

**POETRY AND PATRONAGE: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL VISION OF
RADITLADI'S *SEFALANA SA MONATE* (2018) WRITTEN BY PROF SEKEPE MATJILA
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Critical works that focus on writers of African languages are more important than ever before if we hope to fully understand early works of African writing and the aspirations of those behind them. Such analysis is important because it also provides critical information on the culture, customs, times, and values of the communities the authors represent. This is significant not only for the appreciation of such works but also for the preservation of the culture, and mores contained in such works. Therefore, *Poetry and Patronage: The socio-cultural and historical vision of Raditladi's Sefalana sa Monate* fills an important gap by providing a critical study that examines an African writer/poet and the corpus of his work.

The subject of Matjila's critical lens is one of the popular Satswana authors called Leetile Disang Raditladi or L.D Raditladi as he became popularly known. Raditladi was born in Botswana (where he attended Serowe primary school and was educated in both Botswana and South Africa (where he attended Tigerkloof in the present-day North West province before proceeding to study at Lovedale Collage which later became the University of Fort Hare located in the present day Eastern Cape province. Both institutions are known for having produced some of the luminaries. Some prominent people who were educated at Tigerkloof during its heyday include Dr Ruth Mompati, and former presidents of Botswana Sir Seretse Khama and Sir Ketumile Quett Masire. Raditladi became a tribal Secretary who played an important role in adjudicating tribal disputes. He married a Motswana woman from Mafikeng.

Indeed, up until the publication of *Poetry and Patronage*, there were very few works that focused on early Batswana writers. The author of this work Prof Sekepe Matjila is a well-respected Professor in the Department of African Languages and formerly, the Head of the Centre for Pan African Languages and Cultural Development at the University of South Africa for a long time. He is recognised by South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF) through a C2 rating, as an established researcher who consistently produces research work of high quality. He also serves as a Commissioner of African Languages and a Research Fellow at the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania in the USA. He is an award-winning author of several publications. These prodigious credentials make him the best person to tackle the work of Raditladi.

Poetry and Patronage is, in essence, a synchronic analysis of the work of Raditladi. The key argument in this book is that Raditladi's work and the issues he raises "cut across the Batswana society." To fully comprehend the essence of Matjila's argument one must understand that the Batswana society is not strictly homogenous especially because the Batswana people are diverse and could also be found in various parts of Southern Africa. Principally, the Batswana people are found in large numbers in Botswana and South Africa, especially the North West Province, Northern Cape Province, and parts of the Gauteng and Free State Provinces. Batswana are also found in Namibia and some parts of Zimbabwe albeit in smaller numbers.

It must also be remembered that the current capital city of the North West province in South Africa, Mahikeng, was at one stage the capital city of Botswana during the time of colonialism when Botswana was referred to by the colonial name Bechuanaland. It is also important to note that Raditladi has families in Mafikeng. Apropos to this, Matjila argues that Raditladi's work is not widely known outside Botswana despite its potency and relevance to the current socio-political situation of all the "Batswana people in particular and the African people in general". I find Matjila's argument that "Raditladi demonstrates cultural hybridity and paints a world of poetic contrasts in his work to expand the horizons of lived experience for his readers," very compelling and well-argued. Matjila's insights in Raditladi's work also draw attention to a very important aspect that many critics often take for granted, that is, each culture is one way or another shaped by context and exposure to other cultures.

As Pierre Legrand puts it, "Every culture cultivates itself about other cultures and is cultivated by other cultures." Thus, no culture has emerged from the configuration of others at every moment of its history. Matjila further underscores this point when he says, that Raditladi's poetry blends indigenous African and Western themes and forms into a true Setswana literary gem.

In the same breath, Matjila's book provides depth on the issues of acculturation and enculturation that resulted from the encounter between the Setswana culture and Western culture as explored by Raditladi in some of his poems. Indeed, Matjila succeeds in highlighting the concerns of Raditladi and his call for the preservation of Setswana culture by referring to two specific poems in the chapter focusing on the "context of social change among the Batswana".

In the work cited by Matjila, Raditladi decries the obsession with material things brought by foreign cultures at the expense of the indigenous Batswana culture. Matjila correctly paints a picture of Raditladi as a renaissance man who ruminates about the good olden days when his people were self-reliant and able to produce whatever they needed for themselves without having to rely on mass production of goods that characterise much of the modern-day capitalist society. As Matjila points out the early Batswana "designed and manufactured their clothing, shoes, hats, transport facilities, musical instruments, and dancing gadgets." This history of manufacturing today stands in contrast with modern societies across much of Africa, which are consumed by an obsession with imported goods including clothing and jewelry.

Another unique aspect of Matjila's book was to tell Raditladi's life as a form of history from the margins. I find the section titled Raditladi through the Eyes of Bystanders very compelling and insightful. I call it history from the margins because it is about the life of Raditladi is constructed using the version of ordinary people, his contemporaries. These are the kind of people that former Bophuthatswana leader Lucas Mangope often referred to as "batho fela" (see Motsaathebe 2004). According to Mangope, these "batho fela" are very important because they often make an indelible contribution when no one is watching and without expecting anything in return. They are not in the public eye and often their accounts go unrecorded by the mainstream history that tends to privilege what Njabulo Ndebele referred to as the "spectacular."

The book, therefore, offers a useful, original contribution and adequately engages with recent scholarship using eclectic approaches that are multidimensional and account for the multidisciplinary of Raditladi's work. The title of the work "Poetry and Patronage" is also apt and compelling as the work correspondingly provides a glimpse into Raditladi's patronage relations with important chiefs in his home country of Botswana and the controversies involved. This aspect is little known to many of Raditladi's readers particularly those outside his home country, Botswana. This lucid political background puts into perspective themes and concerns in some of Raditladi's poems such as "Motlhokagae" (a sojourner) as the author correctly points out. This aspect solidifies the patronage treatise and polemics inherent in much of Raditladi's poems. I consider this aspect together with the quality of writing and cohesive argument to be amongst the most indelible strengths of this work. This will go a long way in making this book timeless in terms of its relevance and shelf life.

Matjila also makes an important observation that is gratifying when he notes that despite his Western education, Raditladi chose not to write in English as it was common at the time: "He was aware of the significance of writing in his language Setswana (page 6). This is an important point. Raditladi could have chosen to follow the trend of Plaatje or Achebe who published in English, but he did not. Thus, Matjila joins a significant conversation with language activists and scholars such as Motsaathebe (see Motsaathebe 2010, Motsaathebe 2011), and Shole and Poee, among others.

At a recent national seminar organised by PUKU¹ Children's literature, leading Setswana professor Shole Shole decried the publication of Sol Plaatje's novel *Mhudi*, saying that it robbed Setswana of the opportunity to count as the first language to produce a published novel. Prof Shole and another Setswana scholar Dr Eileen Pooe have argued that *Mhudi* is essentially a Setswana novel although it is written in English. Pooe who incidentally was my Setswana lecturer is adamant that Africans must use their languages not only informally but in formal discourse as well and has for her part practicalised this stance by writing her doctoral thesis in Setswana. This argument lends credibility to Matjila's observation that stresses Raditladi's foresight in writing in his Setswana language.

Thus, this book thrives in making an insightful contribution to an important area that is largely neglected despite its significance. It will certainly rekindle reading interest in early work produced by African writers. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first such elaborate contribution to look at an early African writer using a multiperspective approach that goes beyond an analysis of mere rhetorical devices in the work of the author being studied, to encapsulate an array of issues and contexts that paint a clear picture of the subject's political concerns and aspirations. It would undoubtedly become an important text for African language practitioners, writers, students, educators, and researchers. It would also be very useful as a prescribed material in courses that focus on African languages, African Literature, African studies, Afrikology, and Setswana studies in general.

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¹ Puku is a reading promotion and book curation organisation that aims to ensure that all children have access to quality, culturally relevant literature in all South African languages.