

Reconstruction of Womanhood: Narratives of Unmarried Basotho Women in Lesotho

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Abstract : -- Feminists across various contexts have written extensively on the subject of 'Woman.' Recently the question of difference; to account for the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity among women themselves has become a highly contested issue in feminist theories. Tensions have ensued where 'western feminisms' have been criticized for bias that is embedded in the objectification of 'different' women often regarded as 'other'; traditional, therefore inferior. Thus, it is argued that womanhood; a set of socially defined attributes appropriate for women, holds different meanings depending on the context in which it is defined. Drawing on decolonial feminist approaches, this qualitative study explored the constructions of 'womanhood' from the perspective of unmarried Basotho women in Lesotho, where womanhood is predominantly defined in marital terms. Through the narrated life-stories of twenty unmarried Basotho women, the study revealed that as opposed to the 'traditional' definition that accounts for a single attribute woman as 'wife,' unmarried Basotho women defined 'womanhood' in different ways that deconstructed fixed gendered categories. The women drew meaning from their past personal experiences of childhood to construct and re-construct womanhood in adulthood. By transforming their embodied experiences of hardship and sorrow into valuable constructs with which they self-evaluated as resilient and perseverant, the women constructed a base for self-affirmation as woman. In addition, the women anchored their constructions and reconstructions of woman by transforming the meanings attached to the realms of respectability, sexuality and motherhood. Thus, to the question; what is a Woman? In part, the study concluded that there is no such thing as a 'unitary' definition of womanhood, instead Mosotho womanhood has always been and will always be in a state of flux; bearing multiplicity and complexity. This study highlights the need to exercise caution when using western concepts to understand the experiences of women in local African contexts. In order to decolonize feminist scholarship, African feminisms need to re-construct conceptual and theoretical frameworks appropriate for analyzing and understanding gender issues in African contexts.

Keywords : decoloniality, feminism, Lesotho, womanhood

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