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Political activism and transgender advocacy through poetry: The case of Lee Mokobe

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of political activism and transgender advocacy within Lee Mokobe's poetry, utilising a multidisciplinary methodology that combines thematic literary analysis, socio-political critique, and biographical context. Mokobe, a Cape Town-born transgender poet now based in the United States, employs vivid imagery, narrative voice, and poetic devices to explore themes of identity, societal expectations, resilience, religious conflict, and the quest for acceptance. His poem "What It's Like to Be Transgender" serves as a case study to demonstrate how personal experience becomes a powerful vehicle for activism and education, highlighting the ongoing struggles faced by transgender individuals both in South Africa and globally. The analysis situates Mokobe's work within broader socio-political environments, contrasting South Africa's progressive legal frameworks with persistent societal stigma, violence, and discrimination. The main contribution of this research is to underscore the transformative potential of poetry as a tool for advocacy, emphasising its role in fostering empathy, raising awareness, and influencing educational curricula and public discourse. Through detailed thematic and stylistic analysis, the paper reveals how Mokobe's poetry not only articulates personal narratives but also challenges systemic injustices, making a compelling case for art as a catalyst for social change and a platform for marginalised voices.

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Introduction

It is at the intersection of art and activism that a strong platform is given by marginalised voices not only to be heard but to instigate social change. One such example is Lee Mokobe, a transgender poet and activist born in Cape Town, South Africa, who now lives in the United States. On his part, Mokobe is a poet whose works point to subjective experiences about gender identity but make a broader critique against a society and political systems that marginalize transgender people. The paper investigates the biography of Mokobe, his critical stance towards the treatment of transgender people in South Africa, and how he had made poetry his armament for political activism and education. In this way, Lee Mokobe's poem "What it's like to be transgender" is an ode drowned exploration into the transgender experience voiced through vivid imagery and personal anecdotes.

This thematic analysis is purposed to deconstruct the major themes present in the poem: disruptive to the intricate interplay identity plays with societal expectations, religious conflict, and quest for acceptance. In "What it's like to be transgender," Lee Mokobe has spoken dense poetry, speaking to levels of personal and collective experience for transgender people. The poem also very strongly conveys social critique to struggles and triumphs of being transgender in a world that all too often misunderstands or rejects them for what they are. What It's Like to Be Transgender" by Lee Mokobe is at the same time both an extremely powerful articulation of his personal journey and that of far too many transgender people. He speaks finely nuanced in imagery, resonating deep emotional cadences in recounting his experiences about his gender identity, societal expectations, and quests for acceptance in autobiographical ways.

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Lee Mokobe is an award-winning slam poet and founder of Vocal Revolutionaries, a platform that empowers marginalised voices through spoken word. In 2015. He is from Cape Town and was born in 1996, Mokobe came out as a transgender male and has risen to prominence in both the artistic and activist communities. He is now based in the United States, working as a teaching artist, further taking his activism into many works and public appearances for transgender rights. His work tries to critique problems relating to freedom of expression and various dimensions of liberty that are mostly under attack from societal constraints against transgender people in South Africa (Studocu, 2019).

Literature Review

Global History of Transgender Rights and Activism

Early movements and recognition

Transgender activism only picked up in the middle of the 20th century, and the early days of this activism were usually part of the larger LGBTQ+ rights movement. The turning point toward LGBTQ+ rights in the United States came with the riots at Stonewall in 1969. Groups like the Gay Liberation Front, formed in 1969, and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, formed in 1970, gave the first real avenues for transgender voices (Stryker et al., 2008: 11).

Legal milestones

There have been several legal improvements made for transgender rights during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. “In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association took "homosexuality" off its list of mental disorders” (www.myjoyonline.com, 2014), which went a long way toward de-stigmatising LGBTQ+ identities, including transgender people. Nonetheless, "gender identity disorder" remained until it was reclassified as "gender dysphoria" in 2013 (Drescher, 2010: 427).

Internationally, there were variously significant steps forward by many countries. In 2002, the stage was already being set by Argentina, which had passed one of the world's most progressive gender identity laws, giving the right to change one's gender on official documents without needing to prove medical necessity. While in Europe, in addition to the jurisprudence, it is the European Court of Human Rights that has been at the forefront of protecting the rights of transgender persons with leading decisions such as Christine Goodwin, United Kingdom, 2002, which clearly laid down a person's right to legal gender recognition.

Transgender Rights and Activism in South Africa

Apartheid era

According to Cock (2003: 35) the apartheid period in South Africa was marked with a lot of legal and social oppression, with very minimal protection or even recognition of LGBTQ+ persons. Transgender people have reported that they suffered extensive discrimination and violence due to their respective races and gender.

Post-apartheid developments

According to Cameron and Gevisser (2013) the end of apartheid in 1994 and the establishment of democratic South Africa put human rights at the forefront, which naturally included transgender rights. Entrenched in the Constitution of 1996, this radically new document introduced sexual orientation into the charter of protected categories and paved the way for future improvements in LGBTQ+ rights. Section 9 of South Africa's Constitution is the cornerstone of non-discrimination legislation in the country, forbidding unfair discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act Established Equality Courts to hear complaints in accordance with Section 9 rights. A 2015 report by the Legal Resources Centre and Gender Dynamix gives a detailed account of the problems with Act 49, which allowed for transgender and intersex persons to change their identification documents and have them reflect their gender identity. However, challenges arise in the way the Department of Home Affairs enacted it. The report also points to several other issues, including: the unlawful rejection of applications in which a person was unable to provide proof of gender reassignment surgery; processing times of one to seven years; and forcing those who are married to divorce, since marriage law differs for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. In 2014, transgender woman Nadia Swanepoel staged a hunger strike over the denial of an ID reflective of her name and gender. After losing her application documents several times and four reapplications, she was told she would have to get genital surgery to fall under Act 49's scope. Media and legal intervention helped speed up the process of updating her identity documents (Meer et al., 2017).

Legal improvement and social advancement

South Africa adopted the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act in 2003, which gave transgender persons the right to change their gender status on documents (Deyi, 2017: 128). This move was a step ahead, though this legislation has been heavily criticised for its strict medical requirements. In a 1998 Constitutional Court judgment, Judge Ackermann, in Section 21 of the ruling, established that non-discrimination and equal rights regarding ‘sexual orientation’ ought to be broadly interpreted to include ‘transsexual’ people. Therefore, transgender people in South Africa are entitled to equal protection and non-discrimination under the law. The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act, No. 49 of 2003 (Act 49) seeks to legally enable transgender and intersex people to amend their identification documentation from the gender assigned at birth to reflect their gender identity (Meer et al.,

2017). Civil society organisations have been on the front line in the realisation of transgender rights in South Africa. Organisations like Gender DynamiX, formed in 2005, provide support, advocacy, and education for transgender persons while raising awareness among the wider society on transgender issues (Prinsloo, 2011: 32).

Current challenges

Despite these advances, huge challenges still exist for transgender persons in South Africa, including elevated levels of violence, discrimination within health care, and societal stigma. These are continuous struggles in which activists fight to resolve, lobbying for more inclusive policies and greater enforcement of existing legal protections. Legal Improvement and Social Advancement (Cameron and Gevisser, 2013). According to Nduna (2013: 51) South Africa adopted the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act in 2003, which gave transgender persons the right to change their gender status on documents. This move was a step ahead, though this legislation has been heavily criticised for its strict medical requirements.

Civil society organisations have been on the front line in the realisation of transgender rights in South Africa. Organisations like Gender DynamiX, formed in 2005, provide support, advocacy, and education for transgender persons while raising awareness among the wider society on transgender issues (Prinsloo, 2011:32). Muller (2017:3) states that despite these advances, huge challenges still exist for transgender persons in South Africa, including elevated levels of violence, discrimination within health care, and societal stigma. These are continuous struggles in which activists fight to resolve, lobbying for more inclusive policies and greater enforcement of existing legal protections.

Comparative Analysis: South Africa and the Global Context

According to Currah, Juang, and Minter (2006: 353) while South Africa has made remarkable steps forward in terms of recognising and protecting transgender rights, it is truly imperative to put such progress within a global context. Like most countries, South Africa remains trapped in the dilemma of translating very impressive improvements in the legal domain into tangible social changes. The experiences of transgender people in South Africa mirror global patterns of marginalisation, violence, and activism.

Table1: Key Legal Development Related to Transgender Rights

Year	Legal/Legal Milestone	Description	Region/Country
1973	Removal of homosexuality from mental disorder list	American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder	United States
2002	Progressive gender identity law	Argentina passed one of the world's most progressive laws allowing gender change on documents without proof of medical necessity	Argentina
2002	European Court of Human Rights decisions	Christine Goodwin case affirms the right to legal gender recognition in the UK	Europe
2003	Sex Description and Status Act	South Africa grants transgender persons the right to change gender on documents	South Africa
2013	Reclassification of gender identity disorder	DSM-5 reclassifies "gender identity disorder" as "gender dysphoria"	United States
2014	Media and legal intervention in identity document cases	Speeding up of processes for transgender identity documentation after activism	South Africa

Research and Methodology

In this paper, Lee Mokobe's "What It's Like to Be Transgender" poem is analysed within the framework of political activism and advocacy towards the transgender community as a multidisciplinary methodology. This include thematic notes pertaining to literary analysis, sociopolitical critique, and biographical context for the proper appreciation of effect and meaning left by the work of Mokobe.

Literary Analysis

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis of Mokobe's poetry shows a strong focus on Identity and likewise self-acceptance. His works are similar to those of Agha Shahid Ali, which focus on lost language and identity too (Perveen and Farid, 2022: 370), the poems which Mokobe composes usually search for self-identity relating to gender issues, and it also tries to seek for acceptance within the person and from the society at large. His poetry mostly involve his personal experience, and the narrative aligns with thematic structure which is found in other literary analysis. One of such works is the computational model application as applied to Emily Dickinson's work which revealed some thematic elements (Omar, 2020).

Another theme that has been significant in the poetry of Mokobe, is the resilience in it. His works usually depicts how resilient transgender individual are, even though they face a lot of backlash and discrimination in the society, they do not give up what they believe in, and they continue to fight for what they believe is their right. This resilience is like the themes found in Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's poetry where he focused on hardship and resolution, using biblical backups to affirm his stand on oppression and resistance (Saba, 2020: 228).

Stylistic and structural analysis

The Poetry that Mokobe Writes, usually has stylistic and structural element in it which helps to enhance the emotional impact and accessible of his work. He uses simple but powerful languages in his poems to make them accessible to an exceptionally large audience out there. He applies rhetorical techniques to deepen the thematic content. This approach is like the stylistic work done in Sola Babatunde's "The Valley of Vision," whereby some figures of speech and lexical variations were used to indicate the poets social and cultural background and likewise stir the emotions of readers (Gambari-Olufadi, 2023). Mokobe usually apply parallelism in his poetry, and likewise, he uses repetition and metaphor which are stylistic elements that are used in different poetic works. An example of this is when Dylan Thomas Used repetition and parallelism in "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" which helped to improve the value of the poem in terms of aesthetics (Hamad et al., 2023: 1125). It has been discovered at the end, that Mokobe's use of these devices usually adds rhythm and emphasis on his work, and reinforce the thematic messages present in the work.

Sociopolitical Critique

Contextualising within South African society

The experience that transgender individuals have in South Africa is because of the complexities from historical, social, and political factors in the country. The progressive constitution of the country that included some sort of protections for gender and sexual minorities has not been fully accepted in the society leading to safety and acceptance of people that are transgenders. This gap is obvious judging from previous history in South Africa especially during the National Party's rule from the year 1948 to 1994, which as at then, was filled with homophobia, racism and the marginalization of individuals belonging to the LGBTQI+ (Pillay et al., 2019: 954). Even though there has been some sort of democratic advancement since then, people that are involved with transgender has continued to face one challenge or the other which is made worse by the cultural styles and general beliefs of the society which has invalidated the identities of transgenders thereby contributing massively to their vulnerability (Macheso, 2020: 473). Lee Mokobe's poet, seeks to address most of these challenges. it can therefore be said that In South Africa's, legal and social landscape, likewise cultural norms, and religion plays some major roles about transgender rights and protection.

Comparison with global perspectives

The experiences which transgender people have, varies widely from one region to another globally. This experience is widely shaped by the cultural, legal, and political factors in these countries. In various parts of the world, transgender people face one sort of challenge or the other but the extent to which this happen is different based on some factors like legal Protections, societal level of acceptance and availability of support system for such individuals. In South Africa during the transition to democracy, the recognition of sexual rights was influenced by local and transnational norms which highlighted how non inevitable these rights are, in the national context (Carolin and Frenkel, 2019: 519). Lee Mokobe's work and that of the other activists of transgender in South Africa are majorly cantered on the ongoing struggles for recognition and rights of the transgender people. This dynamic does not only affect the South African society but the world at large as the advancement of LGBTQI+ rights are caught up in the complexities of local and cultural societal beliefs, and political environment of the region. Many countries especially in the western world has been more tolerant and accepting to support transgender rights, however the challenges remains. An example of this is in Canada and United States where they have some sort of established legal protections for transgenders.

Despite everything that has been done, the societal acceptance and inclusion of people that are transgender, such as those championed by poets like Lee Mokobe, has remained limited. The LGBTQI+ rights movement across the globe has been facing a lot of backlashes from diverse groups like those found in South Africa. These groups usually back their actions by believing that they are protecting the traditional values and religious beliefs in the locality, and this has made it difficult to progress with the transgender rights (Francis and McEwen, 2023: 236).

Influence on and by poetry

The subjective experiences which Lee Mokobe has as a transgender person, influenced his works in poetry. This experience added themes of identity, resilience, and acceptance into his work. His work includes the challenges he has passed through in the society during his journey on gender identity. The poem has an extraordinarily rich elements of autobiography in it. The elements reflects his struggle with gender identity and his journey through such circumstances. The poem begins with praying in the church which portrays the fact that he was trying to reconcile his gender identity with God. The poem progressed to when Mokobe was a child and was fascinated with what being a boy looks like, but pressures from people around him, especially from aunts, strongly disapproves of his thoughts and masculinity, and reminded him of how things is done in the society, and how gender role works.

The poem got to a certain point where Mokobe's identity was, forced out in school. The line in the poem that says "Naturally, I did not come out of the closet. The kids at my school opened it without my permission" revealed his personal experience as it is common with other transgender persons where the reality of their identities are forced out of them by the happenings around them even when they are not ready at that point in time. Mokobe's poem also narrated the challenges faced by transgender people trying to live their lives like everyone else but unfortunately, they usually encounter some sort of discrimination in the society. Notable public figures that are transgender persons like Caitlyn Jenner, and Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, and Blake Brockington were mentioned in the write up as a backup to the story of the challenges of transgender people which the poem is trying to convey. Lee Mokobe is well known for his use of poetry as a tool for activism. His poems does not only reflect his struggle through the circumstances surrounding transgender choices, but also the struggle of other transgender persons globally. His story of battling through gender identity and society backlashes has strengthened his choice of activism. He channels all his experiences into work of Arts with the intention of creating awareness in the society on how the lives and choices of transgender people matters too. His poem strongly points out the discrimination and marginalization that transgender people face in the society. He advocates for societal change towards transgender persons, and clamour for better acceptance of transgender person in the society.

Educational and Activist Impact

Poetry in education

The inclusion of Mokobe's poetry into educational curriculum can have a significant impact on learners whereby it enables them to have a proper understanding of what issues and challenges transgender people face in the society. Mokobe's work when added into the education curricula will blend into the evolving education strategies aimed at enhancing gender awareness among learners, especially the younger ones. Burnett and Chapman Hazell (2022: 372) conducted research which was centred on the values and importance of poetry works in education curriculum for the purpose of exploring gender identity was highlighted. They discovered that performance poetry is one useful tool which is powerful for someone to express his or herself, and it can also help someone to reflect on personal experience on gender identity. When Mokobe's poetry is added into the education curriculum, it will enable learners to have empathy on people going through transgender challenges, and it will enable them to have a proper understanding on issues relating to gender identity.

In a work conducted by Mhana (2019: 20) gender inequalities and the challenges that the male and female gender encounter because of societal norms was discussed. These inequalities and challenges when coupled with personality alignment, pose as major factors that gives rise to the desire of gender identity in transgender people, or in individuals aspiring to be one. In this case, Mokobe's work can help such individuals to analyse the perspective of the society and the cultural norms surrounding gender critically, thereby helping them to get a proper understanding of what gender identity is about. As we all know, poetry is an art which offers a unique pedagogical tool when it comes to teachings on gender identity. Poetry has emotions and personal nature built in it. It is immersive and it can help to offer a proper understanding of complex issues like gender identity. Judging from the work done by León et al. (2020: 31), it is believed that when literary education which has a focus on gender identity is involved in education generally, it will be able to help students develop some behaviours that are reflective, and Involve critical thinking that enable them have a proper understanding on gender identity issues.

Findings and Discussions

Poem by Lee Mokobe

Title: “What it’s like to be transgender”

The first time I uttered a prayer was in a glass-stained cathedral.

I was kneeling long after the congregation was on its feet,

dip both hands into holy water,

trace the trinity across my chest,

my tiny body drooping like a question mark.

all over the wooden pew.

I asked Jesus to fix me,
and when he did not answer
I befriended silence in the hopes that my sin would burn.
and salve my mouth would dissolve like sugar on tongue,
but shame lingered as an aftertaste.
And to reintroduce me to sanctity,
my mother told me of the miracle I was,
said I could grow up to be anything I want.
I decided to be a boy.
It was cute.
I had snapback, toothless grin,
used skinned knees as street cred,
played hide and seek with what was left of my goal.
I was it.
The winner to a game the other kids couldn't play,
I was the mystery of an anatomy,
a question asked but not answered,
tightroping between awkward boy and apologetic girl,
and when I turned 12, the boy phase wasn't deemed cute anymore.
It was met with nostalgic aunts who missed seeing my knees in the shadow of skirts,
who reminded me that my kind of attitude would never bring a husband home,
that I exist for heterosexual marriage and childbearing.
And I swallowed their insults along with their slurs.
Naturally, I did not come out of the closet.
The kids at my school opened it without my permission.
Called me by a name I did not recognise,
said "lesbian,"
but I was more boy than girl, more Ken than Barbie.
It had nothing to do with hating my body,
I just love it enough to let it go,
I treat it like a house,
and when your house is falling apart,
you do not evacuate,
you make it comfortable enough to house all your insides,
you make it pretty enough to invite guests over,
you make the floorboards strong enough to stand on.
My mother fears I have named myself after fading things.
As she counts the echoes left behind by Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, Blake Brockington.
She fears that I'll die without a whisper,

that I'll turn into "what a shame" conversations at the bus stop.

She claims I have turned myself into a mausoleum,

that I am a walking casket,

news headlines have turned my identity into a spectacle,

Bruce Jenner on everyone's lips while the brutality of living in this body.

becomes an asterisk at the bottom of equality pages.

No one ever thinks of us as human.

because we are more ghost than flesh,

because people fear that my gender expression is a trick,

that it exists to be perverse,

that it ensnares them without their consent,

that my body is a feast for their eyes and hands

and once they have fed off my queer,

they'll regurgitate all the parts they did not like.

They'll put me back into the closet, hang me with all the other skeletons.

I will be the best attraction.

Can you see how easy it is to talk people into coffins,

to misspell their names on gravestones.

And people still wonder why there are boys rotting,

they go away in high school hallways.

they are afraid of becoming another hashtag in a second.

afraid of classroom discussions becoming like judgment day.

and now oncoming traffic is embracing more transgender children than parents.

I wonder how long it will be.

before the trans suicide notes start to feel redundant,

before we realise that our bodies become lessons about sin

way before we learn how to love them.

Like God didn't save all this breath and mercy,

like my blood is not the wine that washed over Jesus' feet.

My prayers are now getting stuck in my throat.

I am finally fixed,

I just don't care,

maybe God finally listened to my prayers (Popova 2016; Uglow 2022).

Themes and Imagery Emerging in Lee Mokobe's Poem, "What it's Like to Be Transgender"

The poem kicks off by bringing to the reader the picture of Mokobe's childhood, powerfully showing the inner turmoil of growing up in a body which was not in correspondence with his gender identity. "The first time I uttered a prayer was in a glass-stained cathedral. I asked Jesus to fix me" is a phrase that rakes the feelings of desperation or even isolation common in most transgender persons trying to find their identity in hostile environments. The line "tightroping between awkward boy and apologetic girl" reflects the vacancy and confusion of Mokobe's early years in treading a razor's edge. In the face of societal expectations, the poem unfolds—albeit brutish at times—what life is like being transgender: bullying, family pressure. Mentioning "nostalgic aunts who missed seeing my knees in the shadow of skirts" simply speaks tomes of culture in preserving traditional gender roles and how much it hurts not to fit into these molds.

Identity and Self-Acceptance

Internal war and self-actualisation

The poem opens with a young Mokobe standing in a cathedral, already oozing the insinuation of an internal identity crisis. Putting in the mouth of the speaker, the yearning for divine intervention ("I asked Jesus to fix me") underlines the inner turmoil between the self and societal expectation/religious view. This struggle eventually finds itself as self-realisation when the speaker decides to be a boy, exemplifying early assertions of identity against normative gender roles.

Religious Conflict

Prayers and God's silence

Line:

I asked Jesus to fix me,

and when he did not answer

I befriended silence in the hopes that my sin would burn.

The recurring motif of the praying in the poem indicates an inner turmoil over religious belief. Mokobe's early praying for change and later "befriend" was made by silence that aggravated a crisis of faith with their hitherto unanswered pleas. Conclusively, the poem ends with the speaker wondering if they are "finally fixed" or God has finally listened, which to a great degree indicates a continuous struggle to find a link between identity and faith.

Body as Some

Mokobe likens the body to a house, describing an avenue of self-acceptance. In society's rejection, the speaker labours to build a "comfortable" and "pretty" space for their body, denoting a boundless love and regard toward the physique, though it meant refashioning it in respect to their gender identity.

Expressed Expectations: Societal Expectations and Family Pressure

The very first phrase, "my mother told me of the miracle I was," makes clear, by contrast, the sharp opposition between early encouragement from the narrator's mother and the later, onerous pressures of society. The recurring theme of a family and society pushing against gender identity comes with the fears of the mother and carping aunts, who are looking nostalgically through the veil of a bygone past.

Bullying and Marginalisation

This poem strikingly represents the bullying and marginalisation visited upon transgender people. The speaker shows how peers outed them, "The kids at my school opened it or without my permission," and labelled them with terms that did not seem to fit their identity, "said 'lesbian,' but I was more boy than girl." Therein, one major point is made regarding the cruelty and misunderstanding that transgender people often go through.

Suicide and Despair

Line:

I wonder how long it will be.

before the trans suicide notes start to feel redundant

The theme of suicide recurs, with the speaker contemplating the "trans suicide notes" and the societal negligence that leads to such tragedies. This theme is a stark reminder of the mental health struggles and despair that often accompany the transgender experience.

Sin and Salvation

The speaker's relationship with religion is also marked by feelings of sin and shame. They hope their "sin would burn," and the "shame lingered as an aftertaste," reflecting the religious guilt imposed by societal norms. Yet, the speaker also draws a parallel between their blood and the wine that washed over Jesus' feet, seeking validation and sanctity in their existence.

Violence and Mortality

Transgender deaths

The next lines of the poem by Lee Mokobe involve a critical issue of physical violence, which the society throws at the transgender people. He narrates it as:

My mother fears I have named myself after fading things.

As she counts the echoes left behind by Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, Blake Brockington.
She fears that I'll die without a whisper,
that I'll turn into "what a shame" conversations at the bus stop.
She claims I have turned myself into a mausoleum,
that I am a walking casket,
news headlines have turned my identity into a spectacle,

Mokobe raises the question of violence that plagues not just transgender individuals but rather their very fear of becoming part of the "next hashtag" movement just like Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, and Blake Brockington. This brings up the grim reality about transphobia and how high the mortality rate is on transgender people living in a body where one's identity is all at once a "spectacle" and a "news headline." It is a deep, recurring fear of Lee Makobe's mother, fearing that her son might end up like an extensive list of other trans people, who, in death, become tragic symbols within the popular imagination. She cannot seem to clear from memory faces like those of Mya Hall, Leehler Alcorn, and Blake Brockington, each an individual memory imprinted on her mind of how much it costs to be transgender. These names, once vivid lives, are now only echoes, resounding with precautionary tales of refusal and violence within the contours of society. She feels that her son's life might be reduced, before she knows it, into one who invited a moment of sympathy, a whisper among a society that does not really care. That he may end up being only a subject of lamentation in chance discussions at the bus stop: "What a shame," sans depth and humanity which a human being such as her child deserves. By drawing parallels between his life and those of Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, and Blake Brockington, Lee Makobe attempts to shed light on what is painfully scary to him in the transgender community: people who slipped against impossible challenges and finally gave up; they became bitter reminders of the gritty realism with which many transgender lives are envisioned. He thus underscores their millennia-long struggle for recognition, respect, and safety that characterises the transgender experience.

Mya hall

"Mya Hall was a young Black trans woman murdered by police for taking a wrong turn."

Leelah Alcorn

Leelah Alcorn, an American transgender girl, committed suicide in 2014 after posting a suicide note on her Tumblr blog. She criticised societal standards and the lack of support for transgender people, citing loneliness and alienation as reasons. Alcorn's parents, Carla and Doug Alcorn, refused to accept her gender identity and sent her to Christian-based conversion therapy. Her suicide note attracted international attention, leading to calls for "Leelah's Law" and vigils in her memory. The city of Cincinnati criminalized conversion therapy, and Alcorn's parents were criticised for misgendering and defending their Christian beliefs.

Blake Brockington

Blake Brockington, an 18-year-old trans activist, died by suicide after inspiring trans youth to combat transphobia, racism, and police brutality. Brockington, who became the first out trans homecoming king in a North Carolina high school, raised more funds than twelve other senior royalty hopefuls for the school's charity, Mothering Across Continents. He emphasised the importance of an equal opportunity for all students, having been rejected by his family after coming out as transgender. (www.advocate.com, 2015).

Resistance and Resilience

Defiance against norms

Despite the hardships, Mokobe's poem is also a narrative of defiance and resilience. The speaker's determination to make their body a home and the assertion of their identity ("I decided to be a boy") reflect a strong resistance against societal norms and expectations.

Legacy and hope

Lee Makobe's acknowledgment of people who came before them, coupled with their own different visibility ("Bruce Jenner on everyone's lips"), underlines an ongoing fight for transgender rights and recognition. The poem ends on a note of indefiniteness but holds out some room for quiet hope of eventual acceptance and understanding.

Societal and religious criticism

The other significant element of the poem is the critique of societal and religious attitudes against transgender people. The words of Mokobe, "My mother fears I have named myself after fading things," and "Bruce Jenner in everyone's lips while the brutality of living in this body becomes an asterisk at the bottom of equality pages," seem to underline a superficial sensibility and sensationalism that often accompanies many understandings of transgender bodies. It then shows the hypocrisy in this societal acceptance, which has been bought at the cost of real understanding and empathy.

Criticism of South African society

His work continues to testify to strong bonds between him and South Africa and his critical understanding of how it treats transgender citizens. For all its paper progressive law its constitution including protection against discrimination based on gender and sexuality quite to the contrary, South Africa in fact very frequently fails in practice. Transgender citizens face strong social stigma, violence,

and limited access to appropriate health care. Therefore, Mokobe's activism brings out these issues for awareness and acceptance from South African society. He criticises the lack of comprehensive education in schools on transgender issues, thus developing more ignorance that further substantiates prejudice. His work is studied and appreciated here in the United States on the other side, where the discourse on gender identity and rights is more solid.

Poetry as a Means for Activism and Education

The power in activism and education is quite immense in Lee Mokobe's poetry. Unlike "What It's Like to Be Transgender," this, although of a personal nature in that it speaks of his life experience, is universally an appeal to understand and be in empathy with the transgender people that features in some educational curricula within the United States. Mokobe is an advocate for the same educational initiatives in South Africa. He says that including transgender stories in the school curriculum would make society more inclusive and more forgiving. He feels that through literature and arts, this gap existing between ignorance and understanding can be bridged and deeply rooted prejudices can be toppled.

Conclusion

The poetry of Lee Mokobe makes a powerful case for the intersection of art and activism, proving creative expression as an instrument that advocates for transgender rights and social change. His work is strongly based on personal experience and socio-political critique but surmounts his own individual narrative to resonate with broader issues in society and collective struggle related to the transgender community. The paper has, therefore, shown a multidisciplinary approach of textual analysis, sociopolitical critique, and biographical context to show how Mokobe's poetry becomes a conduit for activism and education. Transgender individuals are waged with internal and external battles all which Mokobe captures through poignant imagery and emotive language in his poem about what it is to be transgender: on the tussle with identity, societal expectation, and the quest for acceptance. Metaphors, such as his body being a house, make this work very personal with a first-person narrative and are extremely effective at binding empathy and understanding between him and the readers. The personal lens does not merely underscore his personal journey but opens the window to witness a problematic system that persists in marginalizing transgender people. The poem reaches beyond the personal narrative to critique societal norms and religious dogma that undermine the existence and rights of transgender individuals. The reflection by Mokobe on his South African roots reveals a country still wrestling with deep-seated cultural and religious prejudices, even against the background of progressive legal frameworks. It sets these reflections against his experiences in the United States, which have a more developed discourse on transgender issues but are similarly riddled with problems. Such a comparison brings into focus the globality of transgender struggles and the need for international solidarity and advocacy. In this respect, one must emphasize the educational, just like the activist, impacts in Mokobe's work. First, on an educational level, his poetry has the pedagogical function intrinsic to its being part of an educational curriculum, which gives students the place and space to start engaging with transgender issues. The bringing of transgender narratives into the class environment challenges prevailing prejudices and makes education more open and caring. Secondly, through public engagements and the role as a teaching artist, the advocacy extended to diverse audiences changes public perceptions and policies. Mokobe's criticism of South African society is coupled with activism regarding comprehensive education on transgender issues and calls for the need to include transgender narratives within the school syllabus. He believes literature and art bridge chasms in understanding and battle ignorance. This kind of activism is especially important in a society where legal protections do not always translate into social acceptance, and a lot of violence and discrimination are faced by transgender people.

In conclusion, Lee Mokobe's poetry does not reflect only subjective experiences but is one of the powerful tools for social change. It questions the norms of society, challenges religious dogma, and voices protection and acceptance for transgender people. This paper places his poetry in both personal and broad contexts, which evidences the 'moment of transformation' of art in advocating for transgender rights and social change. Mokobe's poetry is a fine example of creative expression that brought light to communities residing on the fringes of society, bringing in, as a result, empathy, understanding, and finally change in society. Continuing to inspire and educate through his art, Mokobe remembers that the power of poetry is indestructible and capable of challenging injustice while envisioning a new world—one with inclusion.

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