



Are Namibian women being decolonised? Causes of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as presented in !Khaxas' anthology, *We Must Choose Life* (2008)

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Abstract

The paper examines the causes of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Namibia as presented by Namibian women writers in the anthology 'We Must Choose Life' (2008). Gender-based violence against women is a worldwide problem and a global concern. Many women globally, Namibian women included, have remained in abusive relationships because of their dependence on the perpetrators of violence for socio-economic support. As explicated by the poems, some Namibian men treat women as the offenders, and the treatment of women at the hands of the men is compared to Apartheid, slavery, and colonialism. It is safe to say that Namibian women are viewed through the lens of the "aristocratic mind," where they are viewed as weak, oppressed and marginalised in their respective societies. The anthology, 'We Must Choose Life' (2008), compiled by a Namibian feminist, Elisabeth !Khaxas, breaks the silence of Namibian women and evinces their desire to work towards equality and civilised societies. The paper employs a content analysis approach to analyse the projections of GBV in selected poems and short stories from the anthology. A textual analysis of the creative texts is also undertaken, couched within the theoretical framework of Ecofeminism, which examines the suffering of women from the dominant influence of a male-oriented society. In this respect, specific forms of the abuse of women have been identified as gender-based violence with a level of acceptability. The paper establishes the proliferation in Namibia, of trends in which, some women have endured long-standing abusive relationships because of an over-dependence on the male perpetrators of violence for socio-economic support, fear of the perpetrators' reprisals, as well as conformity to cultural and religious practices. These narratives bear witness to the bravery of Namibian women to express their anguish and suffering through their own words.

Keywords: Gender Based Violence, Namibia, Poetry, Patriarchy, Ecofeminism, Culture

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Introduction

In the last few years, Namibia has witnessed surges in some of the most heinous forms of GBV possible, such as passion killings committed by intimate partners in relationships. The dominant theme in Namibian gender literature suggests that Namibian women are among the world's most oppressed. It is frequently asserted that some men have designed oppressive patterns against women for them to be seen but not heard (Nauyoma, 2020). Namibian women have been constrained, restricted, and inhibited from self-discovery and the socio-political and economic advancement that entails. Nauyoma believes GBV to be the exercise of skewed power relations as well as the exacerbation of gender inequalities. In light of the observed instances of GBV in Namibia, the question to ask is: Who empowers men to determine women's position in the social hierarchy? One could argue that the violence perpetrated by men is intended to silence women in their pursuit for equal rights, thereby preventing women from accessing opportunities and resources (Puri, 2010).

Furthermore, young men, for example, are being raised to feel superior to the girl child from childhood and treated as such through a carefully orchestrated and designed systematic plan of preconceptions recognised by the family and society. Generally, culture values masculine effectiveness more than female productivity. This is so because the patriarchal project that characterises most African cultures allows for the enactment of gender inequalities – viewing them in most instances as acceptable common practices (Sabao, 2013). Over 30 years since Namibia attained her independence, significant progress has been made in various studies with regards to how to prevent violence against women in Namibia. The scope of the problem and risk factors for GBV are well documented, as well as its serious mental and physical health consequences for women's lives. World Health Organisation (WHO) (2013) indicates that from 2005 nearly one-third (31%) of Namibian women who had an intimate partner experienced physical violence caused by men and 17% experienced sexual violence (pp. 243-245). If these figures are amalgamated, 38%, over one out of three women, have suffered from one or each of those kinds of violence in Namibia as also projected in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008).

The anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008) is a collection of short stories and poetry penned by Namibian women about culture, violence and HIV/AIDS. It reflects the voices of women in Namibia who are in anguish, grief and defeat as a result of GBV in their homes, families, and communities. As demonstrated in the anthology, the women convert their silence into words and action. In addition, in recent times GBV has reached its highest ever recorded levels in Namibia, leaving families and communities more vulnerable to poverty, particularly women. Poudel (2011) posits that women in Namibia do not have an autonomous identity; men inherit and control most property with the concomitant responsibility to support wives. In unravelling these issues, this paper explores the causes of GBV as evinced in the anthology, *We Must Choose Life* (2008).

Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative desktop research approach to examine women's relationships in an environment characterised by gender-based violence; a phenomenon of a qualitative nature as presented in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008). Creswell (2014)

defines qualitative research as the method for investigating and being able to comprehend the meaning attributed to a social or human issue or circumstance by individuals or groups. The inherent relationship between humans and the environment cannot be easily reduced to numbers, thus the relevance of this approach lies in its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of the paper's core concerns. The literary work for this paper may contribute significantly to the Namibian knowledge base on literature. While the anthology contains 115 short stories and 45 poems written in English by Namibian women, the purposively sampled 10 texts for analysis based on the judgment of their topicality to cover the study's core aims. The primary data analysis method used in the study was content and textual analyses, which were accomplished through a nuanced examination of the contemporary realities confronting the people.

Literature Review

The Current Gender-Based Violence Situation in Namibia

In the field of African literary studies, scholars are committed to conducting social-life studies on issues regarded as current affairs. GBV against women and children is highlighted through various forms of violence and then labelled as human rights violations (Nauyoma, 2020). It is, therefore, critical to contextualise how GBV has been researched in previous Namibian studies. The Legal Assistance Centre (2012) explains that "the disadvantage of violence against women in contemporary Namibian society is influenced by the historical power imbalance between men and women" (p. 157). Furthermore, GBV is also motivated by cultural and economic factors. For example, in some Namibian traditions, a woman is expected to submit completely to her husband as the head of the household. Oliver (2020) believes that cultural beliefs and practices are notions of masculinity in Namibia. For example, the gender power imbalance is one of the biggest contributors to GBV, worsened by the constant alcoholism in men.

Tjitemisa (2014) indicates that Namibia has one of the highest rates of GBV in the SADCR. Furthermore, UNFPA (2016) notes that the Namibian Police identified five (5) of the most frequently reported forms of GBV in the country as assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm (22,174 reported cases); common assault (18,054); rape (2,839); attempted murder (1,138); and murder (734). As a result of these factors, GBV is a pervasive problem in Namibia. Namibian women face a range of forms of violence, and some of these and others are detailed in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008). Moreover, the Ohangwena region recorded 595 cases from December 2020 to October 2021, a situation which police commander Sibolile described as "unpleasant and shameful" points to alcohol consumption and substance abuse have been identified as factors that contribute to GBV (Nembwaya, 2021).

Namibia, despite having international gender equality and women's rights instruments, continues to record high levels of violence against women (Amon, 2008). For instance, Thobella Loretta was raped and murdered in 2014 in Rosh Pinah (Haufiku, 2014). Justine Amweelo, a student at the International University of Management (IUM), was fatally stabbed by her former boyfriend in Windhoek (Ikela, 2019). Moreover, a female teacher was strangled to death and buried by her boyfriend in Rundu (NAMPA, 2018), while Naimi Ngambo Kalenga became the region's latest reported victim of gender-based violence (GBV) after she was hacked to death in Sikali village (Muyamba, 2019).



A review of previous studies on GBV conducted by other researchers laid the groundwork for this study in terms of gender-based violence in Namibia. Women's coping strategies were the focus of Shigwedha's (2018) study. The study notes that dominant male traditions and masculinity conditioned men to physically abuse their partners. Kamaya (2018) also examines male and female media reporting on gender-based violence in Namibia and establishes ten forms of GBV, ranging from murder, rape, and domestic violence to child abuse and physical violence. Matsi (2018) studies vulnerabilities that contribute to GBV against disabled women in Namibia's Khomas Region with the goal of understanding the challenges faced by women with disabilities in the Khomas Region. The study identifies numerous cases of disabled women being abused, but only a few were reported to the GBV Investigative Unit (Namibia). Furthermore, Nauyoma (2020) examined the literary representation of gender-based violence in Namibia and establishes that gender roles, norms and assumptions are a repository of violent techniques and acceptance. In this regard, specific forms of female abuse have been identified as acceptable gender-based violence.

In Namibia, instances of GBV have been gradually increasing in recent years, as noted by various scholars (See, Edwards-Jauch, 2016; Makando, 2017; Nauyoma; 2020). Despite legislation such as the Combating Domestic Violence Act of 2003 and the Combating Rape Act of 2000, Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a national concern in Namibia. Gender-based violence has been the focus of daily media coverage and government efforts in Namibia. Namibia has made progress towards meeting its obligations under these instruments through the adoption of progressive legislation such as the Combating Rape Act 2 and the Combating Domestic Violence Act 3 (Ddamulira Mujuzi, 2015). Correspondingly, policies such as the 2010-2020 National Gender Policy and the 2012-2016 National Plan of Action on Gender-Based Violence have been implemented. For example, police officers, social workers, and traditional and religious leaders all deal with cases of GBV. Cases brought to the police's attention are reported to the charge office. Serious GBV cases, such as rape, murder, or threatening with a firearm, are referred to the investigation unit within the police station. Violence against women and children is referred to the Women and Child Protection Unit (WCPU), which also has social workers on staff.

Despite Namibia being a signatory to varied international agreements protecting the rights of people, GBV continues unabated in Namibia (Oliver, 2011). This has prompted the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGECW) to come up with a campaign to teach people about their rights (Dausab, 2020). Furthermore, changes to the Combating of Domestic Violence Act of 2003 in the National Assembly have been tabled in 2021 (Haiping, 2021). In general, the amendment bill seeks to protect vulnerable women, men, and children who continue to suffer atrocities of violence committed at home and elsewhere. If approved, victims of domestic violence or gender-based violence could obtain a protective order by filling in an affidavit at the nearest police station.

Understanding Theoretical Term: Ecofeminism

The central arguments within this paper are couched within the theoretical lenses of Ecofeminism - and the term has been defined by different thinkers. Cudworth (2005) defines Ecofeminism in the context of male oppression as it analyses the relationship between women

and nature. The usage of the term reflects the ability of women to bring about an ecological transition that would ensure human survival on the earth. This would involve new relationships between men and women as well as humans and nature (Adams, 1993; Merchant 1990; Warren, 2000).

Puleo (2011) expresses similar sentiments, noting that ecofeminism asserts women's suffering as a result of the dominant influence of a male-oriented society. According to this definition, the environment accommodates different people in a society, including traditional people, the elderly, frail and sick people, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups. As a result, the majority of GBV cases against women occur in the context of the environment. In the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008), such qualities are prevalent where men have an impact on women through excessive traditional malpractice, thus merging the perspectives of Ecofeminism.

When it comes to gender-related issues and environmental concerns, Namibia is not an exception. According to some Ecofeminists, women have a more intimate relationship with nature than men because women are typically passive, as is nature (Puleo, 2011). On the other hand, some Ecofeminists, argue that this relationship between women and nature develops socially; thus, Ecofeminism provides a common ground for women and men that helps us understand the relationship with nature (Mies & Shiva, 1993). This is supported by the position that was taken on the basis that the GBV depicted in stories in the anthology written by Namibian women are examples of Ecofeminist literary texts.

Moreover, in most societies, including Namibia, men are often regarded as superior to women, although culture appears to be superior to nature. According to Plumwood (2011), men generally regard themselves as superior to the environment, and masculinity is viewed as the villain behind the ecofeminist crisis. The Earth is a place for all living organisms, whereas homes are habitats for groups of humans where GBV occurs in most cases. Women may lead a life of "self-dependence and self-reliance," and learning will encourage women to do so (Gray, 2004, 137). We agree with Gray's sentiments as reflective of one of the major themes proliferating in the anthology; thus the oppression of women and its connection to nature is critical to understanding women's battery. Some Namibian women may find it difficult to define emotional abuse and therefore, the only way to define it is through telling experiences (IKhaxas, 2008). Although the experience may be abstract, the ability of literature to capture qualitative attributes was crucial in bringing these experiences to light through the critical analysis of the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008) of this paper.

Analysis and Findings

Traditional Beliefs, Cultural Practices, and Gender Inequality

Despite international conventions and local legislation aimed at preventing GBV, incidents appear to be more prevalent in certain Namibian communities. Traditional cultural practices encapsulate the values and beliefs held by members of a community over time, frequently spanning generations. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2015) indicates that each social class in the world has unique traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which favour all members, while at the same time harm a particular group of some women. Incidents of GBV seem to be more prevalent in some Namibian communities



despite international conventions and local legislation enacted to prevent it (WHO, 2013). Many scholars have deliberated on the issues of women and their plight in a traditional African setting. It seems that power imbalances in gender inequality and patriarchal and traditional practices biased against women seem to be the main root causes of GBV in Namibia. Equally, Fonchingong (2006) contests that traditional and cultural beliefs are the centre of gender-based violence. From a literary point of view, it seems that those traditional beliefs and cultural practices favour men over women. The traditional practices include Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); early marriage; practices that prevent women from regulating their fertility; traditional birth practices; dowry or lobola payment (WHO, 2013).

Furthermore, women are often overwhelmed by responsibilities in their lives, such as performing traditional roles (IKhaxas, 2008). This task is done according to the cultural beliefs that women are taught to be inferior to men. Thiara and Hague (2011) point out that traditional customs such as lobola (bride price paid to the parents) in many African traditions tend to fuel gender inequality. Marriage negotiations are usually conducted between senior men in the two families, with no consultation from the women. In the short stories "*My parents decided that I had to marry*" and "*Stolen Youth*" characters are forced into marriages that have been arranged by their parents. In "*Stolen Youth*" for example, the girl's parents argue that:

"We have groomed you into a responsible woman. Time has come for you to take on the role of a woman" (IKhaxas, 2008, p. 21).

This leaves a lot to be desired in terms of behavioural patterns and the presence of parents who practice patriarchal social practices. It appears that African tradition requires young people to show respect to elders, which allows parents to make decisions on a marriage and arrange a wedding without the girl's knowledge/consent. Adding on, some young girls are attempting to gain independence by making educational strides in contexts in which they find themselves in violent marriages. However, traditional marriage is arranged in most cases, limiting their opportunities for a self-sufficient life.

Lobola can be viewed as a symptom of male dominance and power inequality in society, which results in men automatically becoming the head of the family. Lobola is a noble idea in some cultures where it is used as appreciation for the value of raising a woman, as well as a token of appreciation (Chiweshe, 2016). However, it appears that people have commercialised lobola in the modern era. When tradition is commercialised, it harms gender equality and the full realisation of women's rights. For instance, in the short story "*Lobola should not be a punishment*" a fisherman paid the woman's parents four heads of cattle. The man began beating her and referring to her wife as a lesbian, a slut, and a lazy woman. When the woman informed her parents about the problems in the marriage, the parents advised her that:

"The problems were inherent in the marriage and they had no right since the man had paid for lobola, she should return and accept any kind of treatment" (Khaxas, 2008, p. 198).

When confronted with such an event, it is self-evident that paying lobola gave that man the notion that he had the right to abuse and treat women as property. Already, this demonstrates



that men's selfishness and greed are masked behind cultural practices that manipulate women in society.

Moreover, the notion that a family must have a male presence to be considered "whole" and "functional" while harming women in the process, is another cause of gender-based violence. This is evident in most of the short stories, such as "*Culture can turn into danger*", "*Katuna, the victim of tradition*," and "*A love slave*." The character in the short story for example, "*Culture can turn into danger*," is overshadowed by the man who strongly believes in traditional practices. Even after the woman advised her husband to visit the HIV test facility, the man refuses because he could not be persuaded by a woman. This indeed illustrates the traditional rituals of believers of African traditional healing practices when the healer says:

The spirit of your late wife is in your room, and you are eating, sleeping, and doing everything with her. You are supposed to be washed with human blood because this ghost is too powerful, and you could lose your current wife as well. Your house should be washed with blood so the ghost will turn away. You have to pay money and agree to kill one of your sisters so that her blood can be used for cleansing (!Khaxas, 2008, p. 168).

The preceding quotation demonstrates that traditional healers can be held accountable for distorting information to manipulate people who practice and believe in African traditional rituals, some of which benefit men while others primarily harm women. It is evident that in the short story "*Culture can turn into Danger*," five women die as a result of traditional beliefs, leaving the real problem unaddressed. Women are the majority of victims since they are dominated by men in society. This type of practice is a violation of women's rights and makes them vulnerable in society.

Furthermore, in short stories such as "*On the Herero culture*" and "*On the Caprivi culture*," harmful traditional practices can be observed. The stories show that culture puts women at risk for HIV and AIDS. In the short story "*On the Herero Culture*," for example, Herero girls/women are deprived of their rights because they are forced to have sexual relations with their cousins to prepare them for womanhood. In addition, married women cannot refuse to sleep with their husbands without using a condom, and if they do, the man will say, "fine, just give me back my six head of cattle that I paid lobola" (!Khaxas, 2008, p.183). This puts women in a vulnerable position and exposes them to diseases.

There are cultural practices that are harmful to the physical integrity of the person, particularly women, as some may cause terrible physical pain, while others can humiliate and objectify women. In the short story "*On the Caprivi culture*" for instance, girls at the age of 11 years are forced to pull their labia minora and make it longer (!Khaxas, 2008). As referenced in "*On the Herero Culture*," Caprivian girls are expected to sleep with their cousin or male relative to be tested to see if they can perform good sex; this is the first stage of preparing for womanhood (!Khaxas, p.189). if a married woman loses her husband to death, for example, she is dressed in black and told to have sex with a man without a condom once to clear the evil spirit from her late husband (p. 189). This cleansing may involve forced sexual intercourse with a woman since, it is a belief that if this practice is not followed, bad luck will afflict the family.



Domestic Violence

There is almost no country where domestic violence against women does not exist, regardless of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity, or age (Laeheem & Boonprakarn, 2014). Domestic violence between spouses has long been a major issue in many societies, affecting victims as well as family members who witnessed the violence. At the moment, some societies do not pay more attention to domestic violence, since violence between spouses is considered a personal matter or a problem for the family members while violating women's human rights in the process (Laeheem & Boonprakarn, 2014).

Domestic violence, according to Kongsakon and Pojam (2008), is a pattern of acts that injure the other person physically or sexually, and it occurs between husband and wife. Contrary to popular belief, some men still believe that family feuds and conflicts are normal in a society. Domestic violence is another form of violence that is observed in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008) demonstrated by how many Namibian women have been abused in their own homes, places where they should feel safe and protected. When people have heated arguments at home, for example, the atmosphere around them becomes tense, which can lead to domestic violence. The same situation can be observed in the short story "*I wish I could predict the future.*" Ndapewa and John's marriage was wonderful until discord arose between them. When John begins having extramarital affairs, the beating of Ndapewa begins; women are frequently forced to bear the consequences of male infidelity (!Khaxas, 2008, p. 156). It is the author's literary ability to recreate events as they occurred, as well as a fictionalisation of history that is charged with verisimilitude.

The textual analysis makes it clear that when Ndapewa asks the husband where he has been, all she gets is a punch, a kick, or expletive words. Additionally, domestic violence events are expressed in the following ways: John would remind Ndapewa to be thankful he married her; "There are many women out there crying for me, and if you are not happy with my attitude, pack your belongings and leave, and make sure you pay the lobola back" (!Khaxas, 2008, p. 156). The heart of the debate for John centres on the relative importance of patriarchy as the issues of gender and power are the ultimate root of intimate partner violence. Domestic violence appears to be a culturally appropriate way for men to assert dominance and control when their masculinity is challenged.

Furthermore, a woman who has been beaten by her husband or partner, for instance, is likely to be psychologically damaged. Feiring and Taska (2005) assert that a woman who has been sexually abused by a man is usually a vulnerable person who feels complete shame and worthlessness in society. The story "*Raped by the Stepfather,*" for example, revolves around a 14-year-old girl who was raped at gunpoint by her stepfather. The girl dropped out of school as a result of this horrific encounter because she had nightmares and was upset by the accident. Women who have suffered abuse are at risk of a lot of negative consequences that can put them on a destructive path for their future.

Writings by Namibian women on culture and violence in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008) have provided other women with a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel. It is a death trap of course for many Namibian women as they are powerless to negotiate safer sex practices since a good "marriageable woman" is believed to be silent, obedient, and shy to the



husband (!Khaxas, 2008). Indeed, women's contributions to the growth and development of society are real, genuine, remarkable, and worthy of acknowledgement. However, Andima and Tjiramanga (2014) contend that women receive little or no recognition, and as a result, they are oppressed, depressed, subjected, and neglected. Pre-literate women were victims of domestic violence, as presented by Namibian women in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008).

Conclusion

This paper examines the causes of gender-based violence as presented by the Namibian women in the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008). Women's dignity and rights are violated in a variety of ways, most notably through harmful cultural practices that are still prevalent in some communities. The time has come to end the silences and taboos surrounding all forms of cultural violence. The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate how Ecofeminism theory can be used as lenses to analyse African literature. Women's writings in Africa add new thematic dimensions to the African literary tradition, and these new propositions necessitate the development of new theories to address them. The anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008) depicts how women in Namibia are disenfranchised by a patriarchal society that nullifies and represses them. Cultural beliefs empower men to believe that beating women is normal in some way, thereby keeping Namibian women at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Cultural beliefs empower men to feel that beating women is normal in one way or another to keep Namibian women lower down the hierarchy in society. Some men are inconsiderate of intimate feelings and thus, women are not given the chance to demand their rights.

The positive and inspirational ways in which women open their deep-seated wounds of abuse are revealed through the exploration of gender-based violence events in the cited literary work. One visible social tumour exposed in the anthology is the use of culture and tradition to hurt, abuse, and humiliate women. The paper has shown that Ecofeminism theory is relevant and applicable to African literature in terms of enhancing the author's message. As a result, literature is used as a medium to clarify aspects of women's experiences that cannot be expressed in ordinary modes of speech and may even be beyond human comprehension. Literature, therefore, is a powerful tool that has the potential to shape public values as it can express human beings' real-life situations. It is through literature that suspicions can be researched, tested, and explored to eliminate the threads that may be the stumbling blocks to people's rights. The study confirmed that most Namibian women suffer at the hands of Namibian men. Finally, women are empowered to take control of their lives through the anthology *We Must Choose Life* (2008), which serves as a platform for revealing the painful and traumatic effects of gender-based violence on women's lives in Namibia. The literary platform, as demonstrated in this paper, represents a powerful tool in transforming their silence into society.

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