised’ chaste Christian womanhood. Notably, when juxtaposed against the unconverted *Mosotho* girl this ‘newly’ transformed image confirms my contentions (and those of others) concerning the notion of *Mosotho* womanhood being a colonial-mission construct.

Notably, even as young converts, the sexuality of young girls remained suspect and thus necessitated stringent control to ensure chastity. Bastian (2000, p. 150) adds that “checking girls’ perilous sexuality and policing their improperly bounded bodies” was necessitated by the institution of a chaste, respectable-type Christian womanhood. Therefore, while the mission agenda was geared towards the creation of a specific chaste ‘modern’-type womanhood, it was not as liberative, after all, as many had professed (Machobane, 2001; Ntimo-Makara, 1990). Instead, while some attested to the benefits of mission centres as sites of refuge for African girls against forced marriages and the control of African patrikin elders (Batisai, 2013; Kanago, 2005; Tamale, 2011), it did not, however, free young girls from surveillance and control generally. In other words, becoming a “Christian girl” meant anything but liberation; instead girls’ mobility was curtailed in the name of ascertaining ‘purity’. Bastian (2000) confirms that in isolated girls’ institutions that enforced a ‘particular’ chaste Christian feminine ideal, girls were confined under close and constant supervision by missionaries. Subsequently, they were moved directly to marital households, to assume the respectable wifeness-motherhood role under the authority of the unquestioned Christian husband household-head.

Notably, education was a vehicle through which the missionaries could achieve their endeavours for Christianising and ‘civilising’ the Basotho, parallel to which was the creation of the civilised



Christian woman. Ntombana and Mokotso (2018) attest to the strategy enforced through mission schooling that while missionaries were not interested in educating the Basotho for their betterment per se, they instead used education as a recruitment strategy. Conversion would not have been possible without teaching the native to read, write and interpret the bible. Therefore, while education was considered a necessity for this purpose, it also sought to teach the native how to live a new Christian lifestyle aligned with western values. For example, a teachers' training college, *Sekolo sa Thabeng*, was established in 1868 for Basotho boys and only later, in 1871, the Morija Girls' school that focused on training Basotho girls on 'domesticity' was established (Epprecht, 1996; Ntimo-Makara, 1985). Notably, the entire educational system was entrenched within western Christian values, which, in order to pass as civilised, progressive and superior, Basotho had to endorse and embody.

The mission of domesticity enforced through mission schools, amongst other aspects, foregrounded monogamous Christian marriage as representative of a "real" Christian lifestyle. Bastian (2000), writing on the Igbo of Nigeria, confirms that this educational trajectory was enforced in preparation for up-and-coming husbands to assume priesthood; and thus, spread the gospel amongst heathen communities. Mean-whilest young girls were expected to embody European informed 'girlhood' as a precursor for their roles as wives and helpmates to Christian husbands. Moreover, as the soon-to-be "good Christian wives and mothers," these convert girls were trained on a domestic regime modelled on Europe culture. This entailed "sanitation, [and] the proper care of a 'modern' household" (Bastian, 2000 p. 151), thus spelling out the stringency of personal hygiene and cleanliness as prescripts of 'civility' that undergird 'respectable' Christian womanhood. Therefore, this gendered Christian educational trajectory which young African girls were put under served to inscribe - as deeply as possible - the ideal chaste, respectable, familial domestic-type womanhood.

Indeed, to be considered as 'civilised', 'respectable' and 'human' and thus, qualifying as 'Woman', adult African women were forced to convert to Christianity; to internalise and affirm these Christian 'civilisation' arrangements with all their related prescriptions. Noteworthy is that although in contemporary societies Christianity is not overtly tied to class status, at the time, mission conversion and institution of specific Christian-type respectable womanhood led to the creation of an African 'elite' (Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Epprecht, (2001)

argues that the ‘civilised ones’ – *batsoelopele* – were considered to be heading towards salvation promised by the Christian way of life, in contrast to the heathen. The ‘progressive’ were constituted by the educated, those who detached from cultural and traditional-kinship-based structures and those who endorsed - in totality - Christianity and all its demands.

Ntombana and Mokotso (2018, p. 2) corroborate this by pointing out that essentially, “[t]he western lifestyle was defined as enlightened or ‘better life’, which implied that the un-educated were living in darkness or were backward.” In other words, the ‘progressive’ not only endorsed western knowledges, values, practices and belief systems, but they also socialised their girl-children to embody these prescriptions. In so doing, the converted ‘elite’ girl-child was deemed civilised and progressive while the non-converted were considered as backward, repugnant and inferior. Incidentally, while the Basotho were divided into civilised and uncivilised, ironically, the ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* woman did not in any way match up to the same status as the European woman. In other words, in spite of endorsing European ways of being woman, in juxtaposition with the non-converted *Mosotho* woman they were superior yet remained inferior to the white European woman. Thus, embodying ‘civility’ did not necessarily elevate the *Mosotho* to a level of human in the same way as the European.

Interestingly, Bosko (1983) points out that African women and the ideation around respectable womanhood were the key drivers for mission infiltration into Basotho communities and families. Therefore, while missionaries did not use force *per se*, certain strategies to ensure conformity to their prescriptions were instituted. For example, nucleating Basotho families was one such strategy. According to Bosko (1983, p. 116), “the fewer the groups exercising control over an individual [*Mosotho* woman], the more vulnerable [she] is to the demands made on [her] by the church/God”. This implies that the institution of nuclear family type values was a mechanism with which the missionaries could gain control over Basotho women. For, without the extended kin support structure tied to the indigenous Basotho family systems, Basotho women would be forced to seek respite from mission councils instituted within Basotho villages for their domestic disputes. These mission councils were essentially a means for the church to be in proximity, and thus gain easy access, to Basotho women and their families (Bosko, 1983). Moreover, this mission support structure became a much-required recruitment strategy particularly for Basotho women needing salvation.

Therefore, as a site that served the interests of Basotho women more than it did men (predominantly migrant recruits), mission churches were regarded as ‘women’s church’ (Bosko, 1983). Likewise, missionary schools enrolled and supported more girl-children than they did boy-children (mostly focused on herding) (Epprecht, 1996) - all of which worked in the favour of mission goals of creating a ‘civilised’ respectable Christian woman. In exchange for this ‘support’, Basotho women were compelled to conform to mission demands, and failure attracted sanctions. For instance, sanctions were imposed against Basotho women whose children had attended *lebollo* or whose husbands had refused to ‘Christianise’ their traditional marriage (Epprecht, 1996, 2001). Therefore, through the converted Christian *Mosotho* woman, missionaries could extend their prescriptions to those who were sceptical about Christianity like Basotho men (Bosko, 1983) and the unconverted *Mosotho* woman. Therefore, it cannot be doubted given this historical trajectory that Christian missionaries, with the support of colonial authorities and indigenous patriarchs, created and instituted a specific type, ‘Christian womanhood’, that was in stark contrast to the ‘unconverted’ *Mosotho* woman as well as the image of M’anthatisi (and others).

Aligned with this Christian ‘civilisation’ mission were colonial structures that sought to reinforce the construction of a ‘civilised’ dependent *Mosotho* woman. Bosko states that: “women’s lot, not an easy one, is made harder by their dependence on men” (1983, p. 127). Indeed, over and above the patriarchal principles enforced by indigenous patriarchs, the colonial state codified laws that reinforced the subordination of Basotho women. In so doing, this reinforced the mission endeavours of enforcing a specific dependent/subordinate-type notion of womanhood. For instance, in Lesotho (as in many other colonised contexts), according to both indigenous and colonial laws, Basotho women were defined as perpetual minors who were under the constant guardianship of male kin: fathers, brothers, husbands without whom they could not make personal decisions (Kimane, 1985; Kimane & Ntimo-Makara, 1998; Mako, 1997; Matlosa, 2008; Mosito, 1997). Moreover, as minors, Basotho women could not migrate, access resources or enter into contracts without the permission of male kin. In other words, the institution of restrictions over women’s mobility and their prohibition from accessing resources, for instance, meant that they were forced to remain within the domestic hearth. This mirror image of western culture, reinforced Basotho women’s perpetual dependence upon Basotho men for sustenance (Eldredge, 1991; Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980). In retrospect, this reinforced the notion of a ‘civilised’ woman – ‘queen of the home’.

Basotho women's dependency upon men was buttressed through stringent and gender discriminatory inheritance laws that prohibited Basotho women from owning property (Molapo, 2005; Mosito, 1997). These were constructed under customary laws and codified by colonial laws to ensure male supremacy by legitimating inheritance only for sons, but not daughters or wives (Kalabamu, 2006; Molapo, 2005; Selebalo, 2001). Moreover, daughters are expected to marry and establish roles within their marital families, yet as wives, customary law does not permit them to inherit resources in their own right. Instead, customarily, the first-born son was and continues to be regarded as the legal heir of the estate including land (Kalabamu, 2006; Maqutu, 1992; Molapo, 2005; Selebalo, 2001). This meant that the only way for a *Mosotho* woman to get access to land was through a man and marriage. Having given birth to a male child was surety that *he* could inherit through the patrilineage system. This indigenous-colonial restriction ultimately reinforced the creation of a 'civilised' woman; a subordinate and dependent wife under the 'natural' authority of a household-head provider husband.

In addition, the restrictive labour migrancy system sought to reinforce the minority status of Basotho women, and thus, their dependency upon Basotho men. From the 1870s, the labour migrancy system in neighbouring South Africa only recruited Basotho males as migrant labourers (Epprecht, 1996; Gay, 1980). In other words, over and above their perpetual minority status that prevented their freedom of movement, the inherently racialised and gendered controls of the labour system, reinforced the repression of Basotho women. This was achieved through a concerted effort to curtail the mobility of Basotho women, whereby indigenous chiefs and elder patriarchs colluded with colonial officials to restrict the outmigration of Basotho women (Gay, 1980; Epprecht, 1996; Phoofolo, 2007). This racialised, capitalist patriarchal system created Basotho women's greater economic dependency on Basotho men. Subsequently, it reinforced the patriarchal institution of a dependent and subordinate form of womanhood. Essentially this also meant that heterosexual marriage was institutionalised as the only available option for Basotho women's survival. By restricting the mobility of Basotho women, who within this colonial system embodied minority status and thus required constant male guardianship, Basotho women were debarred from access to resources. Therefore, the only means of survival for a *Mosotho* woman was limited to heterosexual marriage to a migrant worker. In this regard, I share Gay's (1980) and Kendall's (1998) sentiments that the 'loyal wife' to migrant husband was the most effective survival strategy for Basotho women since it was, at the time, the only viable means for economic and social security

(Epprecht, 1996). Nevertheless, the institution of ‘civilised’ womanhood was not without conflicts, contradictions and negotiations.

### **2.3.3. Conflicts, contradictions and negotiations around ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* womanhood**

Scholars engaging with the experiences of women during colonisation have often located the conflicts, contradictions and negotiations exhibited by *African* women as they navigated the restrictive religio-socio and political colonial landscape. Indeed, this epoch was characterised by paradoxes that I consider worth mentioning, not only to reveal the ‘silenced’ agencies of Basotho women, but also the hidden ‘truths’ about *Mosotho* womanhood. I also read these contradictions as revelation of the contestability of the notion of ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* womanhood. Accordingly, Epprecht (1996, p. 190) points out that:

Basotho women did not, however, passively accept the “triple squeeze” upon them by colonial rule, Basotho patriarchs, and new commodity relations. On the contrary, Basotho women struggled to take advantage of opportunities created by colonialism and emerging capitalist relations of production, notably by ‘running away’.

For example, as mentioned, mission education was an ‘escape’ mechanism for Basotho women and girls from patriarchal control within their indigenous communities. Moreover, although prescriptive and restrictive in the name of morality and purity, mission education became a means through which Basotho girls escaped forced marriages that were prevalent in their communities (Gay, 1980; Phoofolo, 2007). This exposes the “conflicts, contradictions and negotiations...” (Kanago, 2005, p. 3) that characterised ‘womanhood’ at the time. Moreover, it reveals that the colonial-mission institution of a ‘particular’ notion of ‘civilised’ *Mosotho* woman, as opposed to being considered as linear, seems was rather convoluted. This implies that, as Basotho women navigated this landscape, the notion of womanhood became a contested space which exemplified resistances and transgressions against missional-colonially constructed notions of ‘civilised’ Christian woman. Considering the ‘herstories’ detailed in the beginning of this chapter, I read these dynamics as somehow interlinked; and thus, revealing of a predominantly ‘hidden’ understanding of constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood.

For instance, the mine migrancy system from which Basotho women were excluded not only revealed unanticipated contradictions inherent to the colonial system, but it also pointed to unique

characteristics related to notions of womanhood, Basotho women's agency. As such, South African political icon Ellen Kuzwayo's observation in *Call Me Woman* illustrated how the lived realities of African women, instead, contradicted racist derogatory constructions of *African* womanhood. For instance, Kuzwayo acknowledged that:

the [Black] woman who much against her will had resigned herself to being labelled a 'minor' by the state – was suddenly plunged into a situation of accepting numerous roles of responsibility. Without warning, training or any sort of preparation, she became overnight mother, father, family administrator... overall overseer of both family and neighbourhood affairs in a community which had been totally deprived of its active male populations (2004, p. 14).

Kuzwayo expresses the realities of African women's performance of those roles that are defined as 'masculine' according to western culture, as a result of the long absence of men from their homes during mine migrancy in South Africa. This is reflective of resilience and multitasking that informs constructions of womanhood embodied by African women. Likewise, in spite of their patriarchally and racially-imposed minority status, in view of Basotho women, Epprecht confirms that: "Basotho women by necessity have assumed *de facto* responsibility for many customarily masculine tasks" (1996, p. 184) in which they made decisions on family matters (Matsie, 2009; Naidoo, Matsie, & Ochse, 2011).

Gay (1980, p. 307) corroborates the autonomy enjoyed by Basotho women in the absence of men during this epoch. She further attests that "matrifocal patterns are encouraged by the economic needs of rural women" in the absence of husbands. In due course, these types of households were soon to be the order of the day whereby separated, widowed, unmarried women fulfilled their desire to "bear, rear, support and educate children" (Gay, 1980, p. 307) with the vision of being cared for in old age. Cock (1980) further confirms the centrality of education in Black South African domestic workers' aspirations for their children during apartheid. The author reports that for these women education for their children was considered to be a vehicle for a 'better life'. Undoubtedly, this growing independence of women as well as their aspirations for self-sufficiency contradicted the male headed patrilineal family structure purported to be the mission colonial ideal. Therefore, reflecting the contradictions of a tightly woven system that was, amongst other things,

purposed for institutionalising a respectable, civilised type of womanhood, these dynamics in turn reveal the contestability of the construct ‘respectable, civilised *Mosotho* woman’. This was complicated by Basotho girls and women transcending boundaries to access employment opportunities from which they had been barred in the first place.

In spite of prescriptive and restrictive colonial mission systems, Basotho women’s tread into prohibited spaces, in turn, undermined notions of respectable, civilised *Mosotho* womanhood. For example, some Basotho women migrated to neighbouring South Africa to work within the informal sector as domestic workers, sex workers and traders (Epprecht, 2001; Ulicki & Crush, 2000). Nonetheless, this ‘free movement’ was short-lived following the introduction of the *Aliens Central Act of 1963*<sup>30</sup> that was reinforced through the *Black Laws Amendment Act of 1963*, which prohibited foreigners from entering South Africa unless they were recruited as migrant workers (Modo, 2001). However, apart from the informal sector, it is worth mentioning that female migrants also sought seasonal employment in the neighbouring farms in the Free State province of South Africa (Modo, 2001; Ulicki & Crush, 2000). This sector presented interesting dynamics. Farm work was defined as ‘women’s work’ and therefore, ‘maleness’ reduced men’s chances of employment in this sector even following mine retrenchment. In other words, the preference for women meant that they had an ‘upper hand’ in this regard despite their subjection to double discrimination - race and gender.

Ulicki and Crush highlighted that this new ‘formalised’ movement of Basotho women as migrants to South African farms was an important restructuring of “patterns and processes of migration in Southern African” which in turn challenged the notion of a “dependent stay-at-home wife” (2000, p.77). Essentially, this reveals contradictions around the notion of ‘civilised’ respectable *Mosotho* woman, whose ‘ideal’ location is the domestic hearth rather than the image of an independent provider suggested here. These dynamics raise critical questions around constructions of womanhood central to this thesis. Batisai (2013) looks to “colonial urbanisation” and ensuing socio-cultural shifts for transforming traditional gender and sexuality discourses. By contrast, in this thesis, I read deeper questions into the notions of *Mosotho* womanhood and the unique

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<sup>30</sup> These laws were enforced by the South African apartheid system that sought to regulate the presence of Blacks, foreigners and locals in urban areas.

dynamics which, I argue, undermine normative constructions of ‘respectable’ civilised womanhood.

Considering these dynamics, *African* womanhood and what it entails remains a contested matter through women’s own enactment of ‘contradictory’ roles as well as systemic contradictions that allowed latitude to those they were meant to suppress. Therefore, Kanago asserts that during this era “‘Womanhood’ thus became a battleground where issues of modernisation, tradition, change and personal identity were fought” (2005, p. 2). Resonating with Batisai’s assertion that I alluded to earlier, Kanago (2005) reads mobility, and thus modernity, as the key causes of disruption to women’s ‘traditional’ roles and obligations. Accordingly, these resulted in redefined ‘traditional’ ideologies around the meanings of womanhood. Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018), however, caution us about the need to remain aware of reinforcing the binaries colonial/traditional and new-modern/outdated. Thus, I read ‘traditional’ as questionable because as we have already established, ‘traditional’ womanhood in this sense resonates with ‘colonial’ and was imposed on *African* women in the first place. In other words, the history mapped out in this chapter provides a snapshot of the colonial landscape and thus allows deduction that *African* womanhood – as a particularistic construct – is tied to this context. It therefore, raises caution for the meanings of ‘traditional’ in these respects. Nonetheless, my reading of these dynamics reveals ‘long-concealed’ complexities and uniqueness, including ‘agency’ as central to constructions of womanhood.

I read these unique dynamics as illustrative that “African identity [*African* womanhood] and subjectivity is fluid, eclectic and *agentic*” (Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018, p. 2 emphasis added), in contrast to how it is portrayed and represented in western feminist discourses. In other words, we are prompted to re-view *African* womanhood not as fixed to specific attributes, but instead, as dynamic and responsive to the context in which it is enacted. This brings into disrepute assumptions of ‘normativity’ inherent to the western feminist concept of Woman and as a patriarchal prescriptive structure aimed at controlling women’s bodies and their sexuality. Therefore, locating *African* woman within the historical context of colonisation not only reveals the concept, *African* woman as characterised by multifariousness and complexity, but also brings to the fore how ‘other’ differently located women articulate, contest and redefine dominant notions of womanhood. Therefore, returning to the key concerns of this thesis, I fully concur with the



African feminist assertion that what we know of and what is regarded as ‘normative’ *African* womanhood today is, to a large extent, a colonial mission construct.

#### **2.3.4. The politics of ‘respectability’, sexuality and womanhood**

Respectability, sexuality and womanhood constituted a complex and entangled discourse that characterised the colonial mission epoch in many African contexts. Van der Westhuizen reminds us that “[r]espectability is a nineteenth century bourgeois European invention,” typically articulated as a “sexual ideology... with an emphasis on sexual control, restraint and prohibition” (2017, p. 33). Moreover, of considerable significance is that ‘respectability’ be understood as a gendered and racialised canon purposed to “set apart, to differentiate” between the ‘ideal’ and its non-conforming others (Van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 33). Thus, the notion of ‘respectability’ bears considerable significance for understanding womanhood and sexuality as African women negotiated ‘space’ and ‘survival’ during and beyond the colonial epoch.

Scholars from across Africa investigated African women’s navigation within prohibited ‘urban’ terrains (Barnes, 1995; Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980; Hungwe, 2006). Within these prohibited spaces, the existence of transactional sexual relations considered to be ‘unrespectable’ were ‘the order of the day’. For example, Hungwe (2006) detailed the dynamics that played out in the Zimbabwean context where - to borrow from Batisai (2013, p. 34), the “emerge[nce of] new politics of gender and sexuality” created oppositional binaries of ‘respectable/unrespectable’ womanhood. ‘Respectable’ was denoted by married women residing with their migrant husbands, and otherwise expected to remain behind in the rural homestead. Contrastingly, any other arrangement, ‘unattached’ and ‘un-surveilled’ women were considered as ‘unrespectable’. In reference to the latter, Hungwe mentioned *mapoto* women in Zimbabwe – as those that established live-in relations with men and performed all wifely roles without being customarily married. I read Hungwe’s reference to *mapoto* women as the equivalence of *bonyatsi* and *botekatse* amongst Basotho, although the details may differ.

Married and unmarried women engaged in *bonyatsi*<sup>31</sup> and beer-brewing as means of survival in the absence of men (Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980; Maloka, 1997). These concubine extra-marital

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<sup>31</sup> *Bonyatsi* relations may be long term and involve the transactional exchange of gifts - money, food and clothing (see Maloka 1997). Scholars assert that while marital infidelity was common to Basotho, the advent of migrancy fuelled adultery such that it was ‘normalised’ (see Gay, 1980)

sexual relations, also known as *setsoalle* (special friendship), were common among Basotho men and women wherein one or both may be married. For Basotho women, who were debarred from formal employment, these relations were critical means of survival. Likewise, *matekatse*<sup>32</sup> (implying loose women) also engaged in transactional relations with migrant Basotho men within and around the mine residences in the name of survival (Epprecht, 2001). Notably, *matekatse* within these frequent short-term relations exhibited sexual freedom, bargaining power and independence. Therefore, like *linyatsi*, they embodied a contradictory moral code that undermined the ideal of a civilised and chaste *Mosotho* woman. Moreover, juxtaposed against the Christian respectable ideal, *matekatse* and *linyatsi* like the *mapoto* embodied ‘unrespectable’ womanhood. Of interest is how in the name of survival, African women sought creative ‘options’ that in turn exemplify resistance mechanisms against normative constructions of ‘respectable’ civilised womanhood.

By embodying contradictory ‘sexual mores’ in the name of surviving dire economic constraints during this time, Basotho women further exposed the contestability of the Christian mission ideal of womanhood. Thus, my interpretation of Batisai’s assertion, “emerge[nce of] new politics of gender and sexuality”, alluded to above, in relation to these dynamics is tied to how African women undermined notions of ‘respectable’ sexuality and by extension ‘respectable’ womanhood. As women negotiated racialised and patriarchal boundaries, they in turn complicated the discourses around sexuality and womanhood in colonial mission spaces. According to the racist colonial logic alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, African women were considered to inherently embody abhorrent sexuality and European women were the epitome of sexual morality. While this remained unchanged, as mentioned earlier, mission-colonial activities imposed salient hierarchical and oppositional distinctions amongst the colonised. Conformity to the colonial-mission Christian ideal marked the colonised women as ‘respectable’ in contrast to the ‘unrespectable’ non-conformer. Notably, this complex and entangled discourse has persisted beyond the colonial epoch in many African contexts.

The persistence of these hierarchised and oppositional constructions of ‘respectability’ juxtaposed against ‘unrespectability’ were alluded to by Van der Westhuizen (2017). In a recent manuscript,

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<sup>32</sup> *Matekatse* (singular *letekatse*) is a derogatory label for a person with loose morals - with connotations of prostitute or slut. However, as a gendered construct, it is often used to refer to women perceived to exhibit loose sexual conduct. *Matekatse* operated in and around the migrant residences to provide sexual services to mine workers as a means of survival.

*Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in postapartheid South Africa*, the author referred to *ordentlikheid* – a derivative of the Victorian notion of respectability exclusive to white, Afrikaner, middle-class gendered identity. This is described as an embodied, racialised, gendered, classed, sexualised and ethnicised code denoting “respectability, presentability and good manners to politeness...” (Van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 8) which was particularised to Afrikaner womanhood both during and after apartheid. Bearing the traits of colonial polarities, the particularism embodied by *ordentlikheid* meant that Black, working class, lesbian including ‘unmarried’ women – to name a few – were its abject ‘others’. Thus, pitted against *ordentlik* Afrikaner womanhood characterised by heterosexuality, wifehood, motherhood, and sexual innocence, the Black women were located on the margins of ‘respectable’ womanhood according to the colonial binarized logic. The implications born from the oppositional hierarchical binaries for *Methopa* are that their ‘unmarried’ status, according to Hungwe’s analysis, earned them “a prostitute tag” (Batisai, 2013, p. 35). This meant they were deemed ‘unrespectable’ in relation to the married ‘respectable’ ideal confined to the marital home. Likewise, in Van der Westhuizen’s analysis, being racially, culturally classed non-conforming ‘other’, the *Mothopa* is deemed the ‘abject’ unrespectable ‘other’. However, by contrast some African scholars have produced works that disrupt these binarized categories according to which ‘respectable’ womanhood is fixed to heterosexual marriage.

The ‘African household’ with its unique dynamics complicates binarized and hierarchised conceptions of ‘respectable’ womanhood essentialised to the marital norm. African feminists such as Naira Sudarkasa (1986) have written extensively on the multiple identities embodied by African women – as daughters, mothers, aunts – wherein each identity affords her varying levels of power within various spaces. A case in point is the *rakhali* (paternal aunt in Sesotho) who plays significant leadership roles as the custodian of tradition and culture within and outside the family (Matshidze & Nmutandani, 2016; Tamale, 2005). In addition, this position of power also allows her – regardless of her marital status – to participate in the negotiation of *bohali*. This is a space that is predominantly dominated by men yet *rakhali* is entitled to take part because of the power that is bestowed unto this position in African families. It then goes without saying that *rakhali* – regardless of her marital status – embodies ‘respectable’ womanhood in this context. These dynamics reveal the limitations of racialised binarized conceptions of ‘respectable’ womanhood according to which ‘unmarried-ness’ is associated with negativity within hetero-patriarchal

contexts. Yet these unique intricacies also illuminate turbulences around notions of ‘respectable’ womanhood in spite of deeply rooted hetero-patriarchal social norms in postcolonial contexts. Therefore, they prompt further exploration of the meanings of ‘respectable’ womanhood in various contexts and foster an appreciation of how inclusive languages of ‘respectable womanhood’ can be established in these various contexts.

Nonetheless, in spite of these unique dynamics, contemporary ideas of what a ‘*Mosotho woman*’ entails still mirror dominant ideologies shaped by the historical background of mission and colonial invasion in Lesotho. The definitions of ‘respectable woman’ distinguishable from the ‘unrespectable’ ‘other’ remain palpable in modern day Lesotho and continue to shape religious, societal and cultural notions of *Mosotho* womanhood. Moreover, this deep-seated ideology continues to govern perceptions around women’s sexuality by defining sexual respectability as a key aspect of *Mosotho* woman over and above wifehood and motherhood. In that respect, Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2008, p. 75) emphasises that “‘*Mosotho woman*’ [is] mother, Christian, wife and many others.” Moreover:

Being a *Mosotho* woman is a very loaded status, and her sexuality is constructed as one full of passivity and innocence (or, ignorance). Statements such as “*Mosali oa Mosotho ha a itsoare joalo, ha a robalake hohle*” (a *Mosotho* woman does not behave like that, she does not sleep around) are rife, and locate her as the epitome of sexual respectability (2008, p.75).

The configuration of *Mosotho* woman recited by Mokobocho-Mohlakoana reflects the gendered endeavours of intersecting powers; colonial, mission and indigenous patriarchal prescriptions of ideal womanhood shaped and reshaped through the historical events discussed in preceding sections. This implies that when pitted against this chaste, respectable ideal, the ‘unmarried’ *Mothepe* is considered to be the abject unrespectable ‘Other’. It is this problematic ‘situation’ that this thesis seeks to interrogate in this postcolonial epoch. In particular, it seeks to explore how the *Mothepe* negotiate meaning for their identities in this context and how they use agency in this process. This image is also well suited for the contemporary social-religio-cultural context of Lesotho, whose gendered disparities continue to impact on the lived realities of the *Mothepe* in the 21st century.

## 2.4. *Mosotho* woman in 21st century Lesotho

In closing, I reflect on the implications of the foregoing historical trajectory of Lesotho on how we articulate the notion of *Mosotho* woman in postcolonial Lesotho. This is fundamental for a thesis that seeks to interrogate contemporary constructions of womanhood in Lesotho and subsequently explore how these definitions are reconstructed by the *Methepa*. This postcolonial climate is shaped by intersecting religious, political, legal, socio-economic and cultural factors that bear implications for Basotho women. In this, I also reflect upon the complications of power, gender, class status and socio-economic benefits/costs of being (un)married in postcolonial Lesotho.

Given the foregoing historical reflections, the persistence of heavy Christian influence in postcolonial Lesotho, is not surprising. In a country where Christianity accounts for an “overwhelming 80% of Basotho people” (Chingono, 2016, p. 55), most of whom are Basotho women, the *Mosotho* woman described by Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2008) is a reality in this hetero-patriarchal postcolonial kingdom. By the same token, the resultant cultural conservatism borne out of high Christian influence in the country also meant that same-sex sexual relationships are highly stigmatised and are a major cause of anxiety amongst Basotho (Hartline, 2013; Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2019). Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2019) referred to the persistent denialism around same-sex relationships amongst Basotho (as in many other African societies) – thus lesbianism, typically labelled as ‘unAfrican’ – is still considered not an option for Basotho women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Poteat et al. (2014) confirm that women who identify as lesbian face social prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, with limited choices as a hidden group of women, they grapple with numerous social pressures amidst which marriage to a man and childbearing are part. In other words, lesbian women – a marginalised group amongst the marginalised *Methepa* – are invisibilised for debasing the hetero-patriarchal climate that necessitates heterosexual marriage as the underpin of ideal Christian *Mosotho* womanhood. This is reflected in the paucity of scholarly works on ‘unmarried’ women in general and lesbian women in particular in Lesotho. Apart from the few commonly cited texts written by anthropologists, Judith Gay (1986) and Limakatso Kendall (1998) that purported to ‘discover’ what they considered to be “lesbian-like<sup>33</sup>” (Epprecht,

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<sup>33</sup> This is debatable because although the women did not label these *setsoalle* (special friendships) as sexual in nature, anthropologists, Gay (1986) and Kendall (1998) perceived them through a western frame and labelled them as ‘lesbian-like’. Notable is that these co-existed with heterosexual marital relations and because there was no *koa*e (penis) – denoting ‘real’ penetrative sex – they could not have been sexual according to Basotho women. For this reason, Epprecht (2008) cautions against imposition of western-centric frameworks and concepts lest we mis-label and misinterpret African realities. This resonates with

2008, p. 15) relations amongst Basotho women – the silence around lesbianism is deafening in 21<sup>st</sup> century Lesotho.

As a matter of fact, the educational sector in modern-day Lesotho continues to be highly Christianised in that, although the public schools<sup>34</sup> are co-administered by the government of Lesotho and the mainstream church denominations (Catholic, Anglican and Evangelical churches), the majority are allocated to the latter (Chingono, 2016; Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018). This implies that the mission Christian doctrine remains live in Lesotho schools, centuries after the end of formal colonisation. In other words, the majority of young Basotho children from a tender age, continue to be encultured according to the Christianised chaste girlhood script in preparation for the ideal alluded to by Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2008). Notwithstanding, this historical trajectory has also afforded Lesotho a significantly higher female literacy compared to its surrounding African counterparts (Morojele, 2011b). For example, in 2015, amongst the young people aged 15 to 24, the literacy rate for girls was 93.4 per cent compared to 76.9 per cent for boys (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2018). However, given the multiple intersecting factors; cultural, social, legal, and political, the situation of Basotho women contrasts this unique development.

In accord, Attwood, Castle & Smythe (2004) dispel the assumption that significantly high female literacy rates result in better development prospects for Basotho women. To this effect, Basotho women held minority status until recently when they were awarded adult status in 2006 (Government of Lesotho, 2006). Thus, the persistence of these deeply embedded gendered disparities are not surprising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Attwood et al. (2004) therefore conclude that “[a]pparently, literacy has not empowered [Basotho] women to take their rightful place in the development of either their own households, or of their country. The power of the lion remains restricted by the cut of the dress, designed, it seems, by patriarchy” (2004, p. 156). This quotation

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African feminist, Oyewumi’s (2000, p. 11) contention against “the culture of misrepresentation that pervades the depiction of African peoples, institutions and forms especially by people living in the Northern hemisphere. This culture of misrepresentation inevitably led to discounting and disregarding Africans even in the articulation of their own realities”. In my opinion, by ‘labeling’ these ‘mummies and babies’ relationships essentially meant categorizing and attaching particularistic meanings to an indigenous phenomenon that embodies different meanings for its practitioners – including but not limited to social, cultural, emotional mutual support. In so doing, *setsoalle* relations within a highly heteronormative context, were marked as homosexual in nature and thus demonized as was the case when they were ultimately prohibited in Catholic boarding schools (Khau, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> The majority- 90% - of primary schools are operated by Christian churches (Roman Catholic Mission - 36%, Lesotho Evangelical Church - 33%, Anglican Church - 13%). Likewise, government operates 7% of secondary schools and the rest are administered by churches (Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018)

expresses a view that despite educational advancements and the subsequent empowerment, the hetero-patriarchal climate that undergirds the socio-cultural, economic, legal institutions continues to limit the ‘choices’ and true potential of Basotho women.

Certainly, reports highlight gendered discrepancies in terms of female against male unemployment rates. Accordingly, there is a lower proportion of women compared to men who participated in the labour force: 55.3% for women compared to 72.6% for men (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2012). Notably, even if employed, women still earn less than their male counterparts – thus Basotho women are considered to be significantly poorer compared to Basotho men. Needless to say, for the *Mothepa*, and her ‘female headed’ household – considered to be counter-normative within the hetero-patriarchal context – the situation is more dire. Moreover, this was exacerbated by the decline in agriculture and subsistence farming in the rural areas which has also led to extreme poverty in rural areas. This has been a push effect that forced many Basotho women to migrate to Maseru – the national capital – in search of employment opportunities.

At the same time, there was a pull effect at the advent of the 1990s when the textile and garment industry boomed and thus ‘turned the tide’ for Basotho women (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016). Interestingly, this turn of events was analogous to the massive mine retrenchments, following which there was a significant increase in male unemployment in Lesotho. Like the farming sector – whose preference was Basotho women – this industry became the largest formal employer in the country for Basotho women and accounted for nearly 50% of the formal labour force (UNECA, 2018). In 2009, 36 factories located in Maseru, Maputsoe and Mafeteng employed about 40 000 workers of which most were women (80% to 85%) from various parts of Lesotho (International Labour Organisation, 2017). Damane and Sekantsi (2018) report on this drastic turn of events – that in 2012, “[o]f those employed with a salary, 56 percent were females while 44 percent were males” (2018, p. 939). Indeed, this industry has been considered as a “tool for ... poverty alleviation ... and, by corollary, the empowerment of women” (UNECA, 2018, p. 27) and thus revealed marked changes to the gendered employment rate of the country. This also contradicted the ‘dependent-wife’ ideal – alluded to earlier – that Basotho women have always contested. However, this does not deny the persistence of hierarchical gendered relations between Basotho women and men given the religio-cultural context, that favours the particularistic ideal of *Mosotho* woman.

Progressive developments to improve the status of Basotho women have taken place within the political and legal climates of postcolonial Lesotho. According to the Constitution, Basotho women and men enjoy equal voting rights meaning that Basotho women are free to participate in public affairs. In fact, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to enhance the participation of women in the political space. For example, quota systems have been put in place for political parties to ensure there is an equal number of female and male candidates (Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental-Organisations -LCN, 2015). In addition, the enactment of the *Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act of 2006* is considered to be the most progressive law in protecting the rights of married women and affording them status of adult (Government of Lesotho, 2006; LCN, 2015). This meant that under Common Law married women are given the powers to access and control resources – in their own right – within marriage. In addition, by the terms of Common Law, men and women – regardless of marital status – are afforded similar inheritance rights.

Indeed, Batisai (2013, p. 41) points out that these legal reforms which attempt to address longstanding gender disparities “create an image of nations [that are] deeply committed to the ‘women’s rights’ discourse” whereas the practice thereof remains a challenge. Because of the dual legal system that is constituted by a combination of customary law and Common Law, the former – which remain unwavering on the subordination of Basotho women – is often contradictory to the latter (Maqutu, 1992). Thus, contrary to these legal developments aimed at fostering gender equality, customary laws continue to define all Basotho women as minors while inheritance remains a male prerogative. This implies that while Lesotho boasts a progressive Constitution that claims, ‘Equality for all’, it fails on several counts to protect women’s rights under customary laws (Metsing, 2015). African feminist, Sylvia Tamale (2008) has contended how customary laws and practices are used in postcolonial African states as rational basis for the persistent control of women and their sexuality. Thus, it comes as no surprise that these progressive developments, including the Constitution, continue to be silent on the existence let alone the sexual rights of minority groups such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI) (LCN, 2015). The Lesotho Council for NGO’s also points out the failure of these progressive laws to prioritise the plight of women in rural areas. These women – who are considered to be most vulnerable – it is argued, continue to be disadvantaged by cultural practices that treat them as perpetual minors. Thus, in spite of attempts to improve the status of Basotho women – regardless of marital status –



deeply entrenched economic and socio-cultural forces further distinguish how these benefits are enjoyed by Basotho women in postcolonial Lesotho.

These modern-day disparities are a mirror image of the colonial racial and gendered hierarchical disparities and thus – coloniality – that ought to be addressed. My primary contention is that, in light of the preceding discussions, the image described by Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2008) is reflective of the colonial project in that it confines the definition of *Mosotho* woman within colonial-mission western-centric boundaries. Undergirding this definition is the Cartesian dualism in which ‘respectable’ woman – read European, is pitted against ‘unrespectable’ woman – read African. This thesis thus seeks to deconstruct universalist constructions that are premised upon the racist hierarchical and oppositional binary logic. By extension, these posit the *Mothepe* – her knowledges, her agency, her being – as inferior in relation to ‘respectable’ constructions of womanhood – read European. To achieve these ends, the decolonial feminist approach, proposed as a theoretical landscape seeks to reveal multiplicity and uniqueness of the Sesotho world-senses as a base of pluriversal knowledge production on womanhood and agency. In so doing, eurocentric metanarratives around the Woman matter will be debased whilst also striving to re-cover Basotho knowledges, agency and being.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter gives voice to an endogenous historical perspective of Basotho womanhood. Through the ‘herstories’ that I referenced at the beginning of this chapter, I sought to reflect on precolonial constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood. Thereafter, I detailed the events that undergirded the colonial epoch in Lesotho as a basis upon which I anchor my contention that what we know of *Mosotho* womanhood today is shaped by the historical background of colonisation in Lesotho. Drawing from anecdotal literature, I brought to the centre Basotho women’s ‘herstories’ that have been patriarchally deemed unworthy, and thus not awarded the recognition that they deserve as historical narrations of the Basotho. Although scanty and sketchy, these narratives shed light on what precolonial *Mosotho* womanhood ‘could have’ looked like, in support of my contention that normalised contemporary notions of *Mosotho* womanhood are imposed through the colonial-mission trajectory of Lesotho. I also drew attention to the ways in which Christianity reconstructed

notions of womanhood through its endeavours aimed at regulating Basotho women, their sexuality and subjectivities through specific gendered Christian education.

However, notable are the unique dynamics that exemplify the agency of Basotho women as they contested the Christian ideal by undermining the regulations imposed upon their gendered and racialised sexual bodies. This re-joins the questions posed by postcolonial scholars about the voice of the subaltern - *Can the Subaltern speak?* This is a question that is central to my study. In addition, worth mentioning are the continuities and discontinuities of this colonial epoch in postcolonial Basotho constructions of *Mosali oa Mosotho* – *Mosotho* woman. In other words, I recognised that as interrelated forces, colonisation with missionary and indigenous patriarchies instituted a ‘particular’ image of womanhood against which Basotho women were and continue to be judged as respectable ‘civilised’ Christian women.

Therefore, through this review of literature, I provided contextual insights with which to frame key questions raised in this thesis in view of contemporary notions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency. Moreover, as has been established in this chapter, *Mosotho* womanhood is typically agentic and dynamic, therefore forming a foundation for considering the *Methepa*’s agency as they re-construct normalised notions of *Mosotho* womanhood. In my study, I seek to deconstruct persistent dominant narratives that posit a particularistic and exclusionary image of *Mosotho* womanhood in contemporary Lesotho. Moreover, the persistence of this image, as African feminist scholars have acknowledged, mandates us to re-view the notion of *Mosotho* woman through a lens that will reveal its inherent colonial biases. In the next chapter, I draw on feminist literature to unpack the definitions of womanhood and thereafter map the theoretical landscape that undergirds this study.

## Chapter 3: Literature review

### 3.1. Introduction

Patriarchal constructions of womanhood tend to be prescriptive and oppressive to women. One such construction is the prescription and normalisation of heterosexual marriage as the key aspect of womanhood. Therefore, the patriarchal constructions of womanhood that essentialise marriage need to be interrogated and deconstructed. The prescription of heterosexual marriage for women as affirmation for womanhood implies that those who remain ‘unmarried’ are regarded as problematic and are thus marginalised for undermining these dominant notions of womanhood. In interrogating and problematising patriarchal constructions that essentialise womanhood to marriage, I draw from De Beauvoir’s (2009) analysis of “[w]hat is a Woman?” In so doing, I intend to reveal and challenge their prescriptive and exclusionary tendencies. However, contending the eurocentrism and universalism central to this western feminist scholarship, feminists of the Global South insist that Woman be analysed through intersectional lenses to account for entangled social, cultural, and historical factors that shape the construct. Considering this, I heed the intersectional call to reject “binary thinking” altogether (Collins, 2000, p. xi). Thus, an analysis of the attributes, heterosexuality, femininity, marriage and motherhood through the framework of *uMakhulu* that prioritises the indigenous world-senses revealed complexities and multiplicities borne by the construct - *African* womanhood. With the insights drawn from this literature review, I seek to debunk assumptions of normalcy and universality; and as such, contribute an understanding of differently embodied and located constructions of womanhood.

This chapter is divided into three sections, namely feminist conceptions of womanhood, challenging universalism and the theoretical framework. Firstly, I present a critical review of feminist definitions of womanhood, following which, through an intersectional-indigenous lens, I elaborate on the key attributes of ‘ideal’ womanhood; heterosexuality, femininity, marriage and procreativity. Lastly, I engage with the theoretical landscape that undergirds this study; decolonial feminism. I conclude this chapter by drawing linkages between the key concepts, womanhood, singleness and agency as well as decoloniality and decolonial feminism, as they relate to the key question of this study: gender identity re-construction and agency amongst *Methepa*.

### 3.2. Feminist conceptions of womanhood

Before I engage with feminists' debates on womanhood, it is necessary to understand the historical and cultural context from which they emerge. These debates are undergirded by patriarchal, philosophical and psychoanalytical constructions that posited femaleness as 'naturally' inferior, as 'lack' in relation to maleness (Moi, 2001; Smart, 2002). Accordingly, 'woman', in relation to 'man', who was considered to be the essential human subject, was defined as biologically inferior (Balsamo, 1996). This 'inferiority' stems from female reproductive capacities upon which biological deterministic views around 'woman' were based. For instance, English biologist Grant Allen (cited in Russett, 2009, p. 43) observed that "[s]he is the sex sacrificed to reproductive necessities". In simple terms, "maternity defined womanhood". Throughout the western world, this ideology was the basis of patriarchal perceptions on which womanhood confined to the roles of wifehood and procreativity was premised.

The definition of womanhood in terms of wifehood and procreativity also necessitated the control of women's bodies and their sexuality. Michel Foucault<sup>35</sup> detailed the history of institutionalised sexual regulation and the confinement of sexuality to marital procreation. He had asserted that "sexuality was carefully confined [and] moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction" (1978, p. 3). Foucault refers to the religio-socio-culturally accepted discourse of procreative marital sex on which 'respectable' womanhood is based. Accordingly, sex beyond the confines of marriage (for instance pre-marital sex for pleasure) constituted 'sexual deviance' that warranted sanctioning. This implies that sexuality was reserved for procreation within the marital setting in accord with the broader context in which Woman is essentialised marriage and motherhood. Thus, in affirmation of ideal womanhood, women were expected to fulfil these roles – not as a matter of choice but instead as was necessitated by their biological make up. This was also resonant with the mandatory confinement of women to the domestic sphere while men, their husbands, were considered to be well suited for the public sphere.

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<sup>35</sup> In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault points out that the advent of the Victorian bourgeoisie led to the institutionalisation of a prescriptive and restrictive sexual code. This informed the notion of procreative marital sex as a socio-religio cultural prescription linked to the notion of respectable woman.

Mean whilst within the private sphere to which 'Woman' is confined, roles such as wifehood and motherhood were defined as 'natural' and inevitable for women's bodies. Relatedly, their participation in the public sphere was limited "because of the threat that this supposedly 'natural' woman would otherwise pose to the moral and social order" (Smart, 2002, p. 8). This 'disorder' necessitated that measures that prohibited women from the public sphere be enforced lest they distract men through their 'corrupt' bodies (Pateman, 1980). On the other hand, women's exclusion also sought to uphold ideals of 'true' womanhood (Campbell, 1983; Hurner, 2006). In other words, the public sphere, which has been considered to be a 'natural' location dominated by "lustful, amoral, competitive, and ambitious" men, was regarded as inappropriate for women for whom the private domain was well suited (Campbell, 1983, p. 10). Thus, women's exclusion from the public sphere meant that women were forced to remain as perpetual dependents of men.

In *The Sexual Contract* (1988), Pateman reflects on the institutional enforcement of male supremacy through which particularistic constructions of Woman that necessitated marriage were reinforced. She details how the institution of a sexual contract not only enabled the perpetual minority status of women, but also the control of their sexuality by men in patriarchal western societies. Pateman contended that under the guise of 'freedom for *all*,' – tied to the institution of the social contract - a 'sexual contract' which gave all men unlimited rights over women's bodies as well as their sexuality was established (Diprose, 2005). For instance, the notion of 'freedom' left unchanged the perpetual minority status of females under constant male guardianship. In other words, the constant restraint of women and their sexuality was ascertained within their natal homes as daughters to their fathers; and thereafter, their marital homes as wives to their husbands. This meant that women could not exist as individuals in their own right but instead, by necessity, they required long term relations with men for livelihood. In return, as stipulated by the marriage contract, a wife's sexuality was legitimately appropriated and controlled by the male head - the 'husband' - upon whom she relied for survival - thus marking heterosexual marriage inescapable for women.

The feminist movement challenged patriarchal social constructions that necessitated the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. In other words, by defining womanhood in terms of marriage, domesticity and motherhood served the interests of men, and in turn, reinforced the oppression of women in patriarchal societies (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). Moreover, feminists

contested the idea that womanhood tied to the desire to marry, to mother, and to establish a home were females' naturally destined roles in as much as males were destined for the public sphere. This background provides a brief overview of the context in which western feminists were writing and how this socio-political and legal environment shaped their ideas and contestations against Woman. The work of Simone de Beauvoir has been cited as the basis of feminist contentions against patriarchal constructions of womanhood; and thus, it provides an ideal framework within which to locate an argument for the deconstruction of normalised notions of womanhood central to this thesis.

### **3.3. What is a *Woman*?**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Simone de Beauvoir (2009) wrote from a French context; and in her commonly cited manuscript: *The Second Sex*, she applies an existential phenomenological<sup>36</sup> lens to reveal the complexities of the subject of womanhood (Hekman, 2015; Moi, 2001; Stavro, 1999; Tidd, 2008). The main contention is that in patriarchal societies, 'Woman' has been defined and relegated to a long-standing subordinate state as 'Other' in relation to man defined as the 'Subject'. De Beauvoir (2009) further elaborates that human existence is characterised by an ambiguous interplay between states of transcendence and immanence.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the former is marked as exclusively for 'man' whereas 'woman' is perpetually confined to the latter on the basis of her physiological make-up. This seemingly permanent state, de Beauvoir (2009) argues, is tied to how 'woman' and 'man' have historically been interpreted in patriarchal contexts. However, de Beauvoir (2009) insists that whilst female biology, in many ways, shapes women's experiences differently from those of men, they cannot be used as justification for Woman's perpetual state as 'Other'.

I find a particularly influential contribution of de Beauvoir to be the philosophical question, "What is a Woman?" (2009, p. 1) that she posed in the introduction of *The Second Sex*. With this deconstructive question, I argue that de Beauvoir (2009) intended to interrogate normalised

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<sup>36</sup> De Beauvoir's work is influenced mostly by the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty through which she provided a detailed phenomenological description of existing as woman as well as analysing the meanings constituted by this reality. Others have attributed her views and theoretical positions to her personal life: choosing not to marry or have children but instead remaining in a lifelong open relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre and focusing on politics and advancing her career (Hengehold & Bauer, 2017) At the time the manuscript was published, the subject of woman had never been heard of in the way that de Beauvoir addressed it in *The Second Sex*; hence it was considered to be controversial in philosophy in that regard

<sup>37</sup> Transcendence refers to states of freedom, creativity and growth whilst and immanence relates to repetitive, non-creative aspects of life.

patriarchal conceptions of Woman and instead reveal them to be created through patriarchal ideology. De Beauvoir (2009) explains that ‘femininity’ and ‘Woman’ have been interpreted from a patriarchal point of view; and as such, have been defined as natural attributes inherent to female bodies. Although de Beauvoir (2009) does not dispute the existence of female physiology, she insists that this natural state does not necessitate women’s embodiment of femininity and Woman as a destined identity. This ideology upon which Woman is based, de Beauvoir (2009) insists, is a man-made myth (Wittig, 1993) with which women are relegated to a state of Other. De Beauvoir states:

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through ‘the eternal feminine’, and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: *What is a woman?* (2009, p. 24 emphasis added).

It is in this context that de Beauvoir critically approached the “mytho-ideology” of ‘Woman’ and as suggested by Sanford “[r]ather than soliciting an answer it addresses itself critically to the discourses that think that they already know” (2017, p. 22) what Woman *is*. Therefore, as opposed to seeking a definitive answer, by posing the question “what is a Woman?” de Beauvoir sought to debunk normative and prescriptive constructions of womanhood.

By further emphasising that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (2009, p. 330), de Beauvoir sought to dispel the assumed natural-ness of the identity ‘Woman’ confined to specific attributes. In the second volume, she details the phenomenological meanings of being female within a patriarchal context as well as how females are then made to embody femininity, and thus ‘become’ Woman. She argued that:

...the passivity that essentially characterizes the “feminine” woman is a trait that develops in her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society (2009, p. 341).

In this quotation, de Beauvoir emphasises that the female biological makeup does not necessarily propel women to passivity, nurturance and domesticity or even motherhood or wifeness. Instead, attributes of Woman are learned through a socialisation process that takes place from a girl-child’s earliest upbringing, and as such prepares her for her destined identity: Woman. Conceptualising Woman as a ‘becoming’ as opposed to a trait that is inherent to femaleness, de Beauvoir and her

followers falsify assumptions of a fixed and normalised identity towards which women are forced to strive. With this deconstructive framework, I read ‘becoming’ not as fixed, but instead, as shaped by a myriad of factors (as we shall establish later). Moreover, it also implies that ‘becoming’ Woman can take any direction, and thus may not necessarily be fixed to being feminine - or ‘wife’ for that matter.

Subsequently, the influence of *The Second Sex* on feminist scholarship about the question of womanhood cannot be doubted. Feminist scholars such as Betty Friedan (1963), continued de Beauvoir’s legacy a decade later from an American context to challenge the parameters of womanhood defined in patriarchal terms of marriage, domesticity, and motherhood (Tobias, 2018). In *The Feminine Mystique*, the liberal feminist contested the socialisation process which the girl-child undergoes in order to affirm her adult role as proper ‘Woman’. She questioned the upbringing that encouraged the girl-child to aspire to marriage and motherhood; “[a]ll they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (1963, p.1). This stresses a socio-culturally pre-determined destiny of ‘Woman’ as wife and mother towards which girl-children are made to strive. Relatedly, this also informs how young girls are brought up and made to believe that it is through the assumption of the marital role that one can achieve a state of completeness - as Woman. Thus, according to western culture Woman is necessarily tied to the marital role in which dependency, sexual repression, procreativity and domesticity are its key attributes. These deep-seated ideologies undoubtedly enjoyed the support of the patriarchal context alluded to earlier and as such, continue to be reinforced through various institutions of patriarchal societies across the globe.

African feminists also raise issue with patriarchal constructions that forcefully impose particularistic notions of ‘womanhood’ and ‘girlhood’ to which women and young girls are forced to affirm in striving to be accepted as ‘authentic’ (Adichie, 2017; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003a; Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018). Relatedly, within patriarchal contexts, girls and women are taught that marriage to a man is every woman’s ideal achievement, which affirms her as a ‘real’ woman. In these respects, stringent measures are enforced in various ways that pin women to specific roles such as “traditional care-giving, home-making and nurturing...[patriarchally linked to] their identity as wives and mothers” (Afisi, 2010, p. 229). Contesting strongly such assumptions, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* sarcastically challenges the view that marriage is



an achievement through a loaded statement: “a husband crowns a woman’s life”<sup>38</sup> (Adichie, 2012, p. 75). In this, she reveals the prescriptive and normalised socio-cultural ideation upon which African womanhood is premised, and moreover that marriage to a man marks one as an *ideal* woman. Instead, Adichie (2017, p. 30) contests the notion of marriage being defined as an achievement towards which young girls are made to strive: “Marriage is not an achievement; nor is it what she should aspire to. A marriage can be happy or unhappy, but not an achievement.” Instead, education and self-assertion for the girl-child are critical anchors for ideal womanhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Adichie (2017). The contestations against regulatory prescriptive norms that curtail the choices of African women, inform part of the current African feminist politics.

Likewise, South African feminist, Puleg Segalo challenges the ideology that essentialises womanhood and motherhood to femaleness. She points out that the “idea of womanhood is always conflated with the biological reality of being female, which holds an implicit assumption of motherhood” (2013, p. 4). Accordingly, “fertility defines womanhood and womanhood is defined by a [married] woman’s capacity to be a mother” (2013, p. 4). This critique underscores the essentialist assumptions of procreating and mothering imposed upon women in the name of affirming womanhood - thus affirming the prescriptive and thus oppressive discourse of womanhood. Therefore, speaking against these normalised ideologies through which women are sanctioned should they not meet the socio-cultural demands of patriarchal constructions, Ogun-dipe-Leslie states that “if you are not married, you are *not really a woman* and if you do not have children you are *not human*” (1994, p. 211 emphasis added). By implication, those failing to affirm hetero-patriarchal prescriptions of marriage are marginalised and debarred from identifying as Woman – a key contention that I raise and seek to debunk in this study.

Indeed, the consequences are dire for the ‘unmarried’ woman in contexts that necessitate marriage as affirmation of womanhood. Literature on ‘singleness’ has highlighted that ‘unmarried’ women are problematised for ‘pulling the carpet’ from under patriarchal axioms that undergird Woman (Byrne, 2008; Dales, 2014; Gaetano, 2014; Ibrahim, 2016; Lahad, 2017). These scholars highlight

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<sup>38</sup> This quote is drawn from Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, wherein the lead female protagonist Beatrice, wife to an abusive patriarch Eugene, expresses the view that a woman cannot exist without a husband, for in socio-cultural terms, it is completely unheard of. Thus, marriage and a husband bestow worth and respect unto any woman and as such affirm her as a real woman. This quote captures the entire essence and normalisation of womanhood tied to marriage that I seek to deconstruct in this thesis.

the predicament of being ‘single’ in a context that expects a woman to marry *and* remain married to affirm womanhood. Indeed, Byrne also states that “in terms of social identities, single women have to negotiate between two strong conceptions of womanhood: a patriarchal conception as heterosexual, married and reproductive, and a conception of single womanhood as lack, as deviant and a threat to the patriarchal order” (Byrne, 2008, p. 35). In these respects, the ideology that necessitates marriage as the underpinning of ‘ideal’ womanhood inherently presupposes ‘unmarried’ identities to ‘Othering’ in order to safeguard and uphold normative heterosexual values.

This mandatory arrangement resonates with a heteronormative climate in which constructions of womanhood are housed. Warner and Berlant define heteronormativity as a hegemonic arrangement that not only extends across “institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent - that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged” (1998, p. 548). Noteworthy, is that heteronormativity is different but related to heterosexuality; normalised sexual relations between females and males. In other words, heteronormativity extends beyond sexual practice by also defining a “normal way of life” (Jackson, 2006, p. 107). This is achieved and reinforced through a “vast matrix of cultural beliefs, rewards, privileges and sanctions” that function in tandem to sustain the notion of heterosexuality as natural and normalised (Lynch & Maree, 2013, p. 459; Steyn & Van Zyl, 2009). Considering this, heteronormativity juxtaposes ‘appropriate’ against ‘inappropriate’ and as such while it privileges the former, it simultaneously imposes sanctions upon the latter. Accordingly, that appropriate womanhood is defined in heterosexual marital terms, in turn explains the marginalisation and othering of ‘unmarried’ women – who in this context, embody all forms of inappropriateness.

Hence, in defining ‘Woman’ in heterosexual marital terms not only compels women to abide by the hetero-norm but it also forces them into heterosexual marriage in affirmation of womanhood. Bernroider (2018) contends that this is in spite of a transforming social context wherein ‘modern’ conjures assumptions of liberal and individualistic views. Moreover, implied by this context is the lessening of traditional prescriptions that inform the construction of womanhood in marital terms (Bernroider, 2018). In other words, the misalignment between anticipated effects of socio-economic changes and the realities of the socio-cultural milieu is exemplified by the pervasive

pro-marital notions of ‘true’ womanhood. For instance Bernroider (2018) points out that in South Dehli’s middle class locations, assumed to be ‘modern’ and thus liberal, middle-class, elite ‘single’ women continue to be subjected to surveillance and demeaning exclusory tactics. Likewise, in the South African context Plank explored the experiences of single Black middle-class women. She reported that inspite of women’s successes, as single and unattached to male-head as husband; these women were subjected to stigma and name calling. Therefore, this implies that class progression and achievement in material terms does not protect single women from the grips of socio-cultural prescriptions that undergird the ideal of womanhood. Instead, these continue to curtail women’s choices whereby marriage remains a pivotal role undergirding the identities of women in patriarchal contexts. Thus, it is this normalcy with which womanhood tied to heterosexual marriage is regarded, that this study seeks to interrogate and problematise.

My reading of feminist scholarship on Woman, particularly Beauvoirean thought, reveals efforts to destabilise and problematise normalised constructions of Woman fixed to femininity, marriage, reproduction, repressed sexuality and domesticity. It is the normalcy with which Woman is essentialised to particular attributes which this study seeks to problematise. In order to achieve this, I draw on de Beauvoir’s deconstructive voice invoked by her question, “What is a Woman?” However, I also remain aware of the fact that she writes from a distinctly French context, and the women whose experiences she chose to give priority to were white, French middle-class like herself. Therefore, all that she is writing is ‘situated’ in that specific context. In spite of this, the Beauvoirean approach allows me to deconstruct the normative construction of womanhood – according to which the *Methepa* are marginalised – by viewing it as a ‘becoming’ as opposed to an innate trait of femaleness. I extend the ‘ideological critique’ embodied by this scholarship to suggest a deeper interrogation of the construct, womanhood – in the context of Lesotho. In these respects, I challenge the deeply embedded, normative, taken-for-granted assumptions that essentialise womanhood to marriage in Lesotho.

On the other hand, central to my aims is to bring to the fore how differently bodied and located women relate to and articulate normative constructions of Woman. Therefore, de Beauvoir’s prioritisation of a specific group of women and exclusion of differently bodied women such as the Basotho women to whom I give priority in this study, is problematic. In this instance, I look to

feminisms of the Global South: African, Postcolonial, Third-world and Black feminists'<sup>39</sup> articulations of diversity pertaining to the Woman question. This scholarship dispels normativity within Euro-American feminist theories, particularly the concept, Woman, and in so doing, brings into disrepute normalised constructions of Woman fixated on specific characteristics. Instead, the central argument is that Woman is contextually, historically and spatially situated, thus revealing it as subject to deconstruction and reconstruction by the marginal Other.

### **3.4. Challenging universalism and normativity: *African Woman*?**

To dispel essentialist views of Woman, Euro-American feminisms insisted that it is socially constructed rather than innate. However, their prioritisation of a singular group upon which their construct of Woman is based is itself essentialist. In particular, by presenting the experiences of white, middle-class Euro-American women as representative of those of *all* women, and in turn disregarding those of 'other' women, is not only universalist, but also exclusionary (Carby, 1996; Chaney, 2011; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988; Ogun-dipe-Leslie, 1994; Oyěwùmí, 1997). In this section, I draw on these debates as critiques against normative and exclusive constructions of Woman that fail to account for the experiences of the *Methepa*. Moreover, my intention is to extend these critiques by privileging the contextual diversities as well as those indigenous African aspects to foreground an argument that womanhood in the African context and its constituents are multidimensional.

The demand for diversity and context specificity was central to feminisms of the Global South on the Woman question. In a commonly cited essay, *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, Black feminist Audre Lorde contested western feminists' universalist assumption of a unitary conception of Woman. She pointed out that "white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone; then women of color become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (1997, p. 856 emphasis in original). In this, Lorde raises a critique against western feminist disregard for differences such as race, class, geographical location, culture, religion, sexual preference and age amongst women, which inherently shape not only experiences but also constructions of

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<sup>39</sup> I refer to these critics as feminisms of the Global South when referring to the alternative views to western feminisms; other wise, in reference to their individual positionalities, I name each individually.

womanhood. While women may share experiences of sexism on the basis of gender, other critical social aspects reveal differences that need not be taken for granted. For Lorde, the disregard for these discrepancies foreclose assumptions of solidarity purported by the feminist movement in that by essentialising the experiences of ‘white’ women, feminist politics and thus the construct Woman becomes exclusionary of ‘other’ women.

Likewise, Postcolonial feminist Mohanty (1988) posits that by assuming that ‘Woman’ and its constituents are universal to *all* women in *all* contexts, there lies a false (western feminist) assumption that *all* women share a generalised experience of subordination. Moreover, there is also an assumption that all women grapple against a similar, oppressive construction of Woman. Instead, in concert with Lorde’s plea, fellow Black feminist scholars (Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018; Collins, 2000; Nkealah, 2016; Nnaemeka, 2004) argue that the definition of Woman cannot be tied to specific attributes; rather it bears diversities that ought to be accounted for in any analysis of womanhood. Thus, these feminisms’ concerns for diversity tied to historical and social contexts prompts us to continue posing the questions ‘What is a woman?’ and ‘How does one become a woman?’ within the diverse spatial and temporal contexts - since there can never be coherence nor fixity to the construct Woman. Moreover, for others such as Mohanty, the western concept of Woman also suggests nuances of ethnocentrism - the false assumption of western cultural superiority.

Mohanty (1988) contends that through the exclusion of ‘Other’ women and privileging experiences of white-middle-class women, western feminism, through their construct of Woman, constitutes ‘ethnocentric universalism’. Since Woman constitutes a ‘normalised’ golden standard (in European terms) according to which women are judged (excluding non-European women located on the periphery of Woman), it also conjures those power relations of superiority/inferiority, first/third world, West/Other (Nkealah, 2016; Nnaemeka, 2013). In particular, Mohanty explains these relations as those “feminist analyses which perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the west, produce a corresponding set of universal [and inferior] images of the ‘third-world woman’” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 81). This implies that by positing Woman as superior, in hindsight a coherent image of the non-European woman that is inferior and thus disqualified from – Woman – is constructed. In this critical backlash,

Mohanty does not spare urban-based, middle-class third-world feminists' portrayals of their rural-based working-class sisters.

This “feminist arrogance” (Nkealah, 2016, p. 7365) – constantly ‘speaking down’ on African womanhood by western feminists – is a critique that this author also fashions against many African feminists. In accord, Nkealah (2016) is critical of African feminists for whom the elitist identity which they embody tends to breed arrogance and insensitivity when writing about their rural-based sisters. The latter is always portrayed as downtrodden, culture-dopes who passively and uncritically uphold oppressive cultural norms in comparison to the former – its normative, liberal, urban-based referent. Thus, this universalist ‘feminist arrogance’ that plagues the west as much as the African feminist landscape ought to be debunked in that it reiterates the colonial discourses, according to Mohanty (1988). This logic is premised upon hierarchical and oppositional binaries in which the African ‘rural’ woman is always portrayed as ‘Other’ and inherently inferiorised – while the western Woman is ever posited as superior. Accordingly, the *Mothepa* to whom I give priority in this thesis is further invisibilised and deemed voiceless within this hierarchical order. Thus, reiterating the decry of postcolonial feminisms, this arrogance and bias ought to be debunked through analyses of womanhood and agency that reveal uniqueness borne by these concepts in the African indigenous world-senses. Nonetheless, preoccupation with the North/South comparative analysis commonly adopted by scholars of the Global South tends to be disadvantageous for feminist scholarship on this front.

The oppositional and rejectionist stance adopted by feminisms of the Global South<sup>40</sup> has proved to be detrimental to feminist scholarship on the African front. Accordingly, understanding African as oppositional to ‘western’ conjures not only assumptions of stasis and homogeneity on both sides of the divide but also impermeable boundaries (Coetzee, 2017). Bakare-Yusuf (2003b) considers this to reflect ignorance to the longstanding mutual knowledge sharing between the ‘west’ and the African continent. Thus, uncritical denialism and the rejectionist stances, it is argued, tend to ‘problematically essentialise’ both ‘African’ and the ‘west’ whereas the mutual co-dependency

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<sup>40</sup> Decolonial scholarship has received backlash for their oppositional and rejectionist critiques against western scholarship. Pappas (2017, p. 14) argues against uncritical rejectionist analyses that characterise decolonial scholarship. He considers this to be scholars’ reliance “on lazy theoretical barometers of good and evil...” Instead analyses... “must be able to provide a basis for being critical of Western ideas beyond the fact that they are Western or come from the oppressor. Not all Western concepts, standards, and categories are oppressive even to the most non-Western people. To decide between good and evil requires intelligent discriminative judgment and not easy theoretical formulas according to geopolitical coordinates or cultural origins”.

disputes assumptions of a ‘pure divide’ between the two. For instance, in bid to remain oppositional to western scholarship, African feminist scholars unwittingly essentialise African societies and cultures – ‘African-ness’ (Apusigah, 2008; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003b). A case in point is the work of African feminist, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (referenced in subsequent paragraphs).

Oyěwùmí’s work is caught up in these conundrums. Bakare-Yusuf (2003b, p. 11) does not spare the scholarship of its essentialist and absolutist tendencies, “[h]er account is ultimately ideologically driven by an essentialist will to ultimate truth”. In this, she rebukes Oyěwùmí’s portrayal of a ‘pure’ precolonial Yoruban society whose static and homogenous social relations were tarnished through western colonialism. For Bakare-Yusuf, the simplification of complex phenomena and the dismissal of how they may embody different meanings in different contexts – constitutes “problematic essentialism and authenticity” (2003, p. 4). Instead, in bid to sustain an unyielding oppositional stance against the west, Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyěwùmí’s essentialist tendencies undercut the multiplicities, ambiguities and context specific intricacies of Yoruban society. Accordingly, for a study that seeks to disrupt essentialist and normative constructions of womanhood I find these essentialist tendencies borne by African feminist scholarship to be deeply problematic. Therefore, while my intent is to illuminate the indigenous practices that are central to constructions of womanhood, I remain wary that there is no essence to African cultures, or constructions of womanhood. Instead, the multiplicities, complexities and contexts specificities borne by these cultures and how they subsequently shape notions of womanhood are critical canons for multi-versal knowledge production.

In addition, Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018, p. 1) also caution that oppositional stances simultaneously and problematically tend to re-posit the North as the “progenitor of progress [and superiority], thereby reiterating the colonial tale”. The rhetorical ‘comparative analysis’ that typifies this ‘diversity’ scholarship tends to reinforce the binary depictions of ‘modern/tradition’, urban/rural, in which anything ‘progressive’ to Africa is associated with being ‘unAfrican’ and thus tied to the North (Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018). In essence, this reinforces the ideas that posit constructions of *African* womanhood as ‘backward’ when juxtaposed against Woman – read European – typically constructed as agential. In other words, while feminisms of the Global South pledge to challenging eurocentrism, essentialism, universalism and binarism, in hindsight, they become trapped within the ideologies – isms – that they set out to critique (Bakare-Yusuf,

2003b). In essence, they problematically mirror the shortfalls of western feminisms - alluded to earlier. Thus, oppositional and rejectionist stances foreclose meaningful analyses of the realities of women's lives in Africa – including Lesotho.

South African feminist, Amanda Gouws (2010, p. 14) cautions against feminist tendencies of being “caught in the politics of the North/South divide”, which in turn amounts to lack of understanding when it comes to dealing with local realities – particularly the question of womanhood in Africa. Relatedly, by placing Africa “*against* the West” (Mekgwe, 2008, p. 22), this scholarship tends to foreclose “the intricacies of [the] unique, indigenous worldview” (Mithlo, 2009, p. 18). Therefore, rather than reiterating assertions of North/South divide, I take heed to Bakare-Yusuf's (2003b) suggestion for analytic approaches that are sensitive to and account for contextual differences. This critically reveals how the phenomena that we so seek to indigenise are shaped and reshaped by diversities and complexities. I consider women's experiences and constructions of womanhood to be shaped and reshaped by various factors including race, culture, class, and location. Thus, my intent of reviewing the construct, *African* womanhood through intersectional and *uMakhulu* lenses seeks to reveal contextual dynamics, uniqueness, multiplicities and complexities. In so doing, will not only debase eurocentrism but also foreground African realities – upon which constructions of *African* womanhood are based – in their own right.

### **3.5. Intersectionality; multidimensional view of *African* Woman**

In investigating how multiple forces mutually inform each other in shaping constructions of *African* womanhood, the theory of intersectionality is particularly useful. Born from Black feminisms, intersectionality is an analytic lens that reveals the complexities of African women's experiences given that they are shaped by intersecting forces (Collins, 1990; May, 2015; McCall, 2008). For instance, rather than viewing gender as the only source of women's oppression – as is typified by western feminist construct of Woman – intersectionality posits that multiple, co-constitutive forces shape African women's experiences and by extension their constructions of *African* womanhood. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) broadened the concept of intersectionality to foreground a view that African women's lived realities are located within a matrix in which privileges and oppressions are shaped by differential realities amongst women (Collins, 1990, 2000).



Accordingly, Collins prompts us to “reject the binary thinking” altogether (2000, p. xi) – that is characterised by either/or and instead opt for both/and analyses that expose the complexities of the concept Woman. By this, she implies that binaries such as oppressed/not oppressed, feminine/not feminine, woman/not woman tend to foreclose meaningful analyses of womanhood reshaped by intersecting contextual factors such as geographical location, culture, class, age, and sexuality – to mention a few. Intersectional analyses reveal multiplicities and therefore allow deconstruction of normativity and fixity characteristic to the notion of Woman. To extend the critique fashioned against normalised constructions of Woman, I draw on those indigenous African characteristics and, in so doing, insightfully reveal the notion of *African* woman as complex and multidimensional.

One concept that I find helpful when considering the complexities of *African* woman is *uMakhulu* which is conceptualised by decolonial scholar, Babalwa Magoqwana (2018a). Magoqwana draws on the ideas of African feminists such as Ifi Amadiume (1987), Nkiri Nzegwu (1994) and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) who theorize the principles of indigenous African matriarchal systems. Although these scholars cite numerous examples to illustrate the uniqueness embodied by precolonial matriarchal societies, suffice it here to mention a few of these to provide context for *uMakhulu* framework. Moreover, a reflection on this scholarship is warranted in support of my key contention in this thesis – deconstruction of hegemonic gendered constructions of Woman. For instance, Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) and Oyěwùmí in *The Invention of Women* (1997) provide a critical appraisal of precolonial social relations in African societies. Relatedly, the scholars contend the imposition of gendered hierarchised and oppositional binaries through colonisation of African societies. Basically, it is argued that “gender categories [woman/man] are [not] universal or timeless ... [or] present in every society at all times” (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. xi). Accordingly, the imposition of ‘gender’ to African societies led to the creation of the category, ‘*woman*’ which in relation to ‘*man*’ is perpetually subordinate and inferiorised. In other words, social relations and identities in precolonial African societies were not necessarily gendered nor hierarchised like they are currently. Rather, in precolonial Yoruban

indigenous societies, Oyěwùmí, (1997) argues ‘seniority<sup>41</sup>’ – not gender – was the organising principle of social relations.

In addition, the indigenous ‘matriarchitarianism’ among the Nnobi people (Amadiume, 2002) like the Yoruba people (Oyěwùmí, 1997, 2016), was undergirded by communality, solidarity, survival, spirituality, personhood and complementarity - all of which transcend gendered hierarchised western-centric social arrangements. Moreover, for Amadiume (2002, p. 43), it is “the matriarchal umbrella” – in which mothers and grandmothers, as the ‘primary educators’ – also fostered female solidarity and empowerment of women and girls. For this thesis, while I do not claim Lesotho to be matriarchal, I am instead inspired by these African values that I consider to be critical to identity construction processes in indigenous African societies. Notably, this scholarship not only details the ethnographic description of precolonial African societies, but it also criticises the epistemic distortions resulting from the colonial imposition of ‘gender’ upon African realities. This scholarship – upon which *uMakhulu* is based – has been criticised for romanticising African women’s power precolonially (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003b) and thus obscuring African women’s gendered oppressions across history. However, for Magoqwana (2018a, b), it serves a significant purpose of deconstructing metanarratives based on exclusivist patriarchal binarized thinking through a re-focus on the indigenous matriarchal African world-sense. By foregrounding principles such as communality, solidarity, relationality and complementarity, as the underpinning of social relations in African societies, this scholarship disrupts fixed, hegemonic constructions of identity in these respects.

Magoqwana conceptualises “*uMakhulu* as a knowledge hub that transfers, not only ‘history’ through *iintsomi* (folktales), but also as a body of indigenous knowledge that stores, transfers and disseminates knowledge and values” (2018a, p. 76). In other words, over and above recognising

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<sup>41</sup> By seniority, Oyěwùmí (2002) refers to chronological age as well one’s position in the kin structure – either through birth or marriage. For the in-marrying, the principle of first-in, last-in informs one’s allocation within this structure - the former assumes a higher position compared to the latter. Typically, older siblings also assume authoritative positions compared to younger siblings. However, Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 42) points out that; “no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation” to emphasise relativity embodied by this arrangement. Therefore, seniority being conditional and ever shifting, females were not perpetually positioned in subordination to males – as was the case in gendered western culture. Relatedly, in her latest manuscript; *What gender is Motherhood?*, Oyěwùmí (2016) expands her main arguments and contestation against colonial distortions of indigenous knowledge systems. She argues that like the institution of seniority, motherhood was a site exemplifying the shift “away from the indigenous seniority-based matipotent ethos to a male-dominant, gender-based one” (Oyěwùmí, 2016 p.7). A charge of essentialism has been levelled against Oyěwùmí’s work by fellow feminist scholars. I reflect on these critiques in section 3.6

the material roles embodied by the elderly-*uMakhulu*, of nurturance, empowerment and caregiving, *uMakhulu* is an indigenous knowledge production institution. By this, the author implies drawing from the indigenous matriarchal world-senses as a basis for knowledge production. In other words, by drawing on these African matriarchal values as the underpinning of constructions of womanhood in the African world-senses, contributes alternative knowledges around the notions of womanhood. Accordingly, in allowing theorisation beyond gendered and hierarchical binary terms, Magoqwana (2018a) refers to *uMakhulu* as a decolonial tool – a point to which I return in section 3.6.

In this thesis, the explanatory value of the matriarchal indigenous world-sense – that undergirds *uMakhulu* – is that it offers an alternative lense with which to review and interrogate deeply, the notions of *African* womanhood. I read this matriarchal system as necessarily embodying values that are critical for disrupting gendered hierarchical binaries according to which the *Mothepa* is ‘Othered’ for not fitting predefined gendered categories. Moreover, placing this indigenous world-sense central to the analysis purported in this thesis – we are better able to uncover unique intricacies central to the African world-senses that affirm constructions of *African* womanhood differently from the western feminist construct of Woman. In so doing, we prepare a distinctive landscape for re-imagining the *Methepa*’s re-constructions of womanhood and agency tied to the African world-senses. Therefore, in all, I consider the *uMakhulu* analytical lens to be a powerful force with which to deconstruct universalist metanarratives – particularly around the Woman question.

However, speaking of privileging the indigenous world-sense, Adésínà (2006, p. 134) reminds us that proposals for endogeneity (and indigeneity) often receive backlash as ‘nativism’. Rather, Adésínà (2006, p. 134) contends that “we are invited to embrace the ‘triumph of the West’” as the gold standard of knowledge production. Essentially, reiterating western-centric discourses – in this instance around the notion of womanhood – would reinforce those false assumptions of western cultural superiority – alluded to earlier. At the same time this would facilitate the re-invisibilisation of indigenous voices and knowledge systems – that I seek to elevate in this thesis. Rather than adopting an oppositional stance to western feminisms constructions of womanhood, I apply the lenses of intersectionality and *uMakhulu* to frame a view ‘from the ground up’. I consider it to be a vehicle through which we can re-cover, re-awaken and re-claim those indigenous aspects central

to African ways of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ a woman. In these subsequent discussions, I give priority to African feminist scholarship that disrupts hegemonic gendered discourses to illustrate how hetero-sexuality, femininity, marriage and motherhood are uniquely located within the indigenous African world-senses. Understood in this manner, assumptions of ‘normativity’ with which hetero-sexuality, femininity, marriage and motherhood are often considered in regard to ‘becoming’ Woman are dispelled.

### **3.5.1. Hetero-sexuality and *African woman***

An alternative view of African women’s sexuality – tied to the indigenous African world-senses – is necessitated by the need to deconstruct normative conceptions of Woman. These counter-narratives, are characteristically devoid of “the blister of lack, the suffocating chastity belt, or weight of propriety” (Gqola, 2005, p. 4) that is often harnessed to ideal, respectable womanhood. In support of the key contentions of this thesis, my intention is to foreground the often silenced and demonised “counter-narratives.....[of] erotic fulfilment, agency, pleasure and desire” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013, p. 35) tied to the indigenous African practices such as labia minora elongation. Thus, considering the foregoing debates, by re-viewing African women’s sexuality ‘from the ground up’, will not only reveal unique narratives of African women’s sexuality, but it also raises questions around normative constructions of ‘respectable’ womanhood tied to sexual repression.

Scholars from across several southern African contexts drew attention to the unique, yet undocumented (not adequately) dynamics of African women’s sexuality linked to the indigenous practice of labia minora elongation. Since the last decade, scholarship from different Eastern and Southern parts of Africa has documented the practice (Arnfred, 2011; Batisai, 2013; Khau, 2009, 2012a, 2012c, 2012e; Martínez Pérez, Bagnol, & Tomás Aznar, 2014; Martínez Pérez, Mubanga, Tomás Aznar, & Bagnol, 2015b; Venganai, 2017; Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2014). Khau (2009, 2012a, 2012c) detailed the practice of labial minora elongation amongst the Basotho. This practice is usually performed before the onset of menstruation while the labia are still soft and easy to pull. It involves massaging and stretching the inner labia using fingers from the top to bottom with or without the use of herbs. While the girls are taught to pull the inner labia themselves, at times they also pull each other’s labia as a way of peer support and motivation. This practice takes place in several places one of which is a private space allocated to young girls within or outside the

household (*thakaneng*), wherein peer-to-peer information sharing takes place (Ngozwana, 2014). Within these spaces, girls congregate to learn cultural values, practices and other issues relevant to girlhood including acceptable sexual practices in an informal setting with or without the guidance of an adult. In addition, young girls learn this process from older siblings and aunts amid their daily chores that included collecting firewood or laundry washing at nearby rivers. Labial minora elongation is a key characteristic of Mosotho girlhood through which the female body is sexually prepared for womanhood.

Batisai (2013, p. 99) confirms that labial minora elongation is a process through which young Zimbabwean girls are prepared for womanhood. She states that “[a]ge played a central role in determining and legitimising the time when girls could access their own bodies through the elongation of the labia in preparation for womanhood”. In this, she refers to a process whose significance is predetermined communally such that once the girl child comes of age – she immediately undergoes the training that would eventually affirm her as a ‘woman’. That labial elongation marks the girl-child’s transition from childhood into womanhood is a sentiment shared by many of the scholars cited above. Elongated labia are believed to occlude the vaginal opening for purposes of trapping vaginal heat and as such act as a sexual pleasure enhancing measure in preparation for a young girl’s marital role in adulthood. Khau (2012e) further points out that in reducing a girl’s sexual desires (*mocheso*), the elongated labia in turn acted as a measure to delay premarital sexual encounters and subsequently delayed early pregnancy. While she views this as beneficial for Basotho girls, she is at the same time critical of the practice citing its sexual repressive tendencies.

While many of the authors have cited benefits tied to this practice, by contrast, for others the practice served nothing other than heteronormative regulatory and prescriptive purposes leading to women’s sexual repression. For example, Babatunde and Durowaiye (2015) argue that this practice tends to reinforce heteronormativity whereby girls are socialised to regard sexual relations between men and women as natural. Khau (2009) corroborates this view by adding that amongst the Basotho, this practice reinforces male sexual supremacy. By this, the authors imply that labial elongation taught during a girl’s prepubertal stage – in preparation for her wifely role of sexually pleasuring her husband – reflects a taken-for-granted assumption that she will ‘naturally’ become a wife to a man. Given the broader hetero-patriarchal context within which women’s sexuality and

womanhood are defined – wherein sexual intercourse is reserved for marriage and sexual pleasure is a male prerogative – these concerns make sense. For a moment, Khau (2009, 2012c) and Babatunde and Durowaiye (2015) raise important points that prompt us to debunk practices such as these for their prescriptive nature particularly at a time when we grapple patriarchal control of our female bodies and sexuality (Chisale, 2016; Chisale & Moyo, 2016; Lewis, 2011; Muhanguzi, 2015; Schlyter, 2009; Stander, 2016; Tamale, 2014).

On the other hand, African feminists, such as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2013, p. 35) and Pat McFadden (2003) caution against reinforcing ideas that regard women as “passive recipients of hetero-masculine prerogatives”. Through the rhetorical decry of ‘male sexual supremacy’- there is an ‘unsaid’ assumption that women participating in the practice of labial elongation are passive victims of patriarchal prescriptions. Instead, these practices bear those ‘hidden excitations’ of women’s sexuality which I intend to expose through the frame of *uMakhulu*; and thus, affirm the ‘erotic’ power for African women (McFadden, 2003). African scholars such as Sylvia Tamale (2005) heeded this call and amongst the Baganda of Uganda, explored the indigenous sexual practice named *Ssenga*. Central to this practice is a range of sexually empowering aspects taught to the young African girl including labial elongation. This indigenous Bagandan practice enabled explicit sexual talk between the paternal aunt and her young niece on sexual pleasure and the ‘erotic’ in spite of a tightly policed heteronormative context (Sekyiamah, 2014).

Likewise, several other African scholars acknowledge the positive aspects of the practice of labial elongation by attesting to its enhancement of sexual pleasure for *both* female and male partners (Bagnol & Mariano, 2012; Batisai, 2013; Martínez Pérez et al., 2014). In addition, scholars acknowledge sexual empowerment enabled through what Martínez Pérez et al. (2014, p. 7) term “autoerotism” and “homoeroticism.” Self and mutual pulling practiced by young girls as part of the process of labial elongation, the authors argue, enables discovery of sexual pleasure inducing points. Bagnol and Mariano confirm that “these practices are related to notions of femininity, *womanhood, eroticism, pleasure* and health. They are an expression of *female strategic [erotic] power*” (2008, p. 2, emphasis added). Therefore, not only is the practice harnessed to a woman’s identity as a ‘real’ African woman (Batisai, 2013; Vanganai, 2017), but it also affirms African women as sexual beings capable of tapping into the ‘forbidden’ erotic and pleasurable sex – contrary to the decry of ‘male sexual supremacy’. These are ‘hidden uniquenesses’ – borne out of

the indigenous African world-senses – which I argue, provide an alternative view that will “give birth to new cultural configurations and empowered femininity” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013 p. 35). This therefore, opens room for a counter-hegemonic discourse of women’s sexuality, sexual pleasure and by extension - womanhood.

As an aside, it is worthy to note that practices that involve any form of genital modification have been subjected to scrutiny by the international world. Practices such as labial elongation and female circumcision have long been perceived negatively in feminist literature as well as international health regulatory bodies such as World Health Organisation<sup>42</sup> (WHO, 1997). For instance, Western feminists criticised female circumcision arguing that it is patriarchally inspired to control African women’s reproduction and repress their sexuality (Dellenborg, 2004). These practices were later classified as ‘harmful traditional practices’ (HPT) or derogatorily labelled as ‘female genital mutilation’ (FGM) and as such have been associated with patriarchal sexual repression of African women. Yet, similar practices such as ‘female genital cosmetic surgery’ (FGCS)<sup>43</sup> performed in western contexts on (predominantly) white women are considered to be liberatory for these women (Braun, 2005; Whitcomb, 2011). Considering the eurocentrism that plagues Western scholarship on African women’s sexuality, this differential labelling for similar practices is not surprising.

In other words, in labelling African practices as ‘traditional’, ‘harmful’ and mutilating conjures the unexpressed view that the latter western practices are in fact ‘modern’, normal and liberating (Arnfred, 2004). These hierarchised and oppositional binaries are reflective of colonial biases according to which the black female body is consistently associated with abnormality, mutilation and thus inferior in relation to the ‘normal’ superior white female body (Lewis, 2005; Tamale, 2004). Accordingly, by implication those African women who endorse the practice of labial elongation are overly oppressed, ‘traditional’ and thus ‘inferior’ whereas rejection thereof means that one is agentic, ‘modern’ and superior. While African feminists, such as Amadiume (2006), Lewis (2005) and Tamale (2006) have rebuked African practices that are repressive to African

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<sup>42</sup> According to the WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA Joint Statement (WHO *et al* 1997) “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of female external genitalia and/or injury to the female genital organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reason” are considered female genital mutilation (FGM) and should be banned.

<sup>43</sup> Female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) includes procedures such as vaginal tightening, labial minora reduction, and hymen reconstruction.

women – they have also challenged these eurocentric misconceptions for their perpetuation of racial stereotypical tendencies.

In their article, *The Politics of Naming Sexual practices*, Bagnol and Mariano (2009, p. 2) challenged the misrepresentation of African practices and instead insisted that labial minora elongation amongst practicing African communities represents ““women’s secret” and express an area of power that women have been developing and protecting despite many forms of oppression over generations”. Given that these practices represent the often silenced, and tabooed aspects – African women’s sexual pleasure and the fact that African women are active sexual beings – the unjustified bannings by WHO are not surprising. My reading and that of many others including Bagnol and Mariano (2009) of these ‘bannings’ and regulatory measures imposed upon the practice of labial elongation, forces me to glance at the historical background (discussed in chapter 2) that is characterised by demeaning metanarratives of African women’s sexuality (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; Batisai, 2013; Lewis, 2005; Marais, 2019; McFadden, 2003; Spronk, 2012; Tamale, 2011, 2014). Accordingly, we are prompted by these bannings of the urgency of rectifying the biases of the past.

Considering this, some African feminists (Amadiume, 2006; Nkosi, 2015; Tamale, 2005; Venganai, 2017) have documented the revival of certain practices that were central to African socialisation processes which were denigrated through the introduction of Christianity (discussed in chapter 2). However, in postcolonial contexts, practices such as labial elongation have now been imbued with dichotomised discourses that posit ‘modern’ read – progressive and civilised against ‘traditional’ read – backward and heathen (Venganai, 2017). For example, Venganai (2017) pointed out that in the urban Zimbabwean contexts, modern ‘kitchen parties’ have replaced indigenous *koomba* and *chinamwari* practices held premaritally to sexually prepare the maiden for her marital role. However, interestingly the latter are considered as heathen and barbaric by some Christian Zimbabwean participants who, instead, endorse Christian forms of socialisation that are not ‘too sexualised’. Nonetheless, the now practiced ‘kitchen parties’ contingently include aspects of ‘sexual nature’; and thus, continue as sites of African women’s sexual empowerment. I read this as a contribution to decoloniality (discussed below), which forces us to re-cover indigenous knowledge systems with the intention of dispelling eurocentrism around African women’s sexuality and by extension *African* womanhood - as I illustrate through this thesis. These unique



practices contradict the discourses of perpetual female sexual repression, thus, affirming of the urgency of studying indigenous African practices ‘in their own right’ – as suggested by Oyewumi (1997); from the vantage points of custodians.

In accord, Black feminist, Patricia Collins emphasises the need for a view ‘from the ground up’ and confirms that;

[j]ust as harnessing the power of the erotic is important for domination, reclaiming and self-defining that same eroticism may constitute one path toward Black women’s empowerment.....[moreover] when self-defined by Black women ourselves, *Black women’s sexualities can become an important place of resistance*” (2000, p. 128 emphasis added).

I read this to imply that while sexuality is used as a force to repress and control women as we have established (Tamale, 2005), realising the ‘erotic’ becomes a powerful resource with which African women can resist patriarchal sexual repression as well to become agents of deconstruction (McFadden, 2003). Indeed, women’s sexual pleasure challenges widely-held hetero-patriarchal ideas of women’s sexual naivety and deconstructs the prescriptions of procreative marital sex (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; Batisai, 2013; Marais, 2019; McFadden, 2003). Realising sexual pleasure, as is suggested by these scholars, affords women erotic power. African feminist, Pat McFadden (2003, p. n.p) confirms that “there is an extremely intimate relationship between sexuality and power, a connection which is manifested in a range of circumstances and experiences”. This point resonates with that raised by Black feminist Audre Lorde (1978) who points out to eroticism as symbolic of Black women’s power and as a source of women’s empowerment and emancipation in all spheres of their lives.

I read this realisation of the erotic power as linked to women’s agency which affords women powerful tools for deconstructing normative constructions of ‘Woman’ that otherwise place the *Methepa* on the margins. Gill (2014, p. 179) posits that “erotic subjectivity” refers to “deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul... [which work] ... toward not only transgressing but transcending and finally transforming hegemonies,” of African women’s sexuality and identity. Therefore, in view of hegemonic constructions of womanhood, the ‘erotic’ power to which I link African women’s sexuality (commonly invisibilised and demonised in hetero-patriarchal contexts) may potentially deconstruct and transform such metanarratives. Thus,

as Collins (2000), Bakare-Yusuf (2013), Amadiume (2006), McFadden (2003) and Tamale (2005, 2011) also suggested, realising women's sexualities from their 'own vantage' points can potentially become a tool with which to transform normative perspectives of female sexual repression and simultaneously re-center women's agency tied to their sexuality.

In other words, if normative constructions of womanhood are tied to sexual repression, then African women's capacity for sexual agency through these indigenous practices, brings into disrepute such assumptions of 'normalcy'. Amadiume, (2006, p. 9) confirms that, "view[ing] sexuality historically and cross-culturally in a changing world" constitutes a powerful tool with which to "expos[e] contradictions in the normative, and interrogat[e] dominant oppressive norms through counter normative alternatives". Since these indigenous practices are suggestive of African female eroticism; and thus, contradictory to the hegemonic female sexual-repression narrative central to Euro-American construct of Woman, what implications does sexual agency hold for notions of *African* womanhood? In other words, the unrelenting idea of sexual passivity, sexual repression, procreative marital sex - as key characteristics of 'respectable' womanhood, do not hold true in traditional African societies, given these context-specific dynamics. Moreover, what implications do these indigenous practices hold for the *Methepa* – who are debarred from Woman – in terms of negotiating womanhood in hetero-patriarchal contexts? These questions are explored and interrogated further in the analysis chapters (5 and 6) of this thesis.

It however, suffices to note that any understanding of *African* womanhood articulated in the African world-senses should heed these unique dynamics. In other words, *African* womanhood and its intricate link with African women's sexuality embodies multiplicity, complexity and multifariousness that needs to be brought to the fore if we are to understand constructions of *African* womanhood in their entirety. This sums my primary contention that womanhood in the African world-senses – disrupts assumptions of normalcy and universality undergirding the hegemonic ideal of Woman. Moreover, through this view from the ground up, we are better able to appreciate how the *Methepa* meaningfully base their constructions of womanhood and agency upon this erotic power that is tied to the African world-senses. This also applies to femininity, marriage and procreativity that I discuss next.

### 3.5.2. Femininity and *African woman*

The construction of femininity – attributes that affirm womanhood – in the African context is defined and shaped by many factors such as race, class, history and culture. To illustrate the multiplicity that characterises ‘femininity’, some scholars refer to femininities – in their plurality (Collins, 2004; Daniels, 2009; Davis, 2017; Gqola, 2016; Harper, 2017; Jaji, 2015) inspired by a myriad of intersecting factors. South African feminist scholar, Dineo Pumla Gqola (2016) corroborates this by offering an overview of the changing historical and socio-economic landscape of contemporary South Africa. This context, she argues, shaped contemporary constructions of femininity and womanhood. Accordingly, this led to the deconstruction of colonial/apartheid tropes of ‘Black femininity’, and thus resulted in “new ways of existing as a [Black] woman...in the emerging [neoliberal and globalising] societies” (2016, p. 120). These “new ways of existing as a woman” resonate with post-feminist scholarship that considers reconfigured femininities to be ‘modern’, liberalist, ‘middle-class’, consumerist and embodying independence, beauty and professionalism (Gqola, 2016; Mojola, 2015; Sennott & Mojola, 2017; Van der Westhuizen, 2017) as well as free sexual expression (Gqola, 2016; Sennott & Mojola, 2017). Undoubtedly, these ‘new’ conceptions of femininities in many ways transgress heteronormative constructions of femininity which necessitate the act of ‘sitting pretty’ (Van der Westhuizen, 2017) as a key characteristic of ideal womanhood. Notably, of additional conceptual importance are spatial dynamics that inform these complexities in constructions of femininity and womanhood in modern contexts.

Feminist geographers explored the linkages between spatial mobility and identity construction (Low, 2009; Massey, 1994) to reflect on the dynamic nature of femininity. Of interest is how “the physical movement of bodies through space” from rural areas to urban cities impacts identity construction as suggested by Giddings and Hovorka (2010, p. 214). The authors argue that a shift from the rural to urban spaces inherently transforms meanings attached to femininity. Accordingly, given the diverse characteristics embodied by each context, what femininity entails in rural areas differs from definitions constructed by urban dwellers. Harrison (2006) corroborates this view by pointing to contrasting dynamics of urban from rural contexts. In particular, this author illuminates urban cities as arenas of social interaction; and thus, attributes ideological shifts around ‘femininity’ to these relations. For Giddings and Hovorka (2010, p. 214), this physical-cultural-

ideological shifting “is central in its creation of the possibility for the contestation, modification or entrenchment of behaviours, norms and ideas”, thus inciting reconfigured notions of femininity in urban contexts that are in contrast from its rural spaces. This resonates with socio-historical transformations – ‘passage of time’ (Batisai, 2013) and resultant reconfigurations of femininities alluded to by Gqola and others. Thus, at the core of ‘what it means to be feminine’, and by extension, affirming ideal womanhood, are intersecting and dynamic socio-cultural spatio-temporal forces that in turn reveal the precariousness of ‘womanhood’.

However, if we take a step back to reflect and unpack the ‘new’ in “new ways of existing as a woman,” I argue that “new” attributes of ‘independence’ and ‘sexual expression’, for instance, are not so “new” with regard to African ways of being a woman. Besides, Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018, p. 10) cautioned that positing ‘progressive’ attributes as ‘new’, reinforces “the notion that African women are shackled by immutable cultural expectations that limit women’s possibilities outside of the domestic” - read as the ‘traditional’ way of being an African woman. This perspective, the authors argue is tied to the idea that posits the west as the epitome of empowerment and thus re-iterates ‘feminist arrogance’ (alluded to in preceding discussions). Thus, by analysing femininity ‘from the ground up’, I seek to foreground African uniqueness in support of a contention that independent type femininity is not so ‘new’ when it comes to the African world-senses. Correspondingly, in the preceding section, I detailed indigenous practices that enhance and support the construction of African women’s sexuality as not only existent, but empowering. The discussions that follow reveal unique dynamics that inform constructions of African femininities and by extension independent-type constructions of *African* womanhood – thus bringing into question assumptions of normality borne by Woman.

Without rehearsing the discussions referenced earlier on African matriarchal systems, it suffices here to acknowledge – as my predecessors have done before me – the unique intricacies embodied by this African world-sense through which femininities are affirmed ‘differently’ for African women (Amadiume, 1987, 2002; Bádéjò, 1998; Collins, 2000, 2004; Dosekun, 2016; Jaji, 2015). For instance, Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins argues that “[f]rom African-influenced perspectives ... [femininity] is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit, and body are not conceptualised as separate, oppositional spheres” (2000, p. 170). Collins prompts us to review African femininities through a multifocal lense so that the myriad of converging social,

symbolic, and spiritual attributes – that shape them can be revealed. Thus, given that the body does not exist independently of the mind and spirit, femininities in the African world-senses are not confined to bodily processes nor bodily makeup.

A look at the African custom of *hlonipha* reveals these complexities. Notably, while I discuss it under the rubric of femininity, *hlonipha*, in the true African world-senses is not ‘gendered’ but instead is a “complex African ‘custom of [mutual] respect’” (Rudwick & Shange, 2009, p. 68). Accordingly, *hlonipha* transcends an embodied behavioural code; and instead, prescribes deferential conduct for “others, include[ing] respecting elders, people who are younger than you, your peers, and children (Katide, 2017, p. 126). Moreover, Katide (2017, p. 50) adds that the custom of respect extends beyond the world of the living and encompasses a respectful “relationship with God, ancestors, as well as nature”. In other words, *hlonipha* is a multipronged custom constituted by embodied, spiritual, communal and ancestral values. In view of socialising children, *hlonipha* forms part of the indigenous induction processes that prepare younger generations for adulthood. For instance, as mentioned in chapter 2, through the indigenous initiation schools, girl [and boy] children are not only taught cultural aspects but also social expectations and moral values including how to be respectful and self-respecting persons (Hlatshwayo, 2017; Katide, 2017; Ngunjiri, 2007; Obioha & T’soeunyane, 2012). Ngunjiri (2007) points out that while these institutions are led by the elderly, their enforcement is also spiritual and communal given that nothing ever takes place in isolation in the African world-senses. Fundamentally, socialisation processes for younger generations are undergirded by communal and spiritual need of grooming socially acceptable persons and respectable community members – more so than merely ‘gendered’ women typified by the terms of western culture.

The inculcation of attributes that foster ‘personhood’ reveals further complexity in how femininities are defined and by extension the notions of womanhood when it comes to the African world-senses. The notions of personhood and communality are captured in the African proverb; *motho ke motho ka batho*<sup>44</sup> in which a person is defined by reference to the entire community

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<sup>44</sup> *motho ke motho ka batho* - as part of the African Ubuntu-Botho values stresses communality, interdependence and co-existence. To quote Mkhize “The African view of personhood denies that a person can be described solely in terms of the physical and psychological properties. It is with reference to the community that a person is defined. The importance of the community in self-definition is summed up by Mbiti (1970), “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”. . . It is this rootedness of the self-in-community that gives rise to sayings such as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni)/*Motho ke motho ka batho babang* (Sotho). These roughly translate to, “It is through others that one attains selfhood.” (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 21). For an extended enquiry on this worldview, there is a copious body of literature available in this regard (see Khoza, 2011; Mbigi, 1996; Ndlovu, 2015; Venter, 2004), my mention of it here is tied to the framework *uMakhulu* upon which I base an African worldsense of identity construction.

within which they exist (Letseka, 2013). Letseka (2013, p. 340) points out that “community plays a vital role both as catalyst and as prescriber of norms in the stated journey of the individual towards personhood”. In other words, it is through interaction with the entire community that one learns the essential attributes – dignity, morality, cognition and respect – that underpin their *becoming* persons. Notably, the notion of ‘personhood’ like *hlonipho*, are non-gendered attributes. Thus, resonant with the concept of *Nmadu* – “unifying moral code and culture generating affective relationship” (Amadiume, 1997, p. 85) personhood like *hlonipho* are fundamental attributes for fostering cohesion, collectivity and harmony in African communities. Again, these form the basis of identity construction for younger generations in preparation for their social and communal roles in adulthood. This adds further complexity in how enculturation processes are understood and by extension how womanhood is constructed in African contexts. Emphasis on non-gendered, communal, and spiritual attributes taught to children - regardless of sex, ultimately informs different and complex notions of womanhood tied to the indigenous world-senses. By disrupting gendered binarized categories upon which Woman is based, the African world-senses reveal complex constructions of identities that foreground personhood rather than gender. Thus, in view of the key concerns of this thesis – deconstructing normative constructions of womanhood – the uniqueness borne by the indigenous world-senses is also a critical lens through which we can imagine the re-constructions of womanhood from the world-senses of the *Methepa*.

In addition, productivity and functionality inform an image of womanhood that bears complexities tied to the African world-senses. Collins explains that, “[femininity] is functional in that it has no meaning independent of the group...participating in the group and being a *functioning individual* who strives for harmony is key to assessing an individual’s [femininity]” (2000, p. 170 emphasis added). In other words, fulfilment of functional and harmonising roles that ensure the survival of the entire community is a fundamental attribute that affirms true womanhood in the African world-senses (Hlatshwayo, 2017; Katide, 2017). Although most empirical studies conducted in African contexts do not cite these values per se, I want to suggest that they are reflected in scholars’ articulations of construction of femininities in diverse African contexts (Batisai, 2013; Hlatshwayo, 2017; Katide, 2017; Nanegbe, 2016; Rehema, Verhan, Emmanuel, & Douglas, 2014; Setlhabi, 2014; Venganai, 2017). For example, Batisai (2013) reported that the elderly Zimbabwean women in her study, as young girls, were allocated duties; both within the household - cooking, cleaning (constructed as feminine) and outside - cattle herding (constructed as

masculine role in gendered contexts). This is contrary to the script that confines domestic duties to the gendered kitchen space (Aleck & Thembhani, 2016; Motsa, 2018) constructed as an ideal site of gender construction according to western culture.

However, read against the indigenous African world-senses through *uMakhulu*, girls' engagement with multiple tasks reflects a division of labour that is complementary and purposed for ensuring continuity, survival and harmony within the kin network. These resonate with being a functional member mandated to ensure the continuous operation of various aspects including domestic affairs, farming and herding livestock - all in the name of survival. Therefore, considering the evidence presented here, I suggest that instead of articulating 'independent' type femininities as "new ways of existing as a woman" alluded to by Gqola, I read instead, a 're-awakening' of the indigenous attributes (*makhabane*) inscribed from childhood, that are embodied by African women. In other words, I read these independent-type femininities as reflective of African ways of 'being' woman, that thus brings into disrepute the normality and fixity afforded dominant constructions of Woman. Marriage and motherhood, when conceptualised in the African world-senses also reveal such complexities.

### **3.5.3 Wifhood-motherhood is real *African* womanhood**

In the previous sub-section, I outlined how femininity when conceptualised from the African world-senses reveals unique features that inform unique constructions of *African* womanhood. In this subsection, of significance to this thesis is a reflection on marriage and motherhood as key features considered to be the underpin of 'real' womanhood. Fundamentally, the diversities, multiplicities and complexities of the indigenous African marriage institution constitute a means through which African women are afforded power and social respect. In addition, a reflection on African feminist debates on motherhood and mothering reveal them as meaningful and as a source of power for African women. Therefore, the African feminist scholarship that I engage here, aligns with the key argument of this thesis and raises critical questions around the normalcy purported by the construct Woman. Moreover, it levels the ground for explorations of the *Methepa*'s reconstruction of womanhood and agency. As such, the framework of *uMakhulu* remains an ideal lens through which to reveal the complexities of marriage, motherhood and womanhood.

One such aspect is the linkage of marriage to the customary practice of *bohali* (in Sesotho) or *lobolo* in isiZulu<sup>45</sup> (Nyanungo, 2013) – as alluded to in chapter 2. African scholars have written extensively on the customary practice of *bohali/lobolo* amongst African communities and its centrality to the African marriage institution as a symbolic, compensatory gesture by the groom to the maiden’s kin (Ellece, 2011; Nyanungo, 2013; Rudwick & Posel, 2015; Shetler, 2015; Shope, 2006; Tamale, 2008). Scholars (Mohlabane et al., 2019; Moyo, 2004; Nanegbe, 2016; Nyanungo, 2013; Obioha & T’soeunyane, 2012; Oyèwùmí, 1997; Phoofolo, 2007) acknowledged this aspect as a significant marker of long-lasting relations between two marrying families, clans, ancestors and communities rather than two marrying individuals. Moreover, in these respects, marriage is regarded as symbolic for the establishment of unity, trust and care between those involved and as such can be considered as a communal rather than an individual affair. Linked to this aspect therefore is the notion of social respect and womanhood anchored upon the customary practice of *bohali/lobolo*.

The significance of marriage validated through the exchange of *bohali/lobolo* is linked to women’s affirmation of ‘real’ African womanhood. For instance, in the South African context Rudwick and Posel (2015) point out that *lobolo* amongst the amaZulu ethnic group has implications for women’s affirmation of womanhood. In other words, ‘real’ African womanhood is tied to marriage *and* being *lobola’ed*, as they put it. Therefore, African women are afforded some leverage and respectability through these unique dynamics of the African marriage institution (Chisale, 2017; Fielding-Miller et al., 2016; Plank, 2018; Sennott & Mojola, 2017). Plank (2018) points out that the social respect earned through marriage reflects its socio-cultural significance among African communities. This implies that while marriage affirms womanhood, its social significance transcends the individual woman and instead encompasses kin as well as the communities within which these women exist. Moreover, the aspects of relationality and communality captured in this

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<sup>45</sup> *Bohali (Lobolo)* generally consists of a combination of material and monetary items that the family of the groom gives to the family of the bride. It is commonly believed that these items are given by the groom and his family as an expression of gratitude to the family of the bride. In addition to gratitude, bride wealth is also tied to rights over children and exclusive sexual rights over the woman. In many African societies, a man only has legitimate rights over children when he has given bride-wealth for the woman with whom he bears the children. Wealth comes to the family when daughters are married. This wealth is then used by the sons of that family to marry daughters from other families (Nyanungo, 2013, p. 65). This description reflects the symbolism that surrounds the customary practice and thus I consider the concept of ‘bride-price’ as a shortfall for capturing the complexities of *bohali*. Therefore, I opt to use ‘local concepts’ lest I misrepresent local experiences and institutions with unbecomingly imposed concepts (Magoqwana 2018)



process resonate with the values that are central to *uMakhulu* institution. In addition, *African* women earn procreative rights through marriage and the customary institution of *bohali/lobolo*.

The significance of marriage and its connection to the provision of procreative rights as the underpinning of ideal womanhood has also been acknowledged by African feminists. African theologian, Oduyoye confirms that “marriage becomes a necessity, a cultivated institution upheld by society for the expedience of orderly procreation” (1995, p. 64), all of which are validated through the exchange of *bohali/lobola*. In many African contexts, a woman’s fecundity is valued for extension of patrilineage; and thus, only legitimised within the marriage setting to ascertain legitimacy of the off-spring (Hlatshwayo, 2017; Muhonja, 2013; Nyanungo, 2013). Accordingly, having affirmed this mandate, a woman is allotted social recognition as a ‘real’ *African* woman. At first glance, the necessity of marriage for procreation may be reflective of heteronormative prescriptions of procreative marital sex – as the underpinning of real womanhood. By contrast, contesting universalist ‘gendering’ of African institutions, Oyěwùmí (2000, 2016) insists that marriage in African communities serves social purposes as opposed to gendered sexual relations. Thus, failure to marry implies that one ‘forfeits’ the social respectability as well as rights to legitimate procreation afforded by marriage. Moreover, because the meanings tied to marriage transcend the individual woman, it also suggests failure in establishing those kin and community networks through the exchange of *bohali*. These complexities embodied by marriage, procreation and womanhood that are born out of the African world-senses thus prompt a deeper interrogation of ‘normative’ constructions of womanhood.

On one hand, while these unique features debase western feminist constructions that universalise a particular notion of Woman - tied to marriage and motherhood as oppressive. However, on the other hand that an *African* woman is afforded social significance as a ‘real’ woman, in as far as they have affirmed the heterosexual marital role, failure which they are stigmatised – is also a critical question that this thesis seeks to interrogate. Thus, while I raise ideological critique in this respect, there are certain complexities that require deeper reflection – which I expand upon further down. Before that, however, a refocus on the institution of motherhood beyond its patriarchal underpinnings, is warranted.

Accordingly, African feminist scholars have attempted to read and emphasise empowering meanings of motherhood for African women. For instance, African theologian Oduyoye asserts

that “[a]t the deep center of a woman’s being, uncontrolled and unknown by any other human being, lies motherhood” (1995, p.143). In this, she reinforces the idea of motherhood as *sine qua non* of African womanhood which also holds deeper meanings for her subjectivity. Oyěwùmí (2002, 2000) confirms that by separating the role of motherhood (believed to conjure power) from that of ‘wife’ (regarded as subordinate to a superior husband), motherhood affords African women a sense of power. Accordingly, Oyěwùmí (2002, 2016) posits that motherhood is oppressive in western culture given that it is tied to the ever-oppressed role of ‘wife’ housed within a nuclear familial setting. By contrast, Oyěwùmí (2016) argues that in the African world-sense, the two roles, wifehood and motherhood are separate because the latter is tied to progeny rather than sexual relations to a man, as the argument goes. Thus, motherhood in the African world-senses tied to biological and mystical power is the underpinning of the uniqueness embodied by African womanhood. Essentially, that this affords African women respect and power posits African womanhood in a different and contradictory light to ‘normative’ and universalist western-centric constructions of Woman. As such, it debases assumptions of normalcy with regard to ‘womanhood’ anchored upon oppressive notions of motherhood.

The unique dynamics centered around the African institution of motherhood reveal it to be multidimensional and complex rather than simplistic. For these reasons, scholars like Oyěwùmí proclaim that “motherhood itself is not one thing; rather, it suggests a multiplicity of possibilities for social categorization” (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 161). In this statement, Oyěwùmí reflects on how motherhood in the African world-senses affords African women social respect and authority as well as space to construct positive subjectivities. Relatedly, the multiplicity embodied by motherhood includes the notion of ‘lesbian motherhood’ – a typically invisibilised role (Distiller, 2011; Potgieter, 2003; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017) particularly in African feminist scholarship. For a different often silenced perspective on motherhood and womanhood I seek to digress from the taken-for-granted African feminist (like western feminisms) constructions of motherhood as necessarily heterosexual.

As an aside, noteworthy is that African feminists have expressed reservations for lesbianism in Africa. For instance, African feminist Modupe Kolawole<sup>46</sup> (1997, p. 15) asserts that “to the

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<sup>46</sup> Emphasising the differences between the African American notion of Womanism (conceptualised by Alice Walker as an alternative to feminism) and that coined by African feminists, Kolawole referred to lesbian identities endorsed by the former. By contrast, lesbianism is regarded as misrepresentation of the realities of African women.

majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view". Thus, this explains the silence around lesbian, like 'unmarried' women's constructions of womanhood and motherhood in African feminist theories. Nonetheless, South African feminist scholar, Potgieter (2003, p. 144) in dispute of the marginalisation of this minority group emphatically states that "[m]otherhood is thus a feature of womanhood whether the woman defines herself as lesbian, heterosexual or uses neither of these labels". This quotation expresses a view that motherhood is a powerful and meaningful aspect of *African* womanhood as has been reflected to be a central theme in African feminist scholarship – including those women in lesbian relationships. This adds further complexity to normative constructions of womanhood in which woman as wife/mother necessarily exists as subordinate within a heterosexual marital relationship.

That motherhood affords the marginal Black woman space to construct positive subjectivities, resonates with the idea that 'mothering' is "a site of power for Black women" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. xi). I read this statement as an expansion of the foregoing in that it foregrounds mothering as powerful and as underpinning of Black women's agency. Collins confirms that:

motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment (Collins, 2000, p. 176).

Reflecting on Black women's experiences of oppression and marginalisation, Lawson (2000, p. 26) corroborates Collins' assertion by stating that "mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression in societies that marginalise Black women". In other words, mothering becomes a source of empowerment that also affords the marginalised Black woman - regardless of marital status and sexual orientation – space to construct agency – from within her state of marginality. Thus, woven together with the African feminist scholarship that foregrounds a reinterpretation of the institution of motherhood, this scholarship is representative of an alternative narrative of *African* womanhood – that is based on motherhood as a source of empowerment and agency for African women.

This is linked to several aspects tied to the African world-senses, such as African mother's roles as providers for their offspring. For example, Collins illuminates that:

[m]othering [in Africa] was not a privatized nurturing “occupation” reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men. Instead, for African women, emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival were interwoven as interdependent, complementary dimensions of motherhood (Collins, 2005, p. 287).

In this, she stresses the particularities central to African world-senses that marked motherhood, and thus womanhood, as constituted by independence, provider-ship and communalism. Moreover, because the dependency attribute characteristic to western-centric ‘hegemonic’ femininity is incongruent with African realities, motherhood in African communities is not in opposition to women’s provider roles. Instead, these were co-existent and complementary for African women (Akujobi, 2011; Chaney, 2011; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Ogden, 1996; Oyěwùmí, 2016) – and thus underpinning African women’s power and social respectability (Collins, 2000; Oyěwùmí, 2016; Pala, 2013). This scholarship foregrounds an indigenous view of the institution of motherhood as meaningful as well as an anchor for agentic and empowered forms of *African* womanhood.

In essence, this scholarship deconstructs dominant western-centric ‘absolute truths’ that posit Woman – based on oppressive constructions of marriage and motherhood – as the ‘alpha and omega’ of being a woman. Instead, I read the complexities revealed by this analysis as reflective of agentic forms of *African* womanhood tied to motherhood and women’s mothering experiences. This allows a reflection on how these unique African features of motherhood can be drawn upon by the *Mothepe* – the ‘Other’ in hetero-patriarchal terms – as critical tools with which to deconstruct and reconfigure womanhood from her state of marginality. Nonetheless, while this scholarship – positing motherhood as an essence of *African* womanhood – raises pertinent epistemological questions pertaining to the notion of womanhood, it received backlash from fellow African feminist scholars (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003a; Lewis, 2001; McFadden, 2001; Segalo, 2013) for its perceived essentialist connotations.

Rather than rehearsing the critiques here, suffice it to remind the reader that the central contention is that like western feminists, African feminists challenged essentialist conceptions of marriage and motherhood arguing that they reinforce patriarchal prescripts that curtail African women’s choices by trapping *African* womanhood within motherhood. Desiree Lewis observes that while

this scholarship serves to emphasise a stance oppositional to the west, it simultaneously reinforces “historically determined, profoundly oppressive and coercively policed...” (2001, p. 4) patriarchally defined identities. As such, these ‘essentialist’ perspectives therefore reinforce the “systems we set out to critique” (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003a, p. 3). Indeed, while the pro-motherhood frame sought to present an alternative view that privileges the ‘endogenous’ realities of the African world-senses - also endorsed through *uMakhulu* - it also poses a risk of reinforcing the normalcy with which motherhood is essentialised to femaleness; and thus, curtails women’s choices. In its normalised state, it also implies that those failing to affirm ‘motherhood’ or wifehood for that matter, for any reason, will be secluded from the identity, Woman. Therefore, while *uMakhulu* allows us to foreground the indigenous, it nonetheless forecloses a view of how, in contemporary contexts governed by religio-hetero-patriarchal norms, femininity, wifehood and motherhood become prescriptive and potentially oppressive to women.

However, given the complexities born out of the colonial history of Africa, and a context within which these prescriptive notions of *African* womanhood are housed, their deeper exploration is warranted. In other words, as opposed to simplistically debunking these normalised hetero-patriarchal constructions, I reiterate a question posed by Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018, p. 13); “[h]ow can we undo and redo that which we hardly understand?” Thus, deconstructing normative conceptions that essentialise marriage to womanhood - as reflected in the foregoing - warrants critical reflection of the colonial history to which African feminists have drawn attention. Accordingly, they contend that these essentially subordinate images of *African* womanhood, through which *African* women are posited as gendered subjects confined to the domestic marital setting, have colonial origins (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003a; Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Therefore, historicising these prescriptive norms (an argument expanded upon in Chapter 2) provides us the necessary context within which we can better make sense of their contemporary articulations and invocations in postcolonial African societies. Of interest in particular is how this epoch has shaped and reshaped constructions of womanhood as well as the terms of reference undergirding those definitions. My argument, then, is that the current articulation of *African* womanhood – upon which the marginalisation of the *Methepa* is based – reflects hierarchical oppositional binaries that characterised colonial ideologies. Moreover, my critical engagement with feminist scholarship on womanhood revealed a variety of biases in western feminist conceptions of womanhood. Therefore, I make a claim for the need to re-view

the notion of *Mosotho* womanhood through a lens that has the potential to expose the biases inherent to the construct in contemporary Lesotho.

In the next section, I discuss the theoretical landscape undergirding this thesis constituted by intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminist theories.

### **3.6. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for this thesis is undergirded by intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminist theories that epitomise the need to deconstruct the biases of modernity/coloniality that plague African constructions of identity and agency. By foregrounding a locus of enunciation born from the periphery, these theories recuperate the subaltern as an agent by centralising, historicising and deconstructing knowledge production, identity construction and agency. This thesis thus posits a decolonial feminist critique against eurocentric conceptions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency. In so doing, I seek to reveal and challenge “the most basic, but hidden assumptions” about the postcolonial notion of [*Mosotho*] woman (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. ix). This framework also engages agency via self-definition as conceptualised by Black feminisms.

#### **3.6.1. Decolonial theory**

Decolonial scholarship is broad and constituted by its main concepts: ‘modernity/coloniality’, ‘border thinking’, ‘colonial difference’, ‘coloniality of power’, knowledge, being and coloniality of gender, some of which I outline briefly below to map the linkage between colonisation, coloniality and decoloniality. Notably, the basic assumption of decolonial scholarship is that coloniality, born out of colonial conquest, persists in postcolonial societies including those on the African continent. Thus, decoloniality is a response to coloniality of power, knowledge, being and gender- as is outlined in this section.

The decolonial philosopher Maldonado-Torres provided a clear distinction between ‘colonialism’ and ‘coloniality’ in which he posits that:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation of a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor,

intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism (2007, p. 243).

Accordingly, ‘coloniality’ is characterised by power inequalities that emerged during colonisation, but that have since continued to shape all spheres of modern-day life in post-independence states. In other words, despite the end of formal colonisation, coloniality persists as “the most general form of domination in the world today” (Quijano, 2007, p. 170). It is a hegemonic world order – characterised by racialised, hierarchised categories – in which European people (colonisers) were constructed as being ‘naturally’ privileged and superior to non-European people (colonised). According to Lugones, Europeans were mythically defined as “the most advanced moment on the linear, unidirectional, continuous path of the species” (Lugones, 2007, p. 192) and anything non-European as the opposite to this ideal. African scholars such as (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013a) link these racist ideologies with the persistent inequalities seen across all spheres of life on the African continent today. As such, the persistent unequal and oppressive power relations between Africa and the West as well as within the continent reflect Africa’s colonial past. This can be extrapolated to racialised, gendered relations and the ensuing power inequalities which remain characteristic of postcolonial Africa today.

For Walter Mignolo, “coloniality is the ‘darker side of modernity’” (2007, p. 159). The hierarchised/oppositional racist ideologies that characterised colonisation were sine qua non of modernity in Europe. Therefore, seen as the invisibilised aftermath of European ‘modernity’, coloniality is constituted by the persistence of dehumanisation of non-European people enforced through brutal violence during the processes of colonisation. To Europeans, ‘modernity’ meant civilisation and salvation, whereas in hindsight, it simultaneously concealed ‘coloniality’- characterised by oppression of African communities in the non-European contexts (Chiumbu, 2016). Therefore, Mignolo claims the co-existence of modernity/coloniality and as such any efforts to discern the two is virtually impossible because “there is no modernity without coloniality, that coloniality is constitutive of modernity” (2007, p. 162). This scholarship begs the recognition of the idea that ‘colonial difference’ that is characteristic of coloniality continues to plague global structures of power, knowledge production and identity constructions in postcolonial African societies, including Lesotho - hence the concepts coloniality of power, knowledge and being that I briefly explain below.

*Coloniality of power* was coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, and refers to racialised and hierarchical forces of power that govern multiple dimensions of social life including labour, sexuality, subjectivity and authority (Quijano, 2000). Accordingly, racial differences were used to rearrange all aspects of indigenous African lives; for instance, race determined the arrangement of sexuality in terms of superiority (European as chaste) and inferiority (non-European as grotesque). This complex matrix of intersecting forces of power was the basis of subsequent decolonial concepts like knowledge, being and gender (Grosfoguel, 2011; Mendoza, 2015). *Coloniality of knowledge* is characterised by eurocentrism in which the European knowledges and epistemes are privileged whilst all others are invisibilised and marginalised (Mignolo, 2007). Lastly, *coloniality of being* then refers to the persistent “invisibility and dehumanization” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 257) of subaltern people that has left profound scarring on the subaltern’s constructions of identity. Undergirding coloniality of being is Franz Fanon’s concept of ‘the wretched of the earth’ according to which “[m]arginalised people are thus seen as non-beings, therefore not given an opportunity to articulate their everyday lived experiences” (Chiumbu, 2016, p. 421). In his definition, Maldonado-Torres thus emphasises the pervasiveness of coloniality and its reign in virtually all spheres of modern life, including “in *common sense*, in the *self-image* of peoples, in *aspirations of self*” (2007, p. 243 emphasis added). In other words, coloniality continues to plague the ways in which we, the subaltern, define ourselves and how our identities as well as agency are constructed. Moreover, the meanings that each of our identities stand for and mean in society, continue to be shaped by racialised oppositional hierarchies, born from colonial conquest in Africa. Therefore, ‘coloniality’ and all its constituents prompted decolonial scholars to re-look at, interrogate and address these biases; hence, to the question, “Why decoloniality in the 21st century?” Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013b, p. 6) gives a straightforward answer: “coloniality is still operative and active and needs to be decolonized”. In other words, decoloniality as a response to coloniality seeks to expose, critique and address the continuities of colonisation in postcolonial states. As such, decolonial theory offers an insightful reflection on the present-day Africa as well as the persistence of its colonial history in shaping African realities. Therefore, its value for my study lies in allowing a re-reading of how *African* womanhood continues to be entangled with biases from the colonial past in postcolonial African states today. Moreover, it allows a critical theoretical analysis of the *Methepa*’s agency grounded in the African world-senses. This, I suggest, has perpetually been concealed and thus invisibilised at the hands of eurocentrism and its



supporting structures. In my thesis, I therefore propose the need to decolonise knowledge production, identity constructions and agency.

The urgency with which the decolonial approach is required to deconstruct and address biases of the past that continue to plague us, African women and our subjectivities, as well as our knowledge production systems, cannot be overemphasised. However, within decolonial scholarship, the silencing of gender is deafening as postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars have pointed out (Giraldo, 2016; Lugones, 2010, 2016; Mendez, 2015; Mendoza, 2015). I argue that by silencing gender issues, male decolonial scholars reinforce the injustices that they so much seek to dismantle. Moreover, this ‘androcentricism’ that plagues decolonial scholarship is problematic in that it silences the ways in which coloniality also tends to be gendered as much as it is racist (Giraldo, 2016). To overcome this short-sightedness, Lugones (2007, 2010, 2016) conceptualised coloniality of gender in which she reviews the colonial/modern system as characterised by intersecting forces: racial, sexist and patriarchal, upon which hierarchical gendered, racist categories were constructed.

### **3.6.2. Decolonial feminism**

Decolonial feminism is a response to the ‘coloniality of gender’. Coloniality of gender is linked to and is an extension of Quijano’s concept of ‘coloniality of power’. Lugones (2010) argues that Quijano acknowledges race and gender as constituents of hierarchical and oppositional power relations of colonial/modernity; however, his discussion tends to downplay the role of gender. Moreover, Quijano’s coloniality of power tends to naturalise ‘gender’ as if it pre-existed coloniality, reflected in his lack of critical engagement with gender in the process. By drawing from the work of Oyěwùmí and other anticolonial feminists, Lugones challenges Quijano’s work to illustrate that gender, like race as an organising principle of power relations, knowledges and being, is born out of the aftermath of colonisation. Like Oyěwùmí, Lugones (2007, p. 190) is insistent that ‘gender’ as we have come to understand it – bearing colonial biases – ought to be decolonised:

Gender does not need to organize social arrangements, including social sexual arrangements. But gender arrangements need not be either heterosexual or patriarchal...Biological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy [borne by gender]

are all characteristic of what I call the light side of the colonial/modern organization of gender.

Reiterating Oyěwùmí's contention, Lugones (2007, p. 190) argues against the essentialist assumptions that gender be anchored upon "[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy". This ideology, the scholars argue, reiterates the hegemony of gendered racialised relations borne out of colonial/modernity. Accordingly, the imposition of gendered racialised hierarchies to colonial states such as Lesotho, not only resulted in the dehumanisation of the colonised but it ultimately shaped constructions of inferiorized and subordinate forms of feminine identity - as reflected upon in Chapter 2.

Therefore, Lugones emphasises that "[u]nlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power" (2010, p. 746), including the constructions of Woman. The ideologies central to colonialism and its aftermath, coloniality remain deeply engraved in how womanhood is defined in postcolonial African societies like Lesotho. In particular the binarized categories; 'woman/not woman' human/ not human' that were central to the colonial logic continue to be felt in how womanhood- being essentialised to particular attributes such as marriage - is understood. For example, in postcolonial Lesotho, women who are not married are stigmatised and othered and as such excluded from identifying with the hetero-patriarchal socially accepted understanding of *Mosotho* womanhood. This 'othering', I argue reflects coloniality of gender. Thus, this calls for deconstructive decolonial feminist analyses for interrogating and rectifying persistent colonial biases in constructions of womanhood.

The decolonial feminist theoretical approach proposed here is heavily influenced by intersecting African and Black feminisms. Earlier in this chapter I referenced the matriarchal scholarship undergirded by the works of Oyěwùmí (1997, 2016), Amadiume (1987, 2002) – linked to the framework of *uMakhulu*. Therefore, without rehearsing the scholarship here, suffice it to remind the reader of the deconstructive tone embodied by these works for reimagining 'identity' construction beyond normative discourses that are premised upon binarized, racialised, gendered oppositional categories. The critical role of this scholarship in deconstructing dominant western-centric 'absolute truths' has been acknowledged by fellow African scholars. For example, African sociologist, Adésínà (2010, p. 4), reads these works potential for "instigat[ing] distinct epistemic

insights or lead to epistemic rupture”. In accord, Coetzee (2017, p. 39) proposes that Oyěwùmí’s works in particular constitute, “a resistant response to the colonial erasure of African worlds, cultures and thought and the ways in which African peoples bring value and meaning into the world”. Thus, the author concludes that it is an African feminist “decolonising force” holding “unique epistemological position that is rich in resources to subvert, rupture and enrich the dominant systems of knowledge” (2017, p. 1). For a thesis that seeks to interrogate and deconstruct normative constructions of womanhood - plagued by coloniality – I share the sentiments embodied by these assertions.

I read Oyěwùmí’s works as critical deconstructive tools with which to unsettle taken-for-granted ‘truths’ of constructions of *African* womanhood. Concomitant to her dispute against ‘gender’ as an imposed distortive canon to African realities, Oyěwùmí also contends eurocentrism that plagues knowledge production. In strive to recover African knowledges, she insists that: “[t]his global context for knowledge production must be taken into account in our quest to comprehend African realities and indeed the human condition” (Oyěwùmí, 2002, p. 1). I read this to be inclusive of how we analyse and conceptualise womanhood in the African context. While I draw on Oyěwùmí’s insightful work, in particular her ideas on historicising and indigenising social phenomena, I also take very seriously, the critiques<sup>47</sup> levelled against her work. Notwithstanding, I find her work to embody a critical deconstructive stance against both western and African scholarship that uncritically locates African realities within alien frameworks that in turn distort African realities. Moreover, central to Oyěwùmí’s critique is that these distortions ultimately impose contradictory meanings that limit and misrepresent indigenous African knowledges. Of relevance to this thesis is Oyěwùmí’s compelling argument that raises critical genealogical questions about constructs such as Woman; and thus, prompts their deeper, historicised interrogation in contemporary African contexts. Moreover, the uniqueness and complexities borne out of such analyses are what bring into disrepute dominant systems of knowledge that have long

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<sup>47</sup> For instance, the major contention is her use of linguistic translation of Yoruba language to English upon which she bases her argument of a genderless pre-colonial Yoruba society (see Bakare-Yusuf, 2003b). Other critics (Mama, 2001; Olajubu, 2004; Olupona, 2002) have disputed Oyěwùmí’s claims of a genderless pre-colonial Yoruba society. Amina Mama insisted that at no point in Yoruba history has gender been non-existent; rather she argues “there is ample evidence to suggest that gender, in all its diverse manifestations, has long been one of the central organising principles of African societies, past and present” (2001, p. 69). Apusigah (2008, p. 24) commends Oyěwùmí’s work for unsettling re-colonising endeavours; however, she raises concerns relating to “culturalization of gender... romanticisation of ethnic culture”, also known as essentialised relativism and thus potentially threatening for gender scholars.

been regarded as universal and western-centric. Therefore, the epistemic shift that her work embodies flags falsity in regard to ‘normative’ conceptions of subjectivities in postcolonial African societies. It is this disruptive epistemic stance that draws me to her work (and other African feminists) for a decolonial feminist analysis of womanhood and agency.

Integrated with Oyěwùmí’s work that raises critical questions regarding the Africanisation, historicisation and deconstruction of phenomena, I draw on the work of Black feminisms. This school of thought raises similar sentiments for subverting and deconstructing hegemonic racialised and gendered discourses. Black feminist theories also give voice to marginalised Black women’s resistances to complex oppressions. Thus, I read these scholars as foregrounding issues of history, ‘voice’ and ‘space’ tied to constructions of subaltern subjectivities – all of which are critical for a decolonial feminist analysis of womanhood and agency. Re-covering and re-visibilising the agency of the subaltern, according to decolonial feminist, Lugones – is the core of a decolonial feminist project. Lugones asserts that “[w]hen I think of myself as a theorist of resistance, it is not because I think of resistance as the end or goal of political struggle, but rather as its beginning, its possibility... as both *adaptive* and *creatively* oppositional (2010, p. 746 emphasis added). Lugones shares the sentiments of Black feminist, Patricia Collins that acknowledges the possibility of various subtle forms of resistances inspite of being the marginal ‘object’ of colonialism. Therefore, in the context of this thesis, decolonial feminisms allow us to re-imagine and re-visibilise the creative ways in which the *Methepa* are always agents in spite of existences as the marginalised ‘Other’ within contexts marked by prescriptive norms defining womanhood.

### **3.6.3. Black woman’s agency: empowerment through self-definition**

Patricia Hill Collins coined a theory of agency – ‘self-definition’ that accounts for Black women’s lived experiences of multiple oppressions as well as their enactments of agency within spaces of marginality. Conceptualised in this manner, marginality holds deeper meaning and allows Black women’s sense of empowerment in that it “is a space that offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (Collins, 2000, p. 150). In other words, women’s experiences of oppression not only provide the Black woman with an alternative sense of the world, but they also constitute the basis of her navigation within oppressive spaces through creative and subtle forms of agency. Accordingly, the experience of not

fully belonging to the oppressor's world allowed Black women to develop "a particular way of seeing reality [that enabled that] we looked both from the outside in and from the inside out" (hooks, 1984, p. viii). This entails simultaneously assuming dual consciousness of one's oppressions and self-defined perspectives. In other words, while Black women remain mindful of their racist, sexist and classist oppressions, they simultaneously reject demeaning views by constructing positive self-perceptions (Alinia, 2015; Gines, 2015; hooks, 2015).

Black women's agency is grounded upon oppositional consciousness fostered through self-definition, thus leading to empowerment. Lugones articulates self-definition as manifesting "[i]n our colonized, racially gendered, oppressed existences we are also other than what the hegemon makes us [to] be" (2010, p. 746). In other words, self-definition refers to the capacities of the oppressed to transcend the experiences of oppression and enact forms of resistances no matter how limited. Collins (2000) confirms that the ability for the marginalised to endorse positive self-perceptions also allows Black women to construct positive empowering identities. Wagaman (2016, p. 211) attests to the value of self-definition in enabling "claims of value and existence to be made". In other words, the fact of self-defining in a positive manner also re-visibility those not befitting dominant constructions of womanhood - such as the *Methepa*. Considering this, Collins regards this self-definition process as a "journey from internalised oppression to the 'free mind'" (2000, p. 112). Essentially, this change occurs in the private, personal space of a Black woman's consciousness; and thus, women's ability to have a positive self-image and reject the oppressors' negative definitions are creative ways of enacting agency. However, this is also shaped by the social, cultural and spatial context which one inhabits at different points daily.

'Space' in its various forms is also central to Collins's theory of Black women's agency. Collins (2000) asserts that social spaces - church, family, community organisations - are complex sites within which Black women's empowerment is fostered. Moreover, these spaces are constructed as 'safe places' in which mutual support takes place as well as sharing of positive self-images on which Black women draw to counter racist stereotypes of Black womanhood. However, 'space' and how it enables resistance to oppression is rather complex, for it transcends the occupation of physical space. For instance, Collins cites Sondra O'Neale's articulation of these complex dynamics that characterise a Black woman's agency enacted in different spaces:

Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the Black women's community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions - sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy... (Collins, 2000, p. 101).

The mention of different spaces – physical and spiritual (emotional and psychical) - speaks to the complexities of a Black woman's agency which requires constant negotiation within different spaces. The dynamism of space suggested in this analogy resonates with Boyce-Davies (1994, p. 113) reflection on space as a site that potentially enables and hampers “access” to privileges for self-assertion and construction of positive subjectivities. In other words, this explains how at different time points the meanings attached to space may either be constructed as ‘safe’ and liberating, whilst at others as oppressive and thus hampering of agency. Nevertheless, negotiation of identity and agency within space constantly requires one to embody a specific reflective mindset. This underscores that a Black woman's agency is contextually driven, intersectional, relational and dynamic, constantly shifting in form within different spaces.

Oppositional consciousness is also embodied through the use of ‘silence’, - as resistance to demeaning experiences. Collins illustrates this by quoting Bonner's use of silence to counter racist oppression; “[b]ut quiet; quiet. Like Buddha...sat entirely at ease... motionless and knowing... Motionless on the outside. But inside?” (Bonner 1987 cited by Collins, 2000, p. 98). This non-confrontational, silent resistance, Fivush (2010) and Chisale (2018) assert, can be liberatory for women, as is illustrated in the quotation. Chisale (2018) points out that, used intentionally, silence becomes a source of power with which to evade oppression, and potentially brings about change to an oppressive situation. Fivush adds that “by being silent, one can impose silence on others” (2010, p. 91); and thus, as an act of resistance, also becomes protective against oppressive acts. This speaks to “radical possibility” within spaces of marginality alluded to by bell hooks (1989, p. 20). Within these spaces, not only are creative acts of agency constructed, but women also foster a sense of empowerment with which to navigate around ‘Othering’ spaces and also construct positive images of self. Conceptualising the women's agency in this manner allows recovery and revelation of silenced, submerged and disqualified subtle forms of agency enacted from African women's positions of marginality.

As I prepare to outline the theoretical analytic framework, I consider, how then do we apply this theoretical lens – decoloniality; African and Black feminisms - to fit an analysis of the *Methepa*'s

agency? In other words, what are the convergences and diversities among these intersecting theoretical lenses, and what is their explanatory value for a study that explores the *Methepa*'s reconstruction of womanhood and agency? While these theoretical lenses may not fully account for all components of this study, they nonetheless provide a sound analytic framework with which to address the key concerns of the study. This study seeks to explore the notion of womanhood from the 'world-senses' of the *Methepa*. In addition, I seek to explore the role of agency that the *Methepa* construct and draw from to re-construct their notions of womanhood. The theoretical and empirical debates that I engaged, thus far, in this thesis, point to the persistence of coloniality that plagues the construct, 'Mosotho woman'. In other words, the construct 'Mosotho woman' continues to bear eurocentric biases that posit the *Mosotho* woman as an 'object' rather than a subject of knowledge production. Moreover, the *Mosotho* woman is a 'problem' to be solved. Considering this, it necessitates engagement of decolonial analyses of the notions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency. To achieve these ends, I draw on intersecting theoretical lenses, decolonial, African and Black feminisms. The explanatory value of these intersecting lenses converges around historicity, deconstruction and agency. Below, I outline the framework that guides the analytic chapters of this study.

The historicity of phenomena provides the context through which we can make sense of contemporary constructions of womanhood and agency in postcolonial Lesotho. By glancing at the socio-historical context of Lesotho, I bring to the fore how indigenous Basotho constructions of identity, sexualities and agencies were transformed through the 'modernising discourse' of mission Christianity (Schmidt, 1992). Moreover, this historical context reveals how these pertinent aspects became embroiled with racialised and gendered oppressive colonial structures. Relatedly, it also exposes how this shaped and reshaped meanings of *Mosotho* womanhood in contemporary Lesotho. A historical analysis will reveal how Basotho women grapple with issues of religion, culture and traditional norms that prescribe the terms of 'how' to be a *Mosotho* woman. Therefore, locating the *Methepa*'s experiences within the historical, socio-cultural and religious landscape of Lesotho is critical to understanding contemporary constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency.

Given that these theories are born from the periphery, they purport to deal with the concerns of the subaltern woman - of which the *Methepa* are part. Therefore, privileging knowledge production

‘from the ground up’ will reveal Sesotho world-senses which are critical for correcting “epistemic injustice” (Zondi, 2016, p. 20) that has been levelled against Basotho knowledges. Of considerable significance is the appreciation of this locus of marginality as the anchor of knowledge production – the stand-point – through which we give ‘voice’ to silenced Basotho knowledges. The locus of enunciation – ‘who speaks for who and from where?’ – calls into question how I read, engage with and present the transcribed voices of the *Methepa*. Taking these pertinent aspects of location into consideration serves a deconstructive purpose to rid constructs – womanhood, sexuality, agency, marriage – of the biases that plague them lest they distort and re-invisibilise Basotho knowledges.

Relatedly, the theoretical lenses foreground a thesis antagonistic to the eurocentrism and racism that plagues western feminism. I engage an intersectional and indigenous analyses to explicate how intersecting forces shape and reshape womanhood, sexuality and agency to reveal complexities and multiplicity born out of the Sesotho world-senses. In so doing, I seek to deconstruct ‘taken-for-granted’, normalised knowledges around womanhood, marriage, sexuality, agency – thus enabling a ‘pluriversal’ view that disputes western-centric universalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013b; Nnaemeka, 2004). Thus, by prioritising indigenous realities as ‘truths’ and placing as central these unique Sesotho characteristics articulated by Basotho women from their own world-senses, decolonial feminist analysis is achieved.

Oyěwùmí (and other African feminists) also provides the necessary African world-senses with which to locate and appreciate the unique, indigenous Sesotho realities pertaining to womanhood, sexualities and agency. Therefore, my intention to ‘draw from beneath’ western biases that plague Basotho indigenous practices whose meanings have been distorted through colonisation, addresses decolonial feminist concerns. In so doing, I seek to review indigenous Sesotho practices as sources of empowerment and facilitators for agency among the *Methepa*. In other words, I focus on how the *Methepa* draw from indigenous Sesotho practices to construct agency and reconstruct womanhood in ways that are meaningful to them.

Lastly, through this framework, this thesis posits that ‘the subaltern *Mosotho* woman does speak’ from her locus of marginality. In other words, it allows me to elevate the agency of the subaltern *Mosotho* women enacted in various and creative forms from a space of marginality. To reiterate the words of Lugones (2010), a truly decolonial feminist approach acknowledges, centralises and privileges the agency of the marginalised and oppressed enacted from within the locus of



marginality. Drawing on the works of Black feminisms, I read self-definition that characterises the agency of the marginalised Black woman as critical for theoretical analyses of the *Methepa*'s agency – whose existence within a hetero-patriarchal context is characterised by marginality. Moreover, for an indigenous world-sense, I read Oyěwù mí's works as foregrounding unique forms of agency located within and around the indigenous. In other words, within the indigenous African practices, ways of being and living, lie our agency as African women, that has been concealed by eurocentric lenses. However, because Oyěwù mí's work has not developed the aspect of agency in relation to the indigenous African structures, Nnaemeka's (2004) ideological lens that advocates "negotiation" and "building on the indigenous" augments my proposition.

I draw on Nnaemeka's ideological lens that draws on African values for an analysis of how the *Methepa* 'bargain' with indigenous cultural prescriptions of womanhood, from which they also draw agency. She asserts that "[i]n the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance" (2004, p. 22). Negotiation in these respects refers to how the *Methepa* understand and make meaning of their non-befitting identities whilst also finding a 'voice' from within the indigenous structures to negotiate their survival within gendered contexts. Therefore, for a theoretical analysis of the *Methepa*'s agency, we are prompted to unpeel the multi-layered and complex realities to expose the 'less obvious' enactments of agency tied to the indigenous. In so doing, I postulate an understanding of Basotho women's agency as multi-dimensional, intersectional, indigenous and complex. I find these tenets useful for a thesis that seeks to re-view constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood and thus bring to the fore how differently bodied women (historically exempted from Woman) articulate womanhood and agency from their position of marginality. By privileging our own voices, indigenous and endogenous ways of being woman differently from the "Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric, patriarchal, sexist...hetero-normative, hegemonic" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013b, p. 5) we would have achieved feminist decoloniality.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

This chapter mapped out how I engaged with the key concepts of my research, namely womanhood; femininity, heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood as well as singleness. In spite of the lengthy trajectory that characterises feminist debates on Woman, the concept remains a

contentious matter in feminist theory. While Beauvoirean thought sought to dispel essentialism around womanhood, their attempts were essentialist in themselves. Judith Butler however, suggests that this is partly because defining ‘Woman’ according to certain characteristics is suggestive of ‘correctness’ and ‘normality’ around being Woman - which is problematic. Further, she adds that; “[i]dentity categories [such as women] are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (1994, p. 166). This has been a central contention of feminisms of the Global South, arguing that the western concept of ‘Woman’ not only assumes naturalness and normativity, but also tends to exclude women with different characteristics.

Therefore, contesting the universalism and eurocentrism central to western feminisms, feminists of the Global South posited that womanhood be analysed through intersectional lenses that account for intertwined socio-historical and spatial forces that shape the construct. Central to this deconstructive stance is the need to acknowledge diversities - racial, class, geographical location, culture, religion - amongst women which shape the meanings of womanhood. In so doing, this will reveal the contextual dynamics that shape and reshape constructions of womanhood in different contexts, including Lesotho. My engagement with the concepts, femininity, heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood as constituents of womanhood, through intersectional and indigenous lenses, reveals unique dynamics that reflect the dynamism and fluidity of phenomena viewed in the African world-senses. This multiplicity raises questions the around ‘normalcy’ and thus deconstructs the dominant conceptions of womanhood.

In this thesis, I endorse the contentious stance against exclusive and normative constructions of womanhood central to western feminism, that tend to exclude Basotho women to whom I give priority. Therefore, in view of the gaps highlighted here, a study of this nature is warranted in order to shed light on how differently bodied women deconstruct and re-construct normative constructions of womanhood in the Lesotho context. This necessitated a re-view of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency through a decolonial feminist analysis. This chapter also mapped the theoretical underpinning of the analytical chapters of this thesis which draw from intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminisms. I discussed decoloniality as an approach purposed to reveal and address the biases born out of colonial conquest imposed upon African contexts, including Lesotho. Thereafter, I engaged the work of decolonial feminist scholars Maria Lugones, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, and other Black feminist theories which I integrate, for an analytic decolonial

feminist lens, through which to re-view *Mosotho* womanhood and agency. The theories are born out of the need to deconstruct the biases of modernity/coloniality that plague African constructions of identity and agency. Therefore, foregrounding a locus of enunciation born from the periphery, these theories recuperate the subaltern as an agent by centralising subaltern experiences, historicising phenomena and deconstructing knowledge production, identity construction and agency.

The theoretical framing that will guide the analytic chapters foregrounds these tenets. Locating the *Methepa*'s experiences within the historical socio-cultural and religious landscape of Lesotho is critical to understanding constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency in postcolonial Lesotho. Secondly, the appreciation of the locus of marginality as the anchor of knowledge production – the 'stand-point' – allows us to give 'voice' to silenced Basotho knowledges. At the same time, this deconstructs 'normalised' and western-centric constructions of womanhood and agency. This calls into question how I read, engage with and present the transcribed voices of 'unmarried' Basotho. Thirdly, by engaging an intersectional analysis to explicate how intersecting forces shape and reshape womanhood, sexuality and agency, complexities and multiplicities are revealed. Subsequently, this debases 'universalism' as well as the racist, patriarchal and normalised constructions that relegate Basotho women, our experiences, our knowledges and our identities to the margins.

Lastly, the decolonial feminist analysis undergirding this thesis enforces an appreciation for women's construction and enactment of agency from the position of marginality. Drawing on the work of Black feminism, I read the enactment of self-definition that characterises the agency of the marginalised Black woman. Moreover, for an African indigenous world-sense, I read Oyěwùmí's work as foregrounding unique forms of agency located within and around the indigenous. In other words, within indigenous African practices, ways of being and living, lies our agency as African women, which is often concealed by eurocentric lenses. However, because Oyěwùmí's work has not developed the aspect of agency in relation to the indigenous African structures, Nnaemeka's ideological lens, which advocates negotiation and "building on the indigenous", augments my proposition. As this thesis moves to the methodology chapter, this conceptual framework foregrounds the necessity of engaging in intersectional and historical analyses of womanhood, 'unmarried-ness' and agency for 'new imaginings' of gender re-

construction and agency. Overall, this framework prepares this thesis for an in-depth discussion on the methodological considerations that underpin this study in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Methodological considerations

### 4.1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to allow the *Methepa* an opportunity to narrate their stories in their own voices about their lived experiences of being ‘unmarried’ in a context that defines ‘Woman’ in marital terms. To ensure that this process was conducted in a non-judgemental manner, I opted for a qualitative research approach in which I adopted decolonial feminist lenses. This enabled me to capture and analyse the narrated life-stories of the *Methepa* from their own world-senses. This chapter outlines the methodological and the epistemological stance undergirding the research processes of this study. Sandra Harding (1987) drew our attention to the differences between epistemology - “a theory of knowledge” - and methodology - “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” - and relatedly, method - “a technique for...gathering evidence” (Harding 1987 cited by Naples, 2003, p. 3). Accordingly, this study, located within an interpretive paradigm as it is, was undergirded by decolonial feminist epistemologies. It employed life history methods to explore the *Methepa*’s re-constructions of womanhood and agency. Bennett (2008a, p. 1) argues that methodologies need to be given the attention they warrant as opposed to being regarded simply as “adjuncts to issues of epistemology or as bridges between the conceptualization of an inquiry and its outcome”. Instead, they should be treated as spaces within which rich insights pertaining to the “context, voice, ethical and political depths” can be drawn, particularly for feminist attention. Therefore, following a brief outline of the research approach, I intend to give attention to the realities of the entire research trajectory of this study that explores re-constructions of womanhood among the *Methepa*.

Mbilinyi (1992) reminds me that my positionality - the identities that I embody as *Mosotho*, female, African feminist - also plays a major role in shaping the entire research process, including the outcomes of the study. Therefore, this chapter concludes with a discussion on my positionality as the ‘research instrument’ for the study as well as the ethical considerations guiding the entire process.

## **4.2. Feminist qualitative approaches**

Traditional epistemologies demand that ‘true’ knowledge is objective and value-free (Flick, 2018; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). In contrast, qualitative approaches allow “interpretation of social meaning through mapping and ‘re-presenting’ the social world of research participants” (Ritchie et al., 2013). In other words, this approach demands that phenomena be studied in and through the world views of participants. In accord, feminist researchers are driven by the need not only to foreground the experiences of women in research, but also to actively improve them through research (Kirsch, 2005). Thus, feminist and qualitative approaches plead for recognition of the idea that researchers are part and parcel of the lives for whom research is done. Moreover, knowledge production is premised upon the subjective experiences of the women we seek to empower through research (Brooks, 2007). Therefore, my choice of feminist approaches integrated with qualitative research for exploring the re-construction of womanhood among the *Methepa* and their use of agency in this process was because of the suitability of these approaches for exploring complex situations. Moreover, both approaches foreground the researcher’s voice whilst also giving ‘voice’ to women’s issues. However, while feminist methodologies purport to prioritise the experiences of all women and to empower all women, the marginalised ‘Othered’ African women remain on the margins of research. Therefore, informed by the key concerns of this thesis, one of which is to reveal and address colonial biases according to which marginalised Basotho women are deemed ‘voiceless’, this study endorses a decolonial feminist approach.

### **4.2.1. Decolonial feminist approaches to research**

This study adopts decolonial feminist ways of doing research to understand and account for the socio-historical context that shapes the lived experiences of Basotho women. The decolonial perspective has the potential to elicit in-depth and multidimensional explorations of womanhood and agency in previously colonised contexts, such as Lesotho. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” and therefore received with distrust by and amongst indigenous communities (Smith, 1999, p. 1). Therefore, Boonzaier and Van Niekerk (2019, p. 2) assert that decolonial feminist methodologies are useful for revealing “the continuities in the decimation, destruction and dispossession wrought by colonisation and for

challenging the ways it manifests in the present through knowledge production, representation, and everyday life” of marginalised communities. In this respect, I opted for decolonial feminist approaches to reveal and challenge some colonially derived, racial, patriarchal myths around African womanhood and misconceptions that posit the African woman as devoid of agency that prevail in western-centric gender scholarship. Therefore, not only do decolonial feminist lenses allow the revelation of perpetually silenced ‘voices’ of Basotho women, but they also recover and foreground indigenous knowledges of the Basotho - as well as ways of being a woman through the Sesotho world-senses.

Like other feminist epistemologies, decolonial feminist approaches to research claim to prioritise the lived experiences of marginalised African women whilst also accounting for the socio-cultural and historical context that shapes the lived realities of African women. Accordingly, over and above giving ‘voice’<sup>48</sup>, such research claims that “[l]ooking through the eyes of the colonized, cautionary tales are told from an indigenous perspective, tales designed not just to voice the voiceless but to prevent the *dying* - of people, of culture, of ecosystems...” (Smith 1999, p. 1 emphasis added). In other words, a decolonial feminist project compels the researcher to give close attention to the representation of the subaltern’s realities and knowledges in ways that do not reinforce their invisibilisation and de-humanisation. Throughout the entire thesis, I aimed to dispel imperialist discourses around the notions of womanhood and agency, since *African* womanhood is embroiled in racist and sexist discourses that simultaneously distort African cultures and values (Steady, 2005). Moreover, my analysis of indigenous cultural practices regarded as fundamental to gender identity construction prioritises the world-senses of Basotho. This, therefore, challenges the inferiorisation of and restores African cultures and values that inform our knowledges. In essence, the decolonial feminist approach allowed me to recover and re-instate our Basotho knowledges – drawn from the world-senses of the *Methepa* – as valid and worthy, against popular discourse in the knowledge production systems. Accordingly, this achieves ‘epistemic redress’ as posited by this thesis.

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<sup>48</sup> My use of the concept ‘giving voice’ is cautious given the politics that have been illuminated by postcolonial scholars such as Mohanty (1988). Without necessarily implying to ‘speak for’ this silenced group of Basotho women, I instead intend to represent their constructions of womanhood and agency by drawing from their narrated life stories. In this entire thesis, its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, I have attempted to do so as much as I possibly could. My attempt at detailing the research processes also seeks to guard against misrepresenting these women’s voices.

In addition, representing the voices of the subaltern woman requires the researcher to remain aware of one's positionality and self-reflectivity. Manning (2018, p. 312) asserts that this requires deep reflection on "the personal, political and ethical considerations of our research, [and how they] can result in more transparent and informed research accounts that recognise the lived experiences of those who have been marginalised in mainstream academic discourse". In other words, decolonial feminist approaches compel us to commit to conducting research that is ethical, respectful and continuously reflective on the question "[h]ow can researchers respect the perspective of 'the Other' and invite 'the Other' to speak?" (Manning, 2018, p. 312). To achieve these ends, I consider life history methods to be an appropriate platform that not only affords the subaltern *Mothepe* an opportunity to 'speak' but also enables her empowerment through research. Parallel to the decolonial feminist epistemologies that anchor the need to empower the disempowered, the life history methods that I used to capture the lived experiences of the *Methepe* allow for an in-depth exploration of these experiences. Life history methods have the potential of being liberative to the marginalised *Mothepe* given that they allow her to speak in her own voices about her experiences.

### **4.3. Narrated life histories in decolonial feminist methodologies**

Life history methods "encapsulate a recalling of the past, in the present, with the potential of anticipating the future" (Wilson, 2015, p. 478). Notably, while this exercise is predominantly located in time, Wilson (2015, p. 478 emphasis in original) reminds us that it is "situated in *both* time and space". Thus, narrated life stories provided space for women to voice their own constructions of identity and agency from within their social, cultural and historical contexts. Woodiwiss, Smith, and Lockwood (2017, p. vii) express the view that "the situational, contextual, temporal and relational dynamics that make profound differences to the 'same' circumstance..." shape and reshape how women narrated their life stories. In other words, given that the women's narrated life histories are shaped by entangled familial, historical, spatial, cultural and social forces, life history methods allowed revelation of diversity, complexity and uniqueness in women's constructions of womanhood and agency.

At the same time, narrated life stories allowed the women to construct their agency from their own world-senses through narration. In other words, through life stories the women's narratives of "resistance, reworking and resilience" (Smith, 2017, p. 201) were given voice as they constructed



and reconstructed meanings of their unmarried identities drawing from their past lived experiences. Thus, by allowing Basotho women to narrate their lived experiences from their own world-senses, life histories are resonant with the decolonial project of re-humanising and re-invisibilising previously marginalised Basotho identities, knowledges and agency. Therefore, life histories were well suited to explore the lived realities of marginalised *Methepa* given their emancipatory and transformative potential.

Scholars such as Smith (1999) and Sonn, Stevens, and Duncan (2013) have acknowledged the potential of narrative methodologies for a decolonial agenda that disrupts the power dynamics between the researcher and the story teller. For Smith, “storytelling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the ‘diversities of truth’ within which the story teller rather than the researcher retains control” (Smith, 1999, p. 145). In other words, narration allowed the previously ‘silenced’ *Mothepe* to drive the research process, and in doing so, construct and reconstruct meanings of womanhood from her world-senses. In these respects, narrated life stories become a means through which misconceptions of the subaltern *Mosotho* womanhood and women’s agency are dispelled. Thus, through narrated life stories, multiplicities and complexities that dispel western-centric metanarratives of Basotho women’s subjectivities – were revealed.

Riessman affirms that: “[e]mbedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalised, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and ‘get a life’ by telling...their stories” (2005, p. 2). Decolonial feminist methods integrated with biographical methods afforded the marginalised and previously ‘silenced’, *Methepa*, opportunities for deeper reflection on and redefinition of past lived experiences. This allowed the revelation of the ‘unsaid’ and thus opened room for construction and expression of agency through the narration of life experiences (Coetzee & Rau, 2017; Sonn et al., 2013). By revealing deep-seated unacknowledged emotions tied to being ‘unmarried’ in a context that prescribes marriage for women, narrated life history methods are considerably valuable for a study that explores how the *Methepa* articulate, deconstruct and reconstruct womanhood. By extension, this implies that biographical methods reveal complexities which help to dispel ‘universalist’ and ‘normative’ western-centric constructions of womanhood, and thus, well aligned with the decolonial project. Having discussed the value and significance of narrated life story methods for this study, I am reminded of an old proverb: ‘the proof of the pudding is in

the eating,’ meaning that their value can only be attested to through the fieldwork realities that I discuss in the next section. Indeed Bennett (2008b) asserts that the reality of research depends on the actual context in which it is conducted.

#### **4.4. Realities of the research terrain**

As reflected throughout this chapter, my decision to speak with the *Methepa* within various parts of Lesotho was informed by a deeper interest in notions of womanhood and how these are articulated by women that I identify with culturally. Other than my positionality, the drive to conduct this study is linked to the dearth in scholarly work on ‘unmarried’ identities in Lesotho and how ‘unmarried’ women reconstruct notions of womanhood. Moreover, I seek to elevate the lived experiences and agencies of the marginalised *Mothepe* – who has been deemed voiceless in eurocentric feminist scholarship. In this section, I detail the realities as well as the uncertainties and ambiguities of the research terrain which Bennett (2008b, p. 7) argues “are often the grounds from which the most interesting insights and intuitions about realities and possibilities for change emerge”. In other words, rather than discerning the research field as linear, I elicit its convoluted, rocky and winding nature (Mohlakoana, 2008). I discuss the methodological processes including the study setting and population, participant recruitment, sampling techniques, data collection, and analysis in the form of narrated life histories.

#### 4.4.1. The study setting

The study was conducted in three diverse settings in Lesotho, indicated in Figure 4.1 below.

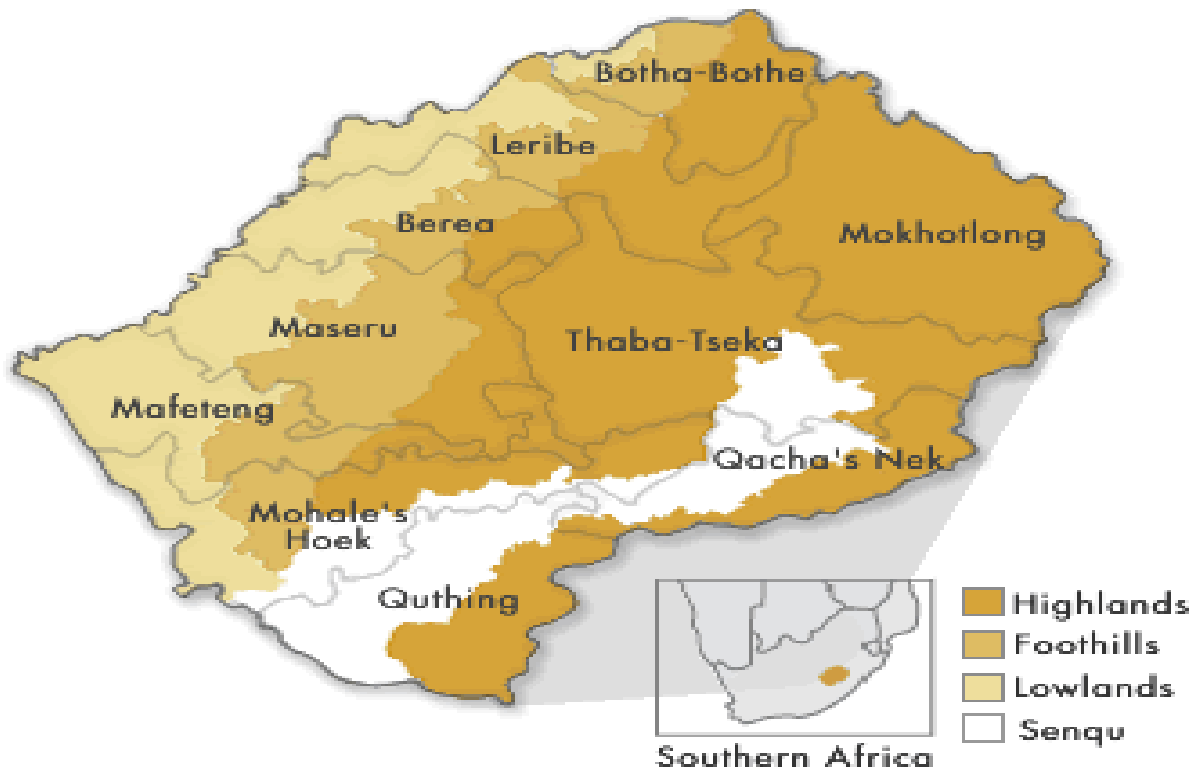


Figure 4.1: Map of Lesotho

According to the Bureau of Statistics (2016) Lesotho is a small, mountainous kingdom situated in the southern part of Africa, which is completely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. Lesotho is divided into four major geographical zones, namely lowlands, foothills, highlands, and the Senqu river valley. Administratively, the country has ten districts in an estimated total area of about 30 355km<sup>2</sup>. The three districts from which study participants were selected are Leribe, Berea and Maseru. Leribe is located in the northern part of Lesotho with a population of about 33 7521 residents. It has a camp-town, Hlotse (located approximately 100 km from Maseru), and is surrounded by rural areas characterised by foothills and highlands. Ha-Ramapepe, Khanyane and Thlakudi are rural villages in which the participants were born and bred. Berea district is located close to the capital town, Maseru. It has a population of about 262 616 and houses Teyateyaneng - a camp-town that is located about 42km from Maseru and is surrounded by rural villages. This

district falls under peri-rural area and thus was framed as such in this study. Maseru is the capital city of Lesotho. It is located in the northwest region of Lesotho on the border with Free State in South Africa. It is the largest urban area of approximately 4279km<sup>2</sup>. It houses a population of about 51 9186 residents. Thaba Bosiu and Morija are rural villages located 25km and 45km from Maseru. In Maseru, participants reside in villages located on the outskirts of the city center. These included, Ha Thetsane, Ha Ts'osane, Lithabaneng, Ha Tsolo.

#### **4.4.2. Sampling techniques and participant recruitment**

This study employed both convenience and purposive sampling techniques to select the study sites. Of interest was to speak with women from diverse backgrounds therefore it was important to select districts with different geographical features. Accordingly, the three distinct contexts - Maseru (urban), Leribe (rural), Thaba-bosiu/TY (semi-rural) - were selected purposively. Subsequently, convenience sampling, on the basis of accessibility, (Ritchie et al., 2013) was used to select the actual villages<sup>49</sup> from which participants were recruited.

The study participants were Basotho women who identified as never married. In Chapter 1, I detailed how I conceptualised '*Methepa*' and its implications for this study. Therefore, while I do not intend to rehearse the discussion here, it suffices to remind the reader of this pertinent insight given its significance in the study. As mentioned in preceding discussions, given the significance of marriage in Lesotho, being 'never married' - 'unmarriedness' - harbours implications for women's gender identity and therefore shapes our lived experiences within the patriarchal context of Lesotho. However, in bid to de-center marriage as part of the deconstructive decolonial project purported by this thesis, I opt to use '*Methepa*' throughout the entire thesis to refer to the participants. *Methepa* acknowledges and accounts for Basotho women's assumption of multiple roles and embodiment of multiple identities - other than marriage. Therefore, it is against this background that this study aims to explore and understand the construction of womanhood and how the *Methepa* re-construct the definition of womanhood in a context where it is defined in marital terms. This decision emerged out of a personal drive to gain insight into the process through which identity is reconstructed in a context where there are socially established ways of 'being' and how women use agency to make meaning of non-conforming identities in such contexts.

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<sup>49</sup> Maseru; Ha Thestane, Ha Ts'osane, Lithabaneng, Ha Tsolo. Leribe; Ha Ramapepe, Khanyane, Ha Thlakuli. Thaba Bosiu/Teyateyaneng

Women who are ‘unmarried’ embody an identity that does not conform to the dominant conceptions of ideal womanhood in Lesotho, and thus form the population of interest for this study.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was used to select participants. In the initial stages of recruitment, a few participants who met the criteria were identified purposively by my key informants. Key informants were people known to me and they resided in the communities of interest. These were elderly women some of whom had successfully led small community projects thus they were known and trusted within their communities. Although I could have contacted government institutions such as Social workers, there were considerable challenges with this option. Firstly, they may not be insiders in the communities - and considering that life history research and historical connection to the community were central in how I selected participants - this would have been hampered. Secondly, SW are guided by a code of ethics part which is client confidentiality, my requesting their clients’ details would have been a breach of this code. Thus, because I needed women who were known to be ‘never married’, key informants were better placed to direct me to these women.

Participants were women who were known to my key informants and perceived to be rich sources of information about the subject of interest (Mbilinyi, 1992). I anticipated diversities around perceptions of womanhood as well as the ways in which ‘unmarried’ women enact agency, since as mentioned in preceding discussions, these are ‘situated’ and variously shaped by the context in which women exist. For this reason, key informants were prompted to identify women of diverse age, geographical location and educational attainment. Given the sensitivity of the subject, I used key informants and thereafter snowballing because it would have been difficult to recruit participants without referral. Snowball sampling, “which involves asking people who have already been interviewed to identify other people they know who fit the selection criteria”, was used to recruit additional participants (Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 84). However, because people tend to choose people with similar characteristics and thus pose a risk to the diversity frame (Ritchie et al., 2013), I asked each of the first six participants to introduce me to one other ‘never married’ woman with characteristics dissimilar to themselves.

Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006, p. 139) state that “[q]ualitative researchers typically work with and actually prefer small non-random samples of information-rich cases that we can study in depth”. Moreover, because life histories are relatively lengthy and require several

interviews with participants, I chose a small sample of twenty ‘never married’ women from the diverse contexts and backgrounds. Considering the low marital age of 20 years for Basotho women (Ministry of Health and ICF International, 2016), this study explores the experiences of ‘never married’ women from the age of 25 years because by that age, a significant number of Basotho women are married. Women within the age cohorts of 25-30 years, 31-39 years, 40-49 years and 50 years and above, categorised on the basis of level of maturity, were approached to take part in the study (see Table 4.1 below). This enabled a comparison of experiences among younger and older women.

Although every effort was made to diversify the sample as much as possible, defining characteristics such as geographical location and class identity proved to be complex rather than simple. Basotho women have always been a mobile population in search of livelihood opportunities as is discussed in Chapter 2. In modern day Lesotho, this has not changed. Due to the high internal mobility, from rural to urban areas in the wake of increasing demands for employment, many of the women had migrated to Maseru (temporarily for some) from their home villages in search for employment and educational opportunities. Therefore, in this context, the definition of geographical location is not fixed to a single location. Instead, in response to the question, *o holetse kae?* (where did you grow up?), the women described their place of origin, which was linked to their childhood experiences, always cited as ‘*haeso*’. In a relatively homogenous context, in terms of cultural identity, Basotho draw meaning and significance from their places of birth, and thus *haeno* (original home) is fundamental to one’s self-identity.

For example, some women who were residents of Maseru (one permanently, one for educational purposes) insisted that I capture their birth places as Qachas Nek and Thaba Tseka respectively, whereas when speaking of their current location in Maseru, this was often cited as *ke lula...*(I live...) followed by *fela hake motho oa mona* (but I am not originally from here). Notably, this implies that identities are “multiple and mobile” (Allen, 2006, p. 57) rather than fixed as is often cited. This distinction and insight is of considerable importance in this study because geographical location as well as mobility has implications for shaping and reshaping constructions of womanhood and agency as suggested by Giddings and Havorka (2010) among the *Methepa*. Thus, for ease of reference in Table 4.1 below, the participants’ location is differentiated in terms of place of birth and current location, both cited in the main text in reference to the participant.

These complexities are even more salient with regard to class identity. The significance of intersectional analyses and the view that ‘class matters’ in shaping the notion of womanhood are key concerns that this thesis seeks to address. However, class identity was difficult to quantify given that in social and demographic studies it is commonly tied to socio-economic status, educational attainment, or employment status, to mention a few. However, in the context of this study, these criteria that necessitated the allocation of an individual to middle or working class were misaligned with the realities of Lesotho as well as the *Methepa* who participated in the study. For example, everyone lived in formal housing and earned a livelihood somehow if not through formal employment, yet some had only completed primary schooling. Thus, class identity based on the predefined criteria failed to capture these ambiguities.

In the context of Lesotho, identity as is commonly cited in anthropological, statistical and demographical texts has been limited to religion, age, gender and location but never class (Turkon, 2009). This explains the difficulties of finding an appropriate reference from which I could draw the definition of class – suitable for the context of Lesotho. Scholars in neighbouring South Africa, (see Alexander, Ceruti, Motseke, Phadi, & Wale, 2013; Phadi & Ceruti, 2011; Plank, 2018) confirmed the complexities of defining class, and middle-class in particular. Considering this complexity, the meaning of middle class is ‘relative’ (Plank, 2018) rather than fixed. Therefore, in the context of this study, I consider class to be context-specific and relative. My tentative or working definition of class is enmeshed with educational attainment, parental/familial circumstances, childhood experiences, and circumstances in adulthood. In other words, I attempted to determine class identity from the women’s narrated life stories as opposed to direct questioning. Therefore, I resorted to mentioning ‘class’ as a very loose concept with no fixed criteria. This was in reference to those who openly embodied middle-classness whereas I avoided referring to working class because this would have been a misrepresentation of Basotho women’s realities.

It is therefore noteworthy that the class identities that appear in the in the table below are read as tentative rather than fixed and their role in shaping constructions of womanhood read with other multiple intersecting forces. Moreover, while class has been considered to be homogenous, particularly in relation to rural contexts, the findings of this study (Chapters 5 and 6) reveal interesting dynamics which further complicate the notion of class identity.

Table 1: Participants' characteristics

Name	Age category	Current location	Birthplace	Educational attainment <sup>50</sup>
M'e Ponto'o	25-30	Thaba Bosiu	Thaba Bosiu	Form E
M'e Tebello	25-30	Thaba Bosiu	Thaba Bosiu	Form E
M'e Mpale	25-30	Maseru	Thaba Tseka	Form E
M'e Limpho	25-30	TY	TY	Diploma
M'e Mamo	25-30	Maseru	Mafeteng	Degree
M'e Lifutso	25-30	Leribe	Leribe	Degree
M'e Lisebo	31-39	Leribe	Leribe	Form E
M'e Mpuse	31-39	Maseru	Maseru	Form E
M'e Lebo	31-39	Maseru	Maseru	Degree
M'e Mpasi	31-39	Maseru	Thaba Khupa	Std 7
M'e Keneuoe	40-49	Maseru	Leribe	Form C
M'e Rehab	40-49	Leribe	Leribe	Form C
M'e Libu	40-49	Maseru	Mafeteng	Std 7
M'e Khanyane	50-60+	Leribe	Leribe	Std 2
M'e Kotseng	50-60+	TY	TY	Form B
M'e Lila	50-60+	TY	TY	Std 4
M'e Mphoza	50-60+	Maseru	Morija	Std 6
M'e Mpuse	50-60+	Maseru	Maseru	Form D
M'e Ts'ido	50-60+	Maseru	Leribe	Masters
M'e Pale	50-60+	Maseru	Qachas Nek	Masters

#### 4.5. Realities of conducting life histories

Data were collected through in-depth, unstructured interviews in the form of life histories in order to gain a deeper understanding of the construction of gender identity and womanhood across the different life stages of the *Methepa*'s lives. Moreover, this also allowed for an exploration and mapping of constructions of agency and how these are variously shaped by different contextual and personal factors. The value of the unstructured in-depth interview lies in its ability to provide in-depth insight into the interviewee's world, especially if conducted in spaces that are familiar to them such as their homes and communities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In addition, they enable

<sup>50</sup> The educational system of Lesotho consists of twelve school years. Primary school is divided into two levels; lower primary (standards 1-4) and upper primary (standards 5-7). The seven years of primary school are concluded with the Primary School Leaving Certificate. Junior secondary is three years (Forms A, B, C) are concluded with the Junior Certificate (JC). Thereafter, higher secondary school consisting of two years (Forms D-E) lead to the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) at the Ordinary Level (O levels) that allows entry into tertiary level (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation, 2011).



close interaction between the researcher and interviewee (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001) to enable a free-flowing conversation led by the interviewee. Although I used an interview schedule with open-ended questions (Appendix B), it was used more as a memory jogger than as a fixed plan. Thus, the interviews took the form of a conversation to allow women to share subjective experiences as well their own interpretations of those experiences. In order to initiate the conversation, I posed an open-ended question - "Please tell me about yourself" - to encourage women to narrate life stories as freely as possible. This was followed up by prompts guided by the discussion. Atkinson points out that "*the less structure a life story interview has the more effective it will be* in achieving the goal of getting the person's own story in the way, form and style that the individual wants to tell it in" (2011, p. 4 emphasis in original). This "grand tour" question (Atkinson, 2011, p. 3) opened the door to women's deep, reflective thoughts on life experiences around identity construction, re-construction and agency.

Mbilinyi (1992) also speaks of the need to be vigilant for non-verbal gestures and the ability to make linkages between different ideas emerging from the process. Although the bulk of the data was collected as stories, direct observation was also conducted throughout the fieldwork. This involved observation of non-verbal cues which potentially conveyed deep-seated meanings, thought processes and feelings expressed as people engaged in discussions (Heslop, 2002) particularly those of sensitive nature like 'unmarriedness'. This was evidenced by moments of sadness, sarcasm, annoyance, crying or elation, joy and pride which were expressed by the *Methepa* during different moments as they narrated life histories.

Nonetheless, although life history interviews enabled a deeper, detailed 'view' into the lives of the *Methepa*, in the words of Mbilinyi, they are "highly stimulating but also exhausting" (1992, p. 62). By this, she highlights the intensity of interviewing and therefore suggests scheduling few interviews in a day to sustain the concentration required for the process. I share similar sentiments in that the fieldwork process is a maze through which one navigates and one that is challenging physically, emotionally and mentally. As such, "daily living constitutes a strategic negotiation from one moment to another" (Bennett, 2008, p. 7), as opposed to a stable, linear, challenge-free methodological trajectory. This is in spite of our hopes, as feminist researchers, for a smooth terrain as stipulated in the research plan. This is compounded by the structural and institutional restrictions in terms of time frames prescribed for PhD studies (Bennett, 2008). Nonetheless, data collection

commenced in June 2017 and continued until December 2017. Recruitment and the first set of interviews were conducted in June 2017.

The preparatory phase, prior to fieldwork, was characterised by elation and fear of the unknown as I embarked on the long-awaited journey in which my methodological plan would be finally put into practice. In order to facilitate the process, prior arrangements were put in place telephonically with my key informant in Maseru before my long travel to Lesotho from Johannesburg where I currently reside for the duration of my studies. In addition, the first few participants were contacted by telephone as a way of establishing the necessary rapport and to schedule appointments for the initial meeting at their residences. This initial encounter was facilitated by my key informant's introductory statement: '*She is doing a school project and needing to speak with 'bo m'e' who are not in a marital relationship*'<sup>51</sup>, which opened the door into the lives of the *Methepa* with whom I could converse about lived experiences of 'unmarriedness'. Interestingly, depending on my relations to my key informant, I was identified through one or both of my parents: *she is the daughter of 'm'e Mamallane and ntate Selikane*<sup>52</sup> or my in-laws<sup>53</sup>: *she is the daughter-in-law of* ..... However, this spells my 'insider' status as a *Mosotho* girl born and bred in Lesotho and well known to some of my participants, either personally or through familial relations which undoubtedly facilitated the recruitment process.

On arrival in Lesotho, I was fully prepared with a data collection schedule which I shared with my key informants since they would need to accompany me on some of my visits to introduce me to those participants that I was going to meet for the first time through their referral. However, because the research terrain is neither a linear nor a challenge-free process as mentioned above, many of the appointments were rescheduled. Although I was aware of the national elections taking place during that time, I had not anticipated the excitement and agitation that characterised that period and the realisation that the study did not hold the same meaning for my participants. This meant that I had lost a week already and had conducted only one interview in that week despite my tight schedule owing to the restrictions mentioned above.

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<sup>51</sup> *o etsa mosebetsi oa skolo joale o buisana le bo m'e basa kenang lenyalong'*

<sup>52</sup> *ke morali oa m'e M'e Mpuseellane le ntate Selikane*

<sup>53</sup> *ke ngoetsi ea xx*

Moreover, this data collection process was characterised by blistering cold conditions and extensive travelling over long distances. The winter months in Lesotho are known to be extremely cold, meaning that my earliest appointment would be around midday when it was warmer, and the pressing daily chores had been completed. As suggested by Mbilinyi (1992), although I had planned to conduct at least one or two interviews a day and scheduled two days a week on which to recuperate, review, reflect and plan, the extensive travelling between and within Maseru, TY and Thaba Bosiu districts was more exhausting than I had anticipated. Consequently, it meant that I could only conduct one interview since I had to travel back to Maseru where I was residing during the data collection phase. In Leribe district, I was hosted by my key informant who was also a participant in the study. Nonetheless, despite the trying realities of data collection, it was both a learning as well as a fulfilling process.

In-depth interviews lasted on average between one hour to one hour and a half with the longest being about three hours. Although I was granted permission by my participants to record the interviews, I made notes in my notebook while simultaneously affording my participants the necessary attention by being aware of my own body language. This involved maintaining eye contact, nodding, being relaxed and at ease to encourage narration and give assurance that I was listening and hearing what she had to say about her life experiences, as have been affirmed by Atkinson (2011). However, there were instances whereby the recorder became an obtrusive object that hampered the free flow of conversation for some participants. Moreover, it raised suspicion for one participant who repeatedly asked, “*Are you recording? ... I should not speak nonsense*”<sup>54</sup>, and exercised caution not to share any personal experiential accounts despite my repeated attempt to assure her of confidentiality. In another instance, my participant requested me to turn off the recorder during narrations of some personal experiences which she labelled as “*off the record*”.

Concerns around the use of a recorder have been raised by Al-Yateem (2012) who highlights that audio recording tends to affect the ease with which participants share personal experiences with the researcher. In other words, for fear of being judged negatively, participants become reluctant to have interviews audio-recorded or tend to limit what they share. This, Al-Yateem (2012) suggests, may potentially affect the quality of data collected. This unanticipated outcome of audio-recording is unacknowledged in most literature in spite of the numerous scholarly works

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<sup>54</sup> *O sontso hatisa...ske be ra pota*

acknowledging their usefulness for in-depth interviews (Fernandez & Griffiths, 2007; Stockdale, 2002). Nonetheless, as Atkinson (2011, p. 8) suggested “[a]ll of this is about establishing rapport” not as a once-off, but as a continuous process (Naples, 2003). I heeded this insight throughout the process by “being as warm, friendly, sensitive, and flexible as possible in all situations [that I] encountered” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 8) with my participants. In addition, also “[being] able to find ...balance between guiding and following and knowing when it is more important to let the pace and direction of the process be set by the person [I was] interviewing” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, following the first encounter when the participants had a ‘gist’ of the process and constant reassurances of confidentiality, the women appeared more relaxed and openly shared personal experiences.

In qualitative research data collection, processing and analysis are conducted concurrently to allow the researcher to be immersed in the data and to reflect, review and redefine research processes. Mbilinyi reminds us that “the ever-present spiral notebook is often considered a must!” (1992, p. 63) in which my reflections, perceptions, fears and incongruencies were documented throughout the research process. For the data collection process, reflections on the day’s work also included having to rephrase some of my prompts. I structured each day such that daily activities were reviewed when I listened to recordings, added notes, clarified concepts, and highlighted ambiguities and contradictions between what was observed and what was said in the interview. The purpose of this preliminary analytic exercise was to capture the ‘unsaid’ and ‘undeclared’ nuances that accompany the research process. Documenting my reflections of the process - the daily hitches, fears, elations and disappointments as well as those of my participants - was a critical exercise that proved useful for making sense of the data. It was during this reflection process that misconceptions were brought to the fore which prompted me to be more sensitive and ‘really sense’ the world from the vantage point of the *Methepa*. Nonetheless, the value of reflection lies in its enabling documentation of the finer details of the everyday of the research terrain. Moreover, it allowed me to also make sense of the ‘the unspoken, undeclared yet highly pertinent details’ of the data as a lived experience for myself.

Given the nature of life history methods, repeated lengthy visits to one participant were at times required to allow greater depth into specific issues pertaining to women’s lived experiences. This also allowed greater reflection around emerging issues on the part of the interviewee as well as

myself (Denzin, 2011; McLeod & Thomson, 2012). However, although this was discussed and agreed upon during the consent process that took place during the initial meeting, in reality, after two to three successive visits lasting approximately 90 minutes each on average, the third visit elucidated no new information and besides was very difficult to secure. Moreover, on average for each encounter, any information shared beyond 90 minutes was ‘off the subject’ owing to the fatigue from the intense process of narrating a life story; recalling, reflecting, making meaning. Although the number of visits per person was determined by individual circumstances, data saturation was also a determining factor (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Accordingly, the number of visits per person ranged from one, for those that were not born narrators, to three for those that had a lot to share and whose narratives I found intriguing, rich and detailed. Atkinson (2011) attributes these differences in abilities to narrate own life stories to one’s ‘voice’. The latter category of my participants, the narrators, having found her ‘voice’ is thus able to tell her life story in this ‘voice’ without any hindrances. Nonetheless, despite the differences, “[e]ach life story is complex in its own way, ... and each tells us something about the complexity of each human being and the patterns, perceptions, and processes that contribute to our understanding of lives across time” (2011, p. 3). Therefore, despite these differences in abilities to narrate, I treated each narrated life with utmost respect and regard. Having discussed the realities of conducting life histories amongst the *Methepa*, equally important are the realities of the analytic trajectory.

#### **4.6. Realities of narrative analysis**

Riessman warns that; “[n]arratives do not speak for themselves or have un-analysed merit; they require interpretation when used as data in social research” (2005, p. 2). In this section, I detail the analysis trajectory that aimed to reveal the ways in which the *Methepa* construct agency and redefine gender identity. Holstein and Gubrium (2012) acknowledge the difficulties of narrative analysis which have long been highlighted by others like McCormack (2004) and Riessman (2005). They observe that “the process following data collection often bogs down at analysis, where the researcher must make sense of material that can appear chaotic, without discernible pattern” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012, p. 4). Indeed, McCormack (2004) commented on the unavailability of a coherent narrative analysis process in available methodological texts. While

some books detail the ‘what’ of narrative research, there remains a paucity of how it is conducted as well as how narratives are analysed following transcription. In response to this gap, she suggests a process of ‘storying stories’ to which I return in the next section. My detailing of the realities of the field as well as the narrative analysis is crucial for addressing such gaps particularly in revealing the particularities of experiences of the *Methepa* upon which we apply western-born data analyses methods such as ‘storying stories’. In the next section, I detail this process; and in so doing, highlight the local specificities that warn against uncritical application of these methods.

While I concur with the concerns raised above, I am also prompted to highlight that analysis for any qualitative study runs concurrently with the data collection phase (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2018; Ritchie et al., 2013). Therefore, in this regard, I will briefly highlight the preliminary analytic activities that I conducted before delving into the complexities of the ‘main’ narrative analysis process. Qualitative analysis often refers to ‘immersion into the data’ in reference to the researcher’s in-depth, critical engagement with the data through repeated listening to audio recordings, transcribing and reading transcribed texts over and over (Green et al., 2007). Although these processes are tedious and intense, they are equally valuable for the entire research process including the conclusions that I draw from the study (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Kim, 2016).

This in-depth process also enabled a re-living of the interview process. The positive and negative emotions, resurfaced. While some triggered laughter shared with the participant, others evoked again the sadness that had engulfed the moment. Woodiwiss et. al (2017) assert that narrative analysis is an ongoing process with no specific beginning or ending. Correspondingly, through this process, I was also able to draw linkages between these experiences in terms of how they are shaped by the context as well as how they shape the present existences of the *Methepa*. Moreover, a few scholars suggest that the narrative inquiry inclusive of its process of reading, analysing and interpreting narratives entails an embodied experience (Hydén, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2012). Hydén alerts us that “bodies in the storytelling event are involved and engaged in the telling of and listening to stories” (2013, p. 3). In other words, my re-living of the experiences from the interview process is typical of embodiment associated with narratology. Nonetheless, this was valuable for the analysis stage in that I was able to capture the ‘unsaid’: the emotions that were not voiced but experienced as women shared lived experiences of ‘unmarriedness’ within which there were palpable expressions of agency that forged re-constructions of themselves as *Mosali*. It is in this

sense that Miller (2017) commended feminist narrative analysis for revealing ‘the less obvious’, and the ‘undeclared’ experiences. I also commend the use of a personal journal, as mentioned earlier, where I documented pertinent aspects relevant for the analysis and interpretation processes.

‘Storying stories’, which constituted data management, processing and analysis of the transcripts, was yet another process worth mentioning.

#### **4.6.1. Storying stories**

McCormack (2004) asserts that ‘storying stories’, while it is located within the broader paradigms such as narrative inquiry, adopts, adapts and extends the principles of narrative analysis. For this study, the process was well-suited based on its epistemological grounding - feminism. In addition, given my position, my aim throughout the research process is to represent the experiences of the *Methepa* ‘as much as possible’. Therefore, by storying these stories, I aimed to retain and represent the voices of my interviewees as much as I possibly could without fragmenting lives into predetermined frameworks. In a manuscript titled, *Storying stories: A narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations* (2004), McCormack provides the details of the process of ‘storying stories’ but I will briefly outline it for the reader to provide some context.

Storying stories incorporates both analysis of narrative as a phenomenon understudy and narrative analysis as a methodology. This involves extracting descriptions of events and experiences as data that are then used to construct stories through ‘emplotment’. Emplotment is the process of piecing together events under a specific theme. For example, my initial story entailed ‘growing up as a *Mosotho* girl’ and events related to this theme were grouped to construct a narrative for each participant. In other words, storying stories aims to generate stories of experiences and analyse stories of certain experiences. This process allowed me to analyse how the women understand and construct meaning of their daily experiences whilst simultaneously accounting for the socio-cultural context in which the women exist. In other words, it allowed a reflection on how these lived experiences are shaped by the broader religio-hetero-patriarchal context of Lesotho. Thus, storying stories is a process that accounts for the ways in which, through stories, the women constructed meanings of their lived experiences.

Drawing from the narrative inquiry framework, stories are characterised by a specific structure: beginning, middle and end (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Kim, 2016). The product of narrative

processes follows a series of reconstructions- initially by the narrator, who tells, recalls and describes an experience to a listener (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Kim, 2016; Miller, 2017). Thereafter, through the processes of listening, transcribing, analysing and interpreting, the listener reconstructs the experience. The experience is further reconstructed by the reader who reinterprets the experiences in their own terms. In this sense, I heed that the women's narrated experiences are not representative of their original experiences which therefore implies that narratives are always "situated...partial... [and] characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings" (McCormack, 2004, p. 220). This complexity is what marks narrative inquiry in its entirety valuable for this study that seeks to explore the *Methepa*'s re-constructions of womanhood. It allowed the women to articulate and rearticulate, from their world-senses, the meanings of womanhood tied to their various lived experiences. Through this process, their agency to which I had intended to give 'voice', was revealed.

In the next sub-sections, I detail this re-construction process which begins with the creation of interpretive stories.

#### **4.6.2. Construction of interpretive stories**

Following thorough reading of the transcripts, I adopted the process outlined by McCormack (2004). This involved two related yet successive processes: first constructing interpretive stories, following which personal experience narratives are constructed for each interviewee. The process involves, firstly, identifying narratives from the transcripts and grouping them thematically to construct different thematic interpretive stories. Interpretive stories were created for each participant in a separate document form. The transcripts and each story were given a story title aligned with the story plot. While some stories were short snippets of specific experiences, others were lengthy and rich descriptions that gave me a clear detailed picture of specific events and the ways in which they relate to the experience. Once this process was complete, I identified the narrative processes from each interpretive story – detailed in McCormack (2004)

On one hand, this process was a fairly easy and enjoyable exercise, particularly when working through the lengthy, rich descriptions of experiences narrated by some women. On the other hand, in instances where the story was 'thin', it was a frustrating struggle trying to figure out where to begin since the transcript would be so fragmented. In these instances, the actual conversation was



so loosely constructed and thin without any detail. In some of these, the tensions that were evident throughout the actual interview were reflected and palpable in the transcript. These were interviews within which, despite my efforts to lessen the power dynamics between myself and the interviewee, she on the other hand tried so hard to maintain them, and consequently hampered free conversation. These took a bit longer to work with and required ‘knitting’ fragmented yet related statements together to reconstruct a narrative.

Although McCormack (2004) provides explicit detail on the process of ‘storying stories’, she makes no mention of the challenges that a researcher may encounter, such as the one I mention above. I consider these challenges to be linked not only to “the complexity of the interview process ... in relation to the dynamics of power and social divisions between women” (Oakley, 2016, p. 197) but also issues related to western methods employed to study local experiences. Thus, as decolonial feminist researchers, we are prompted to always remain aware of the heterogeneity of our local research contexts as well as how our participants’ cultural, social and personal issues may shape the entire research process. This warrants careful consideration of these pertinent, context specific issues and the need to adapt the methods that we use to each individual situation and lived experience.

Throughout this analysis and interpretation process, McCormack (2004, p. 221) recommends that the researcher “share the story with the participant”, which in her context involved sharing written texts upon which participants reflected and commented in writing. However, while I had envisioned that I would follow her process ‘to the tee’, in my context, there were particularities that forced me to contextualise her process of storying stories to the realities of the *Methepa*. Considering that some of the women had minimal education, sharing the stories in writing would have been a fruitless effort if not disrespectful. However, remaining aware of the importance of this process, instead I ensured that before finalising any of these stories I drove back to their homes to share verbally or in writing my interpretations of their stories. I attest to the view that this aspect is crucial for it allowed me to “peel off my own subjectivities and detect [the participants’] tactical agency more accurately” (Van Stapele, 2014, p. 19). For example, participants were able to spot my misinterpretations upon hearing or reading their accounts from the stories that I presented to them and this gave them an opportunity to correct them. Notably, as a decolonial feminist scholar committed to recovering and representing correctly the voices of the marginal as much as possible,

this process tailored to the contexts of our participants is crucial. I read this as part and parcel of a decolonial feminist project in which the *Methepa* are co-constructors of knowledge on women's continuously emerging identities and agencies.

Subsequently, a personal experience narrative was constructed for each interviewee from the consolidated, chronologically arranged interpretive stories based on the main research interests. In other words, since my study sought to explore gender identity re-construction and agency among the *Methepa* from the interpretive stories, I extracted narratives pertaining to the main research questions of the study.

#### **4.6.3 Constructing personal experience narrative**

The construction of personal experience narratives was a subjective exercise because it involved selecting individual stories to construct a coherent narrative that speaks to *my* plot. However, I was mindful not to lose the meanings of what narrators construed as significant, and exercised caution not to distort the narrated experiences. Notably, this process required back and forth re-reading of transcripts and interpretive stories to retain the narrator's voice in the re-reconstructed stories that I reconstructed. Producing personal narratives was a lengthy, in-depth and intense process that required several drafts and re-interpretations of the same stories to elucidate the less obvious, 'unsaid' and contradictory meanings that are hidden in the narratives. This process reflects the fact that there are multiple meanings to the same narrative whose interpretation is shaped by various factors. Thus I concur with the view expressed by Woodiwiss et al. (2017) that women's experiences are always already 'situated' and reshaped by specific contextual factors. Considering this, each re-reading of the *Methepa*'s stories elucidated a reconstructed version of the story and new reinterpretation – that was at times contradictory. This resonates with McCormack's (2004, p. 233) observation that stories "offer the reader multiple pathways along which to travel through a story" thus, implying that there is no final interpretation. Moreover, nor is there a final 'truth', because at each level and each encounter with the narrative, it will continue to be reconstructed by individual readers.

This process allowed me to identify and reflect on my biases and views about the story; an important stage because it allowed me to deal with personal issues that would 'definitely' influence my interpretations and conclusions drawn from these stories. Being aware of this probability

forced me to exercise extra vigilance as I worked through the stories during the entire analysis, interpretation and write-up phases. In this exercise, I was also cautious not to occlude the women's voices and run the risk of misinterpreting them because this would ultimately distort lived experiences. Unlike traditional methods of thematic analysis where the researcher creates themes based on preconceived frameworks (Riessman, 2008), the process of 'storying stories' enabled me to create themes from the stories without trying to force women's voices into preconceived themes. However, given the red tape inherent to scientific and academic writing, it dawned on me that 'themes' cannot be avoided completely, but my attempts at inductive analysis through 'storying' women's stories sought to retain intact as much of the stories as possible. I make this claim notwithstanding the fact that my values as a Mosotho researcher as well as my research interest that influenced the research focus and questions of the study *are* constitutive of a particular thematic framework that I try so hard to avoid. Nonetheless, I address this predicament shortly as part of reflexivity. Notably, it suffices here to mention that the meanings expressed by speakers of lived experiences *are* the point of departure of this analytic process. From that, the findings and interpretations are based on narrated stories, first and foremost, rather than a preconceived framework per se.

In the next section, I reflect on the ethical considerations of the research process.

#### **4.7. Ethical considerations**

This entire research process was underpinned by the need to "protect, respect and be accountable to" the women I spoke with about their lived experiences of 'unmarriedness' (Bennett, 2008a, p. 5). Moreover, this section is particularly crucial to a decolonial feminist project that is committed to ensuring that interviewees are protected at all costs against potential harms related to the study. Liamputtong (2008) describes the consent process as a "thorny subject" in research done amongst indigenous communities. Therefore, it requires that caution be exercised in ensuring that participants are protected, and that they are well-informed of the entire research process from the onset. This process included obtaining informed consent which required that I read the information sheet and consent form (Appendix A) together with the participants so that I could address concerns early in the study. This was done using the Sesotho versions of the information sheet which outlined my research interests and procedures in detail, the anticipated duration of

interviews and frequency of contact sessions as well as the way they may interfere with daily routines. Two women that expressed time constraints opted out of the study.

In my attempts to “tailor [the process] to suit the local setting” (Liamputtong, 2008, p. 15), I made this process as flexible as possible to ensure that the participants were well-versed in the pertinent details of the study before providing any form of consent. Firstly, as opposed to reading through the information sheet from beginning to end, I adopted a conversational approach. In this, I ensured that I addressed all concerns raised by participants, for example, the purpose of the study and if there would be benefits for women who are not married in Lesotho. These are critical questions, central to a decolonial project which required that I openly and truthfully declare that although there are no direct benefits, their stories of womanhood may possibly benefit future generations through the promotion of positive subjectivities. Following this process, those agreeing to participate provided consent; again, this was flexible.

Although everyone could write their name, some opted to sign by placing a cross. This, I interpreted as having understood that participation was fully voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable for any reason without any repercussions. However, from time to time throughout the research, I addressed emerging issues and questions as the process continued. In the second part of the consent form, I requested permission to record the conversations of the interviews using a voice recorder so that I could transcribe interviews later for data analysis. As mentioned earlier, this was a concern for some interviewees initially, but with time as rapport was re-established, the audio recorder was no longer regarded as obtrusive.

However, despite having outlined “what constitutes the ‘correct’ course of action” (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 18) in the proposal stages, in hindsight, methods such as life histories raise ‘unforeseen’ ethical dilemmas for researchers. For example, given the amount of time required for life histories, it meant appropriating valuable time from my interviewees, some of whom I offered to assist with daily chores in order to minimise my intrusion as much as possible. However, traditionally, I was regarded as a ‘visitor’ and treated as such. Women gave me full attention; and given the amount of time I spent in their homes, some felt obliged to offer me food, which I occasionally accepted to avoid being offensive. Considering the intensity of the method for our

interviewees and the fact that life histories' key feature is the "prolonged interview" requiring a series of sessions (Measor & Sikes, 2003, p. 213).

I reflected on how my repeated 'requisitions' for additional 'unnecessary' visits potentially transgressed my promises of 'voluntary participation' and 'doing no harm'. In other words, although participants agree to partake in research voluntarily, the intensity and inconvenience of participation is realised in hindsight if at all. This ethical dilemma is alluded to by Reddy (2000) who pleads for constant reflection on whether the 'data' that we so require is necessary for addressing the key research questions, and thus warranting that extra visit, or whether it merely serves to satisfy our curiosity. Therefore, I limited my visits to a maximum of two or three by necessity and the latter was requested for purposes of follow-up or sharing the interpretive stories as I alluded earlier. While methodological texts acknowledge the intensity and length of life history methods, how this potentially implicates ethical research remains unacknowledged in these texts.

In addition, as I alluded in section 4.6, as some of the women narrated their lived experiences, "some unexpected distressing accounts" (Elliott, 2005, p. 135) emerged, and subsequently, the women experienced emotional teary outbursts and moments of sadness. Considering this, assumptions held by "enthusiastic life history researchers" (Miller, 2000, p. 81) for whom narration of lived experiences is simplistically therapeutic, are clearly misplaced. Nonetheless, the qualitative research setting undergirding this thesis catered for such moments and I extended emotional support to those women who occasionally broke down by stopping the interview. However, this is an ethical issue linked to potential for harm that I anticipated given the sensitive nature of the study. Although none of the women took up my offer for counselling, contacts were made available to them through the consent process and when the need arose during the interview process. Indeed, reflecting on how the narration of lived experiences affects individual participants is warranted, as opposed to universalising the process. Having said this, for some participants, the research experience opened space for self-reflection – a point to which I return in the section outlining my positionality.

Doing research in poor local communities raised additional dilemmas, which, given my position, were equally personal. Although I discuss my positionality in section 4.8, this issue also raises questions around the applicability of ethical requirements to local contexts set out by ethics committees. Doing research in local contexts, as suggested by Mbilinyi (1992), exemplifies

realities that are not accommodated within western scholarship nor acknowledged in written methodological texts. For instance, in terms of ethical research principles, participants' incentives are declared beforehand and subjected to specificities to guard against potential coercion into participation. Ritchie et al. (2013, p. 65) confirm that ethically, the researcher ought to maintain "objectivity and neutrality and some distance" when dealing with issues of reciprocity in research. However, African feminist Amina Mama reminds us that ethical considerations in the African world-sense are informed by our "identity, location, and epistemology". She further informs that "the ethics that we adopt to guide our scholarly practices — are informed by our identifications with particular communities and the values they uphold" (Mama, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, not only were my ethics informed by my identity as a Mosotho woman, but also the dynamics of my local Lesotho context. Given the destitution that I observed due to high unemployment in the communities that I visited, I was obliged at times to provide monetary or food assistance as I saw fit.

This was done out of necessity rather than 'compensation' per se as is captured in protocols of ethical review boards - given my position as an African feminist guided by African principles of *botho*, I considered it unethical to merely sit and conduct an interview with a hungry participant. While assistance was not solicited in direct ways, during a conversation some interviewees would retrospectively share information about their dire circumstances with the hope of getting some form of relief. I did not consider it to be extortion nor was it coercive, but my assistance being monetary, or food, was based on *botho* values that govern our Basotho communities. This raises questions around the meaning of 'ethical' in the western scientific research sense which is in contradistinction from its indigenous local sense that accounts for the realities of the marginalised *Mosotho* woman.

The consent process also included the issue of presenting research findings, including publication of manuscripts from the research. Accordingly, Gune and Manuel (2011, p. 38) warns us of the repercussions of "publication of empirical findings" which we need to be mindful of. Miller adds that ethical dilemmas arise from how publication of life history data makes 'the personal' public (2000, p. 82). Therefore, ethically, I was compelled to disclose to the women before the onset of data collection that I would publish their experiences in my thesis and peer-reviewed manuscripts. However, considering the sensitive nature of the information that the women shared, I am

compelled to safeguard their anonymity by using pseudonyms rather than real names. These will be used throughout the dissemination process including the other platforms which I intend to use for this purpose. Concomitantly to these academic publications, I am obliged as a decolonial feminist scholar to adopt an ethical and respectful approach when doing research with indigenous communities. This entails, amongst other pertinent aspects, “sharing knowledge” with “the people who helped make it” (Smith, 1999, p. 15). Therefore, part of my dissemination plan is to share the findings of the study – in an informal, culturally-appropriate manner – by visiting each of the women in their homes. Failure to do this, Smith cautions, constitutes ‘arrogance’ whereas our mandate is “to demystify, to decolonize” (Smith, 1999, p. 15) metanarratives around *Mosotho* womanhood and agency whilst also representing the realities of the *Methepa* through collaborative research.

#### **4.8. Reflecting on my positionality**

My positionality, as a Mosotho, female, born and bred in Lesotho (Ha Tsiu village located in Maseru district) meant that I am part of the communities into which I entered, being aware of the cultural conventions of acceptable behaviour. The Sesotho language which I speak all the time was also well known to me. These communities are my family and I am immersed as an ‘insider’ in this research process. This process was ‘personal’ and embodied. This calls into question the requirement of “value-free, emotionless and objective” science purported by traditional research (Nadar, 2014, p. 21). Instead, given that my subjectivity is written all over this thesis, the research questions are informed by my embodied drive to explore womanhood amongst Basotho women with whom I share a myriad of characteristics. I thus share with Undie (2007, p. 3) that my “emotional involvement” – as “accruing colossal benefits to the research endeavour” guided my pursuit of issues which I believed were critical in my community. Thus, my drive to explore issues related to womanhood and agency - in the Sesotho world-senses - was informed by a deep-seated need to represent the realities of my community. Therefore, reflecting on my positionality and how all this shaped the processes and outcomes of the research was crucial.

#### 4.8.1. Speaking with Basotho women

Feminist literature on qualitative research proposes that a common bond of gender that exists when women interview other women is the basis on which trust is established (Cotterill, 1992). Moreover, when Black women interview other women, a relation based on sisterhood develops and thus enables free dialogue and an ideal research setting (Beoku-Betts, 1994). Undoubtedly, that I embody similar social reality as a Black *Mosotho* woman who speaks the same language, shares a cultural identity, and comes from the same communities as the Basotho women with whom I was speaking, facilitated my entry into the research field. In other words, the women's perceptions of sharing "common experiences and viewpoints" (Liamputtong, 2008, p. 7) informed the manner in which they received me in their communities as well as their homes. However, being a young *Mosotho* woman speaking with elderly women about issues of womanhood and sexuality, on the other hand, rendered my insider status problematic in several ways. Firstly, some interviewees that were known to my deceased parents continuously reminisced about the 'old times' and less on the interview topics. Consequently, my presence was meaningful to them in this respect, and I afforded them the time to 'praise' my parents without hastening them. These interviews took the longest time, which also impacted on the transcription phase of the study. Secondly, sharing a common culture, it was expected that I should 'know these things'- captured in the expression "*as you know, in our culture ...*". Some expressed astonishment when I probed deeper about certain practices; one woman exclaimed, "*You don't know?!*" I had to stress the importance of recording their explanations of our cultural practices for the school project.

Characteristic to my insider status, "[a]ge was also a factor" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 408), and became an impediment for open sharing and extensive probing, particularly since any discussion around childhood and girlhood touched on sensitive issues of sexuality. However, despite the sensitive nature of the research, some of the women were able to share intimate experiences in subsequent encounters following the establishment of rapport. Naples (2003) reminds us that establishing rapport is an ongoing process that requires negotiation and renegotiation with participants through daily interactions as opposed to a once-off process. Thus, on the other hand, my age as a young *Mosotho* speaking with older Basotho women opened room for deeper engagement with cultural practices. Significantly, this was around the sexual aspects where the women felt, as the bearers of culture, that it was their responsibility to impart insight and



knowledge to a young woman. Notably, I read their motivation and willingness to impart their insight to me about Sesotho<sup>55</sup> as more than the usual rapport established in social science research. Rather, I read my and the women's emotional involvement in this project as a resource that afforded us 'staying power' to see the project through to the end (Undie, 2007). This was also reflected in their willingness to allow additional visits for clarity and follow-up – a point to which I referred in the previous section on ethical considerations.

This aspect, and the trust that we had established with the women - all of which challenge the notion of 'emotionless' science - allowed the revelation of intimate details about women's sexual secrets. For instance, in the discussions of cultural practices that are performed as part of the Basotho enculturation processes, women shared explicit details of a sexual nature. However, given the intimacy that we shared, it raised dilemmas during the writing process where I was contemplating how much information to include in this thesis. On one hand, the women with whom I had established a close trust relationship had taken time to enlighten me about Sesotho cultural practices. On the other hand, I was obliged to keep our secrets safe, yet at the same time, this is rich information with which I could contribute 'new' deconstructive knowledge about womanhood and sexuality amongst Basotho – akin to the key concerns of this thesis. Acknowledging this dilemma, Chi Chi Undie (2007, p. 3) poses a question: "[w]hich and how much data can one use and still remain 'loyal' to a context which one is part?" I am indebted to us and our culture to represent the true picture, but on the other hand, I needed to "'tone it down' a little" (Undie, 2007, p. 3) for my audience without losing the meaning that the women intended to communicate. To address this dilemma, Tamale (2005) suggested that one ought to exercise caution when selecting information to be revealed. Moreover, in so doing, we need to remain aware that the purpose of the information is solely to contribute to advancing knowledge on gender identity, sexuality and agency of Basotho women. I have therefore made greater effort to include only what is necessary and to protect the identities of participants by presenting the life histories under the guise of pseudonyms as I mentioned above.

However, in spite of being accepted as an insider, I found myself having to negotiate around the aspect of marital status by exercising caution in how I phrased the questions. Having imposed my misconceptions upon my participants through my inappropriate questioning that tied being

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<sup>55</sup> Sesotho in this instance is used in reference to cultures and traditions – and not only language

‘unmarried’ to personal choice, I was bound to scrutinise my insider status. As a ‘culture bearer’ - which for Undie (2007, p. 7) “requires growing up with these [cultural] events and being emotionally involved with cultural values and biases” - I should have known better. I was born and bred in my community and I consider myself to be well-accustomed to the cultural norms that inform marriage and womanhood in my communities. However, I erroneously viewed the realities of the women with whom I shared a cultural identity through a westernised, universalist lens (Oyèwùmí, 1997; Smith, 2005). Indeed, my preconceived assumptions were disputed by my very first participant who responded with shock to my question: “Why did you *choose* to remain unmarried?” Mbilinyi (1992) raises concerns about asking the right questions as well as how ‘wrong’ questions can potentially distort the realities of marginalised communities. She also cautions against making totalising interpretations, and thus advocates the need to immerse oneself in the world of the participant. Instead of asking “Why have you *chosen* to remain unmarried?” I asked, “What does it mean to you to be unmarried?” This enabled detailed and rich narrations of lived experiences from which I was able to draw deeply embedded meanings and constructions of agency. My identity as a married woman was problematic on many counts: I was considered to be privileged and while my identity as a *Mosotho* girl allowed me insider status, my ‘wifehood’ identity immediately marked me as less of an insider.

Given the fluidity of my identity and how this shapes my position (Flores, 2018), I had anticipated that my ‘married’ status and speaking with ‘unmarried’ women about lived experiences of being ‘unmarried’ would be problematic. Although I did not volunteer information about my marital status – since many of them knew me personally or through my key informants – none of my participants expressed concerns verbally that I am married. However, some made comments such as “*You are lucky you are married*”<sup>56</sup> while some chose to give unsolicited advice on protecting and respecting my marriage. Notwithstanding, I cannot ignore a comment at which we both laughed by a woman who exclaimed, “*Oh you are married? Is that why you are asking us these questions?*”<sup>57</sup> I read this to reflect the significance of marriage and thus my ‘Other’ status to the women with whom I had close cultural ties. However, Oakley (2016, p. 198), reminds us that “cultural homogeneity” and being ‘gender matched’ do not dissolve the power imbalances born out of our other multiple identities that we embody as feminist researchers. Thus, insider-outsider

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<sup>56</sup> *Uena oa iketla o nyetsoe*, was a statement made an elderly interviewee

<sup>57</sup> *Oh uena o nyetsoe? ke tje onto re botsa lipotso tsee?*

positions, as opposed to being fixed, are instead shaped by various intertwined factors and require constant negotiation throughout the research process, as Flores (2018) alluded. Nonetheless, the women's willingness to continue sharing their lived experiences with me as 'Other' reflected the extent of emotional involvement in this project that sought to give voice to our invisibilised knowledges. Relatedly, of significance, I also read their partaking as knowledge co-constructors on *Bosali* and agency.

As I prepare to discuss the class issue, I am obliged to reflect on how this research space also bore unforeseen positive outcomes for some of the women. For a marginalised class of Basotho women, some *Methepa* used the interview process as a debriefing session and were grateful to share lived experiences of being 'unmarried' with a listener. Meanwhile, for others, the research process enabled reflection and self-discovery as expressed in the following extract: "*I do realise that I don't know a big part of myself and it feels like I'm on a self-discovery journey*". Given the context, for some, speaking openly about experiences of being 'unmarried' was a rare opportunity and one that I acknowledge here as constituting an unwritten benefit of the study to my interviewees (Measor & Sikes, 2003). In addition, a woman who identified as lesbian, notably within a context governed by stringent heteronormative ideologies, was astonished by how open she was speaking about her sexual preferences which, in this context, are typically regard as abhorrent. In the extract below, I captured our conversation as we were wrapping up the interview. She stated:

*I find your questions very funny...(laughing) [Why?] I think it is because... there is no one with whom I can speak about these things in such an open manner...and I think that the reason that I can speak openly is because it is just the two of us [Why do you say that?] Because if there were other people I would have been scared to speak openly. [Why...?] They are judgemental.*

However, this intimate interview space, in which we share aspects such as gender, race, culture, seemingly reduced the distance (Oakley, 2016) between me (as researcher) and the women such that they expressed benefits of being afforded the space to speak openly about their lives. This reflects how power dynamics inherent to the research space can potentially be balanced out, not only through the identities that we embody, but also by fostering reciprocal, respectful and non-judgemental research spaces. In so doing, we afforded the marginalised subaltern women with whom we speak opportunities to speak with dignity (Liamputtong, 2008; Smith, 1999). However,

because our identities are shaped by multiple forces, how we are positioned within the research process is ever shifting.

#### 4.8.2. 'Class matters' in research

Like my marital status, I cannot deny the role of class in illuminating the differences between us. Again I was reminded of my outsider status (Merriam et al., 2001; Savvides, Al-Youssef, Colin, & Garrido, 2014). I was forced to negotiate and manage the power dynamics that ensued as a result of being highly educated, pursuing PhD studies in South Africa, and driving my own car - all of which spelt middle-classness. However, I made every effort to mitigate the effect of my class identity through a number of strategies. For example, from the moment I would enter the household, I would try to blend in and to be as open as possible about general concerns of the community. As a way of bridging power hierarchies, I occasionally accepted food offerings extended to me as a symbol of a warm welcome to a guest rather than a mere inquisitive researcher. I also tried to be as visible as possible within the village by walking to my participants' homes and parking my vehicle at a central point when it was possible to do so. However, in some instances, I got an odd comment or question – “*oh is this your car?*” – to which I hesitantly replied, “Yes... because it is easier and faster to drive from Maseru”. I tried by all means to be honest about any information that I shared about myself and tried to limit it to that pertinent to the research. In regard to my studies, as part of my introduction I briefly added that I was doing a research project<sup>58</sup> but I never mentioned that it was PhD lest it aroused power dynamics. However, a few got to know only when they showed interest and enquired deeper. Moreover, others were informed by my key informants – perhaps as a way of emphasising the seriousness of the project – and this raised interest.

However, there were instances where, despite my attempts to bridge the power dynamics inherent in the research process, some of the younger interviewees tried so hard to uphold them by addressing me as *m'e* (adult/mother). This is a label that is used to show respect and I consistently used it for elderly women followed by first names (for instance *m'e-Neo*) and *ausi* (sister - *ausi-Neo*) for the younger women. This reciprocal respect is, however, typical of a society governed by the values of *hlonpho* wherein respect is extended to every guest of the household, regardless.

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<sup>58</sup> '*ke ngoana sekolo*' - I am a student, this possibly also dispelled any assumptions that I was in a position of employing anybody

Merriam et al. (2001, p. 413) assert that, “[p]ower is something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process”. Evidently, what this implies is that a researcher ought not only to be expectant of ever-present power hierarchies in research, but also to devise culturally appropriate and creative means of negotiating around these and managing them. Allowing the participants to occupy an expert position as suggested by (Tamale, 2011) regarding their lived experiences of ‘unmarriedness’ assisted in ensuring that we deflated the hierarchical researcher/participant power dynamics.

However, power dynamics within the research space are not always linear and unidimensional. I felt overwhelmed with anxiety when I was due to meet women that I categorised as ‘middle-class’; they were elderly, and post-retirement women with post-graduate degrees. Accordingly, my main concern was tied to their reception of me into their personal spaces as well as my performance in the interview space. Cotterill (1992, p. 593) reminds us that “interviews are fluid encounters where [power] balances shift between and during different interview situations, and there are times when researchers as well as the researched are vulnerable”. This therefore implies that power dynamics in research manifest in both ways; and thus, force researchers to be prepared to manage these effectively to mitigate affecting the outcomes of the study. This entailed preparation and rehearsal of information sheets and consent forms prior to all the visits, as well as arriving ahead of the scheduled time for us to acclimatise to the research setting.

#### **4.8.3. The power of language in research**

The power of language in constructing meanings, shaping identities and in turn informing constructions of agency cannot be doubted and thus must be commended as a tool for emancipatory research (Nkoane, 2012). Earlier, I alluded to sharing culture and language with the women; and thus, commended the role that it played in facilitating entry into the field as well as free expression and communication. I therefore share the view raised by Ndimande, (citing Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1986) that “[t]he language a researcher uses in the interviews is crucial because it is through language that people formulate their thoughts as they respond to questions” (2012, p. 216). My sharing a common language meant that the women with whom I was speaking could self-express freely as they constructed and reconstructed the notion of womanhood without having to translate or simplify their narratives for an ‘unfamiliar’ researcher. This in turn cleared the research process

of unnecessary barriers through which women's voices could potentially be distorted. Through the use of Sesotho, the women were also afforded the space "to affirm and reinforce cultural identities" (Ndimande, 2012, p. 216). In other words, not only did Basotho women articulate and construct womanhood, from their cultural world-senses, but this was closely tied to and enabled through their use of Sesotho expressions, idioms and proverbs. Thus, the power of sharing a similar culture undoubtedly afforded this research the depth and richness that it embodies.

Relatedly, the significance of Sesotho idioms and proverbs to how the women make sense of their lives and make meaning of their identities as *basali ba Basotho*<sup>59</sup> is worth mentioning. In the analysis and write up stages I paid close attention to how the women articulated the idioms and proverbs as they grappled to illuminate particular attributes that affirm them as *basali*. In cases where the meanings were unclear in the quotations, I provided the direct translation in the main text and footnoted the deeper meanings and the implications thereof. In so doing, I intended to honour these unique intricacies as "meaning-making devices that unearth deep-rooted constructions and representations" (Batisai, 2013, p. 81) of *basali*. Bagele Chilisa (2012) describes these as representations of knowledges embedded in a localised indigenous identity embodied by our participants. Considering that this thesis is premised upon the call to 'build on the indigenous', taking heed to these unique intricacies in informing women's constructions of womanhood as well as their agency that is informed by their own positionalities was critical. This aligns with the decolonial project purported by this thesis and as such allowed for research on the lived experiences of Basotho women that is mindful, ethical and respectful.

Following verbatim transcription in Sesotho, the next step that was required was to translate the transcripts into English. However, language as has been acknowledged, is a power source that typically reshapes and distorts lived experiences and 'voices' of the marginalised 'other' (Tamale, 2011). Although I had set out to translate the transcripts from Sesotho to English in my hypothetical methodological framework, I encountered difficulties stemming from my political stance that I was unaware of prior to embarking on this journey. Besides, adopting a decolonial feminist lens, I had envisioned representing the 'voices' of the *Methepa* 'as much as possible' in this thesis. However, translating Sesotho idioms, proverbs and colloquial phrases which characterised narrated stories of gender identity construction and agency proved to be problematic,

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<sup>59</sup> *Basali ba Basotho* is loosely translated as Basotho women

lest I distort women's 'voices.' Batisai (2013) raised similar concerns about language in her research and she opted for direct translations of proverbs used by elderly Shona women in the main text and footnoted the descriptions of complex *ChiShona* expressions.

In this thesis, translating the narrated life stories of the *Methepa* from Sesotho to English was not this simple. The politics of language in research and translation from vernacular to English has long been acknowledged by African feminists such as Bennett (2008) and Tamale (2011). Tamale affirms the politics of language as a 'validated' colonial tool for knowledge production. She argues that in sexuality discourses, language was used to "shape and construct meanings and definitions of related concepts [that] necessarily reflect realities and experiences outside Africa..." (2011, p. 18). In other words, Tamale alludes to the notion of language as a power device enforced through colonial structures to misrepresent not only the realities but the sexualities of African people. Therefore, translating transcripts into a foreign coloniser's language - English - I felt, constitutes further, the silencing of the subaltern *Mothepe*. Moreover, my use of Sesotho and intent to foreground Sesotho even in the writing of this thesis is tied to my position as a decolonial feminist scholar. Thus, reflecting the need to "affirm and reinforce the importance of [i]ndigenous languages in research connected to [i]ndigenous communities" (Ndimande, 2012, p. 217 emphasis in original).

Accordingly, the decolonial feminist lens that I adopted emphasises the need to decolonise research by exploring alternative ways of conducting as well as presenting research in ways that preserve the 'voices' of the marginalised. One way in which I set out to achieve this mandate is through the use of Sesotho as suggested by Hamza (2004) and Ndimande (2012). Hamza (2004) reiterates the views of decolonial scholars<sup>60</sup> that the use of indigenous languages serves as a tool to decolonise research and scholarship on phenomena such as womanhood and agency. Moreover, this requires that we place, as central, the experiences and 'voices' of our participants, as validated knowledge producers in *our* own terms (Smith, 1999; Steady, 2005). Therefore, although I tried to retain partially the voices of the *Methepa*, and thus guard against losing the "rich cultural connotations, ambiguities and multiple meanings" of womanhood (Tamale, 2011, p. 19), the colonial-plagued system within which we construct knowledge would have it differently. I had

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<sup>60</sup> Scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) long acknowledged the use of indigenous languages as validated knowledge production resources and as critical tool for re-centering marginalised indigenous knowledges and epistemologies.

intended to retain both the direct English translation and the original Sesotho extracts of women's narrated voices in the texts of the thesis. This would have partially allowed my main stakeholders and co-owners of this research, the *Methepa*, some access to this work.

In her biography, *Singing Away the Hunger*, 'm'e Mpho 'M'aT'sepo Nthunya raised similar issues with having her stories written in English, a language that was a deterrent for her community to access her book - because "it will not mean anything to them" (1996, p. 1). Likewise, that the stories of the *Methepa* are presented in English, in a thesis written in such a way that it 'meets' academic standards, ultimately debars the stakeholders from accessing their own stories. However, while retaining the Sesotho extracts - for the least - would have been important given my loyalty as an African feminist scholar whose gaze in this entire thesis is one of decoloniality, I was swiftly reminded of the stringency embodied by academia enforced through prescriptions of permissible word counts for PhD theses. These regulations and several others tied to postgraduate studies bear the traits of colonial ideologies in which 'there is only one way' of doing and presenting research. These are often captured in expressions such as 'you cannot' or 'you have to' which cripple creative 'out of the box' thinking required by decolonial thought and ultimately forces any decolonial project back into the normative colonised framework.

In the words of Ndimande, "decolonizing research is not without challenges", and citing Swadener and Mutua (2008), asserts that "[d]ecolonizing research is a messy, complex, and perhaps impossible endeavor . . . [but] a project worth pursuing" (Ndimande, 2012, p. 223). Indeed, although I had set out to do decolonial research for reasons outlined earlier, this has not been an easy task. To borrow the words of Ndimande, (2012, p. 221), "I may not have completely succeeded... but I tried to apply different appropriate [decolonizing] strategies" through ensuring respectful, ethical, subjective and collaborative research. However, this bogged down at the writing up stages whereby my intentions were thwarted, thus raising critical questions around the feasibility of decolonising feminist research given the broader context in which this is negotiated.

To deal with these dilemmas, scholars such as Mignolo (2009, p. 3) encourage "epistemic disobedience" to underpin contradictory decolonial discourse, an idea long endorsed by African anthropologist Archie Mafeje (2000) of the need for combative methodologies, which are by nature disobedient. Our very own Chuimbu (2017, p. 3) posits that decolonisation "requires that we have the courage, strength, confidence and humility to rise to the challenges and difficulties of



current times; it commands that we educate ourselves to become comfortable with the discomfort of disrupting the known and common sense”. This is a perspective with which I fully agree. However, I am also cautious about how possible this is for a PhD candidate in training who is ever at the mercy of the supervisor, the department, the external examiners to complete the project within a stipulated time frame in order to be affirmed as a qualified participant within the academic circle. Although I do not purport to provide immediate answers to these questions in this thesis, they are nonetheless food for thought for further exploration beyond this project. The emotions of feeling gutted for being unable to represent the ‘voices’ of the *Methepa* in this thesis, are palpable in this final reflective section. However, at least unlike positivist approaches, feminist and qualitative approaches allow for the embrace of our emotions as part of the research process. Therefore, notwithstanding the emotionalism embodied by my reflections, this thesis brings to the fore my decolonial feminist analytical skills which I apply throughout.

#### **4.9. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the methodological processes of this study; and while I described the processes, I equally justified and supported my choices of epistemologies, methodologies and methods. Moreover, my choices were tied to the necessity of selecting the best suited data collection and analysis methods which would necessarily help explore the *Methepa*’s re-constructions of womanhood. This qualitative study that is located within an interpretive paradigm is undergirded by decolonial feminist epistemologies. This is informed by the key concerns of this thesis, one of which is to reveal and address colonial biases according to which marginalised Basotho women are deemed ‘voiceless’. It employed life history methods to explore the *Methepa*’s re-constructions of womanhood and agency. Life history methods provide space for women to voice their own constructions of identity and agency from within their social, cultural and historical contexts. This study employed both convenience and purposive sampling techniques to select the study settings. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select participants. Considering that life histories are relatively lengthy and require several interviews with participants, I chose a small sample of twenty ‘never married’ women from diverse backgrounds and contexts in Lesotho.

I also gave attention to the realities of the field, and in so doing, highlighted those related to doing life history research in local contexts as well as narrative analysis process; ‘storying stories’, about which there is paucity in written methodological texts. This process was applied to the narrated life histories of the *Methepa*. It accounted for women’s lived experiences as well as the context within which these experiences are housed. Considering my positionality to the study, I also pointed out pertinent aspects of the research process, such as language, that I felt could potentially distort the ‘voices’ of the women that I spoke with. Nonetheless, this in-depth analysis revealed rich and detailed narrations of the *Methepa*’s accounts of identity re-constructions and agency. Now that I outlined the contextual, theoretical and methodological terrains that undergird the study, in the next two chapters, I focus on the analysis of the study results.

## Chapter 5: The young *Mosotho* girl (*ngoanana oa Mosotho*)

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter maps the historical, socio-cultural and economic context that shapes the *Methepa*'s constructions of womanhood in Lesotho. The chapter presents the content of life stories narrated by the *Methepa* with regard to their lived experiences of childhood. Of interest were the women's accounts of what it means to be a young *Mosotho* girl - *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This is a socio-culturally defined identity exemplifying 'proper' *Mosotho* girlhood in transit towards *Mosotho* womanhood. I draw from these narratives as a lens through which to understand the historical, socio-cultural and economic context that shapes the *Methepa*'s constructions of womanhood. This analysis draws on the women's lived experiences of childhood within intersecting, and at times conflicting, familial, communal and schooling spaces. This therefore enables an understanding of the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* as multidimensional, multi-spatial and complex.

Typically, the *Methepa*'s narrations of their upbringing are reflective of the dominant norms since the context within which they exist has predefined *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, according to dominant socio-cultural norms. However, my reading of the transcripts "against the grain" allowed me to elucidate "that which [evades] the dominant discourse" (Walters, 2017, p. 25). By locating these lived childhood experiences within the framework of *uMakhulu* that privileges the indigenous Sesotho world-senses, I am better able to elucidate the 'less obvious' aspects that are central to Basotho enculturation processes. I pay close attention to how, as young girls, the *Methepa* were groomed not only to be domesticated, but to embody their social roles as functional, resilient and respectable adults. I also employ the *Methepa*'s narratives on the practice of labial elongation - a key aspect of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* - as a lens through which to understand the context undergirded by heteronormativity. Within this context, not only are young female bodies shaped and groomed towards their destined sexual roles in adulthood as *mosali oa Mosotho*, but procreative marital bodies are also created. Notable are the values of solidarity, communality, sisterhood and collectivity that undergird the becoming of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* through the Sesotho world-senses. However, given a dynamic socio-cultural, economic and historical context in which these lived experiences are housed, tensions around gender identity construction are bound to be present at the intersection of these spaces. As such, I take account of the role that this

plays in shaping the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. In this regard, we get to the core of what it means to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and how her actions and projects are constituted, limited and empowered by the context within which she exists.

Ntuli (2002) points out that “language represents a specific worldview and ontology” (cited in Magoqwana, 2018b, p.76), and heeding this assertion, I opt to employ *ngoanana oa Mosotho* instead of ‘*Mosotho* girlhood’. In so doing, I seek to capture and privilege the lived realities and as well the embodied symbolic meanings in all their complexities around Basotho gender identity. I also reflect on the influences of Christianity within Basotho families; and where this is obvious, I opt to use the English concept, ‘girlhood’ rather than *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This chapter is divided into two main sections: The ‘becoming’ of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and *Ngoanana oa Mosotho* in contradictory spaces. Agency – in its varied creative and subtle forms is the thread that holds this entire thesis together. However, it will also be dealt with in more depth in Chapter 7 which provides a theoretical analysis of the agency of the *Methepa*.

## **5.2. The ‘becoming’ of *ngoanana oa Mosotho***

### **5.2.1. Creation of ‘functional’ bodies**

In almost all the narratives, women pointed to the familial setting as the primary site of a girl-child’s enculturation as she transitions towards *bosali* (womanhood). Noteworthy, however, is how intersecting geographic locality, class, culture, and gender shape and reshape this enculturation process. While for many participants, the family was constructed as the site within which femininity was inscribed, there were a few exceptions, such as M’e Ts’ido who indicated that within her family, allocation of chores was un-gendered. Rather, girls and boys were allocated the same duties within the household. M’e Ts’ido was born in South Africa and bred in a rural village of Ha Ramapepe in Leribe district. She is the eldest of ten children within a middle class, male-headed family of a South African Police Service (SAPS) employed father and housewife mother. While her mother acknowledged the father’s role and position as head of house, she insisted on de-gendering allocation of chores for the children;

*Therefore, mother used to say that there is only one man in the family...it is her own. The rest of us did work in the family...yes ...the boys were not regarded as boys, girls as girls*

*we did all chores because they were not herding cattle since we did not have livestock. For a boy to take a bucket to go to the well to collect water...it was one of those things. There was no discrimination as far as my mom was concerned...and even my dad because my father was the type that when there is no food, when the children have not eaten, if he does not find anything that he can give them in the house, it was not a problem for him to wash the three legged pot. He would wash it and cook papa (mealie meal pap) and we would see what to eat it with M'e Ts'ido (Maseru, 02 June 2017)*

M'e Ts'ido elaborates on her upbringing in which both parents endorsed the implementation of a non-gendered socialisation process for the children. Interestingly, to corroborate her point, she illuminates her father's participation in child-care and cooking when the need arose. The mother explicitly challenged social norms through her assertion that the boy child should be brought up as a child as opposed to channeling them into gendered norms. Thus, her emphasis on the boy child raises questions regarding mother's convictions and outlook on life. However, while it may be argued that M'e Ts'ido's class identity and her father's migrancy status undergird their 'contradictory' ideologies, I read this finding as resonant with African feminist's dispute against assumptions of universalised gendered division of labour (Oyèwùmí, 1997). Instead, as is reflected in M'e Ts'ido's narration that "*rest of us did work in the family...yes ...the boys were not regarded as boys, girls as girls, we did all chores*", thus confirming that role allocation was not gendered but instead, fulfilment of tasks within the family was based on necessity.

In contrast to M'e Ts'ido's account, for many participants, domesticity, spearheaded by the mother, was constructed as the cornerstone of real girlhood. M'e Lebo grew up in Maseru in a middle class, nuclear, male-headed family. She is the last-born daughter of three girls, and she detailed a typical gendered socialisation process that was spearheaded by the mother as follows:

*But my mom taught me how to cook. Things like bread. When she did...I remember the day when I ate steamed bread for the first time... I remember I was a teenager. She taught me that when one mixes the ingredients, you should not spill...you know how the flour messes*  
M'e Lebo (Maseru, 03 June 2017).

The domestic space is characterised by food preparation and cleanliness which M'e Lebo constructs as key aspects of femininity defining 'girlhood' in transit to 'womanhood'. M'e Lebo describes how from, adolescence, she was trained to embody the symbolic meaning of the kitchen

space - ‘woman’s space’ - and she elaborated on maintaining the required standards which include meticulousness and cleanliness. This is reflective of Christian mission of domesticity instituted to prepare girls to be “good Christian wives and mothers” through their maintenance of good hygiene and cleanliness (Bastian, 2000, p. 151). Indeed, the background that she embodies: middle-class, urban location and Catholic schooling are resonant with this gendered upbringing that prepares her for ‘real’ domestic girlhood.

However, parallel to the inscription of real domestic femininity, M’e Lebo detailed how she equally endorsed tasks performed by her father; for instance, slaughtering sheep and overseeing the family business.

*That is how we grew up; I can say that our upbringing was associated with business... in fact that is my life...that’s what I know. I remember I would watch my dad slaughtering the sheep. I would go with him to fetch them from the abattoir, even if I did not do anything but I know how to kill a sheep, remove the skin, the insides. I didn’t do much, but I would follow him around. When he collated the accounts for the day...I would also be watching him because he used to do it himself* M’e Lebo (Maseru, 03 June 2017).

M’e Lebo’s shadowing of her father into the public space shaped her interest in business. This is a sphere traditionally constructed as exclusively masculine – in gendered terms, thus implying that it challenges social and gender norms guiding what the girl-child gets exposed to. Noteworthy is that while she fully embraced the domestic tasks as the rightful space for her and her mother, overseeing the family business as well as slaughtering sheep were considered as yet another space into which she had access. Thus, M’e Lebo’s accounts reveal that while she does identify with the domestic space and that the roles performed therein are in preparation for womanhood, she is not debarred from the public sphere. This finding contradicts Aleck & Thembhani, (2016, p. 7092) who reiterate western feminist discourse that “the kitchen blocks and suppresses [girls’] visions and plans in life”, thus fuelling women’s oppression in society. Instead, while the domestic hearth may be considered to be a ‘feminised’ space, the grooming of the Mosotho girl-child is, however, not confined to this space. Instead, multi-tasking within many spaces necessarily informed how one becomes *ngoanana oa Mosotho*.

Multi-tasking and occupation of multiple spaces is characteristic to a girl’s becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. M’e Kotseng, the eldest daughter of five children born and bred by a divorced teacher,

residing in a semi-rural camp-town of Teyateyaneng (TY) district, summarised her ‘becoming’ as follows:

*No...we used to do chores that are reserved for girls.... that prepared [basali] women to be mothers [bo m'e]...girls to be women ... yes...we know how to do everything...in the house I do everything... Even in the garden ...I also grind the corn [ho sila]...she really taught us. Even these boys... because we did not have livestock, there is no boy child who cannot make bread... to cook...to wash clothes... they can do all the duties that a female person can do. M'e Kotseng (TY, 19 June 2017).*

M'e Kotseng sketches a linear process through which, as young girls [*banana*], were groomed towards a long-anticipated goal as *basali[women]*; and thereafter, as *bo m'e[mothers]*. This entailed multi-tasking on domestic duties which she acknowledges as ‘feminine’ amongst which were tasks such as gardening and grinding corn. Moreover, like M'e Ts'ido, she elaborated on how her male siblings – in the absence of livestock – were also taught to perform ‘domestic’ duties such as baking bread, cooking, washing clothes – which according to a gendered context are typically defined as feminine. Thus, while M'e Kotseng reflects on a gendered task allocation, these findings contradict the taken-for-granted assumption that girl-children are groomed solely for inferiorised roles of domesticity and passivity as wives. Moreover, that boys are prepared for superiority and provider husband-hood whose rightful space is the public sphere rather than the domestic. Instead, I also read her mother's efforts in teaching girls and boys multiple tasks for self-sustenance.

Within some families, in the absence of a boy-child, the elder girl-child was by necessity, allocated tasks (defined in gendered terms as ‘masculine’) such as herding livestock. Like M'e Lifutso, M'e Keneuoe narrated at length how she was forced to undertake duties that are socially ascribed to males outside the home; yet thereafter, she was expected to resume duties reserved for her female body within the home space.

*When parents have livestock they expect you being a girl-child to perform duties reserved for the boy-child...we had to go collect cattle feed...we took turns with the other families....so failure to conform is punishable ...indeed that was part of growing up...we performed duties that were reserved for boys...when the cows have given birth...you had to milk the cows...you had to get down and milk the cow...it will definitely kick*

*you.(laughing)...it is not our job... everything that men did we were forced to do because there was no other way. The biggest challenge was when we are in the fields and the boys would chase you ...you had to run...on the other hand you still need to go back home to perform your other duties like cooking* M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).

M'e Keneuoe expressed distaste for being forced into a space considered to be 'masculine' - cattle herding. She considered this as a 'misfit' and as such was a source of distress about which M'e Keneuoe constantly exclaimed, "*It is not our job*". Nonetheless, by necessity the girl-child was taught to multi-task within and outside the household and as is reflected in M'e Keneuoe's account, this required constant negotiation within and round the various spaces. This finding is comparable to that reported by Batisai (2013) on the childhood experiences of elderly Zimbabwean women, who performed multiple tasks within the home (defined as feminine) and those requiring physical strength (defined as masculine) outside the home in preparation for adulthood. Reading these experiences through a lens of *uMakhulu*, that posits a 'rejection of binary thinking' herding livestock, milking cows as well as cooking are however, all duties tied to the need for survival and continuity in these indigenous contexts.

Likewise, M'e Lifutso was born and bred in a rural village of Ha Ramapepe in Leribe district. She is the eldest daughter amongst three siblings, one boy and two girls born to a migrant-worker father and housewife mother. She narrated how she was made to undertake chores defined as 'masculine' in the absence of a boy-child. However, once her male sibling had come of age, a gendered division of labour was instituted by her mother. Accordingly, tasks requiring strength were reserved for the appropriately gendered body - the boy child - while she was made to focus on 'feminine' duties - so-called rightful place in this gendered context. However, unlike M'e Keneuoe, M'e Lifutso recounts how she questioned this gendered segregation whilst acknowledging it as incomprehensible:

*Because he comes towards the end, the boy... we completed those tasks but when became wise, she [mother] instructed us to stop chopping wood, that he would do it. So it didn't make any sense why she would say that when we knew how to do it ... indeed she used to select tasks for us, those tasks that required [physical] strength were reserved for this boy...the light tasks were allocated to us...I didn't understand because we could do it* M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).



In this respect, her mother's insistence that they stop performing 'masculine' tasks serves as a 'corrective measure' necessitated by the demands of the domestic script purposed to groom the girl-child for ideal 'civilised' womanhood. Accordingly, performance of 'masculine' tasks is considered to be contradictory to this process. This finding reflects the continuities of the missionary prescriptions, by conformity to which Basotho girls and their families were judged as 'modern' and 'civilised' – as reflected in Chapter 2. By contrast for M'e Lifutso, however, demonstrating ability to perform all the 'unfeminine' duties that were (considered to be) counter-normative led her to interrogate the gendered way of life, albeit discretely. In retrospect, she acknowledged this as an 'eye-opener' that contradicted commonly held religio-cultural beliefs around gender roles. She reported that:

*When I was growing up, there were many things that I used to do and I believed that I could achieve many things ...but at that time I was still and it was not that clear to me. Because I used to do things that would make my mother say... 'I think here I was meant to have a boy child' ... I believe that I can fulfil many tasks being a girl child...not a man...then when I became mature, I realised that I could do many things...M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).*

Within a context governed by hetero-patriarchal Christian norms, her epiphany that "*I believe that I can fulfil many tasks being a girl child...not a man*" resonates with the idea that "gender roles [are] absolute nonsense" (Adichie, 2017, p. n.p) and that girl-children question and reject them in the same way as M'e Lifutso is doing. The findings also affirm decolonial feminism's (Lugones, 2007; Oyěwùmí, 1997) demand that 'gender' be decolonised through a re-reading that disrupts the taken-for-granted-ness of 'gender' as patriarchal. The women's narrated accounts reveal that in spite of a gendered division of labour instituted within their families, the deployment of these roles reflects flexibility rather than a fixed patriarchal order. In other words, Basotho girl's enculturing into womanhood disrupts the patriarchised and hierarchised order through which they would become inferiorised and subordinate women – as is reflected in the western-centric construct Woman. Moreover, re-read through *uMakhulu*, multi-tasking and occupation of multiple spaces that characterised these women's enculturation is also reflective of indigenous values of functionality and multiplicity. These are attributes, that Collins (2000) considers to be

characteristic to African constructions of femininity in contradistinction to the western ideals that demand passivity and dependence.

Functionality, communality and multiplicity tied to Sesotho world-senses are central to the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Reflected in the women's narrated accounts are discernible distinctions of geographical location that also shaped the upbringing of the girl-child to become *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in transit to *mosali oa Mosotho*. In contrast to M'e Ts'ido, M'e Lebo and M'e Kotseng, M'e Keneuoe, M'e Lisebo and M'e Mpale elaborated on a multi-spatial, dynamic and complex enculturation process that reflected the dynamics of the rural context. Notably, strength, diligence and multi-tasking were attributes that marked one as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in this context. M'e Mpale grew up in a rural village in Thaba Tseka, she is the fourth daughter within a family of five children - four girls and one boy, born to a migrant father. M'e Mpale described an upbringing that was characterised by:

*When you work hard...I mean like cooking, like collecting wood, in the rural areas we are forced to collect wood ... I mean those types of tasks. Like knowing how to decorate the interior and exterior walls of traditional Basotho dwelling with cow dung mixture [ho lila]...since that is a requirement M'e Mpale (Maseru, 14 June 2017).*

Noteworthy is M'e Mpale's elaboration on multiple tasks, such as cooking, collecting wood, decorating the homestead, as examples of tasks that are performed outside the home, and requiring some level of strength in contradistinction to M'e Lebo's upbringing. Likewise, M'e Keneuoe reflected on how the ability to fulfil labour intensive chores within and outside the home was central to what it means to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho*.

M'e Keneuoe grew up in a rural village of Thlakuli in Leribe district. She is the eldest daughter of six children born to a migrant-worker father and housewife mother. Interestingly, before delving into details of her childhood, she emphasises the differences that she attributes to the spatial context. She starts off by attesting that her 'complex' childhood was typical of the rural context in which she was born and bred. However, in hindsight, she acknowledges that it was torturous:

*Mmh... that was part of growing up...you had to complete all the activities quickly. That is why you will find that children who grew up in towns are different from those back home.... back home we worked hard...here you find that many things are available...there*

*is a tap in the house...whatever [you need] is available in the house...M'e Keneuoe*  
(Maseru, 08 June 2017)

For M'e Keneuoe, the urban context is considered to be modern and as such, the availability of advanced infrastructure has played a major role in shaping the notion of girlhood in urban contexts differently from *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in rural contexts. Not only did M'e Keneuoe highlight the complexities, but she also emphasised the intensity of the process within the rural context as compared to the urban context. By acknowledging these diversities, M'e Mpale and M'e Keneuoe reflect on a complex script according to which they were groomed into *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Notably, M'e Keneuoe reflects on "here" (*toropong*/urban) in contradistinction to "there" (*hae*/rural), to illuminate not only spatial diversities, but also the historical shifts with their ideological aftermaths that shaped and reshaped 'girlhood' differently from *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. The characteristics read in M'e Keneuoe's account of the urban context (*toropong*) are reflected in M'e Lebo's narrated childhood story, whereas the latter – *hae* – are characteristic to M'e Mpale's and M'e Keneuoe's own upbringing. The differences between urban and rural contexts critically inform how the women negotiate space and construct meaning for their identities within the diverse spaces at different time points – as is reflected upon in Chapter 6.

M'e Keneuoe detailed an intense daily routine<sup>61</sup> (which I have opted to summarise while footnoting the narrated verbatim lest I lose the expressiveness that it embodies) that is enforced from a tender age of 10 years. Accordingly, as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, they were expected to demonstrate diligence, physical strength, resilience, vigilance - all of which are necessary for a functional social role. Diligence is also underscored in the expression *ka sipiti!* (quickly!) that she repeats continuously in her narrative. However, she also elucidates the 'collectivity' that characterised this process whereby peers simulated 'healthy competition' which also fostered a sense of belonging which, in hindsight, facilitated conformity to the prescriptions central to the process of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Although she demonstrates how she embodied the hardships such as having to put a 20-litre bucket of water on her head and straining her neck in the

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<sup>61</sup> *Hae mane bo 20 liha tsena o li qala o santsane ona le bo 10 years ... tseling.... o lateletse hore le uena o otle otle ka sepiti! .... o tlatse drumo ka tlung ka mane o ntano bapala.... ha o sa etse joalo o tla ba mathateng .... o tla boela ha ngata, ene bao sisa banana ka mane kantle.... ha bantse bare 'mokoai ee...!' pelo ena ea hao [laughing] ea bela.... Joale olo fumana o ipolaisa ho sebetsa ka thata .... o matha.... molala ona ha o batle letho...Ke ho roala nkho esa o lekanang... ene joale.... hone hole monate ka nako eno.... neng neng lea etsa.... 'uena ka heno ka moo ho joang?' ae ka mona seke tla otle.... nna seke qalile.... keore ene ele ntho tse ling tseneng lile monate.... hobane lea etsisana ka mane .... lea sheba hore na baka mane na base bale ho kae.... (M'e Keneuoe, Leribe 45).*

process. She simultaneously attests to the gratification that accompanied the process in a statement that “*It was fun then*” to participate in a process that collectively grooms them towards a bigger goal; *ngoanana oa Mosotho* transitioning into *mosali oa Mosotho* (*Mosotho* woman).

In addition, M’e Keneuoe reflects on the socio-cultural and political landscape within which they were forced to navigate their multi-spatial functional roles as *banana ba Basotho*. M’e Keneuoe elaborated on a typical incident:

*I remember one day when we were from school, expectedly we had to go collect wood ...dry cow dung...we went to collect in Free State...in the Free State there were plenty of cattle ...and when there is plenty of dry cow dung, you know that once you get there you just collect [with ease]... we just crossed by the river...when you cross there and the boers [implying white male security guards] chase you ..you had to run with your package...because long ago people would get arrested M’e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).*

Notably, in this experience were racial and gendered restrictions which characterised the apartheid history of neighbouring South Africa at the time. However, as I alluded to in Chapter 2, Basotho girls were able to undermine these restrictions by crossing rivers illegally while simultaneously navigating around the boundary security to elude impoundment (Gay, 1980; Phoofolo, 2007; Ulicki & Crush, 2000). This required caution and swiftness; and as such, reflected bravery and agency by how, despite being aware of the dangers, the girl-child is compelled to navigate dangerous terrains in the name of fulfilling the expectations of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*.

Read through the lens of *uMakhulu*, the enculturation process which many of the women; who grew up in rural areas, underwent is reflective of the indigenous principle of ‘eating out of one pot’ alluded to by Amadiume (2002) as they endeavoured to become *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This process enforced collectivity, solidarity and survival principles, such as resilience, strength, and diligence which resonate with being a functional community member. This finding confirms Collins (2000) assertion that central to African constructions of femininity are attributes such as functionality and communality. Notably, the script of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, juxtaposed against ‘girlhood’, informs the construction of a differently configured image bearing complexities and multiplicities. However, while the two accounts reveal distinctive ‘becoming’ processes given the diverse rural and urban contexts, both contradict the domesticity norm according to which the

European girl-child is groomed to embody passivity and fragility as ideal femininity theorised by Simone de Beauvoir (2009). Evidently, the process through which young Basotho girls are socialised prepares them for their roles as *basali* – in accord with the unique context of Lesotho. As mentioned earlier, this disrupts the hetero-patriarchal order according to which feminine identity construction is fixated within gendered hierarchised binaries wherein womanhood is essentialised to particular inferiorised roles. Correspondingly, the image of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* that is agential and embodies multiplicity, functionality and communality contributes pluriversal knowledges borne out of the indigenous Sesotho world-senses – as demanded by decoloniality.

Linked to being functional through the embodiment of diligence, resilience, and strength were requirements for ‘appropriateness’ and ‘respectability’ as key aspects of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in striving for *mosali oa Mosotho*, M’e Mpale concludes that:

*You know, I realised that back home [hae] the expectation is that [ngoanana] a girl should be.... she needs to be a ‘real’ woman –[mosali oa mankhonthe].... a woman with respect, who can distinguish between good and bad .... she should be a person with self-respect.*

M’e Mpale (Maseru, 14 June 2017).

M’e Mpale emphasised the importance of self-respect and appropriateness, not only to oneself, but also to the watchful kin and community network - which then affirm *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning towards becoming *mosali oa mankhonthe*<sup>62</sup> (sufficing here as real/authentic woman). Earlier, M’e Mpale alluded to the significance of diligence that characterised her upbringing as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Here, she links it to being respectful and demonstrating self-respect as key features embodied by *ngoanana oa Mosotho*.

M’e Ponts’o was born and bred in a rural village on the outskirts of Maseru district, Ha Shaoepane mission station. She is the eldest of four siblings, three girls and one boy. She was brought up by an aunt who worked as a teacher in a missionary school. By the same token, M’e Ponts’o also elaborated on the issue of ‘respect’ to mean one with good behaviour and respect for elders; “*Ngoanana oa Mosotho is someone who is well behaved, who shows respect to her parents and all parents.*” (Maseru, 08 Sept 2017) Therefore, demonstrating socially-appropriate behaviour: obedience, humility, morality and respect for elders – the embodiment of *hlonepha* and

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<sup>62</sup> *Mankhonthe* holds deeper meaning than ‘real’ or authentic. Instead it encompasses a range of aspects such as resilience, strength, respectable, community builder to name a few. For a lack of a better word to translate it, I settled for real or authentic.

*boithlompho*, are thus linked to one's affirmation as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and later *mosali oa Mosotho*. This finding corresponds with Katide's (2017, p. 151) conclusive statement that "Womanhood is closely linked to morality...[and affirmed if she] respects and takes on some responsibilities in the community". Accordingly, these attributes are taught during childhood in the African world-senses (Letseka, 2013; Obioha & T'soeunyane, 2012). Moreover, worthy of noting is that the women's explanations do not refer to gender but instead point to 'person' (*motho*) therefore implying that *hlonepho* and *boithlompho* are attributes that are mandatory for affirmation of personhood embodied by *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This finding resonates with authors (Katide, 2017; Rudwick & Shange, 2009; Sennott & Mojola, 2017) who report that *hlonepha* in the African culture is not gendered but rather is exemplified through intergenerational and mutual respect – as well as for elders, ancestors, God and oneself. Thus, *hlonepha* is constructed as a critical feature through which one is affirmed as a socially acceptable person and respectable community member. I reflect on the notion of personhood in Chapter 6, however, suffice it to mention that these unique features tied to the indigenous Sesotho world-senses reveal complexities embodied by *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who later transitions into *mosali oa Mosotho*. These complexities form the basis for understanding the women's re-constructions of womanhood – a critical theme reflected upon in Chapters 6 and 7.

In response to the demands central to decolonial feminisms, these analyses reveal a serious disruption of gender hegemony in which femininity and masculinity are essentially hierarchical and oppositional. Notably, the women's accounts reveal a disruption of gendered binaries according to which ideal femininity undergirded by domesticity, passivity and dependency is based. Instead, by 'rejecting binary thinking' altogether, these findings foreground attributes (*makhabane*) such as *boithlompho*, *botho*, *hlonepha* and *letsoalo* central to African constructions of identity undergirded by social and communal needs rather than gender.

Next, I discuss the construction of the sexual body as part of inscribing *ngoanana oa Mosotho* through the practice of labial elongation.

### **5.2.2. Creation of sexual bodies**

In this section, I draw on women's narrations of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho* through participation in an indigenous practice of labial elongation. In these narrations, I also appreciate

the ways in which the experiences as well as the meanings held for the practice differ between the narrators. As part of the extensive bodily surveillance under which young girls are placed once they reach puberty stage (Batisai, 2013; Khau, 2009), labial elongation is an indigenous Basotho practice that forms an essential aspect in preparation for their wifhood roles. Women narrated that from the period just before their first menstruation, they were socialised into the realm of *bosali* through labial elongation. They constructed this phase as one wherein the transitioning body is subjected to extensive surveillance enforced through social and cultural norms which define the boundaries and prescripts of women's sexuality (Batisai, 2013; Khau, 2009; Tamale, 2005). Schlyter highlights that "the body is always subject to social, cultural, economic and political definitions..." and as such, through the process of labial elongation, socio-cultural norms "construct... collective women's bodies" (Schlyter, 2009, p. 12) which affirm the institutionalisation of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Noteworthy is that this process entailed a collective effort; and was spearheaded by elders, both within the family and the community. Moreover, conformity was reinforced through peer to peer surveillance, support and mentoring.

### **5.2.2.1 Ke ngoanana oa Mosotho!<sup>63</sup>**

As the women re-lived their experiences of having taken part in the practice of labial elongation, I realised that this was expressed as a source of pride. For instance, M'e Mphoza was born and bred in a rural context of Morija (Outskirts of Maseru district), she is the eldest of four siblings, three girls and one boy to an unmarried mother. She exclaimed that:

*Yes! Those were things that girls were taught that they need to make curtains ...yes they would pull ...pull their things... you are taught in the home by mothers.....they would say 'a girl should not just sleep with her knees up ...she needs to perform girls' work...they would say if a house does not have curtains, it is a mistake (laughing) and those that tell you just say 'don't come with a crow's beak M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).*

M'e Mphoza provided a detailed account of her own experience in which she highlighted the meaning of the practice held by all those that participate, particularly the instructors who needed to ensure conformity. Her reference to *mesebetsi ea banana* ['girls' works'] implies that elongating the labia was part and parcel of 'duties' that affirmed *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Participation in this

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<sup>63</sup> I am a 'real' Mosotho girl!, as affirmation of identity through elongated labia

process was therefore, an obligation to which girls were expected to conform. Accordingly, this was performed during bedtime. Moreover, her narration draws in colloquial discourses known to all participants; *molomo oa lekhoaba* [crow's beak] to refer to a vagina without elongated labia and *likharetene* [curtains] as one with elongated labia, of which both mark her 'insider' status. Reference to *likharetene* is tied to the belief that occluding the vaginal opening retains the warmth inside the vagina. This 'heat' is believed to enhance sexual pleasure during intercourse with a future husband – I elaborate further on this aspect below.

Notably, elongated labia were constructed by the women as replica to what it means to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. The sense of pride tied to this process was expressed by M'e Mphoza, M'e Lisebo, M'e Lila, M'e Kotseng and M'e Libu. M'e Mphoza emphasised that labial elongation is a key aspect of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* that eventually affirmed her as *mosali* (real woman) and therefore, conformity was essential for all girls. M'e Mphoza mentioned that:

*You need to do it....for girls to demonstrate that they are baroetsana (Mosotho maiden), mosali oa Mosotho was identified by elongated labia that indeed she is mosali oa Mosotho ...she was identified by having them...[NM: so we should say that it demonstrated that she was transitioning to bosali?]....thank you m'e!...yes...she is transitioning to bosali now ...it means that you will achieve the state of bosali.* M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).

The emphasis on labial elongation as a means through which *ngoanana oa Mosotho* is affirmed speaks to the ways in which female identity is entrenched in bodily processes (Batisai, 2013). Moreover, the stringency and seriousness of conformity stems from its implications for a girl's transition and affirmation towards her destined identity - *mosali*. In accord, M'e Lisebo, also born and bred in a rural context of Ha Ramapepe, Leribe district, and the eldest daughter of four siblings, two boys and two girls born to a widow. She expressed pride at having achieved a socio-cultural prescription that affirmed her as a real *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. She mentioned that:

*I did it...and I do not regret that I have them .... I feel that they make me ...I do not know because I like my culture... I have a thing for culture...I am really happy that I have them ...I am happy that I am ngoanana oa Mosotho. I complied with the expectations stipulated for Basotho girls or our culture...that are done in our culture...* M'e Lisebo (Leribe, 15 June 2017).



The emphasis on culture to which M'e Lisebo links having participated in the practice of labial elongation resonates with M'e Mphoza's assertion that one is affirmed as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning to *mosali oa Mosotho*. Therefore, the practice bears deeper cultural meaning tied to one's successful transition through a rite of passage and subsequent affirmation of cultural identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* destined for *mosali oa Mosotho*. This finding is comparable with Batisai (2013) and Vanganai (2017) who reported that the cultural practice of labial elongation is tied to affirmation of 'real womanhood' amongst their Zimbabwean participants and Khau (2009) amongst Basotho girls.

Typically, older experienced girls as well as younger women played a key role in orientating younger girls on a process that eventually affirmed their identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning to *mosali oa Mosotho*. Often, labial elongation is enforced as a collective practice within the community, outside the home setting; and is often taught amongst peers whereby empowering knowledge is shared from older to younger girls. There are specific spaces like *thakaneng*<sup>64</sup> in which young girls learn aspects of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* including the practice of labial elongation. However, the women mentioned different spaces in which they were introduced to the process. For some, like M'e Mphoza and M'e Lisebo, for whom the family was a source of advice, it was an individual exercise confined to the privacy of the blankets at night. However, for others, this 'work' was not confined to the privacy of the sleeping area, but several spaces were used effectively and efficiently for continuing the prescribed girls' task. For example, multiple spaces in which girls congregated to perform daily chores were constructed as ideal spaces for skills and knowledge sharing amongst peers. These included riverbanks for washing laundry and collecting water, open fields for collecting solid fuel (*lisu*) and wild herbs (*thepe/tenane*) and forests for collecting wood. For instance, M'e Lila, was born in the camp town of Teyateyaneng, she is the eighth child amongst ten children born to a self-employed father and housewife mother. She explained that:

*We went to the river or the dam where we liked to swim, we leave home with our bags for collecting wood... or to collect tenane in the open fields... when we are done collecting tenane, lisu (dry cow dung), and tying the bundle of wood... we put everything aside... then*

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<sup>64</sup> Thakaneng is a space traditionally inhabited by young girls wherein they learn values, customs and practices underpinning their identity as Basotho girls as well as those expected of them as adult Basotho women. Moreover, emphasis is their roles in marriage as wives and mothers.

*[you sit] in the water... you are pulling that flesh...you are pulling and pulling until they reach the length of my finger... for others they get longer than my finger.. M'e Lila (TY, 08 Sept 2017)*

M'e Lila elaborate description of a daily routine within which young girls strategically 'fitted' this 'girls work' is interesting. Amidst the chores, the girls provided mutual peer support as they constructed their sexual bodies in preparation for the awaited realm of womanhood. The length of the labia bears significant 'unvocalised' meaning in that once the desired length was reached, it essentially meant that the girl had achieved the 'proud' status of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in contradistinction from the metaphorical crows beak (*molomo oa lekhoaba*) - alluded to by M'e Mphoza earlier. Likewise, M'e Ponto's described a similar process and raised another interesting issue that over and above labial elongation, the ideal 'feminine' body was just as critical;

*We taught each other to slide [down the river bank] that is what we did, then we would catch those water (dragon) flies [thalaboliba] then we made it bite our breasts because we wanted our breasts to develop... sometimes the elders would also come to the river and there they would pinch us and tell us to pull... sometimes the boys would come to peep at us to see what we were doing. But we would just run away... M'e Ponto's (Maseru, 08 Sept 2017).*

M'e Ponto's, like M'e Lila, highlighted the role of peer networks as powerful sources of information outside the traditional confines of the family setting. The sense of sisterhood enforced through these peer networks enabled the girls to learn the 'correct' way of embodying sexuality by showcasing breast size and elongated labia – all of which would eventually affirm them as *banana ba Basotho*. Noteworthy in M'e Ponto's account is that the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, over and above 'the pulling', is also entrenched in the shape and size of the breasts.

Accordingly, the girls' innovative efforts to grow their breasts speaks to the significance of this aspect in achieving the desired type of sexual and feminised body of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Describing their girlhood experiences, the elderly women in Batisai's (2013) study reveal that the female breast bears sexualised and gendered meanings according to which a 'girl' is affirmed as 'real' – read sexually naïve - or not. Thus, by having the dragon fly (*thalaboliba*) sting their small prepubertal nipples, M'e Ponto's and her peers had intended to get the sizable rounded breast that would affirm them as real feminine *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This informal, peer supportive exercise

forms part of the game playing that is incorporated into their daily chores and therefore, marks the set up as safe space for young girls to explore and experience sexuality in a safe and socially accepted manner - away from an inquisitive male gaze. This confirms reports by *Mosotho* gender scholar Khau, (2012e, p. 414) that domestic chores performed within multiple spaces outside the home provided Basotho girls an opportunity “to learn about their bodies” from peers and older sisters. African feminists (Amadiume, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997) acknowledge the sense of solidarity and sisterhood embodied by the process of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. These findings also contribute insight on the dynamism of space reflected by how young girls reconstruct the meanings of spaces by imbuing them with feminine and sexual meanings. This creative use of space by young Basotho girls reveals their agency whereby they strategically incorporate the processes of feminising and sexualising their bodies within spaces that are otherwise used for other purposes. Therefore, this thesis contributes a reflection on space, sexual body, agency and gender, all as intersecting nodes in the construction of feminine identity through collective effort - a dynamic that is not addressed in similar studies reporting on the practice (Batisai, 2013; Khau, 2012a; Vanganai, 2017).

The significance attached to the practice made it difficult for young girls to resist the process since it meant foregoing the identity *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Female bodies enter an already pre-defined heteronormative gendered context in which they are imbued with sexual meanings, thus non-compliance to practices such as labial elongation was not tolerated. Considering this, it is interesting that M’e Keneuoe resisted the practice in spite of the pressure enforced by older school peers. Conformity was enforced through constant surveillance whereby elders would demand to inspect their genitals - in the same way as virginity testing (Chisale, 2016). For M’e Keneuoe, unlike M’e Mphoza, M’e Libu and M’e Lisebo, this process was intrusive and caused distress for younger girls like herself. She reported that:

*Oh!... we used to do those things at school!...yes...the older girls used to really bother us...they used to bother us! In fact, they used to call them [maqolotso]...’come let us see [maqolotso]! We did not understand what [maqolotso] were...they used to just undress you. we did not understand...maqolotso! (laughing)...that we had to pull but we did not know the purpose...tell us maybe we are being ignorant. Tell us so that we can also have these*

*things ... honestly, I did not do it because I did not understand. Besides when you try to do it you feel pain... so you understand?* M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).

In this quotation, she explains the enforcement of authority over younger girls by their older peers to ensure conformity. Not only does she express annoyance for the 'invasion', but also the fact that she was ignorant to the purposes of the whole process and for this, considered it senseless.

Evidently age-based and gendered hierarchies are at play in many of these experiences. Older girls are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching, mentoring and supporting younger initiates as they enter into the realm of womanhood. Mean whilst having been socialised to regard their elders with reverence as the custodians of culture, younger girls are expected to comply uncompromisingly to the practice. This resonates with Oyewumi's principles of seniority based on chronological age differences, which she argues are central to social relations within the African kinship structure. In this respect, older siblings as well as older girls in the community assume authoritative positions over younger siblings as was the case with M'e Mphoza, M'e Libu and M'e Lisebo. For M'e Mphoza, the shame associated with the metaphorical crow's beak – implying having no elongated labia – constituted an authoritative measure used by her 'teachers' to enforce compliance to 'girls' work'. Likewise, M'e Lisebo's mother incited the fear of marital dissolution to encourage her to continue 'pulling'. In this instance, non-compliance is said to hamper a girls' performance of her marital responsibilities of ensuring pleasurable sex for her husband. Within this highly regulated space, for M'e Keneuoe this authority was enforced through forceful inspections for which she expressed distaste. These findings resonate with Khau's (2012) study in which young girls were pressured into compliance through the incitement of fear of the 'unknown' in relation to their marital prospects in adulthood. For this reason, the author views the practice with contempt and as a hetero-patriarchal measure of policing young girls' sexuality. Further, she considers this practice as reinforcing of 'violence against women'. While the age-gender power relations embodied by the practice cannot be denied nor condoned, I read the processes involved in the practice to be more complex than thought out in Khau's work.

In re-reading the practice through the framework of *uMakhulu*, the complexities of the practice in relation to the principles of seniority and collectivity are revealed. The act of forceful inspection and enforcing authority to ascertain compliance amongst peers is underpinned by the need to 'eat out of one pot' in strive for a collective identity of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Batisai (2013) and

Vanganai (2017) reported similar findings amongst Zimbabwean maidens that periodic inspections were part of the mentorship and supervision as girls transitioned into womanhood through the process of labial elongation. Thus, rather than viewing it merely as ‘policing’, it was a supportive gesture by the mentors of checking the length and state of the girl’s labia. As reflected in M’e Lila’s account, once they had achieved the correct length, the girls were told to stop pulling - which essentially meant that she had achieved the desired state of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. For this reason, elders insist on forcefully inspecting young girls’ genitals for the collective good in this context. Thus, this finding contributes a contrasting perspective to one posited by African gender scholars (Chisale, 2016; Khau, 2009, 2012c) who posit hetero-patriarchal policing of young women’s sexuality in view of these practices.

Yet, at the same time I take heed to African feminist, Bakare-Yusuf (2003b) concerns around the operations of power particularly how in the name of ‘respecting the elder’ – as is the case in these narratives – abuses of power by the elders go unquestioned and thus ‘normalised’. In this light, while I do not condone abuses of power, I do suggest a deeper engagement that will reveal the complexities and nuances of manifestations of power in the context the women’s narratives. In Khau’s (2012) analysis and her subsequent conclusion that labels the practice as ‘violence against women’, there is overemphasis on ‘power over’ wherein oppressive power is ever present and constraining. Mean whilst, this precludes an appreciation of how within any manifestation of power – there is always room for resistance<sup>65</sup>, ‘power to’ (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003b). In other words, in spite of the authority exercised over young girls by older siblings, some of the younger girls did not simply obey without resisting. A case in point is M’e Keneuoe’s experience detailed above. In spite of a highly policed and constraining environment, she sought ways to elude the ‘pulling’.

Therefore, the findings reveal interesting and ‘invisibilised’ aspects in relation to young Basotho girls’ responses to prescriptive cultural practices. Practices such as these are regarded as prescriptive, therefore implying that they are incontestable. However, M’e Keneuoe’s resistance also raises an interesting dynamic which I read as young girls’ capabilities for interrogating

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<sup>65</sup> Bakare-Yusuf (2003b) points out the coexistence of power over and power to, the former being synonymous with domination and the latter, capacity to act. I read this to be resonant with Michel Foucault’s concept of power in which he argues that “where there is power there is resistance” (1978, p.95). Implied by this statement is that power is not only oppressive but it also productively and creatively allows the development of new ideas to challenge authority amongst those over whom power is exercised.

gendered practices that feed into socially and culturally defined heterosexual norms. To onlookers, M'e Keneuoe conformed to the practice, yet subsequently - under the pretence of pain - she enacted silent resistance in private by refusing to continue the 'pulling' based on the senselessness with which she regarded the practice. That young girls stop the pulling process based on the pain that they experienced corresponds with the findings reported by Khau (2009) and Vanganai (2017). Khau (2009) points out that some Basotho girls abandoned the process of pulling on the basis of discomfort and ignorance to the actual purpose of elongated labia. However, given that conformity was highly prized particularly because it is tied to one's identity as a 'real' woman - later in adult life - non-conformity was an exemption whereas many persisted in spite of the pain. Thus, I read M'e Keneuoe's resistance as revelation of those negotiated, hidden, and thus, unacknowledged subtle agencies enacted by young girls despite constant and continuous policing.

In the broader sense, it is undeniable that the practice of labial elongation is embroiled with the politics of women's sexuality and hetero-patriarchal regulation, as alluded to by Babatunde and Durowaiye (2015) and Khau (2009, 2012a, c). Over and above, affirming one's identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, the meanings attached to the practice of labial elongation are varied. M'e Lisebo suggested that elongating labia was linked to ensuring a girl-child's chaste state for the longest time until she was ready for marriage. She provided an analogy of the ways in which elongated labial ascertain and maintain a girl's chaste state - a key feature of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. She mentioned that:

*When you have pulled these things...they make the clit...clitoris to retract because the body senses...you becomes aroused when the clitoris is sensitised...so the purpose of pulling these things is that this thing must retract so that it doesn't get sensitised easily by your underwear then you wish (arouse sexual desires)...you desire a person.....you see M'e Lisebo (Leribe, 15 June 2017).*

A simplistic reading of M'e Lisebo's account ties labial elongation to restrictive measures of female sexual control as Khau (2012c) suggested. However, the reduction of sexual desires is also linked with a reduction of chances of engaging in premarital sex and therefore, prevents premarital pregnancy. A premarital pregnancy is detrimental to the linear process through which *ngoanana oa Mosotho* goes in preparation for her destiny as *mosali oa Mosotho* which, in this case, is wifehood.

The reduction of sexual desires - *li theola mocheso* (they reduce heat, directly translated) as a means of preventing premarital pregnancy (Khau, 2009, 2012a, c) is an interesting phenomenon reported amongst Basotho with regards to labial elongation. This finding confirms that elongated labia act as a protective measure for *ngoanana oa Mosotho* not only from the shame of premarital pregnancy, but also the negative effects of early pregnancy – I discuss this aspect in more depth below. A re-reading of practices such as labial elongation through alternative lenses that foreground the endogenous view not only transforms commonly held metanarratives, but it reveals the ‘unsaid’ ways in which indigenous practices can be protective to custodians. Therefore, these findings contribute a different perspective to elongated labia in which they are also protective rather than being considered as merely oppressive patriarchal tools as is commonly cited by scholars such as Khau (2009).

Commonly, the practice of labial elongation is linked to the enhancement of male sexual pleasure which reinforces the hegemony of male domination – as suggested by Khau (2009). Enhancement of sexual pleasure for one’s future husband is a key wifhood mandate for which young girls are prepared through the process of labial elongation. M’e Lisebo recalls that at the age of 12, her mother alluded to this particular aspect of labial elongation without providing explicit details:

*Let me tell you, she [mother] did say it...I remember...she said a girl needs to pull.....she said pull them!...[otherwise] your husband will desert you!. I was about 12 or 11 years old [chuckling]... I cannot remember...I think I had just had my periods ... I was 12 when I had my first period when I was doing standard 7... so she was telling me that after menstruation the labia tend to shrink so I should pull them... so I complained... she was adamant ...she stood her ground and insisted that I pull them! ...I did not know what she was talking about, but she said that [my] husband will desert me [if I do not pull] M’e Lisebo (Leribe, 15 June 2017).*

Notably, in insisting that she pulls the shrunken labia, her mother’s fears are informed by the looming threat that failure to ‘pull’ would bear drastic consequences for M’e Lisebo. Elongated labia (metaphorically described as curtains - *likharetene*) served an important purpose of occluding the vagina and ensuring vaginal ‘heat’ generation (*mocheso*). This heat is believed to enhance male sexual pleasure – as has been reflected upon by Mosotho gender scholar (Khau, 2009, 2012a, 2012c). M’e Lila’s elaborate description confirms this;

*That is why most of the time when you sleep with a man when he puts it [penis] in, it does not just go in unrestricted...one may even say that he will not live in a house without curtains...that is why men say that because a house with curtains is very warm... [whereas] one without heat is cold and it feels windy... too wet... those things [labia] occlude [the vagina] so that when he puts it in, it is restricted and you feel a bit of pain... yes... it is also for your benefit...he also experiences pleasure... when he is doing his work ...touching them like this [scratching gesture] ... he experiences pleasure M'e Lila (TY, 08 Sept 2017)*

In this elaborate description, M'e Lila was teaching me 'the facts' of sexual pleasure; notably she confirms that elongated labial are critical resources with which a woman can also experience sexual pleasure. In regard to male sexual pleasure, the idea of failing to fulfil this wifely mandate results in desertion and marital dissolution – as is reflected in M'e Lisebo's narration above. Notably, it deeply embeds the belief that a woman's source of pride is getting married and *staying* married. This confirms findings by authors (Khau, 2009, 2012c; Martínez Pérez, Mubanga, Tomás Aznar, & Bagnol, 2015a) acknowledging that failure to fulfil your wifely role (tied to this practice) is regarded as shameful. Thus, Khau (2012c, p. 769) cites the Sesotho proverb, "*kobo linyane kea hatsela*" (the blankets are too small, I am feeling cold) that captures M'e Lila's analogy as well as the dreaded consequence that leads to desertion - displeasurable 'cold' sex.

Female sexual pleasure is a subject tied to profanity and thus hardly acknowledged as a possibility in studies of sexuality (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; McFadden, 2003). Yet in accord with other studies (Arnfred, 2011; Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Batisai, 2013), labial elongation enhances sexual pleasure amongst Basotho women (although in hindsight) as reflected in M'e Lila's revelation that; "... *it is also for your benefit*". This highly censored yet critical aspect addresses that gap identified by Khau (2012a, p. 765) of the "apparent silence on labial elongation and its effects on female sexual desire and pleasure, in the context of Lesotho". I consider this to be an unrecognised benefit among the few that I highlight in this thesis that are tied to the practice of labial elongation amongst Basotho women and girls. Notably, the notion of sexual pleasure highlighted in this study as well as others is outside "the blister of lack, the suffocating chastity belt, or weight of propriety" that is often harnessed to ideal chaste Christian womanhood as alluded by Gqola (2005, p. 4). Considering this, the findings from this study, while they confirm the linkage of labial elongation with male sexual pleasure, they also challenge the widely held stereotypes about women's



sexuality - virtually non-existent yet solely reserved for procreativity (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; Batisai, 2013). Thus, heeding African feminist Tamale's (2014) allusion to the liberatory potential of African customs such as those related to sexuality – where, while they are premised upon the sexual restriction of African women, labial elongation simultaneously has 'hidden' sexually empowering aspects for Basotho women and girls.

#### **5.2.2.2 Sexually empowered 'ngoanana oa Mosotho'**

The practice of labial elongation requires navigating, touching and pulling the genitalia and therefore, it is this exploration that allows young Basotho girls to become familiar with their genitalia. As highlighted in participants' narratives, they developed self-confidence to freely experience their sexual bodies as they became experts with regards to the erotic and sensual whilst also identifying the sensitive pleasure-inducing spots. An example of this expertise is reflected in M'e Lisebo's account, cited above. Likewise, M'e Lila<sup>66</sup> demonstrated sexual empowerment as she detailed the process of labial elongation with utmost pride as she taught an urban-based girl whom she considered to have been naïve and ignorant. Nonetheless, not only did she detail the physiological make-up of her genitalia, but she also demonstrated knowledge of the pleasure-inducing spots discovered through self and mutual touching and stimulation during the pulling process.

Sexual empowerment is borne by this process that ultimately removes the shame tied around masturbation or self-pleasuring as well as homo-eroticism or same-sex pleasuring since they are socially acceptable as part of the practice of labial elongation. Thus, these findings confirm reports by African scholars (Khau, 2012a; Martínez Pérez et al., 2014) of girls' and women's sexual empowerment through auto and homo-eroticism. Further, in response to Khau's (2012a) observation that the practice involved same-sex interaction, the findings confirm this, and I would also argue that in fact, girls' sexual empowerment shifts beyond the type of relationships whether hetero- or homosexual that one would opt for. Rather, given that the shame of self-pleasuring is eliminated in the context of the practice of labial elongation, this affords them sexual power be it in hetero- or homosexual relationships contrary to the Christian moral code.

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<sup>66</sup> I opted not to include the direct quote in the text because its elaborate and expressive nature constituted "sharing too much" of the women's secrets. I dealt with this issue in Chapter 4.

In addition, the women's ease of narration and openness also highlighted their comfort regarding sex and sexuality which is enabled through their first-hand experience in the practice of labial elongation. This finding is comparable to studies by authors (Arnfred, 2011; Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Batisai, 2013; Martínez Pérez et al., 2014) who report on African girls sexual empowerment through partaking in the practice of labial elongation. The women's familiarity with their sexual bodies is contrary to the way female African bodies are portrayed as well as the way in which *we* are made to perceive them in patriarchal contexts as "dirty, smelly, disgusting ...corrupting ..." (McFadden, 2003, p.n.p). Rather, M'e Lila and M'e Lisebo challenge the status quo that denied and suppressed [our] abilities of "naming and controlling [our] bodies for [our] own joy and nurturing..." (McFadden, 2003, p.n.p). In so doing, they demonstrate an empowered and embodied relation to their sexual bodies (Tamale, 2005) contrary to metanarratives undergirding African women's sexuality.

Moreover, the openness with which the women narrated their stories debunks the long-held assumptions of sex and sexuality being a religio-cultural taboo within the context of Christian morality in contemporary Lesotho. This finding parallels with the findings by scholars (Batisai, 2013; Khau, 2012a; Martínez Pérez et al., 2014). Ironically, Khau, following her outright rejection of the practice of labial elongation, in hindsight acknowledged that with the self- and mutual pulling, "young women ended up exploring many aspects of their sexuality... which proved to be against societal expectations of proper womanhood" (Khau, 2012a, p. 772). Indeed, these narrated lived experiences of partaking in the practice of labial elongation reveal unique aspects characteristic to African women's sexuality and thus undermine notions of female sexual naïveté-hetero-normatively purported to be tied to ideal 'respectable' womanhood. However, noteworthy is that whilst having undergone this practice was a source of pride for some women in rural areas, one of the older women in urban contexts expressed distaste and referred to it as a 'rural' practice. Most of the younger women in urban areas did not know about it. The findings confirm Vanganai's (2017) reports of changing perceptions around these practices amidst Christian moralities – a point to which I return in chapter 6, section 6.3.3.

Nonetheless, I read the fact of young Basotho girls being exposed to matters of sexuality as constituting yet another 'unacknowledged' benefit of labial elongation for Basotho girls. This positive aspect has been acknowledged in several other studies within the African context

(Arnfred, 2011; Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Martínez Pérez et al., 2014; Tamale, 2005) but not Lesotho. Thus, through a deconstructive re-reading of the transcripts ‘from the ground up’, the findings reveal less obvious, implicit benefits of the practice for young Basotho girls. This thesis thus responds to an appeal raised by African feminists (see Amadiume, 2006; Nnaemeka, 2004; Oyěwùmí, 2011) that these benefits ought to be acknowledged if we are to ‘begin with Africa’. Moreover, by foregrounding these positive aspects for knowledge production, this thesis is in many ways “building on the indigenous” and thus deconstructing metanarratives of African women’s sexuality and identity – as suggested by African feminists (Amadiume, 2006; Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013; Marais, 2019). Failure to do so means that we run the risk of reinforcing imperialist views that portray African females as victims whose sexuality is repressed and thus in need of western salvation.

Thus, the findings dispute the eurocentric scholarship by the international regulatory bodies such as WHO that simplistically associates this practice with ‘harm’ and ‘mutilation’ of women’s bodies. I reiterate that by prioritising a view ‘from the ground up’ in our analyses of our indigenous practices, we are able to reveal such uniqueness and diversities that characterise our African sexualities. Thus, these findings by elevating the indigenous Sesotho world-senses and exposing “contradictions in the normative” as suggested by Amadiume (2006, p. 9) also contribute to disrupting universalist assumptions of sexual repression undergirding dominant constructions of womanhood. In so doing, these findings contribute to addressing ‘epistemic injustice’ wherein Sesotho knowledges have long been submerged and invisibilised through western-centric universalist discourses. Equally important to the process of constructing *ngoanana oa Mosotho* was ensuring the creation of a viable reproductive body.

### **5.2.3. Creation of procreative-marital bodies**

This section captures the construction of a procreative-marital body as young Basotho girls become *banana ba Basotho* in transit towards *mosali oa Mosotho*. This process is characterised by celebrations of rites of passage into puberty and the imposition of certain restrictions to safeguard a girl’s chaste state as well as to ensure safe procreation within marriage. In accord with the Christian and indigenous Sesotho moral codes, child-bearing within the marital context is highly valued – as has been acknowledged by African feminists (Akujobi, 2011; Muhonja, 2013;

Nyanungo, 2013; Oduyoye, 1999). As such, concerted effort by kin and community networks are enforced to ensure a girl-child's smooth transition towards this goal. The participants in the study alluded to numerous practices which held significant value for their families as well as communities in ensuring the construction of a collective identity, *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. The physiological change – menarche<sup>67</sup> - signifies the onset of puberty and also holds significant socio-cultural salience for Basotho kin and community networks.

M'e Mphoza was born in a rural context in Morija; she is the third daughter among five children born to an 'unmarried' mother. She narrated her own experiences of menarche and how this was celebrated:

*Like myself...I was taken to the well...but I did not have anything on my head...the calabash was carried by the person that was accompanying me and I followed them...I was wearing a short skirt...when we got to the well, I faced away from the person accompanying me ... then she collected water in the calabash and poured it all over me ...then she collected more water and walked past me and I followed her. It meant that you have grown up! Even boys avoid you ... you also need to avoid [them]...they should know that you have grown up to the extent that you can conceive...indeed you can conceive if you get married... M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).*

While these rituals<sup>68</sup> are performed by certain clans amongst the Basotho, their main purpose is to acknowledge a girl's transition from childhood towards womanhood. M'e Mphoza explains that the ritual was a signifier of her 'coming of age' as a woman who is ready for childbearing within marriage. Notably, the conscious avoidance of boys speaks to how they themselves suddenly become a danger with the potential of sabotaging a girl's smooth transition into womanhood. Thus, this confirms Khau's (2011) explanation that as much as these rituals are celebratory of a girl's

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<sup>67</sup> Menarche is signalled by the onset of menstruation and as such marks a girl's entry into puberty

<sup>68</sup> At the onset of menarche, the girl child is accompanied to the river to perform a ritual that acknowledges menstrual blood as symbolic for her readiness for marriage and childbearing. Khau (2011, p. 132) explain the details of this process amongst Basotho. "In some clans the girl was dressed in a *thethana* (short traditional skirt) and her body smeared with red clay... The menstruating girl would have a clay pot on her head which would be filled with water until it overflowed onto her body. The overflowing water would mix with the red clay and run all over the young girl, symbolizing the red of the menstrual blood. The girls would then walk back to the village accompanied by the ululations of the village women who acknowledged that the girl had become a young woman". Other ways include sitting her on a pile of manure for the same purpose. In the same way as manure, the menstruating girl is fertile and ready for childbearing within marriage. Thus, Khau (2011, p. 132) points out that through these ritual young suitors are made aware that a girl is marriageable. Moreover, "Other young girls watching these ceremonies waited in anticipation for menarche so that they could also be celebrated as young women and get married" thus spelling out the communal and collective effort in ensuring a girls affirmation of womanhood through marriage.

transition to womanhood, they are also meant to alert potential suitors of the maiden's readiness for marriage and childbearing. Hence, akin to this process is the ever-looming threat of premarital pregnancy, which constitutes religio-cultural taboo. As such, community and kin networks embark on a concerted effort to ensure that this is prevented at all costs. Therefore, as part of safeguarding a girl's chaste state until marriage, some of the women elaborated on the institution of dietary restrictions purposed to ascertain the construction of procreative marital bodies that I discuss in subsequent paragraphs.

M'e Mpale, although she did not undergo the same process – she explained that for her sister, after the ritual was performed at the river, she was placed in seclusion where she received the necessary instructions and teaching as well as care and nurturing. She states that:

*When you return from the river, you sit on a Sesotho grass mat [moseme] behind the door. You will sit there the whole day with the elders ...and you will be served food and everything... the following day, very early in the morning you will be accompanied back to the river to wash all the clothes that you wore and the blankets... after that you can resume a normal life* M'e Mpale (Maseru, 14 June 2017).

These rituals also serve a significant purpose in teaching and orientating the girl child into the realm of *bosali* (womanhood). This finding resonates with authors (Hlatshwayo, 2017; Katide, 2017; Nanegbe, 2016) who acknowledge rites of passage as a means of allaying anxieties and fears as the girl-child enters a new phase of their lifespan – becoming a woman. These prepare the initiates for their new roles and responsibilities as soon-to-be adult women (Hlatshwayo, 2017, Katide, 2017). Notably, this process is spearheaded by elders (*bo-nkhono*) who enlighten the maiden on the expectations of this new terrain. This resonates with the institution of *uMakhulu* in which the elderly women – the indigenous knowledge bearers – are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching and mentoring young girls to become *basali* (women).

By contrast, where an acknowledgement ritual is not performed, as was the case for the majority of the participants, the onset of menstruation was followed on with stern warnings. For example, when narrating her experience of menarche, M'e Ts'ido elaborated on how her mother had expressed a swift yet stern warning that:

*...now that you are at this stage...if you sleep with boys you will have a kid...and you have to respect yourself when you are at this stage* M'e Ts'ido (Maseru, 06 June 2017).

Such counsels serve to alert the girl-child of the dangers that her body and menstrual blood pose not only for herself, but to her family and community. Accordingly, Batisai (2015) points out that these warnings harbour connotations that attach restrictive meaning to menstrual blood. The warnings dished out to M'e Ts'ido resonate with these dangers, and thus are purposed to enforce restraint to evade the threat of premarital pregnancy. For others, the religio-cultural premarital sex taboo sufficed as restraint that ensured conformity to the procreative marital norm. For instance, M'e Lebo stated that although she did not receive the stern warning 'when the time came', instead drawing from a staunch Catholic upbringing, she emphasised that, "*there cannot be sex before marriage. That I was not taught but is something I have just always known*" (Maseru, 03 June 2017) which for her was a fundamental prescription.

Notable are the distinctions between the indigenous African practices and the modern Christian teachings, yet both are purposed to ensure conformity to the norm of procreative marital sex. While the former enforced surveillance through communal and kin networks, by contrast the latter was confined to the familial setting and enforced discursively through religious prescriptive lamentations. The latter resonates with deeply embedded religious images of an ideal 'chaste Christian girl' instilled from a young age – as acknowledged by authors (Bastian, 2000; Mokobocho-Mohlakoana, 2005). Of interest in the subsequent discussion is how at the intersection of the modern Christianity and indigenous Sesotho contexts, the procreative marital norm is negotiated in and around the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. In other words, reflecting on practices such as dietary restrictions, what contradictions, tensions and ambiguities arise as young Basotho girls attempt to become *banana ba Basotho* in modern-day Lesotho? This context has considerable bearing upon the articulations of *mosali oa Mosotho* as well as constructions of agency narrated by the participants – a key question addressed in Chapter 6.

Nonetheless, in ensuring the creation of a procreative marital body, central to a girl's 'becoming' *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, dietary restrictions were enforced at the onset of menstruation. Foods such as eggs (*mahe a khoho ea Sesotho*), sheep offal (*likahare tsa nku*) and travel provisions brought by visitors (*mats'ela-nokana*) were prohibited for the pubertal girl-child. M'e Mpale explained dietary restrictions in relation to a girl's sexual desires. She stated that:

*We were instructed not to eat food like eggs, sheep offal...It was believed that [these foods] increase a girl's [sexual] feelings when she meets her boyfriend you would find that they will make mistakes... at that time ... in the olden days there was no way that a girl could protect herself... then you would find that when you have done the things that you were instructed not to do.... You just decide to eat the prohibited food... then when you meet your boyfriend ... you will fall pregnant... there was no way of protecting yourself, that is why you would find that girls in the olden days did not bear children in the same way as girls these days ... These days we eat everything that we want... As individuals...we have become well-informed ...most of us have become enlightened and you can distinguish between things that are troublesome or things that are beneficial. So, one is able to make [informed] decisions .... personal choice... M'e Mpale (Maseru, 14 June 2017).*

M'e Mpale attributes the increased premarital pregnancy in modern contexts to the greater flexibility with regards to consumption of culturally prohibited foods – that were believed to increase sexual desires. This observation resonates with Khau (2016, p. 102) assertion that foods that are rich in protein and fat were believed to heighten the girl's “*mocheso*”<sup>69</sup> and thus were prohibited at the onset of menarche. While these indigenous cultural prescriptions were believed to guard against early pregnancies (Advocate Thipanyane, personal discussion 2018), M'e Mpale's account reflects on how socio-historical shifts opened room for distortions in how these practices are accepted in modern Basotho society. Premised on the idea that a pregnancy out of wedlock continues to be considered as a disgrace for *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, M'e Mpale reflects on the changes embodied in the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. By emphasising that “*Girls in the olden days did not bear children in the same way as girls these days...*”, she reflects on the

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<sup>69</sup> *Mocheso* is a colloquial Sesotho construct that refers to heightened sexual desires. According to Khau, a high protein diet is believed to heighten a girl-child's sexual desires. By contrast, socio-culturally imposed food restrictions bear more serious implications than Khau (2016) acknowledges. Instead the narrative of *mocheso* is a partial explanation, according to Thipanyane (personal discussion 2018), a high protein diet accelerates reproductive maturity in females and therefore high protein foods were restricted to ensure coherence between reproductive maturity and chronological age. In addition, it was intended to delay fertility processes until such time that the young girl was mature enough for marriage and therefore childbearing. While this aspect was not mentioned in the narrated life stories, it bears significant meaning that debases metanarratives undergirded by perpetual female sexual repression. Instead it allows us to re-read such restrictions as indigenous measures protective of the girl-child as opposed to oppressive.

significance of these indigenous pregnancy prevention practices by which ‘modern’ girls fail to abide – hence the detrimental consequences of unwed pregnancy.

At first glance, it seems as if she polarises ‘then’ and ‘now’, yet I read her reflection on the tensions that emerge as Basotho girls attempt to make sense of and construct identity as *banana ba Basotho* by drawing from both worlds. In the past, construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* through a myriad of indigenous practices was reinforced through communal, peer supportive effort. Moreover, there was greater appreciation that *ngoanana oa Mosotho* is a sexual being and as such was afforded space for sexual exploration in the presence of her peers. However, in the current context, with its inherent religio-cultural prescriptions that demonise sexuality, tensions are discernible for young Basotho girls as they navigate the terrain of sexuality on their own. This finding confirms the reflections of Matsúmunyane and Hlalele (2019) on the Christianisation of Basotho and the resultant cultural conservatism according to which sex and sexuality are taboo.

In other words, the mission school’s denigration of indigenous knowledges and measures for preventing pregnancy, for instance, has made it difficult for Basotho girls to negotiate the now stringent religio-cultural procreative-marital sex prescription. This finding resonates with Khau’s (2012d) acknowledgement of the tensions around sexuality ensuing from ‘modern’ Christian-informed and the indigenous Basotho enculturation processes as well as ‘modern technology’ in modern-day Lesotho. While Christianity demands celibacy, modern education warrants that school girls be taught about modern contraceptives and safe-sex practices; at the same time indigenous measures to guard against premarital pregnancy were long denigrated through the Christianization of the Basotho (Khau, 2012d, 2016). Therefore, this finding contributes a view that at the intersection of these contradictory forces is the *Mosotho* girl who is critically left with limited options for negotiating sexuality in modern religio-hetero-patriarchal contexts.

Given that premarital pregnancies are a serious problem in modern-day Lesotho, these findings have implications for how these indigenous Sesotho practices can be incorporated into modern schooling curricula. Khau’s (2012e, 2016) work raises these concerns and considers the opportunities of incorporating the practice of labial elongation - as a measure of delaying early sexual encounters and subsequent unplanned pregnancies – into the curriculum. I support the move that these ought to be considered as options that are made available to young Basotho girls within and outside the premises of modern education. Moreover, as I illustrate in subsequent sections,



efforts to re-awaken these practices within the communities are underway with the use of media as a viable platform for information sharing. However, I am also reminded of the controversies around women's sexuality that have been flagged by African feminists (Chisale, 2016; Chisale & Moyo, 2016; Lewis, 2011; Tamale, 2014). Accordingly, in the name of addressing the plight of HIV and teenage pregnancy, indigenous practices such as virginity testing<sup>70</sup> have been revived in some African countries. In this regard, feminists have rebuked the burdening of young girls with the responsibility of curbing these adversities mean whilst the men who impregnate them are not held accountable – thus leaving “patriarchy undisturbed” (Arnfred, 2004, p. 11). In accord, for Desiree Lewis (2011) virginity testing constitutes ‘the most prominent’ patriarchal policing measure over women's bodies and sexualities in postcolonial African contexts. Undoubtedly, these practices exist within a toxic hetero-patriarchal context. Thus, the revival of the practice of labial elongation and its incorporation into the modern schooling curriculum is only acceptable in as far as it enhances the sexual empowerment of young Basotho girls.

Interestingly, M'e Mpale also alluded to the fact that in modern societies, girls have become increasingly enlightened and are able to make informed individual choices around issues of sexuality. This is reflected in her expression that “*we have become well-informed*”. She reflects on how Basotho girls navigate this modern context given that restrictive sexual norms that are meant to control female bodies remain unchanged in modern society. I read her account to imply that girls, as individuals, have become empowered and are now capable of interrogating and making choices around matters of sexuality. Yet, previously, *ngoanana oa Mosotho* existed within a context governed by communality wherein she was forced to conform to communal expectations – as is reflected in preceding discussions.

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<sup>70</sup> Virginity testing is an old IsiZulu custom which involves the inspection of the genitalia of young maiden by elderly women to establish the state of the hymen for signs of penetration. In essence, the practice is performed to ascertain sexual purity of a young maiden. It is commonly practiced in other African countries including Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Ethiopia. Perspectives on and purposes for the practice differ. For feminist activists, the practice is nothing but pure patriarchal means of controlling the sexuality of young girls under the guise of ensuring their chaste state until marriage. This chaste state, it is argued enhances the maiden's value during *lobolo* negotiations. The scourge of HIV and AIDS amongst young girls and women in some countries has prompted the revival of the practice. As such, it is considered to be a viable indigenous preventative measure for HIV as well as premarital pregnancy (Chisale, 2016; Chisale & Moyo, 2016). Virginity testing has received harsh criticism by gender and human rights organisations for its negative implications on the girls' health and dignity.

In accord, in the extract below, M'e Keneuoe compares her own upbringing as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to the modern-day *Mosotho* girl. In this she illuminates the spatio-temporal and ideological shifts by pointing out that:

*certain foods were restricted for us as [banana ba Basotho]...the Sesotho foods... you were instructed not to consume eggs...sheep ofal...many things...but we didn't really express any points of view...we also didn't question anything... we just conformed... I believe that it is also linked to the strenuous work because the girls these days will not manage to do the work that I do...I consider it to have been ignorance... In fact [banana ba Basotho] are not enlightened...they are always passive and compliant ...even when she is oppressed...M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).*

The image of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who embodies passivity and whom M'e Keneuoe juxtaposes against “*the girls of the modern era*” exemplifies the ideological and cultural shifts alluded to by M'e Mpale. In this respect, like M'e Mpale, M'e Keneuoe alludes to the shift in ideas that marks a historical, socio-cultural context wherein the notion of *Mosotho* girlhood is no longer typified by passivity, but rather by reflexivity and individuality as tools sufficing to navigate the realm of sexuality in lieu of ‘outdated’ dietary restrictions. However, although the women reflect on ‘passage of time’ (Batisai, 2013), ‘then’ as past remains palpable in the ‘now’ present as it continues to shape what it means to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho* amidst ‘modern’ prescriptions – I expand on this discussion in Chapter 6. This finding thus contradicts the suggestion of “new ways of being a woman” conceptualised as distinct from the past as suggested by author Gqola (2016, p. 122). Instead the finding contributes an understanding of the enmeshment of the past and present in the construction of *Mosotho* girlhood in modern-day Lesotho.

However, interesting to note is that conformity to dietary restrictions was constructed by some like M'e Lila as a source of pride and affirmation of her identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, while on the flip side, others undermined these regulations, albeit in implicit ways. For example, M'e Mpale mentioned that despite constant surveillance, her older sister undermined these prescriptions and consumed restricted food privately when she was away at boarding school. Non-conformity in this sense also meant undermining the notion of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*; therefore, inciting doubts regarding the soundness of its prescriptions and its definitive attributes. Likewise, M'e Lila grew up in a context and era that was typified by high Christian drive to instil Christian morality

denoting ideal Christian girlhood. Undoubtedly, stringent controls were enforced in all spheres to ensure that Basotho girl-children remained in the purest state until marriage. However, M'e Lila adopted several strategies to prevent pregnancy while she engaged in sexual intercourse secretly, meaning that she exhibited virtue to the public while discreetly undermining it. She elaborated that;

*Before you sleep with a man...you had to drink a glass full of water...after having slept with him, when you do this ...mmmmhmmm [bearing down... let down to relax vaginal muscles –sighing sound]...those things [semen] come out...you just had to force them out like this ... mmmhmm [forcing out sound] ...all that dirt comes out... then nothing will happen... you would never find yourself having conceived.. that water was your family planning... your own family planning... M'e Lila (TY, 08 Sept 2017)*

As to whether or not her strategy was effective is another debate, but this alone disputes assumptions of passivity and docility alluded to by M'e Keneuoe as well as lack of protective 'options' alluded to M'e Mpale. Thus, considering that within Basotho communities, religio-cultural forces enforced stringent control that required "checking girls' perilous sexuality and policing their improperly bounded bodies" (Bastian, 2000, p. 150), M'e Lila's account reveals intriguing dynamics. It illuminates the thoughtfulness of *banana ba Basotho* in applying creative strategies that I read as agency. Under the pretence of conformity, she embodied subversive strategies to disrupt the notion of chaste Christian girlhood. Interestingly M'e Lila's insistence that '*ke ngoanana oa Mosotho*' speaks to this deception while living up to the idealised identity. African feminist literature detailing the Christianisation of African communities and resultant inscription of ideal chaste Christian girlhood and womanhood is silent on these creative subversive actions enacted by young Basotho girls.

In addition, having to negotiate the prescription of sexual purity yet being sexually empowered and at the same time striving for procreative-marital bodies was undoubtedly a complex image constitutive of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Feminist literature is silent on this complexity that emerges from the findings of this study. However, by viewing the construction *ngoanana oa Mosotho* 'from the ground up' these findings contribute how Basotho girls draw on the endogenous knowledges to navigate prescriptive religio-cultural structures that enforced the procreative marital norm. Thus, by revealing these complexities, these findings serve the decolonial mandate of deconstructing

universalist conceptions of girlhood and by extension, womanhood - as it will be established in Chapter 6.

### **5.3. *Ngoanana oa Mosotho* in contradictory spaces**

Evident from the *Methepa*'s narrated lived childhood experiences was the interrelatedness of familial and community spaces as well as schooling trajectories which they constructed as central to their upbringing. These experiences are housed within the broader socio-cultural, economic and historical context of Lesotho which in turn variously shaped the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* within these spaces. Evidently, Basotho women's narrations reveal intersecting yet occasionally contradicting discourses pertaining to marriage and girlhood within familial, community and schooling spaces. In this section, I focus on how schooling trajectories intersected with familial, community and other aspects to create differently configured images of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* that bear contradictions, and at times reveal young Basotho girl's agentic moments.

#### **5.3.1. Contextualising Mosotho girl's educational trajectories**

Narrated life stories highlight that access to education for the *Mosotho* girl-child was a common feature for many Basotho families. As a result, the schooling experience was often constructed as one that enabled self-assertion; and undoubtedly, was highly valued and memorable for all women. As highlighted in table 4.1, apart from M'e Lebo, M'e Ts'ido, M'e Pale, and M'e Mamo, who achieved post-graduate degrees, educational attainments for participants ranged from as low as standard 4 to completion of primary school (Standard 7). The remaining majority went as far as completing secondary school (Form E). However, while schooling experiences were shaped by diverse intersecting structural factors, in pursuit of education, young Basotho girls were able to negotiate and work around these barriers. This was evident in the response by M'e Mphoza who, despite extreme poverty, expressed delight at having been exposed to education:

*...because in general at school it is nice! Just the learning [itself] with other children in the class is therapeutic!* M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).

M'e Mphoza was schooled by the foster family for whom she worked as a childminder. She grew up under extreme poverty within a female-headed family where education was not a pressing priority, yet against all odds, she states that "*I went up to [standard] 6.*" M'e Libu, was born in

Mafeteng district, she is eldest child amongst five children born to a single mother. However, she was brought up by her maternal grandmother with whom she relocated to South Africa upon marriage. She expressed similar sentiments about having had access to education in spite of financial hardships. M'e Libu started school late, and as a result, she was much older compared to her peers. In pursuit of education, she highlighted how she was able to assume two contradictory roles:

*The following year I went to school. I started from standard one, mind you I was already older...I started at Thabaneng primary...I attended school up to standard seven. We were struggling...I attended school whilst also working as a domestic worker so that I could pay the fees because our mother neglected us. Nkhono was disabled and unable to do anything with one leg. M'e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

For M'e Libu, living within a family headed by her disabled *nkhono*, like M'e Mphoza, she elaborated on how their schooling trajectories were characterised by their assumption of concurrent scholar/breadwinner roles. They grappled to support family livelihoods by working as child-minders from a young age and concurrently attended to schooling needs. These complexities reflect the historical socio-economic context within which schooling trajectories were negotiated by some women. Moreover, while participants highlighted intense struggles, they also drew attention to how young Basotho girls navigated structural barriers in the name of accessing education. This finding contradicts Batisai (2013) who reported that amongst Zimbabwean elderly women, financial restraints were a fundamental barrier for girl's access to education in colonial Zimbabwe.

In contrast, M'e Keneuoe narrated a different schooling trajectory that bore the socio-economic and political landscape of Lesotho at the time. This was typified by financial stability followed by instabilities that eventually ended her school journey. As the eldest daughter of a migrant worker father, she was privileged to pursue education up to form C when a sudden turn of events changed everything:

*Our father was still working...he stopped working in 1990...life was still good...we were still young...life went on [then suddenly] life deteriorated ... I completed form 1, form 2, form C... I failed form C... it was a matter of failing or proceeding... when you fail you*

*forced to stay at home so that they focus on the younger ones.* M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).

This turn of events was common to migrant-headed families at the time of the massive mine retrenchments in 1990s (Epprecht, 1996, 2001; Maloka, 1997; Modo, 2001). For M'e Lifutso and M'e Rehab, like M'e Keneuoe, *“life, became difficult”* and the extent of this difficulty was felt as schooling trajectories ceased abruptly due to financial constraints. For M'e Keneuoe, failing a level meant that she had to leave school so that her younger siblings could *“get the enlightenment that I received to be able to write my name and write a letter...”* She constructs this as a fundamental responsibility linked to her position as the eldest child in the family. Noteworthy is the intersecting forces - class, age, familial structure - that shaped women's educational trajectories. However, these latter experiences illustrate how class privilege existed within a volatile socio-economic context of mine migrancy that was relatively unstable in Lesotho at the time.

Considering the role of mine migrancy in determining the livelihood of many Basotho families (Epprecht, 1996; Gay, 1980; Eldredge, 1981), it is of considerable importance to also pay attention to how this privilege shaped constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* within migrant headed families. However, this class characteristic intersected with the socio-cultural and religious spaces and as such, revealed contradictory discourses pertaining to marriage and constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* - as I illustrate below. Literature addresses the construction of a middle-class elite during and beyond mission-colonial conquest and how this shaped constructions of feminine identity in colonised states (Epprecht, 1996, 2001; Kanogo, 2005) and as such this class status shaped gender construction as is reflected in these findings.

Emerging from women's reflections of their childhoods is how realities of educational trajectories were shaped by class status - undergirded by intersecting factors; migrancy, familial constitution and parental marital status, socio-economic profiling – all of which informed middle-class status. Expectedly, this was key in redefining entire life and schooling journeys differently from those narrated by M'e Mphoza and M'e Libu. Like M'e Ts'ido, M'e Pale was born and bred in South Africa and was relocated to Lesotho by her father at a school-going age to commence schooling. M'e Ts'ido highlighted the value that her father attached to education:

*...But school was...which is why father insisted that we attend school here at home as opposed to in Gauteng because [bad] behaviours may have been a destruction and thus*

*hampered school attendance, so here at home it was fine* M'e Ts'ido (Maseru, 06 June 2017).

By outlining his concern that the South African environment was not conducive for learning and therefore would possibly hamper his goals of educating his children, M'e Ts'ido recounts the value her father attached to education for his daughters. During the apartheid era, enlightened migrant parents opted to send their children back to their original home countries for schooling in lieu of the racist South African schooling system.<sup>71</sup> Given the politics of migrancy, men regarded as the 'natural' providers were the ones permitted to migrate for employment purposes while women, destined for motherhood and dependency, were confined to the home (Eldredge, 1991; Epprecht, 1996, 2001; Gay, 1980). Therefore, that fathers spearheaded access to education resonates well with these micro/macro-dynamics. This resonates with an observation made by Batisai (2013), of the father's role in enabling a girl-child's access to education in colonial Zimbabwe.

Similarly, M'e Pale recalled how her father emphasised the importance of educating her daughters and challenging a male colleague who implied that female education was a waste of resources since girls ultimately get married. The father would emphasise that:

*I want to educate my children because I want them to be able to look after themselves when their husbands no longer able to provide for them. I don't want them to depend on husbands for everything that they have...*M'e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017).

Her father highlighted an interest in giving his daughters bargaining power within the marital setting, instead of rejecting marriage altogether. However, his endorsement of education over marriage - a counter-normative view in socio-cultural terms - is not surprising since he was a migrant worker and, over and above, enjoying middle class status. His ideas (shaped by migrancy status) were influenced differently from those that his neighbours in the rural village held. This implies that he held a 'redefined' notion of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, one that is outside the dependence, passivity narrative. Moreover, within a religio-socio-cultural context wherein the pro-marital narrative is deeply engrained in the construction of ideal girlhood or *ngoanana oa Mosotho*,

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<sup>71</sup> Through the creation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, an inferior education system which aimed at retaining the marginal status of the Black African population was institutionalised through the apartheid system (Thobejane, 2013)

his counter-normative ideas had a significant impact on M'e Pale's own trajectory beyond childhood, as I illustrate below.

Notably, at the intersection of schooling, familial, community, Christianity, as well as cultural forces, was a complexity-riddled image of modern-informed girlhood that differed from *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. M'e Pale highlighted these tensions:

*I don't think she [mother] ever showed the grooming...in fact to tell the truth, verbally especially my father...he used to say that marriage is not necessary ...it was outsiders who said that a woman needs to be married... Hele! It [marriage] was very important... it was instilled through actions and words... you realised that a person was forced to get married."* M'e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017)

M'e Pale narrated that her mother (uneducated housewife to migrant husband) had experienced hardships following marriage through abduction to her father (in spite of her father's middle-class status) and therefore, this may explain her mother's non-endorsement of marriage for her daughters. Yet in her home village, M'e Pale highlighted that the pressing need for marriage was reinforced through practice and discourse, expressed in: "*Hele! It [marriage] was very important... it was instilled through actions and words... you realised that a person was forced to get married.*" Like M'e Mphoza, M'e Pale existed within a context where a pro-marital narrative was rife and as such forced marriages were prevalent and normalised. Moreover, this was linked to socio-culturally defined goals for the girl-child that necessitated marriage as affirmation of *mosali oa Mosotho*. This exemplifies a context in which at the intersection of familial, communal, socio-cultural, religious, and economic forces are contradictory narratives and counsels that ultimately become critical dynamics that reveal complexities around the dominant ideologies defining *Mosotho* girlhood.

Therefore, unlike her peers, for whom abduction marriage was an unavoidable, constantly looming destiny, for M'e Pale, like M'e Ts'ido, middle-class status intersecting with other factors allowed them a redefined script of 'girlhood'. Like M'e Ts'ido, M'e Pale completed post-graduate degrees unlike her peers who expectedly, as soon as they reached puberty, followed a culturally defined linear progression into marriage. Thus, given the different ways in which M'e Ts'ido's and her peers' life experiences were shaped by the socio-cultural and economic contexts, they were forced into different paths. M'e Ts'ido, narrated that her parents enforced an un-gendered division of



labour for the children and emphasised education, and thus it comes as no surprise that her father held an anti-marriage attitude particularly for his daughters. M'e Ts'ido recalled how her father, from when they were young, had suggested that they should not get married, but he was insistent for her specifically;

*I tell you if it were for nstate, none of the girls particularly would have married. But I believe that nstate considered me to be his sibling [more] than a daughter. Because he believed that if I got married...the husband would abuse me... (M'e Ts'ido, Maseru 06 June 2017).*

The endorsements of anti-marital and pro-education narrative by the fathers of M'e Pale, M'e Ts'ido, M'e Lifutso are not only suggestive of the fatherly protective role, but also reveal the complexities that undergird these perspectives. Ironically, in hindsight, M'e Pale linked her father's ill-treatment of her mother to her mother's disinterest in marriage, as well as her father's interest in educating his daughters to her mother's lack of education and thus dependency on her father "*for everything*".

That education for the girl-child is the top priority within families considered to be destitute as well as the middle-class is intriguing. These findings contradict those reported by Batisai (2013, p. 87) that "[g]irlhood experiences illuminate how "a gendered first born position' within families translated into the lack of an education for daughters". Instead, while some Basotho women's girlhood experiences were characterised by hardships, these did not hamper access to education despite its shortened duration, for some. Therefore 'femaleness', amongst Basotho did not jeopardise the girl-child's access to education in the same way as other African contexts as has previously been acknowledged (Epprecht, 2001; Lesthaeghe, 1989; Morojele, 2011b). The dominant role of migrant fathers in enabling extended access to education for their daughters is over-emphasised in the *Methepa's* narrated life stories. This also confirms reports by Batisai (2013) that, in the accounts of schooling narrated by elderly Zimbabwean women, the fathers' roles in enabling access to education were afforded salience. Yet, notably, the gendered dynamics that characterised that colonial epoch in Zimbabwe explain the 'silence' which the mother's roles were afforded - particularly with regard to education. However, by contrast, that the roles of Basotho mothers and *bo-nkhono* of ensuring the necessary support to their daughters in pursuit of education are given voice in these findings is highly intriguing. This (and many other aspects

related to African women) is often silenced in scholarship detailing this historical epoch (Eldredge, 1991; Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980).

### 5.3.2. Giving voice to matrifocality and girlhood

That women in the family toiled to inscribe ‘alternative’ femininities that are not confined to the marital norm was an interesting finding emerging from the women’s narrated stories of childhood. The women who grew up within matrifocal families reflected upon special inter-generational relations; grandmother-granddaughter, mother-daughter formations wherein support, and empowerment were demonstrated. In various spaces, women acted as pillars of support, teachers of wisdom, facilitators of empowerment and agents of change. Within these relations, the notion of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* was also reconfigured through direct and indirect means. Interestingly, support for education was constructed as a critical means through which Basotho girls would gain some level of insight and independence. This was extended by mothers and *bo-nkhono* to ensure that the girl-child gets access to education despite dire situations. M’e Mphoza, for example, commended her mother for the role that she played in ensuring not only their livelihoods, but “*so that we can write*”. Likewise, M’e Pale – although was bred in the idealised nuclear male headed family – also heeded her mother’s role in ensuring that she progressed with school when her father failed to provide the funds:

*Joo! She was such a hard worker! She ploughed the fields, harvested and sold mekopu (pumpkin) and meroho (vegetable leaves), she even brewed joala (traditional Sesotho beer) ...we were able to go to school...father was still there! Resisting to release the money... she used to be proactive in ensuring that her children progress... (M’e Pale, Maseru 10 June 2010).*

This draws attention to the often ‘unacknowledged’ roles of Basotho mothers in catering for their children in the absence or presence of so-called natural male providers. While these ‘ideal’ migrant-father headed families were instituted as befitting of socio-economic and religious norms, their sustainability in ensuring that families are cared for is questionable as is suggested by M’e Pale.

M’e Kotseng recalled how her mother encouraged her daughters to prioritise education over marriage and insisted that: “*...education is the only means of survival ...when it comes to marriage*

*you will not survive...[instead] it punishes you.*” Although her mother got married after completing her education and became an employed wife, her marriage failed, hence her insistence that *“husbands are disappointing.”* While it may seem like M’e Kotseng’s mother’s expression of strong anti-marriage and pro-education stance for her daughters as linked to her past lived experience of a bad marriage. I also read her opting for an alternative for her daughters like the fathers of M’e Pale, M’e Ts’ido, and M’e Lifutso, as tied to her intentions of fostering alternative notions of womanhood through education rather than marriage.

These accounts exemplify Basotho women’s livelihood ‘options’ (Gay, 1980) and roles as providers which have been downplayed in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Epprecht, 2001). Yet often-times, they are the pillars of families in ensuring that girl-children receive education in spite of dire circumstances (Cock, 1980; Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980; Kuzwayo, 2004). Relatedly, anthropologist Judith Gay (1980) acknowledged the existence of matrifocality in Lesotho – contrary to the ideal of womanhood that necessitated heterosexual marriage instituted through colonial missionary confluence amongst Basotho. By contrast, ‘female headed households’ – commonly perceived with negativity – enabled Basotho women to fulfil their desire to “bear, rear, support and educate children” (Gay, 1980, p. 307) with the vision of being cared for in old age. While this may be true – given that Basotho women already limited ‘options’ were tremendously affected by the emergence of the exclusionary racist and sexist migrancy system, to mention but a few aspects – I argue that their efforts were driven by other, less obvious factors.

Instead, I read Basotho women’s contribution to their children’s wellbeing, especially ensuring better life trajectories for their daughters, as linked to enforcement of ‘alternative’ constructions of femininity. In other words, women’s prioritisation of education over marriage suggests that mothers endorsed reconstructed ideologies, not only around marriage, but also around ‘womanhood’ which they toiled to inscribe in their daughters. For instance, M’e Pale narrated that her uneducated mother suffered abuse in her marriage to her father; therefore, I read her mother’s efforts to ensure that she progressed with school to be linked to her vision of a different journey for her daughter. This finding resonates with Black feminist literature (Chaney, 2011; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000) which acknowledges Black mothers for prioritising the education of their daughters within the racist patriarchal American society. Likewise, as reported in Cock’s (1980, p. 83) study amongst Black South African domestic workers during the apartheid era, educational

aspirations were “pitched very high” in bid to ensure that their daughters avoid becoming domestic workers. Like these women, Basotho mothers not only consider economic self-reliance through education to be a vehicle for advancement but also a means for enhancing positive subjectivities in their girl-children. Chaney (2011, p. 519) also links this to Black women’s intention of inscribing a “modified version of womanhood” in pursuit of challenging commonly held racist stereotypical perceptions of Black womanhood.

Correspondingly, by prioritising education over marriage, Basotho mothers sought to reconstruct womanhood outside the confines of marriage. I consider this to be linked to the broader historical, religious socio-political context in which ‘ideal’ womanhood was necessarily inferiorised and confined to a state of dependency within the marital context. Epprecht (1996, p. 190) pointed out that Basotho women did not “passively accept the “triple squeeze” upon them by colonial rule, Basotho patriarchs” as well as Christian missionaries that toiled to inscribe particularistic constructions of womanhood through a tightly woven racialised and gendered restrictive system. Thus, I read the elder women’s inscription of independent type constructions of womanhood through education as additional means through which they toiled to disrupt the continuities and biases borne out of this colonial “triple squeeze”. This also reflects the agency of elderly, rural-based Basotho women that is often silenced in historical texts as mentioned earlier.

This was also reflected through Basotho mothers’ multiple roles that extended beyond livelihoods and formal schooling. They also ensured the construction of a resilient, independent and agentic *ngoanana oa Mosotho* - as I illustrated above. M’e Khanyane, M’e Tebello like M’e Libu, constantly referred to *nkhono oa ka*<sup>72</sup> who was a pillar of strength who ensured access to both the westernised education despite meagre resources as well as the imparting of indigenous knowledges (Magoqwana, 2018a, b) underpinning her identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Therefore, Basotho women’s roles as the knowledge and support bearers responsible for grooming *banana ba Basotho* were informed by intersecting modern (religio-socio-political) and traditional (socio-cultural) forces. It is at this interfacing point that the girl-child’s identity as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* was

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<sup>72</sup> Nkhono is grandmother in Sesotho, thus *nkhono oa ka*, particularly for M’e Libu whose mother was negligent, signifies not only the embodied aging body but *nkhono* symbolised significantly more than the nurturing and caring that she provided. Gay (1980), acknowledged matrifocal families during the postcolonial epoch, in which mothers and grandmothers without husbands lived with children in their own independent households. Grandmothers extended mothering roles to care for grandchildren in the absence of their daughters. Although many of these families were poor in comparison to those that were male-migrant headed, these women sought ‘options’ of feeding, schooling, supporting their offspring.

constructed notwithstanding the ensuing contradictions. Feminist literature is silent on these complexities that characterise postcolonial constructions of identity.

However, while mothers and grandmothers had envisioned better life journeys for their daughters, the most feared threat - unplanned pregnancy - regrettably forced many girls out of school to their mothers' disappointments. M'e Keneuoe, reiterated her deeply engraved counsel when she mentioned that:

*... nkhono repeatedly warned me that I should not have a child out of wedlock ... that word remained with me since then ... do not have a child out of wedlock M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).*

While this counsel was typical to each one's upbringing given the hegemonic context that reinforced the narrative of procreative-marital sexuality for Basotho girls, in various ways, it was unfortunate that M'e Kotseng, M'e Libu, M'e Mphoza, M'e Khanyane and M'e Lifutso were forced to deal with the consequences of unplanned, pre-marital pregnancies. M'e Kotseng, for instance, only went as far as form B when she fell pregnant whilst enrolled in a Roman Catholic school. M'e Mphoza was much younger, as she recalled that: *"I was young when I had a child."* following which, like M'e Libu, and M'e Khanyane, she was forced to abandon schooling and seek full time employment as domestic workers. Therefore, this "sudden altering of context of good girl" to bad girl (Mokobocho-Mohlakoana, 2005, p. iv) within the Catholic schooling context meant that a pregnant girl was located between and within contradicted and conflicted positions of being a child and a 'woman'. Mokobocho-Mohlakoana (2005) acknowledges that an unplanned pre-marital pregnancy was the one common aspect that not only constituted grave transgression against religio-cultural standards of *Mosotho* girlhood, but also a source of interference in schooling trajectories for many Basotho girls.

However, inspite of this daunting experience some reflected upon the support they received from their mothers and grandmothers. M'e Khanyane, was born and bred in Leribe district to an unmarried mother and she was brought up by her maternal grandmother. She recalls her grandmother's warnings:

*Most of the time when she spoke with me ...she would say, my daughter's child... marriage is very troubling...do you know that even your mother's marriage failed ...apparently my mother lived somewhere in Mahobong whilst attending school... then she got into trouble*

*and found herself with a baby, that is me. So my grandmother used to say...hei... I don't want my daughter's daughter to get involved in those things [marriage]... I feel like its things that are annoying. I would rather she go work ... that she works so that she can look after her child... even if she has other children they will survive. It did not work out for my mother, so even for me she decided that there is no point... she said just go and work and be like your mother. You will also be able to establish your own homestead with your children.* M'e Khanyane (Leribe, 09 Sept 2017)

Following the discovery of an unplanned pregnancy, M'e Khanyane, reflects on her grandmother's insistence that she focuses on establishing self-sufficiency and economic self-reliance through paid employment rather than marriage. Interestingly, contrary to the religio-cultural discourses preaching procreative marital sexuality – her grandmother fosters the notion of matrifocality and 'unmarried' motherhood as acceptable. Moreover, she acknowledges and is supportive of the fact that she will bear more children for whom she encouraged M'e Khanyane to establish a home, in the same way her mother had done for them. These findings corroborate the mother's disruption of pro-marital discourses with the intention of enforcing a 'different' notion of girlhood for their young daughters as they transition into 'women'. The significance of these experiences in shaping women's constructions of womanhood and agency are discussed in Chapter 6. However, suffice it to draw the reader's attention to the meaningfulness of matrifocality and how through intimate mother-grandmother-daughter relations counsels that sought to redefine womanhood were shared intergenerationally.

M'e Tebello, who grew up in Thaba Bosiu (semi-rural village on the outskirts of Maseru district), she is the second born child of two children born to an 'unmarried' mother. She elaborated on the intimate relation that she shared with her grandmother who was her mentor throughout her upbringing. Amongst the many counsels that she received from her mentor, were those about marriage:

*My mother is not married...she had children when she was still at home. We were brought up by our grandmother when she was working for us as a domestic worker. We stayed with our grandmother; she is the one who brought us up. She used to tell me about issues of marriage...that it is a difficult role...it is not something that one can enter haphazardly. It is something that you need to prepare for...* M'e Tebello (Thaba Bosiu, 10 Sept 2018)

This cautionary counsel does not debunk the necessity of marriage per se, but it serves to prepare the young girl for the hardships of marriage. In fact, as opposed to enforcing the belief that marriage is an expectation that they need to fulfil, grandmothers provide guidance about the ills of marriage so that their granddaughters can make informed decisions around marriage. I am reminded about my own grandmother during my early adulthood years when she consistently told me not to get married and rather focus on getting educated – as reflected in Chapter 1. In so doing, like my grandmother, not only did these mothers and grandmothers envision a different trajectory for their daughters compared to what they had experienced. They also envisioned a redefined notion of girlhood later to transition into a reconfigured *bosali*. The childhood counsels reflected upon by the women become critical tokens in adulthood that they draw upon to devise navigation and survival strategies within marginalising pro-marital hetero-patriarchal contexts – as reflected in Chapter 6.

African feminist Amadiume (2002, p. 43), referred to the “matriarchal umbrella” in which the revered role of motherhood is emphasised as a critical canon for fostering female solidarity, collectivity and inclusivity. Thus, resonant with this unique feature, elderly Basotho matriarchs, who are endowed with the role of teaching, and nurturing younger generations ensured the empowerment of young daughters and granddaughters. Interestingly, the women’s accounts not only reflect on this intergenerational mentorship by their mothers and grandmothers but also counsels that potentially led to the re-writing of *bosali* beyond the hetero-patriarchal marital norms. As reflected in earlier sections, this was also exemplified wherein women elders spearheaded the processes central to the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in which Basotho girls were taught to embody particularistic attributes that transcend the hetero-patriarchal canon.

Thus, the women’s accounts dispute universalist feminist assumptions that the girl-child is taught to devote her life to “finding a husband and bearing children” (Friedan, 1963, p.1). This is a commonly cited feminist metanarrative central to the contestation against patriarchal inscription of gender identity. Accordingly, feminists contest the patriarchal idea of marriage being defined as an essentialised measure of achievement or completeness (Adichie, 2017; Afisi, 2010; Amenga-Etego, 2013; Friedan, 1963). Instead, the ideal that the elderly mentors sought to inscribe disrupts the universalised image confined to the state of dependency within the marital context as is required in hetero-patriarchal gendered standards. Moreover, heterosexual marriage not only

validates the family structure but also the offspring born to this family ideal (Collins, 2000). Thus, by giving voice to matrifocality within a context governed by religio-hetero-patriarchal norms that mandate heterosexual marriage; the women's accounts embody a deconstructive tone that debases the fixity of pro-marital norms and the uncritical endorsement thereof by women in rural settings of Lesotho. In these respects, the findings dispute the stereotypical construction of the 'female headed' household which in hetero-patriarchal contexts is viewed negatively and constitutive of 'lack'. I consider this to be a critical subject area linked to constructions of womanhood and women's agency that is yet to be explored by African feminisms.

Following a lengthy reflection on Basotho girls' educational trajectories and their undergirding multiple complex dynamics, something ought to be said about the actual schooling curriculum and how it shaped, contradicted and deconstructed ideas around girlhood and marriage in Lesotho.

### **5.3.3. The schooling context and contradictory discourses**

Schooling experiences were housed within a socio-cultural context that prescribed the grooming of young *Mosotho* girls into *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in transit towards *mosali oa Mosotho*. M'e Mphoza elaborated on how, within her home and community life, 'domesticity', marriage, and initiation school (*lebollo*) were emphasised as key aspects necessary for the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in transit to *mosali oa Mosotho*. By contrast, the mission school environment emphasised schooling over marriage. She stated that:

*...when they touched on them [issues of marriage], they would tell us not to rush into marriages whilst we are still young, we should study, we should avoid boys...we were reprimanded for [associating with] boys at school.* M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).

Undoubtedly, the schooling environment is constructed as a space wherein secondary socialisation took place (Khau, 2012e; Morojele, 2011a, 2012; Motsa, 2018). While teachers imparted the formal curriculum, young girls were also warned against the looming realities of heterosexual relations that would potentially hamper academic progress (Batisai, 2013). Yet as mentioned earlier, during *that* time, forced marriages were normalised within some the women's communities to ensure that marriage - a socio-culturally defined goal - was achieved. Notably, M'e Mphoza's account confirms that missionary schools, whose predominance in Lesotho has been documented (in Chapter 2), were long considered as 'escape routes' for many Basotho girls against forced



marriages in their communities. Considering this, schoolteachers regarded early marriages as potential deterrents of better life trajectories which they had envisioned for the young Basotho girls. This finding reflects the contradictions between the socio-cultural norms endorsed and upheld by the family/community dyad and the schooling setting undergirded by religious/mission norms that have been documented (Kanogo, 2005; Phoofolo, 2007).

Nonetheless, the interplay between education and marriage was characteristic in women's narrations of their childhood trajectories. Interestingly, within mission schools, although girls were taught to delay marriage and focus on schooling, the curriculum itself enforced a girl-child's preparation for wifehood and domesticity in both direct and indirect ways. M'e Lisebo, who completed secondary school, alluded to how during secondary schooling, educators always made comments that were loaded with gendered nuances that reinforced pro-marital ideas. M'e Lisebo asserted that although there was emphasis on the importance of education, there was at the same time a taken-for-granted assumption of wifehood and motherhood, thus reinforcing marriage as a girl's destiny. However, in a more direct way, M'e Mamo grew up in Maseru within an upper-middle class, Catholic male-headed family, the eldest of two children. At the time of the interview, she was completing a Master of Commerce degree. She questioned how her high school educators had transferred their values and views onto school children and as such,

*...it's hard for young kids to think differently ...teachers I think... they easily pass on their views to school children...yes there had been many incidents where you find that there will be talks... I remember my home economics said to us ... she said that when we were at high school [level], we should not date, but when we get to varsity...make sure when you leave you have found someone (laughing)...found someone, the person to marry otherwise from there you will struggle. M'e Mamo (Maseru, 06 Sept 2017).*

M'e Mamo reflects on the pressures that young girls have to endure within the schooling setting wherein the formal academic and socio-cultural context intersected to reinforce hegemonic pro-marital discourses. For instance, home economics teaches domesticity, and coupled with the educators' pro-marital perspectives, undoubtedly reinforces beliefs of marriage as a *Mosotho* girl's destiny. A reflection on the curriculum taught in missionary schools, that was characteristically gendered as much as racialized, explains the persistence of subjects such as home economics in which girl children would be expected to enrol. Therefore, this finding confirms reports by authors

(Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018) that the curriculum taught in schools in postcolonial Lesotho reflects the historical colonial mission project. Considering this, given the deep rootedness of this colonial-mission history in Lesotho, the persistence of ideas that ideal girlhood and womanhood are necessarily tied to domesticity are self-explanatory.

These illustrations underscore how the postcolonial learning spaces still reflect the historical trajectory of Christian missionary influence, thus marking them as dynamic sites within which marital norms are discursively deconstructed, constructed and reconstructed. This is reflected in the curriculum as well as the voiced and ‘unvoiced’ pro-marital convictions held by teachers and peers as the key forces spearheading the process. Considering this, religious and socio-cultural gendered norms within the schooling, familial and community spaces at times converge to reinforce the dominant narrative that constructed marriage as a girl-child’s destiny. Therefore, this contributes to the constructing a notion of *Mosotho* girlhood that is not only domesticated but also tied to marriage. However, these intersecting forces also conflict and deconstruct dominant narratives, thus revealing complications around the construction of *Mosotho* girlhood in this context. This finding resonates with Kanogo’s (2005) observation that constructions of girlhood in the colonial-missionary Kenyan context bore contradictions as multiple religious, social and cultural forces converge around identity construction.

By the same token, M’e Pale attended a Catholic school from the onset of her schooling trajectory. She corroborated M’e Mamo’s assertion with regard to pressures not to ‘miss out’ on marriage. She recounted how at university level, the pressure to marry was reinforced, “...*in girls’ talks... if you don’t get married here [university], you will never!... you have missed out! If you miss out here*”. Once again, this emphasis on marriage is not surprising given that the remnants of mission domesticity continued to shape constructions of proper girlhood. Therefore, at the same time, considered to be a vehicle for conversion to Christianity, education for the girl-child was highly valued to groom them into good wives and mothers (Kanogo, 2005). Contradictorily, however, while the pressure for marriage reflects the realities of the religio-cultural context, it is in stark contrast to the Catholic preachings of celibacy to which M’e Pale was exposed throughout her schooling journey. Reflecting on this experience, she stated:

*So I attended Catholic schools where when a person had sexual relations with a man it was a bad thing...so I did not think that I would get married...[NM: so at those catholic*

schools were you not told to get married and have families?]*... No, you were told to join sisterhood! Yes, even if you marry ...but what was insisted upon was that you join sisterhood.....the fear that was instilled by nuns when we were still young... ...it was alive within me! [such that in] my 20s...I had completed form E; I had passed very well...I was a virgin...* M'e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017)

The insistence on sisterhood and celibacy for Basotho girls rather than marriage is not surprising, given the stronghold of Catholicism during and beyond the mission-colonial epoch. Therefore, compared to the pro-marital ideologies that prevailed in the communities from which Basotho girls like M'e Pale emerged, the Catholic school environment preached a contradictory narrative. This was purposed to inscribe a particular ideal of chaste Catholic girlhood and by extension womanhood. Nonetheless, it was also the intense Catholicism that played a major role, shaping her life trajectory. M'e Pale recounted how she surpassed gendered boundaries as a schoolgirl within a mission schooling system:

*...all the Roman Catholic priests were searching for me ...saying that I qualify for teaching... [I was headhunted for a teaching post]! Then they took me to university<sup>73</sup>... Am the first girl in the whole district of Qacha's Nek to enter into university! ... I am the first and only girl!* M'e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017).

She highlights an achievement that contradicted cultural norms undergirding the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*; excelling at school and being head-hunted by Catholic priests. Interestingly, being aware of this cultural transgression, she also elaborated that she was the “first and only girl!” to enter university. This was contrary to the wifhood role that the community envisions for the girl-child, yet the mission schooling system and other familial factors facilitated a different life trajectory for M'e Pale. Therefore, this finding resonates with scholarship that has acknowledged the role of mission schooling for transforming the trajectories of African girl-children (Batisai, 2013; Epprecht, 2001; Gay, 1980; Kanogo, 2005). Moreover, this was aligned with her father's pro-education [and anti-marriage] perspective which in turn contributed

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<sup>73</sup> The Roman Catholic Church founded Pius XII College in 1945, a Catholic university college (now the National University of Lesotho). The chief purpose of the establishment of Pius XII College was to provide African Catholic students with a post-matriculation education. (Ntombana & Mokotso, 2018, p. 3)

significantly to how M'e Pale, like M'e Ts'ido was able to escape the pressures of her rural community.

As a chaste Catholic girl, intelligent and a top achiever, she embodied the ideal of Christian 'girlhood' that is in stark contrast to *ngoanana oa Mosotho* embodied by her peers who were confined within the rural village. However, on the other hand, given that mission education was purposed for inscribing the ideal of 'domesticity'- not intellectual ability, per se - M'e Pale's experience in itself is exceptional for undermining the tenets of Catholicism. Kanago (2005) reported on the heterogeneity of Kenyan girls' mission schooling trajectories and these in turn implicated the notions of 'girlhood' and 'womanhood'. While the majority of those attending mission-stations were channelled into Christianised wifehood and girlhood, there were exceptions whereby African girls exceeded the domestic norm and were channelled into professions such as teaching and nursing. Nonetheless, like M'e Ts'ido, M'e Pale's periodic presence and absence from the rural village to boarding school and later teacher's training college was also advantageous in this regard. Not only did they escape the pressures of a pro-marital cultural context, but it also redefined her ideas around marriage and girlhood – all of which afforded them a different life trajectory.

Consequently, M'e Pale began to question certain gendered aspects such as women's patriarchal oppression by their husbands within her community. She reflects on how she began to problematize the rural lifestyle in which marriage was constructed as a woman's destiny; and interestingly, she equates the context with slavery. Consequently, she rejected this 'normalised' gendered manner of being a 'Woman':

*I didn't want to be like the people that I grew up with, I knew their lifestyle, the extent to which they were being beaten by husbands... you are literally a slave of your husband in fact you work for him. I hated that ...I didn't want that ... I wanted to be as far away from that living as possible...and the fact that I read a lot... ee...you are denying yourself that ...you are refusing to follow* M'e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017).

Noteworthy in M'e Pale's narration above is the ideological change inspired by the specific socialisation that she underwent as a middle-class, Catholic-schooled girl. Moreover, these familial and schooling aspects shielded her from the socio-cultural context that expected her to get

married.<sup>74</sup> Ideological shifts around gender identity tied to spatial mobility is a finding supported by feminist geographers (Low, 2009; Massey, 1994). This finding resonates with reports by Giddings and Hovorka (2010, p. 214) that physical-cultural-ideological shifting exhibited by M'e Pale also reflects “contestation, [and] modification of ... norms and ideas” thus revealing reconfigured notions of girlhood and womanhood. However, the findings of this study also reveal that construction and re-construction of notions of ideal girlhood are underpinned by more than spatial shifts, but instead woven with a myriad of intersecting and times contradictory forces. Notably, at the intersection of familial, communal and schooling spaces, the construction of girlhood embodies complexities and complications born out of competing and at times converging religio-cultural, socio-economic and political forces characteristic of the postcolonial landscape of Lesotho.

Moreover, while the findings are also reflective of the broader religious political socio-cultural terrain of Lesotho in which their constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* are housed, amidst this complicated context, are the traces of the indigenous Sesotho world. Thus while African feminists (Amadiume, 2006; Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018) have been critical of the influence of mission Christianity in distorting indigenous African subjectivities by introducing particular gendered type identities in which African women are perpetual subordinates of men. This suggests the complete erasure of indigenous structures and the replacement thereof by ‘modern’ Christianity. By contrast, these findings contribute a view of how modern institutions – informed by the mission historical trajectory – and indigenous Sesotho – intersect and at times contradict one another in and around the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* – in complex ways.

## 5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter analysis, I drew on the *Methepa*'s lived childhood experiences to map the historical religio-socio-cultural and economic landscape that shapes their constructions of womanhood. Central to this analysis is the ‘becoming’ of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* as she transitions towards

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<sup>74</sup> Like M'e Mphoza, M'e Pale narrated that she also escaped several attempts of forced marriages within her home village, and like M'e Ts'ido, her periodic absence from the rural community to the missionary school that she attended she considered as having protected her from these forced marriages. However, for M'e Mphoza, whose family situation was destitute, forced marriages were facilitated by community and biological kin members and as such her eldest sister was married off to an elderly man. Interestingly she resisted the three attempts by escaping to a foster family with whom she inhabited/worked. Sadly, she worked as a child minder with a foster family while schooling and this was a source of income for her biological mother.

*mosali oa Mosotho* ('proper' *Mosotho* woman). My reading of the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* through an intersectional-*uMakhulu* lens revealed multiplicities, contradictions and complexities evoked by the various intersecting factors - culture, geographical location, class, familial structural forces, to name a few - that shape this process. Moreover, the analysis revealed how African values of communality, survival, functionality, were critical to the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. While this was characteristic of the rural contexts, construction of girlhood in urban contexts was underpinned by a stringent gendered division of labour according to which femininity was typically linked to the gendered domestic hearth as a woman's destined space. However, contrary to the idea of women's confinement to this domestic space and exclusion from the public space, Basotho girls identified with and endorsed this public space as an ideal place.

To ascertain a girls' attainment of 'real' womanhood, the kin-communal network spearheaded the processes of constructing sexual and procreative-marital bodies. Drawing from the women's experiences of partaking in the practice of labial elongation, I illustrated how this indigenous experience was considered to be a source of pride that marked one's belonging to the collective-*ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Notwithstanding the gendered and hetero-patriarchal inclinations, when read 'from the ground up', the practice of labial elongation revealed aspects that are unique to *Methepa's* sexuality. Moreover, the value of the practice for the young *Mosotho* girl was her exposure to the 'invisibilised' and 'tabooed' subject of sexuality as well as a means through which she embodies sexual empowerment. Interestingly, this hidden 'prize' – the 'power of the erotic' realised through this practice – transcends girlhood and extends into adulthood where it shapes agency embodied by the *Methepa* - as I illustrate in the next chapter. Notable is the subtle forms of agency exemplified by young Basotho girls as they strive to become *banana ba Basotho* through the process of labial elongation. By creatively transforming the meanings of spaces and imbuing them with sexual and feminised meanings, the girls' actions innovatively contribute a view of how space, sexual body, agency and gender intersect to inform the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*.

Linked to the construction of sexual bodies was the creation of the procreative-marital body. The inception of this process is marked by menarche, following which dietary restrictions are enforced. This unique indigenous aspect characteristic to *ngoanana oa Mosotho* not only protected the girl from premarital and early pregnancy, but it also ensured the fulfilment of a woman's marital

mandate of childbearing. Noteworthy are the creative ways in which young Basotho girls negotiated the tensions of intersecting Christian, modern and traditional ways of becoming a *Mosotho* girl in postcolonial Lesotho. Moreover, findings contribute how Basotho girls draw on endogenous knowledges to navigate prescriptive religio-cultural structures that enforced the procreative marital norm. Revelation of these complexities through decolonial feminist lenses contributes to deconstructing universalist conceptions of girlhood and, by extension, womanhood.

Noteworthy is the socio-historical and economic context that characterises Lesotho that is palpable in the *Methepa*'s narrated life stories of childhood. Discernible were the rural and urban diversities whereby the dynamics characteristic to each space shaped how the women constructed *ngoanana oa Mosotho* differently from girlhood. Relatedly, a reflection on spatiality bears implication for shifts in time and ideologies around identity construction. Thus, evident in these life stories was a constant shifting between 'then' and 'now' as well as 'there' and 'here'- as a mark not only of 'passage of time' (Batisai, 2013), but also of spatial and ideological shifts that shaped the construction of *Mosotho* girlhood in postcolonial Lesotho. Within the diverse spaces inhabited by young Basotho girls, the 'then-now' and 'there-here' were constructed as relational and co-existent rather than disconnected. I argue that a reflection on this space-time complex is also critical for understanding how the women make meaning of their identities as the unmarried 'other' in adulthood – as illustrated in Chapter 6.

In addition, women's narratives reveal how Christian schooling trajectories, familial and community spaces intersected and informed one another in and around the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in rather complex ways. Notably, the often 'silenced' roles played by Basotho women in ensuring better life trajectories for their girl-children are illuminated in these findings. Within matrifocal families, the power and agency embodied by Basotho mothers and grandmothers is exemplified through their hard work to ensure that young Basotho girls got educated in spite of dire circumstances. In so doing, mothers sought to inscribe an independent-type womanhood through education. At the core of this analysis is a fluid, complexity riddled process of becoming a *Mosotho* girl located at the intersection of the modern and indigenous canons.

The historical mission-influence also reshaped constructions of girlhood amongst Basotho - as in many other African contexts (see Kanago, 2005). This image which is characterised by middle-

classiness, starkly contrasts with the image of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* portrayed in the preceding sections: shaped through communal norms, embodied multiply and relationally, and was considered as a sexual being, and agentic – to mention a few. Evidently, the former is, however, characterised as necessarily chaste and transitioning into a ‘respectable Christian wife and mother’. However, interestingly, while Basotho parents toiled to inscribe a sense of independence by educating their daughters, this Christian script, in hindsight, channelled daughters into ‘dependence’ as ideal Christian wives and mothers. This reveals the ‘unsaid’ tensions evoked by the intersecting forces underpinning the religio-socio-cultural context that shapes constructions of girlhood during and beyond colonisation in Lesotho.

Overall, the narrated life stories of childhood reveal a context constituted by tightly woven and intersecting hetero-religio-socio-cultural forces that inform the constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* as multidimensional and complex. Evidently, indigenous aspects that undergird the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* co-exist amid this ‘now’ modern context - in complex ways. I read this context as central to women’s constructions womanhood, as I illustrate in the next chapter. Considering the key questions of this study, I raise questions around those tensions that ensue at the interface of indigenous aspects and ‘modern’ ideologies on Basotho women’s sexuality and how these shape contemporary configurations of *Mosotho* girlhood and *mosali oa Mosotho*. Through this deconstructive analysis, I gave voice to the indigenous aspects in response to the plea of “building on the indigenous” for knowledge production. In so doing, I revealed complexities of identity construction viewed through the Sesotho world-senses and as such brought into disrepute normalised notions of girlhood and, by extension, womanhood. Moreover, of considerable significance is that in response to a decolonial feminist project, these findings critically deconstruct gendered identities that are based on fixed binarized patriarchal categories – bearing the traces of racialised and gendered colonial hierarchies. In the next chapter, it becomes clearer how these complexities borne by *ngoanana oa Mosotho* shape women’s constructions of womanhood and agency – in ways that further the decolonial feminist project purported by this thesis.



## Chapter 6: (Re)-construction of *mosali oa Mosotho*

### 6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the *Methepa*'s narrated stories of 'becoming' *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. From this analysis, I mapped out the socio-cultural and historical landscape that shapes *Methepa*'s constructions of marriage and womanhood. I illustrated that this context is constituted by tightly woven, complex, and intersecting forces. Notably, the lived experiences of childhood bear heavily on how the *Methepa* construct meaning, make sense of and locate their 'unmarried' identities in adulthood. This chapter analysis adopts an intersectional lens to explore the *Methepa*'s lived experiences as the 'unmarried' 'Other'. I give voice to the *Methepa*'s strategies used to navigate marginalising contexts wherein *mosali oa Mosotho* is defined in marital terms. In tracing the *Methepa*'s varied and creative strategies, I pay attention to how they negotiate space by constructing and reconstructing meanings for their identities within various spaces. The Black feminist agency theory, discussed in Chapter 3, is the golden thread that holds the entire thesis together. Therefore, I pay close attention to how *Methepa* draw meaning from their past personal experiences of 'becoming' *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to construct and reconstruct womanhood in adulthood. In particular, the *Methepa* anchor their re-constructions of *mosali* by transforming the meanings attached to the realms of femininity, sexuality and motherhood. I focus on how the *Methepa* narrate their self-definitions, self-descriptions and self-evaluations of what it means to be *mosali* despite being unmarried. To fully capture and foreground the meanings the *Methepa* construct for their definitions of womanhood, I opt to use *mosali* because it goes beyond what the concept of womanhood offers for a subjective, holistic and embodied perspective of what it means to be *mosali*. This chapter is divided into three main sections: Situating 'unmarried' identities followed by *Ke Mosali!*<sup>75</sup> - subjective meanings of *Mosali*. In the final section, *Botho!* Personhood: A deconstruction of *Mosali*, I shed light on the *Methepa*'s resistive voices that deconstruct gendered and normative categories purposed to segregate and marginalise Other women. Finally, I conclude this chapter by pointing out that the experiences of the *Methepa* are not homogenous. Instead, the analytic gaze reveals the interplay of the religio-socio-cultural and the subjective in shaping the *Methepa*'s self-definitions as *mosali*. Moreover, revealed through the *Methepa*'s

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<sup>75</sup> Ke mosali! translated directly is 'I am a woman!'

narrated life stories is religio-culturally, spatially and temporally informed agency characterised by multiplicity and complexity.

## 6.2. Situating ‘unmarried’ identities

Before I engage with how the *Methepa* re-construct womanhood, a reflection on the *Methepa*’s ‘unmarried’ state is warranted in order to contextualise their reconfigurations of womanhood. These views are also crucial in shaping the ways in which they navigate, negotiate and survive marginalising spaces – as the unmarried ‘other’. As reflected in Chapter 5, the socio-cultural and religious terrain enforced the procreative marital sex norm in both direct and indirect ways. However, the different spaces; family, community, school, in which the *Methepa* - as young Basotho girls - were groomed for womanhood at times opposed and intersected to inform one another around the reinforcement of these dominant norms. Community and collectivity that characterise the rural context through its familial-community dyad spearheaded the process that ensured the construction of a functional, sexual and procreative *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in transit to *mosali oa Mosotho* – part of which entails marriage.

At the core of this process, is the space-time complex which shaped constructions of identity in rural and urban spaces – reflected upon in Chapter 5. I argue that this is also critical for understanding how the *Methepa* make meaning of their identities as the unmarried ‘other’ in adulthood. Thus, its significance to this chapter warrants a brief reminder for the reader. The ‘there-then’ and ‘here-now’ phenomenon was central to some of the reflections of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. This was exemplified in how the dynamics of the rural context shaped the activities and the roles that the girls were expected to fulfil in affirmation of their identities as *banana ba Basotho*. In the narrated stories, some of the *Methepa* juxtaposed their own upbringing characteristic to this rural context against that enforced in the urban context that embodies different infrastructure. Relatedly, the *Methepa* reflected on the socio-cultural fabric of the urban context that shapes girlhood differently from *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Accordingly, it is perceived that girlhood is constituted through a relatively ‘easier’ process compared to the rural context. Moreover, the process is also constituted by modern technologies and ideologies that mark girlhood to be more reflective and flexible compared to *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Thus, a reflection of ‘passage of time’ (then-now) as well as ‘passage of bodies through space’ (there-here) as

reflected in the narratives of childhood shapes how the *Methepa* construct meanings of their identities in urban and rural spaces - as reflected in this section as well as the next.

M'e Mpale sheds light on the rural-urban divide which explains the different ways in which *Methepa* experience their lives within the two contexts - 'there' and 'here':

*So, I realised that in town [urban] people don't care about each other...everyone does whatever they want whenever. But at home [hae-rural] people care about each other... 'when is the daughter of [m'anyeo] getting married...do you know that [m'anyeos] (so and so's) daughter is not married?'.....indeed at home people care about each other, here in town nobody asks, 'when are you getting married?' Town [toropong] and home [hae] are completely different things... M'e Mpale (Maseru, 14 June 2017).*

M'e Mpale points out contextual urban-rural characteristics that shape ideologies around marriage and by extension one's identity as *mosali oa Mosotho*. Thus, failure to get married in this context is considered to be failure not only on the part of the woman but the entire kin-community network. By contrast, as was reflected in Chapter 5, the urban context is perceived to be modernised and as such enforced a characteristic image that was in contradistinction to *ngoanana oa Mosotho* borne by the rural context. Thus, within the urban spaces – as reflected by M'e Mpale “*here in town nobody asks, 'when are you getting married?'*” Noteworthy however, is that in spite of these spatial diversities the *Methepa*'s experiences are shaped by intersecting forces such as geo-locality, class, religion, culture and personal intricacies related to their desires for marriage. In response to the question; what is the significance of marriage? while some of the *Methepa* reflected on the religious socio-cultural necessity of marriage, others constructed meanings that were tied to their personal circumstances. As reflected in Chapter 5, M'e Keneuoe grew up in a context characterised by deeply rooted traditional norms that undergird the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. She draws on cultural and religious teachings as she emphasised the necessity of marriage for the girl-child;

*Marriage...you have to get married ...if things went according to plan, mosali has to get married ...a girl should get married! ...coz it is wrong when one does not get married ...you will find that sometimes you just grab people...and sometimes many issues of bad behaviour creep in... You know what...culture runs concurrently with the bible...that is why you will find that people forced the girl-child to get married ..even a young child to*

*get married... there should not be a girl-child who is not married ...a boy should marry...do you understand? That is related to what our culture prescribes...[joang kapa joang] there is no other way...the women make sure that you get married. M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017)*

M'e Keneuoe's analogy reflects her home context that is characterised by communal efforts to construct a particularistic *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning to *mosali*. Part of this is ensuring that she gets married so that she fulfils the roles for which she was prepared. In these respects, she considers abduction marriage – as a justified means to an expected end – marriage. Thus, M'e Keneuoe's insistence on the necessity of marriage for the girl-child is not surprising. Moreover, this is tied to the hetero-patriarchal norm according to which appropriate female [sexual] conduct is premised within the parameters of marriage. This is reflected in her reference to 'behavioural issues' – implying sexual impropriety - should this aspect take place elsewhere.

Reflecting on her own experiences of being 'unmarried' and thus being stigmatised within her family and community resonates with these strong pro-marital convictions. M'e Keneuoe narrated how, in various ways, she experiences pressure either through explicit comments that reinforce marriage or implicitly where she picks up the nuances in peoples' comments. Her father consistently enquires about her plans for marriage in a more direct way:

*In the house...even in your own home you find that even your parents it's like...you have a problem...(laughing)...you find that they will interrogate you...! that will you ever get married ever?...my father...my father wants people who get married...(laughing)...he will ask..."you are not getting married, you are not having children...you are just a person" ...you are a burden...their burden. I don't often go home...I don't stay there...so that is my issue that I don't stay there at all! Most of the time I stay here... because at home I don't even have the urge to go since there are no longer any girls that I can go around with and have fun. Because when you get to town you find that ...hey...life is normal...there is plenty of us even those older than I am!... M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017).*

M'e Keneuoe constructed her home village and her family home as spaces that evoked great distress ('there'), whereas the urban context of Maseru where she is currently employed as a domestic worker is considered a place of safety ('here'). Moreover, she links 'normalcy' not only to the extent of 'unmarriedness' in urban contexts, but also to the 'elderliness' of those 'unmarried'

women against whom she compares herself. The fact that M'e Keneuoe perceives herself as 'better off' for being unmarried, but younger *at least*, also informs her assertion, "*so you find that the challenges are much better when you compare town and home (hae)....*" Therefore, since her home has become a space of vulnerability, she devised means to strategically avoid it to evade objectification and marginalisation.

By the same token, the rural and urban diversities were reflected upon by some *Methepa* for whom the notion of 'achievement' was a contested matter against which they grappled within their families. For instance, M'e Mamo illustrated how the socio-cultural understanding of 'achievement' that is linked to marriage, instead, contradicted her own educational attainment:

*There is still that belief that somehow you have to graduate from being a girl to a woman...[chuckling]...I think it's nonsense...[chuckling]...because I personally, honestly do not understand how a person who is married [but] does not have a qualification... how they be more of a woman than me.. ...yes...especially when I go to my place of origin [haeso]...you will find that the question is ...oh...you graduated...so marriage?... you know... and coming from a big family...some of my cousins that are not even qualified are considered more successful than I am... because they are married.... I feel that marriage should not be a requirement... But I feel like marriage is established by God...And not everyone will be married... and it should be inspired by love and nothing else... Not society pressuring you to do it... not as a measure of success like I said ...yes... if you find the person that you feel like you can spend the rest of your life with ... then by all means ...get married...If not ... there is nothing wrong with not getting married... M'e Mamo (Maseru, 06 Sept 2017).*

M'e Mamo expressed annoyance for being regarded as a non-achiever in comparison to her illiterate cousins who are considered as 'achievers' and thus, bestowed with cultural reverence for being married. Her reference to "*especially when I go to my place of origin [haeso]*" implies a shift not only in physical space - urban to rural home place - but also their inherent cultural ideological implications. In comparing the two contexts, she related how the only time her mother had ever mentioned marriage was when in reassurance she stated that;

*My mother said...that you don't have to do anything! Yes... like I shouldn't be pressured to get married or have children or whatever...yah...as mature as I am ...but also at a younger age, I don't remember us ever discussing marriage...nor did she ever make comments that are marriage-related... M'e Mamo (Maseru, 06 Sept 2017).*

That her mother holds a contradictory view against cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood resonates with Adichie's (2017) suggestion that daughters should be taught to aspire in themselves rather than to marriage. Notably, M'e Mamo's mother's embodies middle-class identity and urban location which may inform her contradictory views towards the cultural norm of marriage as mandatory. However, her mother's views cannot be viewed in isolation from other intersecting factors – such as the cultural context, that governs constructions of womanhood. The significance of these norms is reflected in how the *Methepa* respond to marginalisation levelled by extended family.

M'e Lebo who also enjoys middle-class status elaborated on her experiences of being marginalised by extended family.

*They don't make you feel it much, but you will hear when they talk...they say, when are you getting married? We want cows now...Yah...sometimes it really sinks in ...even when you have told yourself that you will not think about it too much... they evoke it. Because the minute I am gone from them... I am back to normal again. I don't think about it ...I don't worry about it...um if it comes it will come M'e Lebo (Maseru, 03 June 2017).*

For M'e Lebo, an extended family member made a statement that was clearly riddled with stigmatising nuances - “*We want cattle now*” (*bohali* in the form of cattle) - instead of directly questioning her marital state. This statement foregrounds the socio-cultural significance attached to *bohali* which, to many families, signifies a sense of pride that a daughter has achieved a long-awaited destiny – marriage (Adichie, 2017; Nyanungo, 2013). However, M'e Lebo expressed annoyance for being located within this stigmatising familial space as she continues to be reminded of her inadequacy. Moreover, reflected in M'e Lebo's account like M'e Mamo is that while the extended family played a major role in reinforcing marital pressure, biological parents were increasingly more accommodating of their 'unmarried' state.

Evidently, while for M'e Lebo, to use Byrne's words, "these reminders are painful" (2000, p. 18), she manages to 'escape' the distress by shifting from a space of vulnerability - 'there' to 'here', urban home that enables her to function in a state of "normalcy" in which she is able to rationalise and strategise. Central to these experiences are palpable differences between the rural and urban context not only in how they are received in both contexts but in how the *Methepa* respond to stigma. Noteworthy is that the meanings that the *Methepa* construct differently for rural and urban areas are based on experiences and emotions evoked in these spaces.

M'e Keneuoe, M'e Lebo and M'e Mamo, reveal interrelation and continuity in how the time-space complex informs not only their experiences but how they construct meanings for their identities within these rural and urban spaces. In other words, the sense of 'normalcy' enabled within the 'here' 'now' (urban space) is derived from the lived experiences of having been 'there' 'then' (rural space) - where being 'unmarried' is problematised and 'othered'. Therefore, because the two are always interdependent and synchronous, the meanings, identities, and agencies that the *Methepa* construct for each 'space' are always linked to the other. This contradicts assumptions that "the physical movement of bodies through space" from rural to urban areas, and the resultant ideological shifts, are fixed and discontinuous – as is implied by Giddins and Harvorka (2010, p. 214). Instead, this finding contributes a reflection of how there is always interconnection within and between time, space and agency in spite of physical movement through space from rural to urban spaces. Moreover, the dynamism of space as an inhibitor and facilitator for women's resistance to marginalisation has been acknowledged by feminists (Boyce-Davies, 1994; Collins, 2000). However, how this shapes responses to marginalisation and constructions of identity as interrelated spatial-temporal points is an interesting phenomenon emerging in this study.

Notably, these subtle, non-vocal survival strategies reflect the ways in which cultural prescriptions remain deeply embedded, and thus inform the *Methepa*'s responses to marginalisation. In other words, while M'e Mamo and M'e Lebo enjoy class privilege, their subtle responses reflect the role of 'weighty' cultural norms that also inform their struggle for belonging to the collective. This finding confirms the view by authors (Abeyasekera, 2017; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Plank, 2018) that the significance of socio-cultural norms upholding marriage as 'real' womanhood often outweighs class privilege in shaping the experiences of single women. Thus, in response to being considered as non-achiever for being unmarried, M'e Mamo asserts: "*I normally just keep quiet...*"

This response can be read in various ways; as conformity or resistance. Chisale (2018) suggested that self-silencing is linked to women's conformity to socio-cultural and religious expectations of ideal femininity. However, "[s]ilence is not to be interpreted [simplistically] as submission" (Collins, 2000, p. 98) as suggested in the case of M'e Mamo. Instead, I read her self-silencing as a resistance strategy acknowledged by feminists (Collins 2000; Chisale, 2017). This is corroborated by her assertion that "*I have my own opinions, but I never voice them...I choose to keep quiet.*" In other words, in choosing not to engage, M'e Mamo is also using self-silencing to prevent any further engagement on the matter, and in the process, silence the 'marginaliser' (Fivush, 2010). Therefore, her response is beyond mere conformity to the principles of seniority and respect. Instead, 'self-silencing to silence' one's marginaliser is an expression of agency enacted by M'e Mamo. This new phenomenon, emerging from this study, is not addressed in Black feminist agency theory.

In spite of the religio-cultural significance afforded to the marital norm, some *Methepa* disrupted commonly held assumptions of rurality by how they navigate these rural spaces. While M'e Lifutso acknowledges marriage as a God defined destiny, she however disputes assumptions of it being a measure of 'completeness' for her. She stated; "*yes ...marriage... because I believe in God... it is God's gift ....were I to meet someone that I love... yes I would agree [to marry] Father...but it is not something that makes me feel that not being part of it... means that my life is incomplete...no! [chuckling] ...*" Although she is not opposed to marriage, she however does not regard it to be her destiny despite being surrounded by pro-marital discourses that prevail in her rural community in Leribe. Notably, amongst the multiple intersecting forces that shape the *Methepa*'s convictions around marriage and womanhood are their childhood experiences within familial, community and schooling spaces. Thus, a reflection of her questioning of gender roles at a young age as well as her parents' counsels that prioritised education as a means of independence and self-sufficiency over marriage, partly explain her attitude towards marriage as well as her response to marginalising discourses.

Expectedly, M'e Lifutso emphatically opposed 'othering' through self-assertion and claiming her space within a marginalising context. She elaborated on how, within her rural context, her being 'unmarried' was problematic particularly amongst elderly women. Accordingly, these elderly women regarded M'e Lifutso's property ownership with suspicion since it contradicted the religio-



cultural ideal ‘dependent wife to provider husband’ narrative. Heteronormativity prescribes that it is only acceptable and ‘normal’ that household ownership and headship are male prerogatives; thus, M’e Lifutso transgresses this script, not only by owning a house, but also *not* being married to a man. In dealing with these negative perceptions levelled against her for being unmarried, and the pressures to conform to gendered norms, M’e Lifutso emphatically states;

*So, if you consider labels such as lefetoa...you end up having self-doubts and everything that comes your way... even if it is a [useless] person who promises to take you... you will go. Just because you do not want to be labelled as lefetoa...because we need to look at what it is that we need first of all... and know what you need!... A person who does not know what they need is the one who will grab whatever comes their way...M’e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).*

M’e Lifutso adopted a resistant attitude whereby she also set boundaries in which she enforced her own personal goals that clearly challenged social norms. In this powerful declaration, she positions herself at the centre as an individual within the collective. As an individual with personal goals and who is unwilling to jeopardise her personal goals for marriage yet who does not oppose marriage *per se*. As such, M’e Lifutso finds inspiration in personal development rather than marriage as Adichie (2017) suggested. Although M’e Lifutso does not reject marriage *per se*, instead, she questions the oppressive structures that stigmatise and render a certain group of women as the ‘unmarried’ ‘Other’. Moreover, I read her as advocating, instead, that women challenge marital pressures that force them to jeopardise their personal goals for fear of being stigmatised. While she does not repudiate women striving for ‘belonging’ to the collective, she criticised the stigmatisation that forces ‘unmarried’ women like herself to abandon personal growth.

Contrary to dominant hetero-patriarchal norms that mark marriage as an expectation which women are obliged to unquestioningly endorse, emerging from the women’s narrated stories is the discourse of personal gratification and sense of belonging tied to their constructions of marriage. For example, M’e Lisebo, in trying to make sense of her experiences, rearticulated the dominant narrative that necessitates marriage for ideal womanhood and concomitantly expressed a personal desire to ‘belong’. For M’e Lisebo, marriage meant that:

*I am a woman! Am a wife! I belong somewhere... I belong to this family... I belong to this person!. Because honestly marriage is something that I love ... I love marriage ... I love family ... I always have that desire to... I love having that responsibility linked to motherhood...!” “I have that courage to be a mother... to be mosali...to have a home ...my own children ...I wish!...I desire that!...I think that is why I have the belief that ... I am left alone... M’e Lisebo (Leribe, 15 June 2017)*

While it may seem that she emphasises the need to conform to cultural practices in pursuit of her identity as *Mosali oa Mosotho*, instead she also constructs it as an aspect for personal gratification that is beyond social prescriptions. She also idealises a nuclear family setting based on heteronormative values, in which her roles of wifehood and motherhood are tied to the ideal of womanhood. Of interest, is how she emphasises love, belonging and personal gratification rather than conformity to cultural norms and it is this unfulfilled desire upon which she bases the feeling of being “*left alone*”. Given that women are expected to get married at a particular age, bear children and establish socially acceptable families, being unmarried constitutes inadequacy and lack for many women – as was reflected in these narratives. This finding resonates with literature that reports single women’s expressions of ‘feeling alone’ (Ibrahim, 2016; Lahad & Hazan, 2014; Simpson, 2016).

Noteworthy is that for many of the women, remaining unmarried was not a personal choice. Instead, commonly cited reasons included: loss of a fiancé, rejection by partner following unplanned teenage pregnancy, and ‘unexplainable’ fate. Ironically, this includes those women that had received anti-marriage counsels during childhood and as such I consider this to be reflective of the significance of marriage amongst this group of *Methepa*. Thus, the extent to which they desired marriage and the lack thereof, determined how they constructed meanings for their identities as well as how they dealt with the marginalisation levelled against them. However, it is also interesting to note that apart for M’e Lisebo, none of the women cited a desire for marriage in affirmation of womanhood – the socio-cultural hetero-patriarchally defined canon. Instead, the *Methepa* devised multiple creative survival strategies including their infusion of new meanings into cultural marital norms.

Like M’e Lisebo, M’e Libu redefines the meanings of marriage:

*I think the most important thing is for a person to change their surname... to be referred to as 'm'a mang mang'<sup>76</sup> [mother of so and so] ... Experience married life or just to experience to be part of a different family ... I need to transform my life. I believe that marriage is just about exploring life M'e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

Like M'e Lisebo's insistence on personal desires, M'e Libu also expresses the need for self-transformation through marriage rather than fulfilling cultural expectations – as reflected by M'e Keneuoe above. Notably, in a context where marriage is normalised their expressions of desire – tied to marriage and the sense of 'belonging' that comes with it – may also be reflective of the ubiquity of the norm. M'e Mamo captured it simply by stating “*I also realised that the things we think we want are determined by society and the lines are very blurry between what you really want and what society expects of you..*” In this she expresses the difficulties faced not only by herself but many young girls for whom a trajectory towards marriage has been predefined. Feminist scholars have been highly critical of this aspect (see Adichie, 2017; de Beauvoir, 2009; Friedan, 1963; Pateman, 1988). In particular, they challenge the normalisation of attributes such as marriage not only for their prescriptive tendencies over women's choices but as the very basis of women's oppression. On the other hand, I also read the *Methepa's* articulations of marriage tied to personal interests rather than as affirmation of womanhood, as a powerful deconstructive lens through which concepts such as marriage and 'unmarriedness' can be understood from the world-senses of the *Methepa*. Moreover, for a thesis that decentralises fixed hetero-patriarchal thinking, and centres these world-senses, expressions of personal desires tied to the marital norm raises critical questions for feminist theorisations outside the binarized patriarchal canon. I consider this to be an area of research that is yet to be explored by feminisms.

Research on single identities in the African context (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Plank, 2018; Van der Watt, 2015) has focused on a singular class of urban located women and often discussed women's experiences without reference to their survival strategies let alone their agency as they navigate hetero-patriarchal contexts. Thus, these findings contribute insight on how 'unmarried women' embodying diverse identities – located in rural areas – navigate marginalising hetero-patriarchal contexts of Lesotho. Not only do these findings disrupt metanarratives that confine

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<sup>76</sup> According to Sesotho, following marriage a woman is given a name beginning with the prefix M'a – mother of. For example, M'aThabo. This is in anticipation that the first-born child will be given the name Thabo

‘unmarriedness’ to a perpetual state of victimhood within hetero-patriarchal premises. Instead, these rural located accounts also reflect counter-narratives around marriage, unmarriedness and agency that tremendously disrupt gendered hierarchised binaries. Thus, in many ways these constructions that are borne out of the world-senses of the *Methepa* debase universalist knowledges around unmarriedness within hetero-patriarchal contexts.

The reflections upon the *Methepa*’s construction of marriage, experiences of being unmarried and their ‘othering’ and responses thereof, prepare the ground for the upcoming analyses of their re-constructions of *basali*. I reflect on how they draw on their past experiences of childhood as anchors upon which they base their self-definitions as *basali*.

### **6.3. *Ke Mosali!*<sup>77</sup> subjective meanings of *Mosali***

In this analysis, I focus on the ways in which the *Methepa* make sense of and articulate the notion of *mosali* based on their own personal discernments. However, noteworthy is the extent to which they also endorsed the socio-cultural understanding of *mosali oa Mosotho* constructed in marital terms with some typically citing “*mosali ke mosali ka monna*” [a woman is defined in relation to a man]. Typically, in response to a question ‘what is your understanding of a [*Mosotho*] woman?’<sup>78</sup> *Methepa* endorsed the ‘normative’ ideology that defined ‘woman’ in relation to a ‘man’. This is expected given the socio-cultural context that is characterised by heteronormative pro-marital discourses as I discussed earlier. This cultural prescription of heterosexual marriage remained significant in their articulation of *mosali oa Mosotho*. For instance, M’e Kotseng defined *mosali oa Mosotho* according to dominant norms that associate it with wifehood;

*...who has a husband...mosali is a person who has a husband...if you don’t have [a husband] you are not mosali...yes according to Sesotho [culture] M’e Kotseng (TY, 19 June 2017).*

While this statement emphasises *mosali oa Mosotho* in socio-cultural terms, read ‘against the grain’, it harbours some sense of resistance to the ideology that ties *mosali* to a ‘husband’. Her

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<sup>77</sup> *Mosali* translated in simple terms is woman, *basali* is the plural of *mosali*, *bosali* is womanhood. However as mentioned earlier in the context of these analyses it bears significantly more meaning than the western notion of woman can offer. Therefore, I opt to use *mosali-bosali* throughout to capture its socio-cultural, symbolic and personal significance for Basotho women

<sup>78</sup> The translated question that was posed during the interviews was phrased as “*kutluisiso ea hao ea mosali oa Mosotho ke eng?*”

insistence “*according to Sesotho culture*” [ka Sesotho] holds oppositional connotations which imply that she dissociates from socio-cultural prescriptions that connect *mosali oa Mosotho* with marriage thus, marking her as the ‘other’ for being ‘unmarried’. By the same token, M’e Puseletso, like M’e Kotseng, made remarks that challenged gender norms in subtle ways expressed in: “*yes according to their Sesotho (culture)...but these Sesotho cultural things...Sesotho culture can also be irrational*” M’e Puseletso (Maseru, 02 June 2017).

However, articulations of *mosali* from the vantage point of the *Methepa* reveal that the social is located distinctly from the subjective. Throughout this analysis, I sought to highlight *Methepa*’s constructions and expressions of agency and how they used it to construct and reconstruct the notion of *mosali* through self-definition (Collins, 2000). As the “outsiders looking in” (Byrne, 2008, p. 18), in relation to the married woman, *Methepa* remain conscious of socio-cultural norms that necessitate marriage as affirmation of ‘real’ *bosali*. The following quotation drawn from M’e Pale’s narration illustrates how ‘unmarried’ women exist within two distinct ‘worlds’: “one for them and one for ourselves” as Collins (2000, p. 100) would call it. Although M’e Pale remains aware of the significance of marriage for affirmation of *bosali*, and the cultural reverence it affords the married women compared to the ‘unmarried’ woman, she also articulated a different perspective of self;

*Being unmarried...yes it has!...to me...as a person it has not changed anything but people who are watching me regard me as ...it has changed my sense of womanhood because I am regarded as letekatse in our culture* M’e Pale (Maseru, 10 June 2017).

She separates two distinct positions that relate to her identity as a woman; her self-image and the socio-cultural perception of herself as ‘unmarried’ ‘other’. She deconstructs the identity by de-gendering it in her assertion, “*as a person*”, implying that being ‘unmarried’ has not impacted her ‘personhood’ or selfhood in any way; thus, in that regard, she remains unaffected by socially defined identities. However, M’e Pale acknowledges that according to the socio-cultural lens, there is a stigma associated with her identity; and thus, perceiving herself through that lens she is referred to as *letekatse*, a derogatory label implying one with ‘loose morals’. By remaining aware of the social perceptions held of ‘unmarried’ women, and simultaneously being able to reinterpret and reject these demeaning labels (like M’e Mpuse, M’e Mpuse, M’e Lifutso), M’e Pale displayed an ability to exercise contextually constructed agency. Moreover, M’e Pale’s expression of agency

through self-definition becomes significant as she consciously distinguishes between the two worlds. This expression of agency resonates with situated forms of self-definition acknowledged by Black feminism (Collins, 2000; Wagaman, 2016). Notably, by foregrounding ‘personhood’ in lieu of gendered identity, this finding contributes a reflection on how *Methepa*’s expression of self-definition is tied to the indigenous African world-senses and values. This is a view that I seek to elevate through these narratives – discussed in more detail in section 6.4.

The *Methepa*’s narrated life stories revealed the many ways in which they re-construct *mosali* through self-definition by drawing on a myriad of intersecting aspects which I detail below. This section is divided into four sub-sections –namely: *Bosali ba m’ankhonthe*, *Boithlompho!* Erotic is power, and lastly *Ke nale ngoana!* Mothering experiences – as thematic terrains upon which ‘unmarried’ women construct *mosali*.

### **6.3.1. *Bosali ba m’ankhonthe!* Perseverance and resilience**

Personal attributes (*makhabane*) such as self-determination and perseverance were constructed as definitive of real *bosali*. These are shaped by various life experiences from which the *Methepa* draw to affirm their identities - from their unique “stand-point” (Collins, 2000). For instance, M’e Lisebo draws from her experience of child household-headship following her mother’s death to self-identify as *mosali*. She argues that her ability to overcome hardship is testimony with which she self-affirms as *mosali*:

*Yhoo...I have done it a lot! I am sure that I achieved a lot...you know from 15 years...I was the eldest ...believe me ...I stayed with those children from that time ... but we were to survive... I am very proud! I do not want to be as proud as a peacock ...but I know that God [was with us] when I think of myself...am very strong! I lived with my siblings ..we ate, washed, I bought them Christmas clothing ... they got dressed, went to school...honestly ...I have them [makhabane]...I regard myself as mosali...even because of my age...I am no longer a girl...I am mosali... M’e Lisebo (Leribe, 15 June 2017).*

M’e Lisebo took over motherhood, provider, and decision-maker roles, you name it, from a very young age of 15 following her mother’s death. Following from this experience, her self-evaluation posits her as a ‘conqueror’ and thus, worthy of self-identifying as *mosali* regardless of socio-cultural norms. Moreover, she corroborates this assertion by acknowledging her age (31 years) to

self-affirm as *mosali* as opposed to *ngoanana* - ‘unmarried’ girl. According to social norms, she is regarded as *ngoanana*, yet she consciously chooses to reject this identity and instead, opts for a culturally revered *mosali*.

Similarly, M’e Libu draws from her childhood experience of rejection by her biological mother to assert herself as proper *mosali*;

*I left with my grandmother [at a young age] ...I got to know my mother when I was older...I think I was about 17 ... I realised that ..honestly my mother did not like me ... she had some hatred that I did not understand...let me tell you it made me miserable ...I was very miserable...I believe that is what made me a resilient mosali that I am right now...because there is nothing as painful as when a parent neglects you...M’e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

Additionally, the extreme impoverishment which forced her to fulfil a role of provider for the family headed by her ailing *nkhono* in the absence of her mother also contributes to this assertion. For M’e Libu, being a girl-child and assuming an adult, ‘male’ provider role (according to gendered norms anyway), this is a significant event in her life from which she drew inner strength. She constructs herself as resilient, courageous, determined and perseverant during hardship, thereby qualifying as *mosali*. Evidently, the meanings that the *Methepa* construct for their self-definitions as *mosali* are reflective of their lived experiences shaped by the socio-cultural, economic, historical landscape of Lesotho – as alluded to in chapter 5. Moreover, their complex pasts also shape how they construct agency to make sense of their identities and self-define as *mosali*. Thus, this finding echoes Bakare-Yusuf (2003a) who posits lived experiences as the anchor of ‘what it means to be a woman’ within different historical and cultural contexts. Relatedly, drawing on the redefined meanings of these past experiences, the *Methepa* construct positive and empowering subjectivities as *mosali* distinguishable from the marginalising social meanings of *mosali oa Mosotho*. Therefore, the resultant self-empowerment with which the *Methepa* re-interpret not only their marginal state, but also the experiences of childhood, becomes a solid anchor for their agency in adulthood - as acknowledged by Black feminist agency theory (Collins, 2000).

However, a critical analysis of the *Methepa*’s narrations through an indigenous framework of *uMakhulu* (Magoqwana, 2018b) also reveals that resilience, independence, and perseverance are

part of the becoming as *ngoanana oa Mosotho* as was evident in M'e Keneuoe's narration in Chapter 5. Moreover, based on the values of communality, teaching these attributes (*makhabane*) to the young was purposed to infuse functionality and survival skills necessary for their social roles in adulthood – as acknowledged by African feminists (Collins, 2000; Oyěwùní, 1997). Collins substantiates this in her assertion that; “[w]hether by choice or circumstance, African...women have ‘possessed the spirit of independence’”, which I link with our upbringing and becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. For instance, reflecting on her upbringing to which she attributes her strength and resilience, M'e Keneuoe stated that;

*...it was the books, the cows, work in the household, every single thing was your responsibility...on you alone as a person... alone... that is why I say that we older people are resilient, we are strong ...it is because we worked hard....we did not care ... indeed we had to work ... we could not just sit and be resting.* M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017)

She reflects on how they had to multitask as was detailed in Chapter 5. She links these skills and attributes of self-sufficiency and independence to this upbringing and stresses that having to take on responsibility for everything at a young age groomed her to be the strong person that she is today. Therefore, this finding contributes an understanding of how the *Methepa*'s agency is not only linked to past lived experiences – as reflected by Black feminist agency theory, but also to the indigenous features instilled and nurtured in various ways from childhood in preparation for later adult life.

Relatedly for her *bosali* means embodying these attributes. She emphasised that;

*Yes the life that we live now ...these days we should not be oppressed because we have our own opinions... things have changed, they are no longer the same as they were long ago... women should not allow themselves to be oppressed... I disagree...No!...No ...you need to express your views ...someone cannot just jump on you and force you to sleep with them without your permission....[saying] you are my wife!...No! You need to decide if this is what you want or not...even if you are married, if there is something that you don't understand don't be oppressed just because you are a woman! You have your own opinions and should be able to voice them... in fact women should not be oppressed...No! in this era we should no longer be oppressed, as women we should rise up...rise up...I insist honestly, rise...our voices should rise up high... M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017)*



Interestingly, M'e Keneuoe endorses the 'women's rights' discourse that challenges women's subordination, over and above her advocacy for self-reliance and independence related to *bosali*. Her insistence that; "*No!...in this era we should no longer be oppressed...*" reflects on the challenges that women face in hetero-patriarchal contexts in response to which she emphasises the 'women's rights' discourse. Accordingly, she insists that current constructions of *bosali* require an enabling environment in which Basotho women can reach their true potential – to be independent, vocal and functional. Therefore, I read this as advocacy for a re-awakening of *bosali ba mankhothe* for which as young girls, they were prepared as part of their transitioning to *mosali oa Mosotho*. Later she reflected on her own life;

*If I find a husband, everyone has to work on whatever they are working on...if you are stationed there...you should be stationed there...nobody should hamper your actions ...the things that you need to achieve... no one should prevent you from achieving them... I do not want anybody to interfere in my life in that way... I am very far now... in spite of being in this house...sweeping in this house... I am very far ... I am on another higher level... you also need to be smart...long ago it was only the men who were working ...these days women work...yes I control the situation ...aah... aah... I am independent ... I am independent ... I will not change ... I do not want to be controlled ...aah... aah M'e Keneuoe (Maseru, 08 June 2017)*

M'e Keneuoe embodies indigenous attributes (*makhabane*) learned as *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, reflected in her insistence that "*I am independent... I am independent*". She also reflects on her job as a domestic worker as if in admission of inadequacy but in spite of that she insists that she is "*on another higher level*" to imply self-reliance, intelligence and capacities to navigate the world as an independent woman. Interestingly, while for her it is of critical essence that a woman marries - she also reflects on the type of marital relationship that she considers to be ideal in which the dependency and passivity norm – central to western derived constructions of womanhood – are repudiated. In this, she advocates a reconfigured notion of *bosali* according to which she is well suited because as she stated: "*I can handle everything... each and everything... good or bad... I definitely can ...I am a resilient person ... I can persevere inspite of hardships*"

Undoubtedly, as I reflected earlier, the urban context is an enabling space in which she enacts liberatory yet culturally informed agency. In other words, while this is reflective of being

“personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act...” (Collins, 2000, p. 118), her self-definition as *mosali* should be viewed as shaped by a myriad of intersecting factors including her upbringing that is tied to the indigenous world-sense. Black feminism acknowledges past lived experiences as a basis for Black women’s construction of agency that is shaped by various intersecting forces. However, by elevating the indigenous Sesotho world-senses, these findings contribute another dimension through which the *Methepa*’s self-definition as *mosali* with all its nuanced intricacies and complexities can be understood. This finding, therefore, is also a contradiction to the assumptions that independent forms of femininity are simplistically a result of ‘modernity’ and ‘urbanity’ upon which ‘new’ meanings of Black womanhood are based – as suggested by Gqola (2016). Thus, the revelation of multiplicities inherent to this indigenous world bears out analyses that ‘reject binary thinking’ (Collins, 2000) and disrupt universalist constructions of womanhood and agency fixed to particular attributes – as is intended by this thesis. This goes as far as the *Methepa* drawing from norms such as *boithlompho* – also inscribed through their process of ‘becoming’ *ngoanana oa Mosotho* – to construct agency with which to navigate a prescriptive, marginalising context.

### **6.3.2. *Boithlompho!* The narrative of self-respect**

Emphasis on self-respect - *boithlompho* - is another way through which the *Methepa* not only negotiated space and eluded the stigma associated with ‘unmarriedness’ within a marginalising context, but also anchored their self-evaluations as *mosali*. As a key characteristic of ‘true’ femininity (Hungwe, 2006; Jaji, 2015), respectability is embodied and expressed by the *Methepa* as an effective negotiating token. To recall, this was instilled as part of the ‘becoming’ of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and required concerted effort by kin and community networks that ensured *hlonepha* (respect for elders) and *boithlompho* (self-respect). However, in adulthood, being ‘unmarried’ – having no husband – in a context that necessitates marriage for ‘respectable’ womanhood earned them “a prostitute tag” (Batisai, 2013, p. 35). Not only are they considered to be free agents whose sexuality is not controlled but they are also considered to be less dignified, ‘unrespectable’ both sexually and socially. Undeniably, many insist that in order to elude name calling, *boithlompho* is key. M’e Libu confirms that sexual misconduct subjects one to name calling;

*... because some people often ask someone ...why do you befriend some who is not married? ...that woman keeps on changing men...we are given bad names...if it's not this one...and this one...in fact, that is what will give you a label ...you will be labelled...oh that letekatse! So, I don't want those types of labels ...M'e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

Accordingly, these labels can be avoided through embodiment of socially appropriate feminine conduct. *Boithlompho* - characterised by constant self-surveillance<sup>79</sup> - was a predominant feature in the *Methepa*'s constructions of *mosali*. Nevertheless, by making concerted effort to embody the religio-socio-cultural norm of *boithlompho*, *Methepa* eluded the widely held stereotypes of having 'loose' morals. Moreover, they used it strategically to negotiate space, respect and acceptance in a context where they were 'othered'. For *Methepa*, *boithlompho* was also linked to their self-affirmation as *mosali*.

Accordingly, M'e Mphoza undertakes constant self-surveillance which also serves as a way in which she negotiates space within a context that continuously marginalises her;

*I do not consider myself to be separate from others...I consider myself to be the same as them because...I always tell them that ...I... amidst all people considered to be promiscuous they will never find me...despite being unmarried...you will always find a woman tucked away securely in her home... I also tell them that I am mosali oa Mosotho ...I tell them that I am m'e oa Mosotho...Yes...I am m'e!... I consider myself to be...I don't know how others perceive me. Because they never say anything based on the ways in which I respect myself...it is not easy for someone to say such things to me. M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).*

M'e Mphoza extends *boithlompho* beyond mere conformity to socio-religiously prescribed feminine conduct to elude stigma and name calling. Instead, affirming *boithlompho* bears implications for her self-identity as *m'e*. While for M'e Mphoza, *boithlompho* is exemplified through stringent self-surveillance, although unacknowledged in her account, I also read the element of age into her insistence on self-identifying as *m'e oa Mosotho*. Thus, the aspect of

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<sup>79</sup> Post-structuralist Michel Foucault conceptualised the notion of 'self-surveillance' as part of his theory of power. For Foucault, the notion of power as discipline centres on modern institutions like the army, hospital, and prison where power manifests and uses different techniques in its operations. The Panopticon is an example of such a technique that enforces surveillance within the prison setting. It is an architectural structure designed to improve the efficacy of dealing with prison inmates that creates permanent visibility so assuring that inmates ultimately discipline themselves. Behaviour is therefore changed by surveillance that becomes self-surveillance thus creating docile bodies (McHoul & Grace, 1993).

seniority also affords her some power and reverence with which to negotiate space within a hierarchised categorical structure from which she is debarred for being unmarried. This resonates with Collins (2000) matrix of domination wherein the enmeshment of multiple factors affords M'e Mphoza the privilege to self-define as *m'e oa Mosotho* within a context that marginalises her for being unmarried.

Accordingly, as an 'unmarried' woman, she is disqualified from identifying as *mosali*, and to a greater degree, '*m'e*' – which is used to refer to a married mother (in this gendered context). Instead, according to the hierarchy, she remains as *ngoanana* since she failed to transition to *mosali*. Noteworthy is her rejection of *mosali*, which M'e Mphoza pointed out is used colloquially to refer to women considered to have loose morals; "*mosali...refers to 'uncontrollable' women*" and thus considered to be 'unrespectable'. This explains her dissociation from *mosali* and opting, instead, for *m'e*, from both of which she is disqualified, as mentioned. Therefore, while seniority and consciously embodying *boithlompho* are constructed as valuable tokens upon which M'e Mphoza anchors her self-identification as '*m'e*', the complexities embodied by these concepts in local contexts also play a major role. By insisting on self-defining as '*m'e*', M'e Mphoza challenges categorical 'binary thinking' in which the *Methepa* are marginalised for not befitting patriarchal prescriptions. While the *Methepa*'s agency is tied to a myriad of intersecting forces, it also informs the 'free' choice that is reflective in their self-identifications – I expand on this discussion in subsection 6.3.4.1 below.

The interconnection between age and gender in the women's narrative reflects the salience of seniority within African contexts. Their age shaped not only how they were received in various contexts but also how they made meaning of their experiences and identities. This critical aspect is reflected in the narratives of M'e Mphoza, M'e Tsidio, M'e Pale, M'e Kotseng wherein as the elder women they are afforded respect within their families, communities and church spaces. However, their experiences were not homogenous. For example, while M'e Mphoza is afforded the power to self-affirm as '*m'e*' within her community and place of employment, within her natal family this was not the case. Instead, she narrated how her younger male sibling constantly levelled demeaning remarks concerning her 'unmarried' status and in other instances referring to her as '*ngoanana*' (unmarried girl). By contrast, M'e Tsidio mentioned that being the eldest in the family, she gets the recognition and the respect from her male siblings. She is also a very prominent and

highly respected community member who is often entrusted to hold community meetings. However, she also mentioned isolated instances where being the girl-child, has also been problematic particularly around family rituals.

*Now apart from that... I am a Mosotho who was born a long time ago as you can see. What I know is that men.. I mean my siblings particularly the one after me...is a person who enjoys being recognised... and to be seen that he is relevant. I give them a chance...that I will say my peace... nobody walks all over me...but at the same time I know that I am a girl-child in the family and I will not over step [the boundaries] and interfere in issues that are meant for men... M'e Tsido (Maseru, 06 June 2017)*

In this, she reflects on a context in which leadership and headship are patriarchally defined male prerogatives. Her awareness and respect for tradition allows her to 'step back' for her male sibling to take the leadership role inspite of her elder position. Interestingly, she also has boundaries around 'her peace' that she safeguards against gendered hierarchies and limitations informed by gendered norms. Further, inspite of this, she adds that "*we don't have the same 'financial muscle'*" to point out the fact that her male sibling is forced to 'depend' on her financially regardless of gendered cultural norms that privilege maleness. The significance of and respect attached to seniority in African contexts is central to the work of African feminist, Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké (1997, 2002, 2016). The findings confirm that seniority – in terms of chronological age – affords some of the women varying levels of authority and respect within the family and others not. For some, the community recognises them as elders and as the beholders of wisdom and thus affords them the respect (*hlonepho*). However, as acknowledged by Bakare-Yusuf (2003b) seniority need not be viewed in isolation from other social aspects such as gender, class, the cultural climate, and the spatial context which complicate the notion of seniority in how it shapes the experinces of the women. These findings reveal the complexities and nuances of seniority in how it informs the notion of *boithlompho* that is central to the women's constructions of *bosali*.

Noteworthy is how the meaning of *boithlompho* – as reflected in the *Methepa's* accounts is predominantly linked to sexual propriety – definitive of respectable womanhood (Hungwe, 2006, Van der Westhuizen, 2017). By contrast, as mentioned earlier, *boithlompho* was all encompassing for the construction of a socially respectable adult as an aspect of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Therefore, I read this shift in meaning as revelation of the remnants of colonial-mission influences

in Lesotho – reflected upon in Chapter 2. The women’s weariness of being labelled as *letekatse* also reflects this trajectory during which ‘unmarried’ women were considered to be uncontrolled women – ‘prostitutes’ – and thus unrespectable. This confirms Hungwe’s (2006) acknowledgement of colonial-mission influences and the constructions of respectable/unrespectable womanhoods born out of the racialised and gendered restrictions imposed over women’s sexuality. Therefore, considering this history, the *Methepa* – considered to be ‘unrespectable’ – grappled to acquire some sense of ‘respectability’ and worth, by paying strict attention to and conforming to the ‘sexual’ respectability norm.

However, in the *Methepa*’s accounts, *boithlompho* – upon which they pin their self-definition as *mosali* – also bears more complexity and depth. On one hand, their conformity to *boithlompho* was adjoined with the need to gain *hlonepho* (respect). In other words, by embodying *boithlompho*, one gains the necessary self-perceived social respect, and by extension becomes qualified to self-identify as *mosali*. Conceptualised as a redemptive canon, *boithlompho* to some extent resonates with *ordentlikheid* (Van der Westhuizen, 2017). Yet *boithlompho* simultaneously diverges from *ordentlikheid* in that *boithlompho* is also tied to the Basotho indigenous world-senses. According to Sesotho, *makhabane* (attributes) of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* who is transitioning to *mosali oa Mosotho* were all encompassing of *boithlompho*, *hlonepho*, co-existent with being sexual and functional through diligence, and strength – to mention a few. Notably, these latter attributes are contradictory to the notion of ‘respectable’ Victorian womanhood – from which *ordentlikheid* also derives. Thus, women’s self-definition tied to *boithlompho* reveals complexities born out of the Sesotho world-senses which extends beyond the meanings of the “nineteenth century bourgeois European invention” (Van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 33) premised upon racialised and gendered oppositional colonial binaries. Thus, I read the women’s articulation of identity – *mosali* – and agency as pinned upon intersecting, indigenous Sesotho world-senses as well as religio-cultural norms borne out of the Christianisation of Basotho.

However, for women like M’e Lebo complexities ensuing from the notion of ‘respectable’ Christian womanhood were revealed as they toiled to articulate respectable womanhood. M’e Lebo’s account emphasised the convergence of body, mind and soul, as the underpinning of respectable womanhood – exemplified through ‘doing’, ‘feeling’ and ‘being’ a woman. She attests that; “*Because womanhood doesn’t only have to do with what she does but she also has to feel like*

a woman, in order to *act like a woman ...*”. Accordingly, respectable womanhood is not only performative, but embodied, psychical and self-affirming. As such, she states:

*I think the very fact that I respect myself and of course Christianity has helped me... and it defines who I am as a person and not as a woman... as a child of God... because what I don't let is the world outside to define me...I am who God says I am. Yes! So the definition or perception of what other people have of me, plays little in my life...as long as I know ...who I am...I said that I have a challenge about how society works ... and I ...I... accept that am different and I won't try to fit in... Ok...I am confident in what I have become...in who I am as a person, as a woman. I don't feel any less ...um... I don't feel any less of a woman...I feel complete! M'e Lebo (Maseru, 03 June 2017).*

Her possession and embodiment of these attributes leads her to emphasise: *So,...I don't think as a person I have lost my womanhood...* Evidently, her construction of womanhood is informed by intersecting, yet contradicting religious and social forces. Moreover, the distinctive and contradictory binaries - religious/social, personhood/womanhood – that she constructs, cause tensions as she attempts to articulate respectable womanhood. She rejects social definitions and rather, re-constructs her identity in accordance with religious values that foreground ‘child of God’ and ‘personhood’ as opposed to ‘woman’. However, central to her articulation of personhood is her greatest attribute - self-respect - that she draws from to locate herself as ‘woman’. Ironically, her rejection of social norms and her strong upholding and embodiment of religious norms, is interesting in that they are different sides of the same coin.

M'e Lebo's account is also reflective of the complexities of defining respectable womanhood within the premises of stringent religio-cultural norms that necessitate marriage. Acknowledging ensuing contradictions in her assertions, she stated;

*...Yes... but... um... I hope I won't contradict myself... by... ... you can still fulfil ... or ... how can I put it?... you can still be a woman without a man. ...Ee.... you can be complete as a woman without a man.... but I think that women also need to be loved ...to be cared for to know that someone loves you. So, that you do not go out looking for love everywhere...M'e Lebo (Maseru, 03 June 2017).*

M'e Lebo's assertion harbours ambiguity and contradiction; she defines 'woman' outside the marital premises and simultaneously relocates her definition of 'woman' within the marital context given the prescription that sex is legitimised within marriage. While she seeks to accommodate herself in the notion of a 'respectable' woman, she simultaneously contravenes the religious script that necessitates marriage for intimacy. Essentially, for M'e Lebo, respectable 'womanhood' can be embodied and expressed by all women including the unmarried. However, the value of marriage lies in its purpose in ensuring the woman's 'sexual propriety' expressed in "*So that you do not go out looking for love everywhere*". Considering her intense Catholic upbringing within the ideal nuclear middle-class family – as was reflected upon in Chapter 5 – her logic around 'respectable' womanhood is rooted in the 'procreative marital sex' narrative. Expectedly, this also resonates with her endorsement of premarital sex taboo which also informs her unmet need for marriage.

Being judged and marginalised according to these cultural and Christian-informed stringent forces, the *Methepa* are compelled to 'work their way around' these intersecting forces as they construct and reconstruct *bosali*. However, worthy to note is that this process is riddled with tensions and contradictions rather than being simple and linear. M'e Lebo's refutation of the idea that respectable womanhood be defined in relation to a 'man' as she toils to self-define as a 'woman' – is interesting. In these respects, I read self-evaluation as a complete, respectable Christian woman and person pinned upon her enactment of self-respect that is informed by a myriad of factors amongst which is Catholicism. Thus, amid the tensions of articulating respectable womanhood is M'e Lebo's less obvious convoluted and contradicted enactment of agency that is shaped by the broader religio-cultural context, therefore revealing complexities that are not addressed by Black feminist agency theory.

The *Methepa*'s self-definition pinned to indigenous practices – enabling the erotic power – is critical to their re-constructions of *mosali*

### **6.3.3. The Erotic as Power<sup>80</sup> - negotiating space and reconstructing *mosali***

In this analysis, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which the indigenous practice of labial elongation is constructed as a symbolic token that the *Methepa* use to navigate and negotiate

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<sup>80</sup> 'The Erotic as Power' is part of Audre Lorde's commonly cited manuscript titled *The Uses of the Erotic; The Erotic as Power* (1978)



acceptance within exclusive indigenous spaces such as *pitiki*<sup>81</sup>. *Pitiki* is an exclusive ritual in which the birth of a child is celebrated by married mothers in the community. Moreover, within these exclusive spaces where labial elongation is highly valued, ‘unmarried’ women draw meaning and power from having elongated labia. To recall, the indigenous practice of labial elongation – referred to in Chapter 5 – was part of the socialisation process of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*. Thus, in this analysis my intention is to shed light on the ways in which having the required ‘resources’ - elongated labia - enables the *Methepa* to navigate an exclusive terrain that marginalises them. Moreover, I seek to illustrate how they draw from this indigenous practice to construct agency which they, in turn, use to redefine the meanings of exclusive spaces as well to self-define as *mosali*.

Although the space of *pitiki* traditionally admitted only married mothers for the purposes of celebrating a new birth, contemporary forms of the practice have become increasingly flexible. This flexibility was acknowledged by M’e Libu who proudly announced that “*I participate in pitiki*<sup>82</sup>” to declare herself as a legitimate participant within this traditionally exclusive space. However, in hindsight, M’e Libu remains aware that her ‘belonging’ status within *pitiki* is earned. Evidently with pride she asserts:

*That is why initially pitiki was exclusively for married women...even if you had a child you were not permitted entry. Now of late we just attend ...even us who have children but are unmarried...we are taught [erotic] skills on how to ‘keep’ men satisfied* M’e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).

In accord, M’e Lifutso not only attested to the exclusiveness and ‘secrets’ of *pitiki* but she also reflected on the dangers that the ‘unmarried’ woman poses to this space. She stated that:

*Methepa speak about many things in their meetings. We never attend but we always hear about them...everything that happens in those meetings we get to hear about them*

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<sup>81</sup> Translated as ‘feast’ wherein the birth of a child is acknowledged and celebrated by married mothers, particularly those that assisted with the birthing process and post-natal care to see to the recuperation of the new mother. It also marks women’s acknowledgement that mothering is a shared, communal responsibility (Thobea, n.d). This ritual is performed in seclusion and women sing and perform erotic dance (*litobonya*) either naked or with a short fibre skirts to remind the new mother of the erotic movements she is expected to perform when she resumes her wifely role of sexually pleasuring her husband. Within this space women equip each other on matters of sexuality, relationships and indigenous knowledges. In modern day practice *pitiki* is performed with or without a child but information sharing remains central to the practice.

<sup>82</sup> M’e Libu claimed that “...*Ke motho oa pitiki!*...” which spells status as one’s qualified ‘uncontested’ access to the space. This captures the expressiveness and sense of pride that characterised the narrated verbatim.

*including how to handle a man. How to handle him so that he does not desert you easily. It is issues that they discuss when they share advice in their meetings...because most of the time we listen on the radio. But you are allowed to participate in some, most of them they don't allow you... when you don't have a husband, they don't allow you to attend... because they fear that you will hear their secrets and go practice them. Then once you have heard and practiced those secrets, at the end of the day you will take other women's husbands* M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).

Not only are *pitiki* 'secrets' publicised on radio stations, but 'unmarried' women like M'e Libu are permitted entry into some of the spaces. Nonetheless, M'e Lifutso points out the persistent restricted access by its gatekeepers "*for the fear that you ['unmarried' woman] will hear the 'secrets' and go practice them*". The 'unmarried' woman is still considered to be a 'suspicious party' around the married women who are ever engulfed by the fear of risking their marriage to the 'unmarried' 'loose' women should they learn too many 'bedroom secrets'. As an aside, this affirms the heteronormative assumption of marriage as an ideal setting for regulating women's sexuality and thus curbing sexual impropriety – often associated with being unmarried.

These 'secrets' include a traditional erotic dance movement called *litolobonya* performed by naked or half naked women for the purposes of male sexual enticement and pleasure. M'e Lifutso described this special dance in the following words:

*...one of the purposes for litolobonya is to be able to entertain the men because you are able to pinch and stuff...to be flexible in bed...I get tired honestly! But now I know how to do it...When the dress is going like this [waving gestures]* M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).

The significance of this space lies in its purpose for the empowerment of Basotho women on sexual matters including this erotic dance movement. These cultural practices involving women's sexual empowerment have been acknowledged in other parts of the African continent by African feminist authors (Amadiume, 2006; Tamale, 2005; Venganai, 2017). Tamale (2005) detailed the *Ssenga* practice and Venganai (2017) detailed indigenous *koomba* and *chinamwari* practices held premaritally to sexually prepare the maiden for her marital role as was reflected in chapter 3. However, *pitiki* holds different meanings for Basotho women – it affords the married mother space to express sexuality as reflected in the illustration below.

Interestingly, the practice of *pitiki* not only reflects the significance of motherhood in African communities, as reflected upon by African feminist scholars (Akujobi, 2011; Muhonja, 2013; Oyěwùmí, 2016; Pala, 2013). Correspondingly, matters of sexuality are incorporated to re-awaken the sexuality of the new mother after a long pregnancy, birthing process and post-partum period. Perhaps this explains the ‘secrecy’ with which such spaces are regarded and ‘exclusivity’ for the married mother. This speaks to the significance of women’s sexuality amongst the Basotho communities and the concerted effort of ensuring that a woman gets sexually re-energised following childbirth. This contradicts the Mosotho gender scholar, Karabo Mokobocho-Mohlakoana’s (2008, p. 61) “unwritten laws” that govern and posit *Mosotho* motherhood as a non-sexual mother as “sexual intercourse is bad for mother’s milk”. Instead, I read the *pitiki* space as site of sexual empowerment – as reflected in M’e Libu and M’e Lifutso’s account - over and above the mothering role, particularly for Basotho mothers.

This indigenous space also serves as an all-inclusive knowledge hub (Magoqwana, 2018b) for women’s sexual empowerment and reproductive well-being. Thus, like the practice of labial elongation, the *pitiki* is a space within which Basotho women “eat out of one pot” as suggested by Amadiume (2002, p. 43). Within this space, indigenous knowledges and skills are shared amongst women, with the elderly - as the ones with more experience - imparting knowledges to the young women. Although M’e Lifutso had no prior exposure to these spaces, she had inside information and emphatically pointed out that;

*I was taught by an elderly woman that in pitiki, women learn many things from one another...she stated that Basotho have their own science...once you have given birth there is a difference in here [pointing to vagina], it is no longer tightly closed like it was before...so Basotho women are taught to use litaepa<sup>83</sup> ...to retain the heat in here so that when you entertain your man it is still the same as before ... M’e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).*

The importance of this space as an indigenous site for Basotho women’s empowerment through intergenerational and peer mentoring cannot be doubted and as such is reflective of the

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<sup>83</sup> Cotton cloth that is traditionally used during menstruation, but Basotho women use it throughout to retain heat in the vagina following the birthing process. This is commonly believed to aid recovery and reconstruction of the birthing canal to prepare the vagina for its other purposes- sexual intercourse.

“matriarchal umbrella” acknowledged by Amadiume (2002, p. 43). Considering this, the solidarity and collectivity fostered within this space also opens room for women’s self-assertion and self-actualisation. In particular, I read this benefit for the *Methepa* – typically cast to the margins of society. While ‘unmarried’ women continue to be received with suspicion within these spaces, some claim ownership of these exclusive spaces and construct themselves as ‘belonging’ in a context where there are religio-hetero-normatively predefined ways of being *mosali oa Mosotho* - ‘wife’ and ‘mother.’

For instance, in her position as “outsider-within” (Collins, 2000, p. 11), M’e Libu, remains aware of her ‘othered’ status in other social spaces based on being unmarried. However, within this space, she has access to knowledge and skills that were reserved for a selected class - married women. As such, this provides a sense of pride for M’e Libu. Moreover, her possession of the necessary capital for this forum sets her apart from other women - married or not - who do not have elongated labia. This in turn, gives her license to objectify and ‘other’ women without elongated labia;

*...So, you will find that a crazy woman will just appear naked ...and you find that this woman does not the things that you have...she is not like me ...so I ask myself ...a grown-up woman like this honestly does not have this things! And she is from here...it’s not many who have these things... but when we see a woman like that we were just surprised...[and thinking] where did you grow up? What happened? What is going on with you? Things like that... M’e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

She draws from her successful participation in the practice of labial elongation during adolescence which she constructs and embodies as a resource that necessitates and qualifies her full participation in this forum. In addition, by objectifying those women without elongated labia - “and you find that this woman does not the things that you have...who is not like me” - as the ‘other’ and ‘incomplete’ *mosali*, M’e Libu refers to herself as a complete *mosali* within this context. Therefore, by virtue of having elongated labia within this space, M’e Libu includes herself amongst those qualified as *m’e*: “We just become surprised as bo m’e that there is a person of this kind....” She therefore feels entitled to embody and self-define as *m’e* - an identity that is revered and well beyond *mosali* – as alluded earlier. This sheds light on the way she draws from the practice of labial elongation to redefine the socio-cultural notion of *bosali* outside the premises of marriage.

In addition, M'e Libu's participation in *pitiki*, being an exclusive cultural space, enables her to transform the meaning attached to the place through her sexual body. In other words, by virtue of possessing elongated labia as an 'unmarried' woman, within an exclusive space for married women, implies that she transforms the meaning attached to the *pitiki* space. Moreover, having the 'valued possessions' allows M'e Libu to "access" privileges as well as "reposition" (Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 113) herself as a qualifying participant within this space, more so than those for whom it was originally allocated - married mothers. In this sense, she draws from having elongated labia to construct the agency which she in turn uses to transform not only the meaning of the *pitiki* space, but the definitions of *m'e* and *mosali*. Essentially, I argue that elongated labia within a *pitiki* space privileges those that are simultaneously marginalised within other social spaces, thus, affirming the power embedded in the erotic as Audre Lorde suggested. Women like M'e Libu, who realised and appropriated this erotic power, exemplified "erotic subjectivity" that enabled "transgress[sion], transcend[ence] and finally transformat[ion]" of exclusive and hegemonic *mosali* identity as well as *pitiki* space (Gill, 2014, p. 179). I read M'e Libu as expressing embodied, spatially-temporally-culturally driven 'erotic' agency- informed by this indigenous landscape.

Essentially, her elongated labia are a means by which she expresses agency and through which she self-affirms as *m'e*, whilst temporarily 'shelving' her 'unmarried' status which is otherwise considered to be a source of distress in other spaces and instances. To recall, in the preceding subsection, for M'e Libu, consciously embodying *boithlompho* earned her some self-perceived respect. Thus, I also extend this respect to her access to and appropriation of this *pitiki* space as a 'qualifying' participant. This is another way through which she 'earns' self-bestowed respect as *m'e* from which she is barred in other spaces. This therefore, implies that having access to spaces such as *pitiki* and being able to utilise them strategically, like M'e Libu, to some extent reshapes the lived experiences of 'unmarried' women who partake in such spaces, be it in rural or urban contexts. This resonates with African feminists'(Collins, 2000; Tamale, 2005) acknowledgement of the liberatory potential of African customs related to women's sexuality as tools with which to express "*female strategic [erotic] power*" (Bagnol & Mariano, 2008, p. 2, emphasis added). However, this literature is silent on how these customs enable women's redefinition of normative notions of womanhood – as is reflected in these findings. In other words, these findings reveal complexities that are unacknowledged in African feminist scholarship on how indigenous African practices inform African women's re-construction of womanhood. Moreover, the complexities of

women's agency tied to the erotic is revealed. In particular, space, transformed consciousness and sexuality - as interdependent, embodied, psychical aspects that inform the *Methepa*'s erotic agency informed by indigenous norms – are new phenomena emerging from these findings that are not addressed by Black feminist agency theory.

Acceptance of these indigenous practices by the *Methepa* was, nonetheless, not uniform. While M'e Libu expressed pride at having undergone labial elongation, and subsequently used it as a symbol of *bosali*, M'e Keneuoe expressed a contradictory view. In Chapter 5, I detailed her rejection of the practice of labial elongation and later reflected on changes around ideological positionings around indigenous practices amidst Christian morality. With regard to the practice of *pitiki*, M'e Keneuoe, M'e Lifutso, M'e Khanyane and M'e Mpuse expressed reservations at the idea of partaking in such platforms. M'e Lifutso stated:

*I think that I never... I don't usually attend women's group meetings, I think that it is also linked to our different [religious, cultural] convictions... the other women in the community do meet, I always see that there are women who meet... but we get to hear about their 'stuff' M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).*

M'e Lifutso's disinterest in this cultural practice is tied to her religious convictions; being a staunch Catholic, she opted to dissociate from the women's groups in her community. Likewise, reflecting on M'e Keneuoe's insistence: "*but in these current times the girls do not do such things...the children these days are smart...they are really smart.*" Linked to this statement was her assertion that, in comparison to these modern girls, "*we were dumb*<sup>84</sup>..." as I alluded in the previous chapter. Evidently, M'e Keneuoe alluded to these changes expressed in the 'now- then' discourse in reference to the practice of labial elongation. Accordingly, in the 'now', the practice is 'old-fashioned' and thus, not suited for modern times of 'enlightenment'. I read this to be linked to the colonial-mission Christianized influence over indigenous sexual practices as African feminists have acknowledged (Chisale, 2016; Tamale, 2005, 2014; Vanganai, 2017). In particular, the oppositional and hierarchical logic with which indigenous/modern have come to be understood in contemporary postcolonial African contexts has led to the denigration of the former by many Christianized Africans (Vanganai, 2017). Therefore, some *Methepa* like M'e Lifutso who opted

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<sup>84</sup> *rona rene rele tomo...*

out of the *pitiki* practice on the basis of religious convictions confirm Vanganai's (2017) observations. Nonetheless, the revival of these practices, notwithstanding their modernised implementation in modern contexts, reflects their significance – tied to African women's sexuality – to modern African communities.

Thus, in striving to incite and revive the interest of Basotho in the indigenous practices, the publicization of *pitiki* on media speaks to the value attached to sexuality - the 'erotic' - for Basotho women. *Pitiki*, is in contravention of the Christian ideal of 'respectable' womanhood, and 'respectable' womanly sexual conduct. The engagement in erotic movements, sexual self-touching and free sexual talk – illuminates how Sesotho discernibly digresses from Christian morality that many of the *Methepa* were taught to embrace from a young age. However, as reflected in Chapter 5, the upbringing of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* incorporated indigenous aspects that prepared her sexual body for her marital role. Thus, acknowledging *mosali oa Mosotho* as a sexual being in as much as she is procreative, *pitiki* space is essentially continuation of this cultural canon. Therefore, I read the revival of *pitiki* as a means through which the 'sexually empowered' *mosali oa Mosotho* – amongst other attributes – can be re-awakened and re-claimed. This resonates with reports from other African contexts, for instance, Venganai (2017) among Zimbabweans and Tamale (2005) among the Baganda of Uganda who also report on the revival of similar practices in these societies. Therefore, despite a deeply embedded hegemonic Christian gendered modern context in which sexuality, femininity and identity are 'now' shaped by religio-cultural heterosexual norms, communities are by necessity invested in 'reclaiming their own' sexually empowering indigenous practices.

Speaking of sexual empowerment and agency forces me to reflect on how young Basotho girls' participation in the practice of labial elongation also informed their sexual agency as *basali ba Basotho*. For example, M'e Mphoza, like M'e Libu, took part in the process of preparing her sexual body through labial elongation. Contrary to dominant Christian hetero-norms governing women's sexuality, she acknowledged herself as a sexual being. M'e Mphoza mentioned that she recently developed strong sexual desires which she states have recently caused an undying need for marriage:

*Do you know that I recently started feeling like a real person ...I started to experience [sexual] desires...It made me wish I had a [sexual] partner... I was not bothered by it until*

*recently... it all changed recently... and I had a strong desire ...it was a strong heat! I felt it in my heart and my soul... M'e Mphoza (Maseru, 07 June 2017).*

M'e Mphoza's account is amidst those by M'e Lila, M'e Puseletso and M'e Lisebo, that reflect the 'demonized' aspects - sexual desires, sexual pleasure – that thus critically debase normative constructions of women's sexuality and by extension the notions of womanhood. Being an elderly, *Mothepe* who is also rural-based, her expression of sexual desire challenges the notion of sexual naiveté associated with western-centric constructions of womanhood. Thus this finding confirms a view posited by African feminist, Amadiume (2006, p. 8), that “traditional African settings were not that inhibited about sexual enjoyment” contrary to common belief. Instead within African communities, as is reflected in the *Methepe*'s testimonies – women's sexuality and in particular pleasurable sex seem to be permissible.

M'e Mphoza's free expression of sexual desire, and M'e Lila revelation of sexual pleasure tied to labial elongation, are powerful and intriguing revelations that speak loudly of *mosali oa Mosotho* in contradistinction from eurocentric constructions of womanhood against which the *Methepe* are posited as 'non-woman'. Therefore, this resonates with Amadiume's (2006, p. 9) reference to indigenous African practices such as labial elongation as “subversive alternative” with which to challenge the status quo pertaining to women's sexuality – as is revealed by these findings. Fundamentally, juxtaposed against Mokobocho-Mohlakoana's (2008) description of a sexually repressed Christian *Mosotho* woman – that I cited in chapter 2 – what is reflected by these findings drawn from the narratives of the *Methepe* – is contradictory. This confirms Bawa & Adeniyi Ogunyankin's (2018, p. 12) impression that the African world-senses, allow us to re-visualise “the complexities of ...African women's identities and agency as dynamic, evolutionary and complicated” and thus ill fitted for the notion of Christian *Mosotho* woman – that bears western-centric biases. In other words, given these complex, seemingly contradictory details of Basotho women's sexuality, I argue that *mosali oa Mosotho* bears complexities and thus deconstructs normative and fixed notions of womanhood that essentialise marriage. Given this uniqueness that is rooted in the indigenous, I posit that this thesis responds to the call for “building on the indigenous” as well as draws from the indigenous for knowledge production. In so doing, it deconstructs metanarratives and reconfigures knowledges around Basotho women's sexualities, constructions of *bosali*, and constructions of the *Methepe*'s agency as contribution to pluriversal knowledge production.



In the next sub-section, I analyse women's experiences of 'unmarried' mothering and how these inform women's constructions and self-definitions as *mosali*.

#### **6.3.4. *Ke na le ngoana!* 'unmarried' mothering experiences**

The experience of mothering, as narrated by the *Methepa*, can be summed up as an event that was initially bitter, then became sweet. It was bitter in the sense that a pregnancy out of wedlock is an unacceptable source of shame for the girl, her family and the entire community (Mokobocho-Mohlakoana, 2008). These experiences are reflected upon in Chapter 5 but suffice it here to remind the reader that an unplanned pregnancy as a schooling teenager was constructed as a tragic, life-changing event. M'e Kotseng, M'e Limpho, M'e Mphoza, M'e Libu, M'e Lifutso, M'e Rehab, M'e Mpuse, M'e Lila and M'e Khanyane narrated their experiences and the shock of falling pregnant after the very first sexual encounter, and ultimately, the denial of paternity by the boyfriend. These were undoubtedly major turning points in each of their young lives. An unplanned pregnancy is often accompanied by hope that the outcome would be marriage; thus, pregnancy becomes a means to a desired outcome. M'e Lifutso summarises it as follows:

*When you have had a baby in Lesotho you become very desperate...in fact you have that hope that this person will agree so that you will establish a family...we will raise the child [together]... M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017).*

In this quotation, M'e Lifutso reflects on the stringent socio-cultural and religious terrain within which they were groomed to be *ngoanana oa Mosotho*; and within which premarital sex and pregnancy are regarded as shameful. Moreover, the denial of paternity is regrettable for a girl-child in that her prospects of marriage are reduced significantly. However, by contrast, while the other women cited hope to get married following this event, M'e Limpho, who self identifies as a lesbian, had cited disinterest in marriage. She was born and bred in a semi-rural camp town of Teyateyaneng. She is the last-born daughter of four children - two boys and two girls - to a nuclear, male-headed family. For M'e Limpho, in contrast to M'e Lifutso's 'taken-for-granted' heteronormative assertion that all girls remain hopeful for marriage, she instead states that;

*...the issue about marriage was not my interest...I believe from a young age ...I did not want to get married...yes...I did not think that I needed to get married honestly...even now...I do not think that I will manage...I think that it is because of my current lifestyle...I*

*have never wanted to get married ...it was just a mistake that I had a child...yes I prefer to have intimate relations with other girls ...M'e Limpho (TY, 13 June 2017).*

For M'e Limpho, an unplanned 'unmarried' pregnancy was not to be a means to a 'desired end' into marital premises as is traditionally accepted. Although attesting to the mistimed pregnancy like other women, for her, this predicament was tied to having had to negotiate her sexual identity. Identifying as a lesbian – the 'othered' within the 'othered' – exhibiting lack of interest in heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage from a young age disputes the religio-socio-cultural ideal of a girl-child's linear trajectory towards womanhood through heterosexual marriage.

Nonetheless, considering that the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* required a concerted effort by kin and community networks, this 'unmarried' pregnancy reflected negatively on these institutions; hence, some *Methepa* narrated experiences of derogatory name calling - *o senyehile*<sup>85</sup>. This negativity with which 'unmarried' mothers are perceived is linked to the procreative-marital sex narrative that necessitates that "bio-motherhood arrive through wifehood" (Muhonja, 2017, p. xxv); and as such, the *Methepa* suffer the consequences of transgressing this prescription. Nonetheless, important to note from these narrated experiences is the way each protagonist deals with shame and ultimately reconstructs selfhood amid sorrow. I read this as constituting agency that they constructed in their young lives. However, later in life, mothering is constructed as a meaningful and fulfilling experience from which they draw a sense of achievement as well to construct agency. Moreover, this entire experience, shaped by various intertwining forces ('unmarried' pregnancy, socio-cultural and financial struggles of 'unmarried' mothering, to mention a few) enables self-affirmation as *mosali*.

As mentioned earlier, although the *Methepa* do not oppose cultural norms that necessitate marriage as a critical feature of *bosali*, they do however challenge the 'othering' levelled against unmarried women on the basis of not fitting these dominant norms. The *Methepa* insisted on self-identifying as *mosali* based on their experiences of 'unmarried' mothering. M'e Khanyane challenged her exclusion from the normative constructions of *mosali*, linked to the possession of 'husband' and insisted that her childbearing experience marks her as *mosali* regardless of her marital status:

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<sup>85</sup> In chapter 1, I provided a detailed analogy of the concept *ho senyaha*; thus it should suffice here to remind the reader that it implies 'spoilt or rotten' goods. This is linked to the girl-child's engagement in pre-marital sexual intercourse- otherwise prohibited for her until marriage. The implications thereof are tied to the belief that marriage prospects for the girl are reduced following 'unmarried' pregnancy.

*When the people of Lesotho speak of mosali they define mosali in relation to being married and having children...that is why I ask myself if, mosali is defined in terms of being married and having children ...does that mean that I, having children ...am not a woman? M'e Khanyane (Leribe, 09 Sept 2017).*

M'e Khanyane endorses an oppositional stance against dominant and exclusive constructions of *mosali*, and with a sarcastic attitude expressed as “*I have children, but I am not [considered to be] mosali?*” that also seeks to ridicule these dominant constructions. Moreover, she corroborates this with an oppositional statement: “*that is the reason why I said that it's just linked to Basotho expressions ...anyway that is how they are constructed*”. This oppositional view resonates with that expressed by M'e Puseletso and M'e Kotseng cited above, in regard to heteronormative socio-cultural definitions of *mosali* that marginalise ‘unmarried’ women. Notably, in Chapter 5, I reflected upon how within the intimate matrifocal relations as young girls the *Methepa* (M'e Kotseng, M'e Tebello, M'e Khanyane) had received counsels that sought to inscribe a redefined script of *mosali*. I consider M'e Khanyane's contestation against exclusional constructions of *mosali* that necessitate marriage and insistence on self-identifying as *mosali*, to be partly linked these childhood counsels. Having children and being able to provide for them like her mother had done for her and her siblings, was an arrangement that her grandmother had supported and thus for her, matrifocal families were normal contrary to dominant social norms. Thus, instead of endorsing an apologetic stance, M'e Mpuse like M'e Khanyane, instead, insists:

*But how is she different from me when I am a woman who had a child, but passed on, and I was unmarried? We are women! yes...why wouldn't I be included amongst those women? Yes indeed? ... (laughing)... M'e Mpuse (Maseru, 18 June 2017).*

The *Methepa* expressed the centrality of childbearing as the anchor of their self-affirmations as *mosali* regardless of being unmarried. Indeed, if read through a derogatory colloquial lens, once a girl-child shows signs of sexual activity or, even more detrimental, pregnancy as proof of premarital sex, she is derogatorily labelled as ‘*mosali*’ - as M'e Mphoza suggested. However, I read the *Methepa*'s self-definitions of *mosali* as undergirded by other personal circumstances rather than negativity insinuated by socio-cultural norms. Instead, their lived experiences and the personal, positive meanings that they construct for their experiences as ‘unmarried’ mothers shape their self-definitions as *mosali*. This finding undermines the religio-cultural wifemotherhood

dyad purported as the underpin of real African womanhood – acknowledged by feminist authors (Moyo, 2004; Muhonja, 2013, 2017; Munalula, 2009; Pala, 2013). Instead the *Methepa*'s narratives contribute a reflection on how African women negotiate around such ideologies by drawing meaning instead from their experiences and strengths linked to the realm of motherhood – as a base for their agency and self-affirmation as *mosali* – from which they are debarred in the first place. African feminisms are silent on this critical aspect.

The narrated life stories reveal the stringency of a religio-cultural patriarchal context – within which *Methepa* are forced to navigate as they grapple to construct meaning of their identities and realities. Therefore, their insistence that they too are worthy of self-identifying as *mosali* is linked to a myriad of intersecting factors including those lived past personal experiences - as acknowledged by Bakare-Yusuf (2003). Moreover, for M'e Mpuse whose child lived only for 24 hours, pain and sorrow prompt her to fiercely demand acknowledgement of having affirmed motherhood - notwithstanding its shortened duration - and thus being worthy of the identity *mosali*. By drawing meaning from and reinterpreting past lived experiences, these mothers construct a solid base for self-definition as *mosali*. Thus, by insisting on self-identifying as *mosali* despite being unmarried, the mothers disrupt normative religio-cultural constructions that fixate marriage and motherhood to womanhood. However, as they grapple to negotiate 'space' within fixed identity categories their constructions of identity actually reveal the fluidity of these prescriptive gendered categories upon which their marginal state is based.

#### **6.3.4.1 Negotiating location - Ngoanana, Mosali or M'e<sup>86</sup>?**

In spite of the positive subjectivities embodied by the *Methepa* – tied to their mothering experiences, the ever-present significant impact of the prescriptive gendered context is always felt. The *Methepa*'s self-affirmation as *mosali* was often preceded by a reflective exercise of rationalising and gauging oneself against the hierarchised identity categories of *ngoanana*, *mosali* and *m'e*. For instance, M'e Mpuse locates herself as 'neither-nor', thus indicating the tensions and ambiguities that surround fixed identity categories as the *Methepa* negotiate meaning for their identities. She insists;

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<sup>86</sup> Direct translation of *ngoanana* is girl, *mosali* is woman and *m'e* is mother. However, these concepts embody complexities that are revealed through the narrated accounts of unmarried Basotho women.

*Yes I am a bat right now, I don't fall amongst basali I fall amongst the girls...aah but a girl is somebody who doesn't have a child honestly...I don't fall amongst the girls at all...I would be getting it all wrong...in fact I don't fall amongst the girls... M'e Mpuse (Maseru, 18 June 2017).*

M'e Mpuse is conflicted as she attempts to establish the correct 'fit' for her identity. Having given birth and lost a baby at a young age, M'e Mpuse cannot fully claim identity of *mosali* (woman) nor can she fully claim that of *ngoanana*, (maiden) hence, she labels herself as a bat (*mankhane*) to signify her 'neither/nor' identity. This denotes ambiguity and conflict ensuing from two different identities; *mosali* and *ngoanana* – in the same way as a bat that embodies the features of a mouse and a bird. This reflects a bifurcated selfhood as she attempts to negotiate space within gendered, fixed categories whose stringent rules and regulations posit 'unmarried' mothers as the abject 'Others'. Nonetheless, in spite of the stringency of the cultural context that necessitates marriage for legitimate motherhood, M'e Mpuse's self-evaluation re-positions her towards the parity discourse with the married woman, she states “*but I don't feel like there is anything lacking...because anything that a married woman is doing I am also doing...*” through which she self-affirms as *mosali* regardless of her marital status.

Likewise, M'e Libu was conflicted by *m'e* (a revered identity linked to motherhood) versus *mosali*. Reflecting on her life circumstances, she states;

*Mosali and m'e are two different things...I think they are different according to my understanding...m'e is defined on the basis of having a family...she has children...mosali is someone who is mature and has experienced life ... yes when she has a child, she is mosali ... M'e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017).*

This intense and reflective exercise is characteristic of the lived experiences of the *Methepa* as they grapple with the politics of location within a context shaped by gendered and hierarchical categories. Remaining mindful of the socio-cultural and religious norms that associate Woman with marriage forces the *Methepa* to constantly rationalise, reflect, and deliberate as they negotiate around these norms. Following this reflective exercise, M'e Libu declares that “*I am mosali...I have a child. I will not refer to myself as a girl (ngoanana), am mosali even if I am not married...but I am now mosali...*”. In her reflection on *m'e*, M'e Libu associates this revered identity with hetero-familial, woman/wife as mother ideal (Van der Westhuizen, 2017) from which she is debarred for

being unmarried thus, it is for this reason that M'e Libu settles for *mosali*. This echoes the concept of negotiation described by Nnaemeka (2004) in which, as opposed to rejecting the dominant norms that necessitate marriage for childbearing, the *Methepa* grapple to locate themselves within this dominant landscape. African feminists (Adichie, 2017; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Segalo, 2013) have been critical of prescriptive constructions of womanhood according to which women are marginalised should they fail to affirm dominant prescriptions. By contrast, these findings contribute a reflection on how 'unmarried' mothers not befitting these dominant norms negotiate their identities within this context – an aspect on which African feminism is silent. Moreover, the deliberations and self-reflections exhibited by these mothers as they locate themselves around dominant norms are intricacies that are also not reflected in Black feminist agency theory. However, a view 'from the ground up' that privileges the world-senses of the *Methepa* reveals the fragility of identity that in turn disputes assumptions of normalcy undergirding notions of womanhood. Moreover, while this may also be informed by the diverse identities embodied by the women such as age, class, locality – to mention a few - it is also reflective of women's agency that is situated within the dominant norms that essentialise motherhood.

It is interesting to note how the *Methepa* shift between *mosali* and *m'e* at certain times and spaces. For instance, earlier I pointed out how within the *pitiki* space, M'e Libu self-identified as *m'e*, yet when narrating her mothering experiences, she consciously self-defines as *mosali* and foregoes *m'e*. This suggests that although ideologically these hierarchised categories are constructed as fixed and immutable, through self-definition, the *Methepa* claim the 'liberty' to embody and disembody any identity – notwithstanding the intense reflective process. In other words, in spite of remaining weary of the ideologies that necessitate marriage, their articulations reflect the power of self-definition and the resultant empowerment that afford them space to 'choose' which identity to embody at different times and in different spaces. This resonates with Black feminist, bell hooks assertion that; "[a]s subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (2015, p. 42) afforded by self-empowerment and self-definition. This also illustrates the context specificity and versatility of these identities for the *Methepa*. By disrupting fixed hierarchised binaries these findings contribute a reflection on how intersecting; spatial, temporal, personal, cultural, factors differently afford the *Methepa* the latitude to embody and disembody *mosali* or *m'e*, *ausi* and not *mosali*. Therefore, this debases the fixity and normalcy of Woman that is tied to a particular attribute – marriage. This contributes a multiversal

understanding of identity construction tied to the *Methepa*'s experiences of mothering articulated from their world-senses.

In addition, successful mothering – also shaped by various factors – becomes the meaningful and fundamental resource from which the *Methepa* draw to anchor their self-affirmations as *mosali*, or *m'e*.

#### **6.3.4.2 Successful, provider-mothering and *mosali***

Successful mothering tied to the *Methepa*'s fulfilment of their provider-ship roles was constructed as the anchor for self-identifying as *mosali*. M'e Lifutso draws from her experience of mothering and insists on self-identifying as *m'e*:

*I am similar to every other m'e who is raising a child even if I am not married...mothers are people who are entrusted with the role of disciplining [children]... I still manage to achieve that with this one that I am bringing up alone... I alert her to things that may get her into danger...and things that she should avoid despite my being alone...we grew up with the understanding that m'e should rightfully be provided for...so I was forced to assume m'e-ntate [implying both mothering-provider roles] who is able to do everything herself...mmh...[being an 'unmarried' mother] forced me to work hard M'e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017)*

M'e Lifutso like M'e Kotseng, M'e Khanyane, M'e Mphoza and M'e Libu endorsed the parity discourse that juxtaposes her life circumstances against those of the married mother. Notably, the women's emphases that they are raising their children 'alone' seeks to showcase their successes in spite of being 'unmarried'. Moreover, positing parity with the married 'ideal' also seeks to falsify the normalcy with which the 'civilised' ideal husband provider-headed family is considered. Ultimately, these testimonies deconstruct normative constructions of dependent-type womanhood – mythically defined as 'ideal' in hetero-patriarchal terms. In M'e Lifutso's account like M'e Keneuoe, I read strong emphasis on the *Methepa*'s capacities and thus their advocacy for *bosali* that endorses self-assertion and independence against all odds. Thus, exemplifying the power of self-definition, M'e Lifutso endorsed a non-apologetic attitude with which she adamantly rejected exclusive socio-cultural categories that disqualify her from identifying as *mosali*. Instead, she insisted that: "*I feel that I am mosali...regardless of how other people define me...yes...I feel that I*

*am a complete mosali...regardless of how Basotho define mosali...I consider myself to be important ...” M’e Lifutso (Leribe, 12 June 2017)*

It could be argued that M’e Lifutso’s ‘middle’ class identity allows her to endorse a ‘carefree’ attitude with which she explicitly opposes socio-cultural norms. However, class identity cannot be viewed in isolation from multiple other intersecting factors including personal and familial circumstances that shape the *Methepa*’s experiences. Rather, their personal testimonies as well the ‘autonomous’<sup>87</sup> and self-affirming responses to a marginalising socio-cultural context are uniquely shaped by the meanings that they construct for their roles as ‘unmarried’ provider-mothers. Therefore, I consider M’e Lifutso’s culturally located agency to be shaped by interlinked events; past experiences of betrayal, her entire journey of self-healing and self-transformation as well as successful ‘provider’ mothering over and above identity markers such as class. This finding resonates with Wagaman (2016, p. 211) assertion that self-definition affords the *Methepa*, “claims of value and existence” as well as self-worth regardless of dominant social perceptions that posit them as ‘Other’ - as reflected in M’e Lifutso’s account.

Successful mothering for the *Methepa* is characterised by their unrelenting capacity to provide better livelihoods for their children. For instance, M’e Libu draws great pride from having put her daughter through university despite hardship. In the following quotation, she re-lives the moments as she reflects on how she was determined to provide a better life for her daughter:

*That was the only thing that was bothering me in my head...I asked God to help me to be able to raise this child...I have really consoled myself it does not matter if I am not married ... Even if I do not have my own home, it does not matter...God will give my own home but as long as my child has completed her education. She is the only child and I do not think that I will have another one... that will be to dispute God’s will...considering the type of life that I lived with this one child... I was a single parent, I was the breadwinner in the house ...had we remain in our rural homestead [hae]my child would have been pregnant*

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<sup>87</sup> I use ‘autonomous’ cautiously, heeding that the women’s enactments and articulations are always located within the premises of cultural norms. Therefore, while in some instances their responses may seem resistive, oppositional and liberal, elsewhere in their narrations they show accommodation for the same cultural norms that mark them as marginal. For example the women are aware that ‘unmarried’ motherhood is considered as a transgression of religio-cultural norms and at times endorse the same view for their circumstances - hence some self-referenced as ‘*ke senyehile*’ (spoilt goods) and ‘*ke robeile lengoele*’ (broken knee) and *mankhane* (bat) all of which are derogatorily used to refer to unwed childbearing.



[*senyehile*]...Yet indeed she has given me life...she completed her [university] education...really. Let me tell you...It is a blessing to me! M'e Libu (Maseru, 10 June 2017)

Noteworthy is the spiritual aspect upon which she based this massive mothering task at the young age and having succeeded is indeed a source of pride. Mothering linked to provider-ship role is constructed as a positive experience that enables *Methepa* like M'e Libu to set aside – temporarily – all other negative experiences linked to the socio-cultural terrain within which she is stigmatised for being 'unmarried'. Reflecting on their own lived experiences of 'unmarried' pregnancy at a young age, informs how the *Methepa* construct their mothering experiences in which they toil to provide 'different' trajectories for their daughters. For example, this is reflected in M'e Lifutso's reference to 'danger' that she warns her daughter against as well as M'e Libu's retrospection that her daughter would have fallen pregnant [*a senyehile*] had they remained in the rural areas [*hae*]. Thus, successful provider-mothering – upon which the *Methepa* anchor their self-definitions as *mosali* – also entails enabling their daughters to acquire better futures through education as well as cautionary counsels – all of which are meant to inscribe independent and self-sufficient type womanhoods - as alluded by African feminists (Adichie, 2017; Chaney, 2011).

Therefore, the *Methepa*'s contestations against the exclusory socio-cultural constructions of *mosali* were stirred by their subjective perceptions that uphold successful provider-mothering with all its self-sacrifices as the core features of their self-definitions as *basali*. These findings confirm African feminist acknowledgement of motherhood as inherently linked to women's roles as providers for their offspring (Collins, 2005; Oyěwùmí, 2016). Evidently, the 'unmarried' Basotho mothers illustrate “emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival [as attributes] interwoven as interdependent, complementary dimensions of motherhood” (Collins, 2005, p. 287). Thus, within a marginalising context, the *Methepa*'s embodiment of provider and mothering roles is a resource through which they construct feelings of self-respect and personal worth as well as means through which they self-affirm as *mosali*.

Likewise, M'e Limpho's self-definition as *mosali* foregrounds successful mothering and akin to this is her provider role. She mentioned that:

*I consider myself as mosali...according to Sesotho [culture] mosali grabs the knife's sharp end<sup>88</sup>...meaning that she is responsible... brings up her children...cook for them...wash for them...care for ntate (husband)...and many others...umm...I care for my child...I cook for her...I wash for her...when I am employed I provide for her... M'e Limpho (TY, 13 June 2017).*

Her recital of 'woman as wife/mother' discourse is not surprising given that the *Methepa's* constructions of identity are heavily influenced by the heteronormative climate within which their childhood, girlhood and adulthood experiences are housed. However, M'e Limpho – as an 'unmarried' mother identifying as lesbian – rather than perceiving herself as a 'lack' in comparison to the heterosexual married ideal, her lived experience of successful mothering meaningfully anchors her self-definition as *mosali*. Noteworthy is that the idiom - *Mosali o ts'oara thipa ka bohaleng* cited by M'e Limpho holds deeper meanings than what is reflected in her quotation. These idioms are rooted in how women define themselves and understand the notion of womanhood in general. The idiom is often associated with a type of womanhood characterised by strength, resilience and endurance. On one hand, Sesotho idioms are said to be patriarchal and reinforcing of essentialist attributes of womanhood (Mothoagae, 2015). Paradoxically, such idioms like the 'strong Black woman' stereotype – debunked by Black feminists (Collins, 2000) create illusions of a black woman who is ever strong, resilient and perseverant without showing weakness. However, for the marginalised *Methepa*, as successful provider mothers, attributes such as these are constructed as valuable canons from which they draw a sense of self-worth and power to self-define as *mosali*.

Moreover, I read M'e Limpho's self-identification as *mosali* as a challenge against hegemonic ideologies that posit heterosexuality as representative of ideal 'respectable' motherhood and womanhood. This finding confirms Potgieter (2003, p. 144)'s assertion that "[m]otherhood is thus a feature of womanhood whether the woman defines herself as lesbian, [or] heterosexual". Moreover, not only does it dispute Kolawole's (1997, p. 15) sweeping assertion that "lesbianism is ...non-existent" within African communities. Instead, it actually also contributes to African feminism an understanding of how mothering tied to the provider role affords African women identifying as lesbian, space to construct meaningful subjectivities in the face of marginalisation.

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<sup>88</sup> *Mosali o ts'oara thipa ka bohaleng*

Thus, for the *Methepa*, regardless of the multiple identities that they embody, the meanings that they attached to *mosali* are not necessarily tied to heterosexual relations as defined by heteronormativity, but successful ‘provider’ mothering - as has been acknowledged by African and Black feminists.

In this study, amongst the multiple intersecting identities that the *Methepa* embody, two identities stand out that are considered to be incongruent with the hetero-patriarchal climate within which they exist. As ‘unmarried’ women and as ‘unmarried’ mothers – these identities converge (with multiple others) to produce a compounded experience (notable for M’e Limpho, her lesbian identity further complicates these experiences). Thus, as they negotiate space as “‘unmarried’ ‘Other’ in a context that expects them to be heterosexual and married to a man, they foreground those meaningful events related to their experiences of mothering with which they express joy and pride. These were linked to children’s positive schooling journeys, children as pillars of support and companions, children as a mother’s *raison d’être*, and as motivation to soldier on in an unfriendly context. From these lived successes, the *Methepa* construct agency with which they self-affirm as successful mothers and thus as *mosali*. Undoubtedly, while these experiences incite a sense of pride in the lives of many women, they also serve an ‘undeclared’ deeper meaning pertaining to their self-identification as *mosali*. Moreover, these narratives mark mothering as meaningful and undergirded by an embodied, psychological, continuously reflective and spiritual process that also informs their agency. This finding supports Collin’s view of “motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization” and agency for Black women (2000, p. 176).

These findings reveal complexities embedded in actual lived experiences of mothering that warrant acknowledgement if we are to contribute knowledge from the ground up. Evidently, from the narratives of the *Methepa*, lived experiences of ‘unmarried’ mothering are multi-layered, intertwined and complex and in essence are constructed by the *Methepa* as sources of empowerment. This finding contrasts African feminist scholarship that argues against conceptions that regard motherhood in African contexts as a source of power for African women. (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; McFadden, 2003; Lewis, 2001). Rather than simplistically foregrounding a contention of essentialism, women’s narrated experiences highlight that motherhood and mothering cannot be viewed as universal- as acknowledged by Black feminist literature (Chaney, 2011; Collins, 2000). But instead warrant acknowledgement of the historicity, complexity and

contextual factors that shape mothering as an experience embodied by African women in the face of marginalisation. In accord with decolonial feminist project of decolonising gender, we re-centre the lived experiences of African women without prioritising hetero-patriarchal ideology that ties motherhood with wifehood as key aspects of Woman.

Therefore, I argue that when viewed from the ground up, as suggested by decolonial feminist lenses, not only do we reveal mothering as an embodied experience; but also get to appreciate the multiple, personal meanings in which women – particularly the marginal subaltern – construct and anchor their agency as suggested by Lawson (2000). Thus, by foregrounding multidimensional views of mothering through the *Methepa*'s world-senses, this thesis ultimately debases essentialist ideologies that fix definitions of womanhood to specific hetero-patriarchal attributes. Ultimately eurocentric, hierarchised binaries that inform exclusive constructions of womanhood and agency are dismantled while simultaneously elevating historically denigrated African experiences. Personhood in lieu of womanhood – according to which ‘unmarried’ women are marginalised – is elevated in the narrated stories.

#### **6.4. *Botho!* Personhood: A deconstruction of *Mosali***

While the traditional definition that locates *mosali oa Mosotho* within a heterosexual marriage is well known to the *Methepa*, some repudiated these fixed and exclusive gendered norms that marginalise ‘unmarried’ women. Accordingly, the *Methepa*'s narrated stories reveal heterogeneity, fluidity and multiplicity borne by identity and thus deconstructs the dominant understanding of identity located within gendered categories. Interestingly, these deconstructive perspectives are shared openly and confidently despite the weighty social norms that predominantly shape these narratives. M'e Mamo disputes the notion of a typical *Mosotho* girl (*ngoanana oa Mosotho*) or even *Mosotho* woman (*mosali oa Mosotho*). For instance, in response to a question about *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and what it entails, M'e Mamo simply stated; “*To me it means exactly just that...you were born in Lesotho...your parents are Basotho nationals... that's it!*” (*laughing*). This explicit rejection of gendered concepts and emphasis on national identity of *Mosotho* is intriguing, yet at the same time, it is expected given the fact that her mother endorses liberal perceptions about marriage. Therefore, her ability to de-construct dominant norms is also partially enabled by her class identity and the fact that she was not confined within a context that

enforced the idea of marriage as her destiny. Rather, for her, identity is more than a simple social prescription. It is diversified by specific attributes that are unique to everyone, hence her assertion that:

*[Ngoanana] oa Mosotho...I think there is none...because for me everyone is different regardless hore na ke Mosotho or not... So, I don't think there is a benchmark for a Mosotho girl... I don't think there is one way to explain mosali oa Mosotho. M'e Mamo (Maseru, 06 Sept 2017)*

By insisting that there is no benchmark for a *Mosotho* girl, M'e Mamo deconstructs the taken-for-granted normative ideologies that essentialise 'woman' or 'girl' to specific attributes. Considering the *makhabane* (attributes) embodied by *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, her repudiation of a gendered image based on binary gendered categories, resonates with decolonial feminist project. Accordingly, gender identity based on fixed binarized patriarchal categories – bearing traces of racialised and gendered colonial hierarchies – ought to be deconstructed – as is reflected in M'e Mamo's account. Moreover, for M'e Mamo, gendered identity is non-existent, it is mythical, based on one's uniqueness – tied to the multiple intersecting and complex forces that shape identity – as is purported by intersectionality (Collins, 2000). This is exemplified by her assertion that “*I don't think there is one way to explain mosali oa Mosotho*” in support of the decolonial idea of multiplicity and fluidity with which phenomena such as 'Woman' should be conceptualised. In western culture – as reflected by Simone de Beauvoir (2009), the definition Woman is fixed to particular attributes such as marriage, motherhood, femininity. Evidently, considering the findings of this study, the complexities revealed in the narratives seriously contradict the assumptions of normalcy and fixity embodied by this so-called golden standard. The constructions that foreground uniqueness, reveal the complexities and messiness of identity constructed from the world-senses of the *Methepa* that is completely different from its normative gendered counterparts.

Further complexity is reflected in the account by M'e Kotseng when in response to a question about *mosali oa Mosotho* and what it entails, offered a complicated analogy in which she foregrounds personhood rather than self-defining as *mosali*. She insisted that;

*... I have the same dignity [seriti<sup>89</sup>] as a married woman... I am a person who is authentic [Ke motho a nang le seriti] ... it all depends on how you behave as a person...I am not married... I don't care about the fact that a person will call me ausi...or that I am not married...no...I am proud of being unmarried because marriage ...this time I decided that I don't want it ... 'she is not married'...even if they can say that. M'e Kotseng (TY, 55).*

M'e Kotseng's contestation is also exemplified by her refusal to identify with *mosali* and instead she opted rather for a less significant identity, 'ausi' [sister<sup>90</sup>]. This label does not hold any significant meaning in terms of gender identity but rather is an identity defining one as a female sibling within the natal family. Notably, the word *seriti* in Sesotho has two meanings; 'dignity' and 'integrity'. In addition, *seriti* also refers to the shadow that one casts. In Sesotho, this bears symbolic meanings that are unique to each human being. I read M'e Kotseng's account as reflective of both these explanations, while she attests to being dignified in the same way as a married woman, a critical re-reading of the account also reveals the symbolism of *seriti* - captured in her insistence that, "*I am a person who is authentic*" [*Ke motho a nang le seriti*]. Noteworthy, is her insistence on foregrounding personhood in lieu of gendered identity from which she is excluded in cultural terms.

Likewise, M'e Ts'ido's response was also riddled with complexity that brought into question the notion of fixed gender identity. Her contestation against gendered categories is reflected in her simple reply; "*I am me...I don't answer to anybody...*" to claim her space outside these prescriptive gendered definitions of womanhood. Moreover "*I am me*" reflects an identity that is rooted in the individual 'self' rather than the collective - *mosali oa Mosotho*. Relatedly in articulating *mosali* she foregrounds first and foremost personhood and humanness:

*I believe that a person [motho] that is mosali...is a human being! [motho] Who has a brain...who should not be oppressed by virtue of being mosali...No!...She should be given an opportunity and she should not be oppressed because she is a woman...a woman is not*

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<sup>89</sup> *Seriti*, in the symbolic Sesotho sense, is read as reflective of personhood, and authenticity which are tied to one's legacy that one leaves behind when they die. However, in Sesotho, *motho* (a person) does not exist in isolation from others and as such peoples' *liriti* (shadows) are cast upon each other (discussion with Dr Possa, September 2018).

<sup>90</sup> The terms *ausi* and *abuti* come from Afrikaans *ou sis* (older sister) and *ou boet* (older brother) respectively. Traditionally *moholoane* a gender-neutral term (Molalapatla, 2004) used in reference to one's elder sibling. *Moholoane* is not specific to marital status and only holds authority if used to refer to seniority (elder sister, elder brother)

*a child ...she is a human being like the other one... her brain should distinguish between a bad thing and a good thing, it should identify things that lead to progress ... and those that lead to regression...regardless of being married or not...M'e Ts'ido (Maseru, 06 June 2017).*

By insisting that *mosali*, as a human being, is worthy of respect, and critical thinking M'e T'sido disrupts the western androcentrism that posits maleness as the epitome of critical thinking and inferiorisation of femaleness - a long contested issue central to feminism discussed in Chapter 3. Notable is that M'e T'sido's upbringing was uniquely informed by a non-gendered role allocation and as a middle class, urban located, highly educated elderly woman her disruptive attitude is expected. Moreover, like M'e Mamo, M'e Kotseng and M'e Lifutso who received counsels that endorsed contradictory meanings of 'girlhood' and womanhood from their mothers – I read their endorsement of deconstructive ideologies as partly linked to their upbringing.

While it would be erroneous to simplistically suggest feminist consciousness as the underpin of these accounts – suffice it to acknowledge that at first glance, they could be interpreted as harbouring a sense of gender consciousness. However, re-read against the grain, noteworthy are their articulations of personhood, uniqueness, humanness which disrupt gendered binaries that essentialise womanhood to particularistic features according to which the 'unmarried' woman is posited as 'Other'. Their emphases on these aspects rather than genderedness and marital status are resonant with the works of African feminists. For instance, in dispute of universalist gendered ideologies Oyěwùmí (1997, p. xi) argued that “gender categories [woman/man] are [not] universal [or] present in every society at all times”. Thus, 'gender' need not be universalised nor defined in masculine terms as patriarchal. Instead, by foregrounding personhood (*botho*) the *Methepa* insist on a non-gendered manner of self-identification that is expressed as “*ke motho*” (a person). Accordingly, as acknowledged by Katide, (2017) personhood is relational, and it is the underpinning of collectivity, and communalism required for social harmony in African communities.

Likewise, these African values are explicated in the work by Amadiume (2002, p. 43); for whom the concept of *Nmadu* is “a genderless word meaning person/human...based on non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism, as a unifying moral code and culture”. Relatedly, *botho* informed the enculturation process that groomed younger generations, regardless of sex, to become socially

acceptable persons and community members – that many of the *Methepa* underwent. This resonates with Letseka’s (2013) observation that personhood - linked to morality and integrity is taught from childhood. Thus, self-identifying as a person [*ke motho*] first and foremost seeks to foreground the attributes (*makhabane*) that the *Methepa* embody and enact as socially acceptable community members worthy of respect rather than the gendered conjugal *mosali oa Mosotho* – from which they are debarred for being unmarried. This represents the African values upon which the *Methepa* base their constructions of identity and thus bring into disrepute definitions of womanhood fixed to “[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy” (Lugones, 2007, p. 190). Thus, in accord with decolonial feminism, the *Methepa*’s articulations of identity that are outside the confines of gender critically undermine and deconstruct racialised heterosexist categories borne by coloniality.

This deconstructive narrative expands our understanding of how identity and agency according to the world-senses of the *Methepa* can be re-imagined and articulated beyond exclusionary gendered racialised binaries. Moreover, these narratives reveal the multiplicity and fluidity embodied by identity and agency which in these respects, is enabled by centralising the indigenous Sesotho world-senses. These findings contribute a new, complex perspective of how the *Methepa* enact self-definition that is not accounted for by Black feminist agency theory. Thus, these findings contribute to pluriversal knowledge production on identity and agency born out of the world-senses of the *Methepa*.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter analysis adopts an intersectional lens to explore the *Methepa*’s lived experiences as the ‘unmarried’ ‘Other’. Notably, the lived experiences of childhood bear heavily on how they construct meaning, make sense of and locate their ‘unmarried’ identities in adulthood. While there are certain similarities in terms of narrated experiences of marginality, I do not attempt to make generalisations given that the *Methepa*’s experiences are shaped by intersecting forces including geographical location, sexuality, class, age, culture, on one hand and on the other personal factors. Citing Hall (1989), Boyce-Davies suggests that even among the “marginal... the periphery, the ‘Other’... we do not stand in the same relation of ‘otherness’ to the metropolitan centres” (Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 113). Therefore, despite sharing the experience of embodying marginality,



*Methepa*'s re-constructions of *mosali* and agency varied immensely. Likewise, the meanings that they attach to marriage as well as their lived experiences as 'unmarried' 'Other' were diverse. While some *Methepa* endorsed the socio-cultural and religious norms that inform the necessity of marriage, others foreground personal gratification and personal desires in lieu of dominant norms. The family was constructed as a dynamic space whose meanings shifted from one evoking distress while at other times it was the safety haven it is commonly known to be.

Discernible were the rural and urban diversities whereby the dynamics characteristic to each shaped how the *Methepa* were perceived and received by family members in each of the contexts. This also informed how the *Methepa* identified with the space and constructed meanings for their identities within each space. While the latter (urban) was typically perceived to be a space of safety and self-assertion – characterised by 'normalcy' wherein being 'unmarried' was less problematised. Within the former (rural space) deep seated anxieties of being 'unmarried' were reawakened. Rather than perceiving the rural (there) and urban (here) spaces as distinct and discontinuous, the narratives reveal that they are interdependent and inform the identities, meanings and agencies constructed by the *Methepa* within and around each space. Thus, their experiences, rather than being viewed solely as shaped by space, should instead be understood as shaped by intersecting space-time over and above the social aspects of class, age and location, to mention a few. Rather, the dynamism and complexity of space-time as intersecting and interdependent aspects shaping the '*Methepa*'s constructions of identities and agency disputes a simplistic view of the rural-urban divide – typically conceptualised as distinctive and discontinuous in how it informs constructions of identity.

Interestingly, the *Methepa* in rural areas disputed stereotypical assumptions that regard them as homogenous and as 'defenders of tradition'. As opposed to passively succumbing to stigmatisation, some *Methepa* openly debunked exclusive and prescriptive cultural norms that marginalise 'unmarried' women. By confronting stigmatising labels such as *lefetoo*, not only did the *Methepa* challenge the status quo but they exemplified the power of self-definition and self-empowerment. Ultimately, this challenges longstanding stereotypical assumptions of victimhood embodied by western-centric feminist discourses of rural-based African women - often juxtaposed against the agentic, progressive western and urban-based African woman. As a matter worthy of noting, urban-based *Methepa* also responded to stigma in subtle non-confrontational ways such as

silence and avoidance to illustrate their respect for cultural norms that necessitate marriage. Thus, while both contexts have characteristic dynamics at play, there are intersecting circumstantial as well as individual factors that shape the *Methepa*'s experiences and responses as 'unmarried' 'Other' in contexts where marriage is constructed as a significant aspect of womanhood.

This chapter also analysed the various ways in which the *Methepa* construct and reconstruct the notion of *mosali oa Mosotho*. Subsequently, this analysis gave voice to the *Methepa*'s constructions of agency. By separating the social (dominant narrative that defines *mosali oa Mosotho* in marital terms) and the subjective (accounting for one's own lived experiences to redefine *mosali*) the *Methepa* enacted agency through self-definition – discussed further in Chapter 7. Rather than conceptualising *mosali* in unitary terms, the narratives reveal a construct that is ever shifting, complicated and multidimensional. I paid close attention to how the *Methepa* drew meaning from their past personal experiences of childhood to re-construct *bosali* in adulthood. By transforming their embodied experiences of hardship and sorrow into valuable constructs with which they self-evaluated as resilient and perseverant, the *Methepa* constructed a base for self-affirmation as *mosali*. In addition, they anchored their re-constructions of *mosali* by transforming the meanings attached to the realms of femininity, sexuality and motherhood. The *Methepa* consciously embodied the norm of *boithlompho*, not only to dispel stereotypes associated with remaining unmarried, but also as the base of their self-definition as *mosali*. This revealed complexities as they toiled to embody, enact and express respectable Christian womanhood. Nonetheless, amid the tensions of articulating respectable womanhood were the *Methepa*'s less obvious convoluted and contradicted enactments of agency that is shaped by the broader religio-cultural context of Lesotho.

Likewise, a view of the *Methepa*'s experiences in the realm of sexuality and motherhood - from the ground up - revealed how subjective meanings were constructed to anchor their self-affirmation as *mosali*. My uninterrupted interest in "building on the indigenous" informed my motivation to prioritise practices such as labial elongation and *pitiki* as sources of knowledge production as well as potentially liberatory canons for *Methepa*. In particular, by focusing on the *pitiki* space in which the *Methepa* 'eat out of one pot' for sexual empowerment, my study revealed the 'power of the erotic' for the marginalised *Mothepe*. The uniqueness of this indigenous aspect in sexuality and gender research lies in its ability to afford the marginalised Mosotho woman space to draw

empowering meaning with which to reconstruct normative and exclusive constructions of *mosali oa Mosotho*. However, this ‘liberatory’ re-reading of African women’s sexuality remains work in progress reflected through the paucity of theoretical and empirical work on this specific aspect (Tamale, 2014). Like the realm of sexuality, mothering experiences were constructed as a valuable anchor for the *Methepa*’s self-affirmation as *mosali*.

Mothering was constructed as an anchor for self-actualisation and self-affirmation as *mosali*. For *Methepa* who exist as ‘unmarried’- ‘woman’ and ‘mother’- within a hetero-patriarchal context, lived experiences of mothering hold deeper meanings upon which they based their self-definitions as *mosali*. In this regard, I interpret the power of mothering – tied to women’s fulfilment of provider-ship roles – as an underpinning for *Methepa*’s embodied agency constructed from a marginal location. Moreover, given that their experiences are shaped by a myriad of intersecting factors, the flexibility with which they shifted between self-identification as *mosali* and *m’e* dispels assumptions of fixed and immutable identity. Notably, by giving voice to silenced lesbian identities, the thesis illuminates multiple layers of marginality which in turn inform multiple constructions of womanhood and agency tied to the *Methepa*’s experiences of successful mothering.

This multiversal knowledge production system is also confirmed by the *Methepa*’s deconstructive stance that rejected hierarchised categories; and instead, foreground the notion of personhood. While the *Methepa*’s deconstructive perspective may be read as emerging gender consciousness in the advent of modernity, indigenous agencies and modes of questioning the status quo were revealed in the narrated stories. By foregrounding ‘personhood’ and ‘uniqueness’ rather than the gendered notion of *mosali* brings to bear the biases of coloniality that plague the construct of womanhood. Moreover, multiplicity and fluidity, born out of the indigenous Sesotho world-senses reveals alternative ways in which identity can be re-imagined from the world-senses of the *Methepa*.

A glance at the historical context within which the narrations are housed also reveals complexities around the local construct ‘*mosali*’ and the religio-cultural construct according to which the *Methepa* are judged as respectable Christian women. Evidently, when reviewed through an integrated intersectional-decolonial lens that privileges endogenous knowledges (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013b), a view of *mosali* as multidimensional and contradictory is exposed through the

*Methepa*'s narrated life-stories. In addition, these findings raise issues around how 'the marginal within the marginal' (revealed through intersectional analyses) makes meanings of complex marginalised identities as well how this implicates notions of *mosali*. This brings into extreme disrepute normalised constructions of 'Woman' fixed to specific attributes including marriage. In addition, in response to the demands of decolonial feminisms, the *Methepa*'s re-constructions of *bosali* transcend binarized, hierarchised, gendered ideation that underpins hetero-patriarchal constructions of womanhood. Instead, *bosali* is informed by the spiritual, symbolic, embodied forces borne out of the intersecting Christianised and indigenised world-senses of the *Methepa*. As reflected upon by decolonial feminism, definitions of gender – womanhood in this instance – need not be based on the hetero-patriarchal racialised colonial canon. The findings illustrate this and further contribute a reflection on the critical role of the indigenous worlds of the Basotho. This adds further complexity around knowledges pertaining to notions of womanhood and agency.

## **Chapter 7: Theoretical reflection on the *Methepa*'s agency- study conclusions**

### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter brings the study to a partial closure by providing some conclusions and pointing to the gaps and issues that require further research. Accordingly, the chapter is organised into three main sections: firstly, I retrace the research trajectory through critical reflection on the conceptual, theoretical and methodological processes that brought this thesis to its current standing. From this, I present a summary of the findings, part of which I provide a theoretical analysis of the *Methepa*'s agency through decolonial lenses undergirding this study. Thirdly, I review the contributions that my study has made on womanhood, sexuality and agency to gender studies and decolonial feminist theories. Additionally, the study limitations are presented as well as how these were overcome throughout the research process.

### **7.2. Reflections on conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches**

This thesis sought to interrogate normative constructions of womanhood that essentialise marriage in Lesotho. To achieve these ends, in Chapter 3, I rearticulated a provocative question posed by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, 'What is a Woman?' to dispute the fixity and normativity with which womanhood is defined. However, contesting universalism and eurocentrism central to western feminisms, feminists of the Global South posited that womanhood be analysed through intersectional lenses that account for intertwined socio-historical and spatial forces that shape the construct. Central to this deconstructive stance is the need to acknowledge diversities - racial, class, geographical location, culture, religion - amongst women which shape the meanings of womanhood. This multiplicity raises questions for 'normalcy', and thus deconstructs the dominant conceptions of womanhood. In other words, central to this thesis is an ideological critique that seeks to debase normalised constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood that essentialise marriage and in turn marginalise the *Methepa*. I also took issue with epistemological underpinnings of the construct 'Woman' which is central to western feminist theory. In these respects, I argued that the western feminist construct of 'Woman' is exclusive, and thus marks differently bodied women,

including the *Methepa*, as ‘Other’. Secondly, I proposed that it harbours eurocentrism and is thus posited as the ‘golden standard’ against which the *Methepa* are judged and marked as ‘non-woman’. These key questions are located within a theoretical landscape underpinned by intersecting decolonial, African and Black feminisms. The theories are born out of the need to deconstruct the biases of modernity/coloniality that plague African constructions of identity and agency. Therefore, foregrounding a locus of enunciation born from the periphery, these theories recuperate the subaltern as an agent by centralising, historicising and deconstructing knowledge production, identity construction and agency. The conceptual and theoretical approaches undergirding this study thus seem to have been appropriate for illuminating multiplicity and complexity borne by indigenous constructions of womanhood and agency, thus allowing a deconstructive analysis that debases normative constructions of womanhood.

In striving to disentangle the ‘normative’ notion of *Mosotho* womanhood, I heeded the African feminist contention that *African* womanhood is a colonial/mission construct. Therefore, in Chapter 2 I sought to examine the constructions and transformations of womanhood amongst the Basotho through the confluence of the historical facets central to this epoch. Subsequently, by engaging with events that undergirded the Christian mission-colonial epoch in Lesotho, I posited that the contemporary notion of *Mosotho* womanhood that is essentialised to marriage is shaped by colonial mission conquest in Lesotho. Notably, this process was far from being linear. Instead, it was characterised by contradictions and complexities that pointed to the unacknowledged agentic and fluid forms of Basotho subjectivities. Therefore, the historicity of *Mosotho* womanhood raised pertinent questions linked to the complex enmeshment of womanhood and agency within the broader structures within which the *Methepa* exist in postcolonial Lesotho.

Considering this, the thesis went beyond merely acknowledging the African feminist contention that *African* womanhood is a colonial/mission construct. Instead, heeding the agentic nature of *Mosotho* womanhood, I explored how the *Methepa* negotiated and reconstructed these ‘foreign’ constructions of womanhood and also how agency was used in this process. Therefore, in dispute of the normalcy of *mosali oa Mosotho* (*Mosotho* womanhood) essentialised to marriage, this thesis asked, “How do the *Methepa* construct and reconstruct the notion of *mosali*?” In addition, it also asked; “How do they construct and use agency in this process?” Notably, by piecing together the pertinent aspects that reveal the colonial biases inherent to the notion of *Mosotho* Woman, my

primary contention is that it requires an analytic lens that will reveal and debase these biases - decolonial feminist approaches outlined in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I mapped out the methodological trajectory of this thesis. This qualitative study that is located within an interpretive paradigm is undergirded by decolonial feminist epistemologies. This is informed by the key concerns of this thesis, one of which is to reveal and address colonial biases according to which the marginalised *Methepa* are deemed 'voiceless'. It employed life history methods to explore the *Methepa*'s re-constructions of womanhood and agency. This study employed both convenience and purposive sampling techniques to select the study settings. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was used to select participants. I chose a small sample of twenty 'never married' *Methepa* from diverse contexts and backgrounds. Chapter 4 concludes with a discussion on my positionality as the 'research instrument' for the study as well as the ethical considerations guiding the entire process. In Chapters 5 and 6 I presented the research findings that I summarise next.

### **7.3. Summary of findings**

This thesis was born out of my interest to interrogate constructions of womanhood amongst the Basotho and explore how those who do not fit within the dominant discourses that essentialise marriage to womanhood make meaning of their identities. To achieve these ends, this thesis sought to address the following sub-questions: what historical, socio-cultural factors shape the *Methepa*'s perceptions on womanhood in Lesotho? What are the lived experiences of the *Methepa* in rural and urban contexts of Lesotho? How do the *Methepa* draw from agency to re-construct womanhood in Lesotho? The subsequent discussions present summaries of the findings as well as reflect on these sub-questions that guided the study as identified in Chapter 1.

#### **7.3.1. What historical, socio-cultural factors shape the *Methepa*'s perceptions on womanhood in Lesotho?**

The *Methepa*'s lived childhood experiences of becoming a socially acceptable *ngoanana oa Mosotho* was a powerful lens through which to map the historical, socio-cultural and economic terrain that shapes the *Methepa*'s articulations of womanhood. The findings illuminated a closely policed transitional process from *ngoanana oa Mosotho* to *mosali oa Mosotho*. However, in spite

of the existence of a gendered enculturation process, this was not based on a fixed hetero-patriarchal order. Instead, its malleability was exemplified by contradictions that undermined fixed constructions of femininity and masculinity. Role allocation within families was flexible and on the basis of necessity infused attributes of functionality and communality into constructions of gender identity. Moreover, the interrelated familial-community dyad ensured a concerted effort in the construction of a functional, communal *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in transit to *mosali oa Mosotho*. To ascertain a girl's attainment of 'real' *bosali*, this kin-communal network spearheaded the processes of constructing sexual and procreative bodies. Through the indigenous practice of labial elongation, the study zoomed in on the hetero-patriarchal context that governed the realm of women's sexuality. While this process constituted an aspect of a heteronormative gendered script which is enforced upon female bodies, its 'hidden' value is tied to the young Mosotho girl's exposure to the 'invisibilised' and tabooed subject of sexuality as well as means through which she embodies sexual empowerment. Thus, the transitional process of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* disputes hetero-patriarchal constructions of womanhood.

Linked to the construction of sexual bodies was the creation of the procreative-marital body. The inception of this process is marked by menarche, following which dietary restrictions are enforced. This unique indigenous aspect characteristic to *ngoanana oa Mosotho* protected the young girl from premarital and early pregnancy. Reflecting on dietary restrictions revealed contradictions, tensions and ambiguities that arise as young Basotho girls attempt to become *banana ba Basotho* in modern Lesotho. In particular, having to negotiate the prescription of sexual purity yet being sexually empowered and at the same time striving for procreative-marital bodies was undoubtedly a complex image constitutive of contemporary constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* in postcolonial Lesotho. I gave voice to the young Basotho girl's creative, embodied and spatially located forms of agency tied to endogenous Basotho knowledges with which they navigated prescriptive religio-cultural structures that enforced the procreative marital norm.

Thus, the findings shed light on how this process, coinciding with the historical, Christianised, socio-economic and political terrain of Lesotho, also informed the constructions of identity in complex ways. Interestingly, the women's narratives give voice to the deeply embedded, racialised and gendered discrepancies inherent to the colonial context and its supporting structures. Notably, the role of intersecting religious, cultural, political and economic forces and the complexities



thereof were reflected in how they shaped constructions of *ngoanana oa Mosotho*, as well as the schooling trajectories of the young Mosotho girl. However, intriguing in these narratives are the long-silenced roles of Basotho women in ensuring positive life trajectories for their daughters. Instead, contrary to metanarratives positing them as passive dependents, Basotho mothers (*bo-m'e*) and grandmothers (*bo-nkhono*) worked hard to ensure that Basotho girls accessed education in spite of dire circumstances. In so doing, I argued that *basali ba Basotho* toiled to inscribe an independent type *bosali* through modern Christian education and the indigenous Sesotho within the racist capitalist gender discriminatory context. Nonetheless, worth noting is the irony that the Christian mission schooling system was underpinned by the urge to construct 'Christian wives and mothers' embodying passivity and dependence.

This thesis revealed how modern Christianity and indigenous Sesotho at times oppose yet intersect and inform one another in and around the construction of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* - and later *mosali oa Mosotho* - in rather complex ways. Consequently, I paid close attention to the felt distinctive spatial and temporal points of 'then-now' and 'there-here', constructed not merely as "the present is 'here and now'; the past, 'then and there'" (Wilson, 2015, p. 479). Instead, there were strong interlinkages characteristic of shifts not only of 'passage of time' (Batisai, 2013), but also spatial and ideological aspects that shaped the contemporary constructions of girlhood and womanhood in postcolonial Lesotho. In other words, while there is always a reflection of the past, with its spatial and ideological aspects, it informs a present that is characterised by complex and multidimensional images of girlhood and womanhood.

The narrated stories reveal complexities born out of a tightly woven and intersecting hetero-religio-socio-cultural context and the indigenous Sesotho world-senses that inform the constructions of womanhood in postcolonial Lesotho. It is from this context that the *Methepa* draw to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct womanhood in contradiction to hetero-patriarchal western-centric constructions of womanhood. Thus, in response to the demands of decolonial feminism, the *Methepa's* articulations of identity thoroughly disrupt the confines of racialised heterosexist categories borne by coloniality. Accordingly, *Mosotho* womanhood is not fundamentally gendered and inferiorised as purported by hetero-patriarchal constructions of womanhood.

### **7.3.2. What are the lived experiences of the *Methepa* in rural and urban contexts of Lesotho?**

The women's lived experiences of childhood bear heavily on how they construct meaning for, make sense of and locate their 'unmarried' identities in adulthood. The familial space was posited as the battle site upon which the *Methepa* negotiated and reconstructed meanings for their non-conforming identities. However, given that the *Methepa*'s experiences are shaped by diverse intersecting forces - geographical location, age, culture, class as well as personal aspects - the familial space and the meanings thereof were not uniform. As the *Methepa* shifted between the 'there' (rural) and 'here' (urban) spaces, discernible rural-urban diversities shaped how they were perceived and received by family members in each of the contexts. Being 'unmarried' in rural contexts was associated with 'failure', hence the *Methepa* constructed it as space in which they felt mostly stigmatised. By contrast, the urban centres were constructed as spaces in which positive subjectivities were nurtured. In response to experiences of marginalisation, the *Methepa* constructed diverse, less confrontational, subtle strategies such as avoidance and silence. This was not a sign of 'defeat' but was reflective of the *Methepa*'s 'navigation' around weighty socio-cultural norms that foreground marriage as affirmation of womanhood. The narratives reveal that *Methepa*'s responses to marginalisation as well as subsequent identities and agencies constructed from their location of marginality within the rural and urban spaces be understood as contingent and relational rather than fixed. In other words, the positive meanings that the *Methepa* constructed for their identities in urban spaces were always related to the negative experiences and feelings of 'abnormality' encountered in the rural spaces. This dynamism and complexity of the space-time complex shaped the *Methepa*'s responses to marginalisation as well as the meanings that they attached to their identities. Thus, this complexity disputes a simplistic view of the rural-urban divide as separable and discontinuous aspects. Instead there is always interconnection between space, time, and agency in spite of physical movement through space from rural to urban spaces.

Interestingly, the *Methepa* in rural areas disputed stereotypical assumptions that regard them as homogenous and as 'defenders of tradition'. Instead, some *Methepa* openly debunked prescriptive cultural norms mandating marriage as they confronted stigmatising labels such as *lefetoa*. Therefore, this disputes universalist assumptions that rural-based *Methepa* uncritically support oppressive cultural norms in contradistinction from urban dwellers. The latter are perceived to be progressive – thus tending to forego socio-cultural norms in the name of progression and

modernity. In contrast, the narratives illustrate that the *Methepa* in rural communities posit advocacy for enabling contexts in which independence, self-assertion and goal orientation as attributes of *mosali oa Mosotho* can be re-awakened and fostered. In so doing, not only did these *Methepa* challenge the status quo but they exemplified the power of self-definition and self-empowerment. This challenges longstanding ‘feminist arrogance’ according to which rural-based African women – often juxtaposed against the agentic, progressive western and urban-based African woman – are perpetual victims of oppression. Undoubtedly, while both contexts have characteristic dynamics at play, there are intersecting circumstantial as well as individual factors that shape the *Methepa*’s experiences and responses as ‘unmarried’ ‘Other’ in contexts where marriage is constructed as a significant aspect of womanhood.

### **7.3.3. How do the *Methepa* draw from agency to re-construct womanhood in Lesotho?**

This section presents the theory-findings interplay with a focus on the *Methepa*’s agency. In this reflection, I also highlight what I consider to be the contributions of this study to agency, feminist and decolonial theories. Throughout the analytic chapters, I focused on how the *Methepa* constructed and enacted agency as they made sense of and negotiated space for their ‘unmarried’ identities within a context that necessitated marriage for affirmation of womanhood. By separating the social from the subjective to redefine empowering and positive self-perceptions, the *Methepa* enacted agency through self-definition. In so doing, they shifted from a state of ‘othering’ to a ‘free and empowered mind’. However, noteworthy is that while self-definition is a characteristic form of enacting agency among the *Methepa*, it was not universal. Instead, it was shaped by a myriad of intersecting factors, thus, marking each enactment as a unique expression of power to subvert marginalising circumstances, and thus, in accord with the Black feminist theory of agency.

I argue that the agency of the *Methepa* cannot be fully understood without locating it and acknowledging the confluence of various events that contribute to its constitution. By infusing past childhood experiences with new meanings and reconstructing them as positive events, the *Methepa* created anchors from which to draw meaning to affirm *bosali*. In particular, through self-evaluation as resilient, courageous, determined and perseverant during hardship, participants qualified themselves as *mosali*. Self-definition is constituted by drawing on these positive and empowering aspects upon which subjective constructions of *mosali* are based, distinguishable from the

marginalising social meanings of *mosali*. Therefore, the resultant self-empowerment with which the *Methepa* re-interpreted, not only their marginal state, but also their experiences of childhood, formed the anchor of the women's agency in adulthood - as acknowledged by the Black feminist agency theory.

In view of how the *Methepa* drew from and bargained with socio-cultural and religious norms as they grappled with constructions of *bosali*, I argued that this reflected the extent to which they remained invested in the Basotho traditional world-senses. This is expected given the cultural and religious terrain undergirding a socialisation process that deeply inscribes the ideal image of a procreative wife, notwithstanding the collateral contradictions of this process. My intrigue was linked to how the *Methepa* creatively and strategically drew on the indigenous practice of labial elongation to negotiate space within exclusive spaces. In other words, the *Methepa* infiltrated and accessed exclusive spaces through the erotic. This marks the 'erotic' as power (as Audre Lorde suggested) to self-affirm as *mosali* and reconstruct fixed and normative gendered identities in this regard. By viewing indigenous practices from the ground up, as suggested by decolonial feminist lenses, I revealed erotic agency with which the *Methepa* redefine the notion of *mosali oa Mosotho*. Although Black feminisms recognise the liberatory potential of Black women's sexuality, this study contributes a reflection on how agency is undergirded by the complex enmeshment of women's sexuality, space, time tied to the indigenous Sesotho world-senses.

Nonetheless, pertinent aspects of the *Methepa*'s enactment of agency illuminate a shortfall of the Black feminist theory that foregrounds 'oppositional' and resistive forms of agency against oppressive structures. For the *Methepa*, whose world-senses are anchored upon the values of communality and interdependence, I read their 'actions' as reflective of aspirations to belong to the collective. Moreover, attributes taught during childhood – such as resilience, independence and strength – were drawn upon by the *Methepa* and used as critical anchors for culturally situated agency. Considering this, I also read how the *Methepa*'s agency was, in the indigenous sense, instilled and nurtured in various ways from childhood in preparation for later life. While this finding resonates with Black feminist agency theory, its discourse of 'opposition' and resistance are disputable in view of the *Methepa*'s experiences. This aspect therefore contributes a new perspective on agency enacted through self-definition – as 'bargaining' with, rather than 'resistance' against, norms, and tied to the indigenous Sesotho world-senses.

Amidst the complications embodied by the *Methepa*'s agency, are the endogenous expressions of subjectivity that foreground the notion of 'personhood' which is tied to African value systems. In strive to reconfigure positive self-identifications the *Methepa* articulated personhood - expressed as 'I am a person' (*ke motho*) - as meaningful in lieu of the gendered social notion of '*mosali*'. At the core of this self-identity are attributes of communality, collectivity, morality, *boithlompho* and *seriti* – reflected upon by African feminists. According to the African world-senses these attributes are all enculturated during childhood in preparation for community membership in adulthood. Thus, by foregrounding these attributes as fundamental measures of self-evaluation and self-identity as *motho* rather than *mosali*, the thesis contributes a reflection of how the *Methepa* navigate around and critically disrupt fixed gendered categories purposed to exclude them as 'unmarried' women. Paradoxically, this indigenous world that foregrounds personhood was at times entangled with Christian values to inform convoluted and contradicted enactment of self-definition constituted by intersecting spiritual, social and cultural forces. This complication is unique to the *Methepa*'s agency and not reflected upon by Black feminist theory of agency. Through analyses that reject binary thinking altogether, the findings not only disrupt taken-for-granted 'truths' that mark African women as devoid of agency, but they also contribute new and intriguing ways of re-imagining the long-submerged agency of African women.

While I read this complexity as resonating with Oyěwùmí's central contention that the imposition of gendered and racist colonial constructs resulted in the distortion of indigenous African realities, I also consider these to be complex issues that warrant ongoing investigation and critical reflection. Moreover, while this thesis confirms the critical role of historicising and indigenising phenomena – as is purported in Oyěwùmí's work – I also consider ways in which African women's agency tied to the indigenous African world-senses can be reimagined and rediscovered. Thus, I consider this aspect as a contribution to Oyěwùmí's (1997) work – not only on how the African world-senses reveal multiplicity and uniqueness of phenomena but also how they reveal African women's agency that is tied to the African indigenous world-senses. Nonetheless, this pluriversal view of the *Methepa*'s agency that is messy, convoluted and contradictory – enacted within intersecting indigenous and modern religio-cultural matrix – debases eurocentrism that plagues knowledge production systems.

As I conclude this theoretical analysis of the *Methepa*'s agency, I reiterate, that constant and conscious shifting between two worlds reflects the *Methepa*'s construction of power and agency with which to re-construct notions of *bosali*. However, considering that women's construction of agency is shaped by a myriad of intersecting forces (gender, culture, geographical location, sexuality, class, and personal factors) I am propelled to raise the reader's attention to the multiple layers of marginality within the space of marginality, born out of these intersecting forces. In other words, the findings confirm the intersectional tenet that womanhood and agency bear complexities that render it impossible to articulate a single axis upon which to pin '*Methepa*'s agency' as well as a single configuration of '*mosali*' tabled through self-definition.

The narrated life stories present more than a simple descriptive rehearsal of experiences of being 'unmarried' in a context that mandates marriage as the basis for womanhood. Instead, the *Methepa*'s stories are a powerful tool with which to reimagine the notion of *mosali* and agency through the world-senses of the *Methepa*. By rereading these narratives through the theoretical lenses decoloniality, African and Black feminisms, I was not only able to reveal the unique realities of these world-senses, but also pointed to expressions of silenced power and agency enacted from the periphery. Moreover, through this theoretical lens, I gave voice to the *Methepa*'s identity negotiations expressed through their self-evaluations, self-definitions and ultimately reconstructed versions of *mosali* informed by a myriad of intersecting factors.

#### **7.4. Study conclusions and implications for future research**

As I conclude this thesis, I am prompted to reiterate Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) question alluded to earlier: 'What is a Woman?' My reversion to it seeks to revoke the deconstructive and critical voice assumed by this thesis in view of the findings and the conclusions to be drawn from them. The women's narrated life-stories confirm the inconclusive nature of the construct womanhood, and as such, posit it as fluid, multidimensional and complex. Amongst the *Methepa*, (re)constructions of *mosali oa Mosotho* are tied to a myriad of intersecting factors including culture, class, sexuality, geographical location, and personal issues. Considering this, the *Methepa*'s configurations of *bosali* cannot be pinned to specific aspects - but instead bear multiplicity. Thus, in response to the demands of decolonial feminisms, these configurations of *bosali* transcend binarized, hierarchised, gendered ideation that underpins the unitary hetero-

patriarchal woman-as-wife purported to be the Christian ideal. Instead, *bosali* is informed by the spiritual, symbolic, embodied forces borne out of the intersecting Christianised and indigenised world-senses of the *Methepa*. These findings also have implications for other marginalised groups for example trans-gender women who are excluded on the basis of fixed constructions of ‘Woman’ undergirded by ‘Biological dimorphism, heterosexualism, and patriarchy’. This confirms the necessity of including indigenous meanings of ‘womanhood’ in bid to finding an inclusive language on what it means to be a ‘woman’ beyond the biology-centred politics.

To date, no studies exploring African women’s identity have taken an interest in dismantling the coloniality that plagues the concept of *African* womanhood, let alone engaged decolonial feminist analyses to unpack conceptions of womanhood and agency. This thesis innovatively employed the decolonial frameworks as well as African and Black feminisms as intersecting lenses for a decolonial feminist analysis of the *Methepa*’s constructions of womanhood and agency. This allowed me to reveal a ‘multidimensional’ view of the notions of *Mosotho* womanhood and agency articulated through the world-senses of the ‘never married women’ - a class of women silenced in African feminist scholarship. This thesis contributes to feminist theories, gender and women’s studies by proposing an urgent need for intersectional analyses, not only of phenomena, but of theoretical approaches, as was done in this study. By so doing, the thesis transgressed the ‘boxed thinking’, that ultimately forecloses a multidimensional view of phenomena, typical to feminist theories.

Further, in this thesis I innovatively drew on the framework of *uMakhulu* – based on matriarchal principles (integrated with intersectionality) - as an analytic tool through which to reveal the indigenous Sesotho world-senses in the *Methepa*’s constructions of womanhood. This is a contribution to decolonial scholarship in that being a theoretical approach, decolonial scholarship does not provide the tools for ‘doing’ decolonial analyses. Considering this, *uMakhulu* – as a tool that deconstructs binary knowledge systems – therefore, is the ‘means’ through which to reveal multiplicities and complexities born out of the indigenous Sesotho world-senses. By engaging this theoretical lens – *uMakhulu* reveals multiplicities and uniqueness that not only contributes to recovering submerged Sesotho knowledges but also pluriversal knowledge production on constructions of womanhood and women’s agency.

This thesis brings to the fore the distinctive contributions tied to African indigenous structures – notwithstanding the intersection with modern Christian ideologies upon which contemporary constructions of womanhood are based. Considering this, the thesis also brings into the limelight some of the fundamental omissions and blind spots of African feminism’s projective conclusions that *African* womanhood bears colonial-mission traits. As such, the resultant distortions to African customs have remained a tenacious critique by African feminisms. Reflecting on this, African feminist Ifi Amadiume (2002, p. 42) posed a question: “What, for example, are the implications of the banning, marginalization, or erosion of rituals that had strengthened the solidarity of women in many communities in Africa?” In this thesis, I extended a view that, in spite of these mission Christian distortions, traces of the indigenous aspects are evident in the *Methepa*’s narrated life stories. For instance, viewed through the lens of *uMakhulu*, the process of becoming *ngoanana oa Mosotho* (Chapter 5) and *pitiki* spaces (Chapter 6) accentuate female solidarity and sisterhood as well as intergenerational relations amongst women, all of which are purposed to foster collectivism. This tenet critically underpins the women’s self-definitions of identity in strive to belong to the collective rather than exclusive hetero-patriarchal constructions of womanhood upon which their marginal state is anchored.

I do not claim to have discovered ‘matriarcharianism’ amongst the Basotho, but noteworthy is how these indigenous intricacies of collectivity, sisterhood, spirituality and personhood are drawn upon by the *Methepa* as anchors for their constructions of *mosali*. By extension, the *Methepa*’s agency draws on the indigenous aspects that inform their need for ‘belonging’ to the collective as they navigate marginalising hetero-patriarchal contexts. On a broader level, these unique dynamics further complicate and falsify normative constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood essentialised to features such as marriage. I propose, therefore, that for a critical and in-depth analysis, not only are we warranted to view the lived experiences of African women as shaped by intersecting multiple forces, but we are compelled to build knowledge *from* the indigenous to reveal further complexities of African women’s realities. Through this deconstructive theoretical analysis that foregrounds African indigenous world-senses, this thesis contributes to overcoming the “stasis in theorizing” suffered by African feminisms as alluded to by Pinkie Mekgwe (2008, p. 12). Moreover, these complexities falsify imperialist assumptions of ‘universality’ anchored upon colonial racialised and gendered hierarchies, that mark the *Mosotho*



woman as ‘Other’. Instead, the thesis brings to the fore the ‘multiversal’ understanding of womanhood - and by extension women’s agency.

A re-gance at the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak’s question, “*Can the subaltern speak?*” that gave rise to this thesis warrants a stern affirmative response. The subaltern *Mothepe* speaks from her position of marginality in various ways that elude the trained eurocentric eye, whose myopic vision is made to see a specific ‘ever repressed’ image purposed to further silence the subaltern woman. This thesis engaged critically with the issue of African women’s agency, and thus confirms the outcry by African feminists that African women, in this case, the subaltern *Mothepe*, can speak. Evidently, it proves that the subaltern *Mothepe* speaks in various ways that expose the biases of coloniality that regard her as silent, passive and overly oppressed by hetero-patriarchal cultural structures. To achieve these ends, I drew on the Black feminist agency theory to address the paucity of theoretical and empirical scholarly works on African women’s personal agency. This thesis contributes new knowledge with regard to theoretical analyses of the *Methepe*’s agency that foregrounds African world-senses. *Methepe*’s agency in the form of self-definitions is characterised by ‘bargaining’ rather than oppositional consciousness; and thus, remains culturally situated. However, I regard this to be a complex task that warrants further exploration in future research beyond this project. For now, I view it to be an opening of an as yet under-researched aspect regarding women’s personal agency in Africa.

In response to Babalwa Magoqwana’s (2018a, p. 22) suggestion that “we begin to create new [conceptual] frameworks that speak to our context”, through *uMakhulu*, the study foregrounds Sesotho concepts such as *boithlompho*, *seriti*, *botho* (personhood) tied to the *Methepe*’s agency and *bosali*. In pursuit of the decolonial project purported by this thesis, I also opted to draw on Sesotho constructs - *mosali oa Mosotho*, *ngoanana oa Mosotho* - to capture the indigenous Sesotho specificities that the concepts embody. The Sesotho term, *Methepe* that I use in reference to the participants of this study refers to female persons regardless of marital status. This is in lieu of the limiting concepts such as ‘single’, ‘unmarried’, ‘singlehood’ – in themselves born out of binarized logics that centralise heterosexual coupledness and marriage. Thus, heeding the significance of this decision for a thesis that seeks to re-represent and re-visibility the Sesotho world-senses and in so doing, deconstruct eurocentrism, I reiterate the words by Ntuli who points out that “language represents a specific worldview and ontology” (cited by Magoqwana, 2018, p. 76). These Sesotho

concepts bear symbolic, cultural, social and ontological significance to this thesis and as well the realities of the *Methepa*. Therefore, this is a conceptual contribution made by this thesis to (African) feminist theory with which to capture the ‘multiversality’ of the African world-sense.

Further, considering the key questions of this study, I also raise questions around those tensions that ensue at the interface of the indigenous norms and modern ideologies around African women’s sexuality and how these shape contemporary configurations of *ngoanana oa Mosotho* and *mosali oa Mosotho*. The realm of African women’s sexuality remains undoubtedly a contested terrain in which we are made to tread with utmost caution. However, in my study I sought to dig deeper into the unexplored and the profane in the eyes of hetero-religio-cultural norms that render women’s sexuality invisible and reserved for procreative purposes within the marital premises. Instead, by going “beyond conventional research paradigms on African [female] sexuality” (Tamale, 2005, p. 29) the thesis revealed and confirms the sexually empowering potential of the indigenous African practice of labial elongation – as alluded to by previous African feminist studies (Batisai, 2013; Tamale, 2005; Vanganai, 2017). By exposing young Basotho girls to matters of sexuality, the practice posited us as sexual beings who are capable of sexual pleasure and sexual agency. This unique aspect challenges normative assumptions of women’s sexual passivity - central to hetero-patriarchal constructions of ideal womanhood. Certainly, by asking new questions, constructing new understandings and new interpretations, the thesis discerned the ‘liberatory’ from the ‘oppressive’ regarding the Basotho women’s sexuality.

Thus, this thesis confirms that in view of this indigenous practice, the ‘erotic’ proved to be powerful and liberatory for the *Methepa*. However, it also contributes new knowledge on how this indigenous practice enabled the marginalised *Mothepe* to draw empowering meaning with which to deconstruct and reconfigure normative and exclusive constructions of *mosali oa Mosotho*. A view from the ground up allowed this thesis to come up with innovative conclusions that privilege the voices of the *Methepa* while re-presenting them as agents. Ultimately, this alternative perspective not only contributes new knowledge to gender scholarship pertaining to the African context, but also adds ‘voices’ premised on destabilising and contesting the status quo around African women’s sexuality, and by extension the notion of *African* womanhood. However, the paucity of scholarship on the liberatory re-reading of African women’s sexuality confirms that it remains work in progress that therefore warrants further research on the subject.

Lastly, the thesis employed life history methods as a critical decolonial feminist methodological tool to give voice to and empower the marginalised subaltern woman. Life history methods reveal multiplicities and complexities born out of their typical historicising, in-depth nature. By allowing the *Methepa* to reflect on, historicise, construct and reconstruct life experiences through narration, the *Methepa* are afforded space to construct agency as well as configure and reconfigure notions of *bosali*. This allowed revelation of multiplicities and complexities of ‘what it means to be *mosali*’ – tied to the *Methepa*’s world-senses – as required by decoloniality. Moreover, by allowing knowledge production from the ground up, life stories give voice to silenced, submerged, and disqualified subaltern African women’s knowledges and realities. Therefore, considering the key questions raised by this thesis, life history methods as a decolonial tool constitutes a methodological contribution for epistemic redress.

In addition, the difficulties of narrative analysis as well as the lack of coherent narrative analysis processes in methodological texts have been highlighted by scholars like McCormack (2004) and Riessman (2005). This prompted me to detail the processes of ‘storying stories’ (McCormack, 2004) that I used to analyse the narratives of the *Methepa*. My detailing of these processes revealed the contextual, personal and cultural particularities that shaped the experiences of the *Methepa* within the research space. As such, these shaped and reshaped how the women constructed and articulated their lived experiences upon which we apply western-born data analyses methods such as ‘storying stories’. This thus emphasises the local specificities that warn against uncritical application of these methods.

The thesis also raised critical questions that prompt critical thinking around ‘ethical’ research in poor local contexts. In particular, the formalised and prescribed processes of incentivising participants as stipulated by ethical committees is at odds with the *botho* principles that govern local African communities. Given the destitution that I observed due to high unemployment in the communities that I visited, I was obliged at times to provide monetary or food assistance as I saw fit. Failure to do this would have been a transgression of African principles of *botho*, for I considered it unethical to merely sit and conduct an interview with a hungry participant. These are methodological contributions to the decolonial research approach, that prompts us to pay special attention to difficulties that arise when research is conducted in African settings amongst marginal communities. However, unresolved queries remain with regard to the feasibility of ‘decolonial’

research considering that academic spaces – in which we attempt to do such research – continue to bear colonial legacies. In this regard, I raised conundrums (reflected upon in Chapter 4) that require further research beyond this project.

## **7.5. Limitations of the study**

In this last section, I draw attention to the limitations which were encountered in the entire study process. Noteworthy is that the methodological issues have been detailed in Chapter 4, but where necessary, methodological issues are reiterated here. Mosotho and Basotho are identity constructs that appear throughout this thesis because I spoke with only Basotho women. Moreover, I only spoke with ‘unmarried’ Basotho women, but I acknowledge that had I included a large sample covering different categories of women - say widows, divorced, married and nuns - I could have given ‘voice’ to different life stories; and thus, ‘different’ constructions of *mosali* and agency. Thus, because I drew on the narrated lived experiences of this small group of ‘unmarried’ Basotho women (*Methepa*), the findings and conclusions drawn are limited to their designated confines. Nonetheless, because of commonalities spanning across the eastern, southern and western parts of the African continent, I attempted to view the findings of this thesis in relation to literature from these regions. Therefore, intra- and inter-regional inferences may open room for reflection on the scholarship of African womanhood and agency more generally.

Conceptually, conducting research on ‘women’s agency’ and ‘womanhood’ was more challenging than I anticipated. Conceptualising and operationalising ‘agency’ and ‘womanhood’ in preparation for the data collection stage proved to be most difficult. However, although I had a rough interview guide that served as a memory jogger during the interviews, I allowed the process to take its course. Following the first questions on demographic aspects, the women unravelled their life stories without my interference apart from periodic interjections to probe or seek clarity. Following my reading and rereading of the transcripts against the grain, I was able to acquire in-depth insight into their expressions of agency. For example, I interpreted the construction of meanings, redefinitions and reinterpretations of certain life events as constitutive of agency.

In closing, a reflection on the theoretical conclusion purported by this thesis is warranted

## 7.6 Theoretical conclusion

The golden thread that runs through this thesis is my unencumbered interest of interrogating and deconstructing normative constructions of womanhood. I posited that in the Basotho context, these constructions and the meanings thereof can be traced to the historical trajectory of colonisation in Lesotho. Therefore, this insight warranted a theoretical lens that would, firstly, reveal the colonial biases inherent to constructions of *Mosotho* womanhood. Secondly, reveal the multiplicities and unique dynamics inherent to the Sesotho world-senses. A decolonial feminist approach – that embodies the principles of deconstruction, historicity, and multiplicity – afforded the analysis of womanhood and agency a significant degree of complexity that not only revealed eurocentrism but also was a powerful tool for the deconstruction and falsifying of exclusory metanarratives.

It was precisely the inter-theoretical dialogue of African, Black and decolonial feminisms, which are informed by diverse yet intersecting positionalities, which enabled this thesis to achieve enriching, powerful and original contributions to the study of gender and agency. Thus, by ‘intersectionalising’, historicising and indigenising womanhood and agency, these decolonial feminist lenses reveal that constructions and reconstructions of *ngonana oa Mosotho*, *mosali oa Mosotho* and agency are located at the intersections of indigenous Sesotho world-senses and modern Christianity. Thus, this reveals multiple reconfigurations characterised by a complex, contradictory and convoluted enmeshment of intersecting forces. This analysis allowed revelations of such complexities around African women’s identities and agency as dynamic, evolutionary and complicated – and thus in contradistinction to eurocentric constructions of them. Not only does the analysis achieve epistemic redress by giving voice to historically silenced and subordinated knowledges, but it also places as central the indigenous African world-senses as the new anchor of African women’s identity and agency.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM (English)

University of Pretoria

Telephone number: +27 824818281

Email: [neomohlabane@gmail.com](mailto:neomohlabane@gmail.com)

Good day. Thank you for volunteering to participate in the study. My name is Neo Mohlabane and I am a Doctoral Candidate studying at the University of Pretoria (Sociology department). I am currently undertaking research titled “**Re-Construction of womanhood: Narratives of single Methepa.**” I hope to speak with Methepa who currently ‘unmarried’ aged between 25 to 30 years and 50 years and above. The scope of the research requires me to learn more about Methepa and their views and understanding about womanhood, marriage and their experiences of being ‘unmarried’ as a *Mosotho* woman. The study will take the form of storytelling such that women will share their life stories in an unstructured way at a place and time convenient to them.

Although data collection is expected to last for 6 months, each interview session is expected to take between 45 minutes and 1 hour, there will be up to three visits or more if necessary, to enable me to get an in-depth understanding of your views. With your permission the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed only by the researcher (Neo) but your names will not be disclosed in the final research thesis and other publications. The information that you provide will be kept confidential. I take full responsibility for all the recordings and verbatim transcriptions and assure you that they will be stored in a secure place for a period of 15 years at the University of Pretoria. With your permission, there is a possibility that data may be re-used by the researcher (Neo) for research purposes. The outputs of this study include a research thesis and published peer-reviewed manuscripts.

It is vital to note that participation in the study is purely voluntary. As a participant you have the right to opt out at any time during the study without penalty and any information provided will be destroyed. If you feel sad after sharing any of your experiences with me, you can stop the interview at any time. There are also people from Blue Cross (Thaba Bosiu) or Sesioana counselling services (Maseru) who can talk to you about the things that upset you. Their contact details will be shared with you, if you need assistance later.

If you have any concerns or questions about the research, you may contact my supervisor Dr Malehoko Tshoaedi at Tel: +27 (0)12 420 4366; Email: malehoko.tshoaedi@up.ac.za  
Or me, Neo Mohlabane at Tel: +27 824818281/58866948; Email: neomohlabane@gmail.com

Attached to this letter is a consent form that you should complete and sign if you agree to be part of this research project.

Thank you for your time and assistance.

Yours faithfully,

Neo Mohlabane

**CONSENT**

I.....hereby consent to participate in a research conducted by Neo Mohlabane as part of her requirements for the fulfilment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria.

I have read and understood the information sheet above. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded but my identity shall not be disclosed. The recording will be kept and transcribed by the researcher only. It is also the researcher’s responsibility to ensure that the recording and transcripts are stored securely at the University of Pretoria for 15 years. There is a possibility that the data will be re-used by the researcher for research purposes only. My participation in the study is entirely voluntary and I may decide not to participate at any time during the study without any penalty. In addition the information obtained from the study will be used for academic purposes only and shall be published under the shield of anonymity – as far as possible at least.

Interviewee Signature

Researcher Signature

Date .....

Date .....

**APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM (Sesotho)**

University of Pretoria

Telephone number: +27 824818281  
Email: [neomohlabane@gmail.com](mailto:neomohlabane@gmail.com)

Madume, o phetse jwang? Ke a leboha ha e le mona o ithaopile ho nka karolo thutong yena. Lebitso laka ke Neo Mohlabane mm eke moithuti wa boemo ba Bongaka mane Yunibesithi ya Pitoria (lefapheng la Sociology). Ha jwale ke etsa dipatlisiso ka “**Diphetoho tsa basadi ka hare ho Lesotho: Dipale tsa basadi ba sa nyalloang.**” Ke lebelletse ho bua le basadi ba Basotho basa nyalloang ba dilemong tse 25 ho ya ho 55. Tepamiso ya dipatlisiso e hloka hore ke ithute haholoana ka basadi ba Basotho le mehopolole kutlwisiso ya bona ka sesadi, lenyalo le maiphihlelo a bona ka hoba bang bas a nyalwa e le basadi ba Basotho. Thuto e tla nka mokgwa wa meqoqo ya dipale ka tsela yaha hore basadi ba tla arolelana dipale tsa maphelo a bona ka tsela e sa ikgethang sebakeng le ka nako e ba e kgethang.

Le ha pokello ya lesedi e lebelletswe ho nka digwedi tse 6, potsoloso engwe le engwe e lebelletswe ho ba bakeng tsa metsotso e 45 ho ya ho hora elengoe, ho tla ba le diketelo tse 3 kapa hofeta ha ho hloka hore ke fumana kutlwisiso e tebileng ya mehopolole ya hao. Ka tumello ya hao dipotsoloso di tla hadiswa le ho kopollwa ke mmatlisisi (Neo) empa mabitso a la se bolelwe qetellong ya dipatlisiso. Lesedi le o tla fanang ka lona le tla bewa ka polokeho. Ke nka maikarabelo ohle ho boloka dikgatiso le mekopollo ka mokhoa o bolokehileng hofitisisa Yunibesithing ya Pitoria nako e kaalo ka lilemo tse 15. Ka tumello ea hao, ho ka etsahala hore dikgatiso lika sebelisoa hape ke mmatlisisi (Neo) molemong oa lipatlisiso. Litebello tsa lipatlisiso tsena ke buka e hatsitsoeng.

Ho bohlokoa ho tseba hore ho nka karolo thutong yena ke ka boithaopo. Jwalo ka monkakarolo o na le tokelo ya ho ikhula nako engwe le engwe tsamaisong ya thuto ntle le kotlo mme lesedi leo o tla beng o se o nehelana ka lona le tla sengwa. Haeba oka ikutloa osa thaba ka mora hore o buisane le nna ka bophelo ba hao, oka emisa lipuisano neng kapa neng. Honale batho ba Blue Cross (Thaba Bosiu) kapa Sesioana counselling services (Maseru) baka buisanang le uena ka tsohle tseo utluisang bohloko. Linomoro tsa bona tsa mohala o tla li fuoa hao ka hloka thuso ha morao.

Hao na le hots’oenyeha kapa lipotso ka lipatlisiso, oka letsetsa motataisi oaka Dr Malehoko Tshoedi at Tel: +27 (0)12 420 4366; Email: [malehoko.tshoedi@up.ac.za](mailto:malehoko.tshoedi@up.ac.za)

Kapa nna, Neo Mohlabane at Tel: +27 824818281/58866948; Email: [neomohlabane@gmail.com](mailto:neomohlabane@gmail.com)

Lengolo lena le hatisitwe le foromo ya tumello eo o tlamehang ho e tlatsa le ho tekena ebang o dumela ho nka karolo patlisisong ena.

Ke lebohela nako le thuso ya hao.

Kgotso,

Neo Mohlabane

**TUMELLO**

Nna ..... ke dumela ho nka karolo patlisisong yena e nkwuwang ke Neo Mohlabane bakeng sa ditlhoko tsa ho phetha Lengolo la Bongaka ba Tsebo Yunibesithing ya Pitoria

Ke badile le ho utlwisisa sephepheshana sa lesedi le boletsweng hodomo. Ke a utlwisisa hore potsoloso e tla hatiswa empa boitsibiso ba ka bo ka se phahlalatswe. Kgatiso e tla bewa le mme e kopollo ke mmatlisisi feela. Ke maikarabelo ya mmatlisisi ho netefatsa hore dikgatiso le mekopollo litla bolokeha ka mokhoa o bolokehileng hofitisisa Yunibesithing ya Pitoria nako e kaalo ka lilemo tse 15. Mmeng honale monyetla oa hore likhatiso lika sebelisoa hap eke mmatlisisi molemong oa lipatlisiso. Ho nka karolo hoa ka thutong yena ke ka boithaopo mme ke ka kgetha ho sa nke karolo nako le nako ntle le kotlo. Hodima moo, lesedi le kgobakantsweng thutong yena le tla sebediswa bakeng sa dithutiso feela mme le tla hlahiswa ka ho sa tsebahale hwa ka – ho ya ka moo ho kgonehang.

Tekeno ya Mmotsiswa

Mohla .....

Tekeno ya Mmatlisisi

Mohla .....

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE (English)**

1. The socio-cultural context/perceptions on womanhood and marriage
  - Can we start with your social background? Who are you? When were you born and where were you born?
  - Please tell me more about your schooling? (school attended; highest education level completed)
  - What is your current employment status, what type of employment?
  - How has your upbringing shaped your views on what it means to be a girl and a woman in the Basotho society?
  - How has your culture and the way you were brought up influenced your ideas about being a woman and what is expected of you? What other factors influenced your ideas about being a woman and what is expected of you?
  - What is the significance of being married in your community?
  - What are your reasons for not being married yet?
  - What are the dominant views on womanhood and marriage in your community?
  - How have these views changed in the last 5 or 10 years? And what has influenced these changes?
  - What are your views on the dominant ideas on womanhood and marriage in Lesotho?
  - What are your views regarding the idea that women in Lesotho are forced into marriage by the society's patriarchal views on womanhood?
  - How do you think 'unmarried' women are responding to these patriarchal ideas on marriage?
  - How do you think 'unmarried' women are responding to society's patriarchal views on womanhood?
  - How do you think Methepa are transforming society's patriarchal views on what it means to be a woman?
  
2. Lived experiences of being unmarried.
  - From your understanding how are 'unmarried' women perceived?

- What does 'lefetoa' mean to you? How do you deal with such labels in your community, family, among friends?
  - Please tell me about your own experiences of being 'unmarried' as a *Mosotho* woman?
  - When thinking about being an 'unmarried' woman at this age, what does it mean to you personally?
  - How has being 'unmarried' affected your sense of womanhood?
3. The socio-economic context and definitions of womanhood.
- What are your views regarding women's access to opportunities like education, employment in Lesotho?
  - In what ways do you think access to opportunities relates to Methopa's empowerment?
  - In what ways do you think changes in modern Lesotho (education, employment for women, foreign influences – through inward/external migration) influenced your views on marriage?
  - In what ways do you think these changes influenced your views and understanding of womanhood?
  - Please tell more about how you think these changes influenced your decision to remain unmarried?
4. The role of women's agency in re-construction of womanhood.
- How do you think your identity as an 'unmarried' woman has changed what it means to be a 'woman' in your community? In Lesotho?
  - When thinking about the expectations of being a woman in Lesotho, what are your feelings and reactions in regard to your personal experiences?
  - In what ways have you changed the meaning of what it means to be a woman, for yourself?



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE (Sesotho)

1. The socio-cultural context/perceptions on womanhood and marriage
  - Ke kopa re qale ka kholiso ea hao? O mang? O hlahile neng? O hlahetse kae?
  - Ke kopa oko mpoelle haholoanyane ka thuto ea hao (O kene skolo ho kae? O felletse sehlopheng sefeng?)
  - Boemo ba hao ba mosebetsi ke bofeng? Ke mosebetsi oa mofuta ofeng?
  - Khuliso ea hao e susumelitse maikutlo a hao joang mabapi le hore na hoba ngoana ngoanana ho bolelang le hoba mosali oa Mosostho?
  - Setso sa hao le khuliso ea hao li susumelitse maikutlo a hao joang mabapi le sesali le litebello tsa sechaba ka uena? Ke lintlha lifeng tseling tse susumelitseng maikutlo a hao a sesali?
  - Bohlokoa ba ho nyaloa ke bofeng motseng oo oa heno?
  - Ebe mabaka a hao a hore ebe hao so nyaloa ke afeng?
  - Kutluisiso e ka sehlohong mabapi le sesali le lenyalo ke efeng motseng oo oa heno?
  - Ebe kutluisiso ee e fetohile ka mekhoha efeng lilemong tse 5 ho isa ho 10 tsefetileng? Tsusumetso e bile efeng ea lipheto ho tsee?
  - Ekaba uena maikutlo a hao ke afeng ka kutluisiso ee eka sehlohong mabapi le sesali le lenyalo sechabeng sa Basotho?
  - Maikutlo a hao ke afeng mabapi le taba ea hore basali ba Basotho ba qobelletsoe ho kena lenyalong ke tsona kutluisiso tsee tsa sesali?
  - Ke ka mekhoha efeng eo nahanang hore basali basa nyaloang ba arabela kutluisiso ee ea lenyalo e hatellang basali?
  - Ke ka mekhoha efeng eo nahanang hore basali basa nyaloang ba arabela kutluisiso ee ea sesali e hatellang basali?
  - Ke ka mekhoha efeng eo nahanang hore basali ba ba sotho ba fetola kutluisiso tse tsa sechaba tse hatellang basali mabapi le sesali le litebello tsa teng?
2. Lived experiences of being unmarried.
  - Tsebong ea hao, basali basa nyaloang ba shejoa joang setjabeng?

- Ha hothoe motho ke 'lefetoa' ho boleloang ho ya ka wena? Maikutlo a hao ke afe ka mats'oao a kang a?
  - sebedisa metjha efe ho ema kgahlanong le mats'oao a tjee sechabeng sa heno, ka lapeng heno le pakeng tsa metswalle ya hao?
  - Ke kopa ompolelle hore na maiphihlelo (bophelo) a hao ebile afeng tje ka hao sa nyaloa ole mosali oa *Mosotho*?
  - Hao nahana hore hao so nyaloa lilemong tse oleng ho tsona ha joale, ho bolelang ho uena? (maikutlo a hao ke afeng ka taba ea hose nyaloa?)
  - Hose nyaloa ha hao ho amme ha kae maikutlo a hao ka taba ea sesadi?
3. The socio-economic context and definitions of womanhood.
- Maikutlo a hao ke afe nthleng ea ho fihlella hoa basali menyetle ekang thuto, mesebetsi ka hara naha ea Lesotho?
  - Ke ka mekhoha efeng eo nahanang hore menyetla ee e amana le boikemelo ho basali ba Lesotho moo?
  - Ho ea ka maikutlo a hao, ke ka mekhoha efeng eo boemo ba hao ba thuto le mosebetsi bo susumelitseng kutluisiso le mehopollo ea hao mabapi le lenyalo?
  - Ho ea ka maikutlo a hao, ke ka mekhoha efeng eo boemo ba hao ba thuto le mosebetsi bo susumelitseng kutluisiso le mehopollo ea hao mabapi le litebello tabeng tsa sesali?
  - Ke kopa oko mpoelle haholoanyane hore na o nahana lipheto ho tsee sechabeng sa Basotho li nkile karolo ha kae ho susumetseng liqeto tsa hao tsa hose nyaloa?
4. The role of women's agency in re-construction of womanhood.
- Ka kutluisiso ea hao boitsibiso ba hao ole mosali ea sa nyaloang bo tlisa lipheto ho lifeng mabapi le kutluisiso ea sechaba ka sesali le hore na sebolelang?
  - Hao nahana hore na litebello ke lifeng tsa sesali kapa 'mosali oa *Mosotho*', maikutlo a hao ke afeng mabapi le bophelo ba hao the ka mosali as nyaloang?
  - Hao nahana ka bophelo ba hao, ke ka mekhoha efeng eo o fetotseng thlalo le kutluisiso ea sesali?

## APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities  
Office of the Deputy Dean

4 May 2017

Dear Ms Mohlabane

**Project:** (Re)-Construction of womanhood in Lesotho: Narratives of single Basotho woman.  
**Researcher:** NN Mohalabane  
**Supervisor:** Dr CM Tshoaedi  
**Department:** Sociology  
**Reference number:** 04381734(GW20170412HS)

Thank you for the application that was submitted for ethics review.

I am pleased to inform you that the above application was **approved** by the **Research Ethics Committee** on 4 May 2017 **with the following comments:**

- The researcher is commenced on the translation of the letter of informed consent.

Data collection may therefore commence. Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

**Prof Maxi Schoeman**  
**Deputy Dean: Postgraduate and Research Ethics**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**  
**e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za**

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof MME Schoeman (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Dr L Blokland; Ms A dos Santos; Dr R Fasselt; Ms KT Govinder; Dr E Johnson; Dr C Panebianco; Dr C Puttergill; Dr D Reyburn; Dr M Taub; Prof GM Spies; Prof E Taljard; Ms B Taebe; Dr E van der Klashorst; Dr G Wolmarans; Ms D Mokalapa