

Botswana Women Write.

Maitseo M. M. Bolaane, Mary S. Lederer, Leloba S. Molema and Connie Rapoo (eds.).

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Botswana Women Write is the first anthology of women's writings from Botswana, with contributions from over sixty Botswana women in varying capacities. The anthology accommodates a range of narratives and representations. Through a collection of short stories, poems, novel extracts, traditional songs and poetry, alongside a selection of letters, memoirs, court statements, journalistic works, interviews and speeches; the compilation is thus a fairly inclusive representation of various facets of Tswana life as seen through the eyes of women who are either native Botswana or resided in the country for a time. *Botswana Women Write* subsequently serves to give context to and provide elaboration on a national historical background with limited archival evidence, especially within the country itself or within the institutional and digital realms.

Botswana Women Write is edited by Maitseo M. M. Bolaane, Mary S. Lederer, Leloba S. Molema and Connie Rapoo—all well-established, nationally and internationally acclaimed academics in their respective fields. With writing from prominent figures such as Bessie Head, Unity Dow, Wame Molefhe, Tjawangwa Dema, B. K. Knight, Lilian Ngwenya Khupe, Mabel Kebotsamang and a foreword by Athaliah Molokomme—this anthology is notable, and spectacularly so, for a nation that has yet to propagate an imperishable leftist, radical, or overtly pro-black feminist movement: “Over the years there has been a substantial movement of women activists into and out of government, and yet today women activists consider the government to be less receptive and less responsive than ever” (Bauer 33). The fact that the first comprehensive anthology to be produced by Botswana Women is published outside of the country, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, over fifty years after the country accomplished independence, could be seen as reflective of larger cultural and institutional issues that result in a failure to preserve a matrilineal credo which at its crux, edifies Botswana's cultural identity.

Embracing documents and narratives that, in their content and reference, span from as early as 1925 to as late as its year of publication—2019—the anthology, in this way, doubly serves as a historical document for a country whose ephemeral, oral culture

is often to the detriment of its written archive. To archive in this apparent and intentional way is not only to acknowledge the harm of a colonial and male-centered legacy, through both act and omission, but is also to purposefully create circumstances that allow for remedy and resolution through re-narration and a repositioning of the historical vantage point. This is crucial for Botswana whose traditionally patriarchally inclined culture has created an environment that systematically quiets and erases women's voices, narratives and experiences.

The incorporation of both fictional and non-fictional works effectuates, in a telling of a generalised narrative, a sensitive subjectivity which one could argue is necessary to comprehensively illustrate the nuances of such a particular positionality. Considering that a vast majority of readily available writing and research on and of Botswana women has been largely in relation to gender-based violence and the still prevalent HI-Virus, this anthology challenges these quantitative analyses by rather making prominent the subtleties behind and beyond measurable data. To mention this is not to discount the importance of that kind of research. Rather, it is to use this juncture to mention that there are more holistic ways of interpreting the lived experiences and experiential spaces that Botswana women inhabit. The inclusion of legal reform documents is a testament to the democratic and social advancements afforded to the country solely through the efforts of the early women's movement—unambiguously through the work of non-profit and non-governmental entities such as Emang Basadi which can be said to have established what we now understand to be the quotidian of gender-equity pedagogy and proselytisation in the context of Botswana.

On the 11th of June 2019, Botswana's high court declared section 164 of its penal code that criminalised homosexual acts unconstitutional and through this change in legislature, various concerns related to marginalised gender identities were brought to the forefront. This can be seen as a highly publicised first step, nationally, towards an acknowledgement of the broad spectrum upon which 'Botswana Women' lie. It is integral to take note of this to acknowledge the strides the country has taken as far as gender reform and transformation which is not overtly evident with regards to this anthology and its titling. It, however, does not dismiss the discrete and distinct experiences of cis-gendered Botswana women and remains invaluable in that regard. The inclusion of more expressive, sublime pieces of writing in the style of short stories, extracts

from novels, traditional and neoteric poems provides a hearty exemplification of the connotations of *bosadi* (womanhood) as experienced and inured by Botswana women. Significantly in this regard, the chapters of the anthology explore the motions and *parti pris* of female education in a 'new nation', love, marriage, child-bearing, widowhood and the metaphysical, as well as the tension between colonial and customary laws and the effect of said experiences on the current reappraisal of womanhood. Worthwhile to mention is the (in)accessibility of the work. Noted by Gretchen Bauer in *Update on the Women's movement: Have the Women stopped talking?* (2011) as one of the primary reasons for the inability of the movement to remain within reach of the majority, was its failure "to broaden its geographic base beyond the capital city and its socioeconomic base beyond educated, professional women" (Bauer 31). So while this anthology is a necessary piece of literature, it does, in way of language, content and ease of access, speak more to the 'educated and professional'.

"The Women's Manifesto: A Summary of Botswana Women's Issues and Demands (1996)" is aptly placed as a pre-conclusion to the book. The manifesto's introduction proclaims women to be a "very important human resource" (519). To expand on this point as one of acute significance; Botswana operates, on a macro-level, as a patriarchal society. Yet, at micro-levels, in terms of influence in decision making at household and societal level—Botswana women epitomise the roles of cultural keepers or curators. While men are seen to control and direct the flow of power—and though their influence in this regard is considerable—their exercise of power cannot be said to be as compelling from an ethnographic standpoint.

Work cited

Bauer, Gretchen. "Update on the Women's Movement in Botswana: Have Women Stopped Talking?" *African Studies Review* vol. 54, no. 2, 2011, pp. 23–46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2011.0040>.

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