

# Monyaise as a Setswana Novelist:

## With particular reference to the novel

### Go Sa Baori

*by James Moilwa*

#### The Novel

Investigation of the novel as a genre has received attention of many scholars and as students and teachers of novels we should be interested in their findings. Because Monyaise is a novelist it would be interesting to consider him against the background of the tradition of the novel in its universal sense and for that purpose we shall use the statements of only three authorities from amongst the many, namely, E.J. Gordon, M.Z. Shroder, and W. Allen.

- a. A writer is creating a world and asking you to enter imaginatively into it. You hear a voice (point of view), saying that something is happening (plot), to someone (character) in some time and place (setting), and that the action of the story illustrates a meaning or dominating idea (theme),<sup>1</sup>
- b. --- the novel has a typical action, with a thematic value, which is characteristically its own.<sup>2</sup>
- c. W. Allen's statement on what he regards as model novels - The classic novels are classics because of the illumination of life they offer. They are statements about human nature, made in terms of story and character, which have stood the test of time and have withstood the scrutiny of successive generations of readers.<sup>3</sup>

He further suggests that intelligent reading of a novel should prompt the following questions in a reader:

Does this novelist's view of life as expressed in this book, square with the essential facts of life as I myself have known them? Does it seem false to them? Does it lead me to question my own experience of life? Shall I have to revise or amplify my view of life as a result of reading this novel?

The above words invoke the sense of responsibility of both the author and the reader - i.e. sincerity in both writing and reading. As Gordon suggests, the novelist writes imaginatively, creating a world, and asks the reader to read him imaginatively as well, for clear understanding and authentic interpretation. The most important thing about any novel is its meaning and value. Firstly, therefore, the reader must understand clearly the meaning of the experience of the author as communicated in the novel before he can evaluate it. Appreciation of meaning leads to evaluation, evaluation leads to the discrimination of the experience against the other experiences, and without discrimination, there can be no pleasure.

In the view of W. Allen, pleasure is not the only entitlement of the reader. A reader himself has a duty to what he reads. A sportsman, e.g. a boxer or a footballer, who is unsportmanlike and disregards the rules of the game is often checked by the referee or booed by the spectators. The novelist too has an obligation to the art, which is as much as to say, to the tradition of the novel. Firstly, he should be honest to his life experience. This is called the novelist's integrity, and it is up to the reader

to see to it that the novelist maintains his integrity by shunning one who does not. If the novelist fakes the findings of his experience, whether for money or desire to please a large public, whether to make converts to his religion or propaganda for his political party, he is being dishonest as a novelist and has lost his integrity, and must be shunned.<sup>5</sup>

What we observe as the point of convergence of the statements of the three authorities cited above is 'meaning'. Allen emphasises 'illumination of life and human nature' as the subject of the novel. Shroder stresses the thematic value of its action, and Gordon suggests that all the elements of a novel are deployed to illustrate its meaning, which is the main thing about a novel.

Briefly, they are saying, that a novel exists for conveying meaning of whatever aspect of life. One of the important considerations in reading a novel therefore is its world and the range of experience communicated within it. And in compliance with his integrity, the novelist must create the world in which he himself sincerely believes, to be plausible and rewarding.

#### **Monyaise's Place in the Setswana Novel Tradition**

In terms of Tswana literature, Monyaise's works are a milestone. They constitute a quantitative leap in the development of the Tswana novel and literature as a whole. His novels mark a stage in the Setswana novel tradition well above the preceding stages. In quality his novels are miles away from those of his predecessors that even some of his successors still write after the pattern of those of his predecessors. His level has not yet been surpassed, instead, we have a crop of young budding novelists who have committed themselves to emulating his style - some successfully and others unsuccessfully e.g. Lebetho, and Mmileng.<sup>6</sup> To date, he is a colossus that bestrides the tradition of the Tswana novel. He has thoroughly disturbed the tradition by adding something radically new to it, both in form and content.

His novels mainly address themselves to the social and psychological problems as opposed to the earlier ones that tend to be biographical, historical, and romantic, marked by stereotyped plot structure and heroic heroes. I therefore see his writings as a reaction against what has come before them.

To understand Monyaise, one has to understand the novel and its tradition and to understand any one of his novels one has to be aware of the distinctive features of his writings as a whole.

His novels make very difficult and yet very interesting and rewarding reading. The question, therefore, is; "what makes him difficult and interesting?" The answer is that he has a unique vision to which he owes a unique style. His writings are characterised by the following features which anyone who reads him must be aware of:

1. His diction is subtle, poetic, and for the best part he writes in restricted code as against the elaborate one.
2. He uses hints and elliptical suspense in place of explicit and full blown statements.
3. His tone is one of confidence in the intelligence of his readers.
4. Each of his novels is often loaded with a number of themes; i.e. his novels are rich in meaning.

5. Irony is one of the strongest tools that pervade his novels. He commands it and can turn it to whatever use, e.g. expression of scorn or pity.
6. He seldom has a single main character but a group of main characters.
7. His books are structured on several plots which are carried through concurrently but intermittently, which ostensibly suggests fragmentation.
8. He uses design in terms of juxtaposition and repetition amply e.g. flashback, foreshadowing, motifs, and repetition of images.
9. His characters sometimes are not portrayed as either types or individuals but as embodiments of both functions, i.e. they are themselves and more than themselves simultaneously e.g. Naomi in Ngaka, Mosadi Mooka, Lebogang in Marara, and Kerotse in Go Sa Baori, each of them is an individual round character whilst at the same time they represent a certain type of a modern young woman found in urban townships.
10. He uses symbols e.g. the setting of Ngaka, Mosadi Mooka is Baragwanath Hospital. Symbolically it signifies the illness (social pathology) of the society which is portrayed in it. Another common symbol is 'Marakanelo a ditsela' (Cross-roads) which signifies internal conflict.
11. His main characters are not heroic and inflated like e.g. Rammone in Rammone wa Kgalagadi, Mokomaditlhare in Mokomaditlhare, Mokwena in Mokwena, Bolokang in Kobo e Ntsho, Selotlegeng in Moremogolo wa Motho.
12. Unlike with romances, whose action is based on quest which is literal, his are also based on quest but which is metaphorical.
13. He uses exposition flexibly. According to the demands of the situation he resorts to what he deems appropriate to use. Commonly he uses concentrated and delayed types of exposition.
14. Like with exposition, he uses different types of Point of View for various purposes.
15. A common feature in his presentation of his stories is the method of the Inverted Time Shift as opposed to the conventional linear one i.e. what comes last is presented first and vice versa.
16. Another technique he commonly uses is that of 'The Story of concentric circles' i.e. a story within a story as, for instance, in Go Sa Baori, Marara, and Bogosi Kupe.
17. He is the only Tswana novelist who has, at least in one of his books, attempted the stream of consciousness technique. According to this technique the events and thoughts are not chronologically sequenced. They are neither time nor space bound. Rather they assume a dream-like sequence.
18. Monyaise is an opening-up writer. He does not have to be read once but several times. Each of the subsequent readings yields more understanding. His novels read like good poetry whose meaning is submerged and not on the surface. He has to be read slowly and with concentration.

The above catalogue is of items which attribute to the complexity and difficulty of Monyaise's works. To be aware of them would facilitate reading him. The catalogue does not only imply the sophistication of Monyaise as a writer but also the need for his readers to be equally sophisticated, which means that knowledge of literary theory on the part of his readers would make him more accessible and meaningful. The various literary aspects and techniques mentioned in the catalogue must be familiar to anyone who wants to analyse and interpret his works satisfactorily. Whoever prescribes anyone of Monyaise's works for school pupils must have in mind what it demands to teach and to study it and at what level.

We admit that Monyaise writes above the head of many a reader. A novelist who works by restriction in this way always risks limiting his appeal. But there will always be readers to whom his best and most characteristic novels will always evoke that combination of recognition and discovery which only novels of real quality and originality can produce. Such readers are the ones who have been suggested above. Let it be recognised and accepted - to teach Monyaise, and to teach him well, is not an ordinary and easy task until such time when one has mastered the strategies of approaching him.

### **Go ša Baori**

It is against the foregoing background that we have to appreciate his latest novel, Go ša Baori.

The complexity of Monyaise's novels corresponds with their publication sequence. The later novels are more complex than the earlier ones. Go ša Baori, being the last of the five publications is by that token the most baffling of them all. In it are multithemes, multiplots, many main characters, characters who are simultaneously themselves and more than themselves, various types of point of view and exposition, use of design, symbolism and irony, complex poetic and recondite diction, elegant prose, use of hints and elliptical suspense, the story of concentric circles and the use of the stream of consciousness technique as well as the inverted time shift method of presentation - the whole assortment concentrated in one book as if the author is deliberately straining to be abstruse and obscure. The fortunate thing however, is that all these elements do not clash with one another. They are harmoniously integrated and as such, together they serve to enhance the point of the novel.

### **Plot Structure**

The events are presented in two concentric plots which are kept moving forward concurrently yet alternately and with sustained suspense to the end. One plot is centred around a dream (toro) and the other around 'semi-consciousness' (maibi). At the end, the two plots converge. Their convergence is somewhat haphazard and yet not out of place considering that the stream of consciousness technique has been used for presentation.

The themes are spread across the plots and respective groups of characters are assigned various plots to act them out. The concentric arrangement of the plots has helped to bring about the unity between the two plots themselves and the characters who service them and of the novel as a whole. For the use of the stream of consciousness technique and the occasional inverted time shift method, events often lack chronological sequence. The first plot is assigned Potso, Kerotse and Kedibone as main characters. The second plot is manned by Olebile, Mmoni, Diale Motlagole, Mosimane wa Olanti, Mapule and Leta as chief characters.

## Theme

In this novel the author explores the following range of themes:

1. Fate, and how it operates. ('Fa badimo ba sa rate, nkgo di a wa')<sup>7</sup> p.118;
2. Pelo e ja serati (one's own choice is the best) though often attended by promiscuity and irresponsible sex and love relations;
3. Protest against hedonism of the youth ('Basa o ba tshabe: Jwa bona botshelo ke jwa gompiano - gona jaanong - ka moso o tla ipona') p.74;
4. Life in black urban townships.
5. Low sense of values;
6. Go ša baori.

The themes of *Go ša Baori* are present in the first part of the book which is the parallel and basis of the second part. The first part is short and serves as a useful prelude to the second. It has few characters and although it looks simple it is not as simple as it appears. It is rich in meaning and contains most of what is contained in the next plot. The first plot is short; it has few characters and events as contrasted with the second. They however have thematic equality and similarity. All the themes listed above are illustrated by the interaction of the main characters in the first plot, namely Posto, Kedibone, and Kerotse.

The first theme we are presented with is "Fa badimo ba sa rate, nkgo di a wa". p.118. Here we are presented with the situation where the hand of fate has been given sway and the responsibility has been shifted to the will of gods, a theme which pervades the entire book. Put simply, it is like saying: I have been planning this but fate has defied my plans and has put me where I find myself.

For two years, Potso had planned and hoped he would marry Kedibone, a woman of good qualities, but he finally found himself in the hands of an apology for a wife, Kerotse. "Fa badimo ba sa rate, nkgo di a wa". The other themes naturally develop out of this situation - Potso preferred Kerotse to Kedibone the pleasure seeker (hedonism), Potso preferred Kerotse to Kedibone against his family's wish (Pelo e ja serati), Potso preferred an inferior woman to a superior one (low sense of values). Potso later realised from experience that his choice of Kerotse as a wife and the abandonment of Kedibone was not wise and to his disadvantage (*Go ša baori*), Potso is assaulted by unknown people on his return from dancing, (black township life and its precariousness).

Another way in which it is presented is where Potso is committed to his own responsibility - where he has to choose between two objects which are both attractive but are unequal in value. This has to do with the making of important lifetime decisions. The decisions taken are often wrong for the principle on which they are based - the pleasure principle which guides the population of his fictive world. This brings out one of the author's intentions - to criticise and parody the life of the modern society in the urban townships. What is reflected is a low sense of values on the part of the people portrayed in Monyaise's world. The error is often discovered very late when nothing can be done to correct it. This is captured by the image of the cross-roads (*marakanelo a ditsela*) which at the same time is ironical in effect:

Fa o fitlha mo marakanelong a ditsela o tsaya ya molema kgotsa ya moja ya bokone kgotsa ya borwa. Mme fa o sena go tsamaya sekgala se seleele, e bile o lapile, o lemoga gore tsela ya gago ke e o e tlogetseng kwa morago.<sup>9</sup>

[When one comes to the Cross-roads, he follows the one leading to the left or the one leading to the right, the one leading to the north or the one leading to the South. But after having walked a long distance and even tired for that, one comes to realise that the road he should have followed was the one he avoided .

The immediate meaning of the image is that when Potso had to choose for a wife between Kerotse and Kedibone he chose Kerotse only to discover later that Kedibone might have been a better choice. At one level (fate), it is to say that life is unkind to some people sometimes, at another (character's responsibility) it is to say that we approach life irresponsibly and therefore wrongly. We value the valueless and devalue the valuable as exemplified by Potso's sudden preference of Kerotse to Kedibone - a portrayal of a life which is guided by the pleasure principle and lack of self-discipline; a life which takes no account of the happy and secure future.

Potso's position between the two valences referred to above, represents a reaction to a life situation which besets the contemporary society, especially the modern young people in the urban setting.

### Setting

The setting of the novel Goša Baori is in perfect harmony with the other features of the work and the manner in which it enhances them. The time setting is the present day and the place setting is Johannesburg, Sofia (Sophiatown), Mmasepala (Western Native Township), Matshaeneng (Newclare), Benoni, Tshwane (Pretoria) Olanti (Orlando), Teemaneng (Kimberley) Matlosane (Klerksdorp). The many places at which the activities surrounding dancing are set suggests that the type of life portrayed is not peculiar to a specific township. Rather it suggests that the life portrayed is of the black urban townships in general. The events and characters are made plausible by the setting because they fit in with it and the themes are clearly illustrated by it.

Occasionally, the action shifts to a hospital. Like in Ngaka Mosadi Mooka, the hospital symbolises illness - that of the society. The book portrays to us a life beset by social pathology in all its shades.

### Presentation

The story has been presented through Potso's dream and semi-consciousness deliberately as an adaption of the stream of consciousness method. With this method the flow of thoughts is random. The thoughts and events are neither time nor space bound. The sequence is that of a dream. According to Daiches "The stream of consciousness, at its most subtle and most intense, is able to achieve by depth what the traditional method achieves by extension. It provides a method of presenting character outside time and place"<sup>10</sup> (Daiches, p.24). In such a presentation there must be a unifying element. And such unifying elements are:

- a. Potso.  
He is the narrator as well as the character. He therefore straddles both plots. Thus he reduces the apparent fragmentation.

- b. The dancing activity.

It is encountered in the first plot and it is continued in the second plot as the central activity which serves as the watershed of all other activities. Kerotse and Potso are actually involved in the dancing in the first plot; in the second part he dreams about the activities. What Kerotse indulges in, and later Potso, is repeated in the second part where it involves many people and at many places.

It is around this activity (dance) that a lot is exposed. All the themes we have mentioned are revealed by what emanates from the dance activity.

### **Exposition**

We find concentrated and delayed types of exposition have been used in connection with the following: Sekolo sa bana ba Mathabe, Diale, Kerotse, Kedibone, Mapule, Sello (concentrated) Monna wa peipi (delayed).

### **Point of View**

Point of view is the way the actions of a story are reported to the reader. It is the perspective of the narrator toward the materials of the story that determines what information the reader is given, in what order, with what emphasis, and in what tone.

There are many types of point of view. For the first plot of *Go Ša Baori* the point of view used is that of the First Person Central or 'I' as the Protagonist. In this type the author allows the characters to tell the story in their own words. These must be the main or important character(s). Hence Potso is the one who tells his own story. This type of point of view achieves a certain intimacy and a psychological closeness so that the reader identifies with the speaker easily. For a big fictive world with a big population of characters with a lot of action, it can prove to be limiting.

After Potso's accident, the First Person Central Point of View is abandoned in favour of the omniscient one. Here the narrator knows everything. He can tell us what the characters think, what they do when they are alone, and he can follow one character and then another. He can go forward and backward in time.

In the second plot are involved Olebile's group and many other dancing groups, the Magapela and Mawelana gangs. The multiplicity of these characters warrants the use of the omniscient point of view. The one used is the multiple selective omniscience. Here the reader ostensibly listens to no one. The story comes directly through the minds of characters. As a result the tendency is almost wholly in the direction of scene, both inside the mind and externally with speech and action. Narrative summary where it appears it is either supplied unobtrusively by the author as if by way of 'stage direction' or it emerges through the thoughts and words of the characters themselves. Objectivity is achieved by the adoption of this perspective.

In brief, the first plot point of view is restricted and that of the second plot is omniscient.

## Characters

The characters are mainly presented through the dramatic method, the speeches of characters about others, created situations to which the characters are made to react so that inference about what type of people they are, is made from their reactions, and seldom by direct description by the author. They are dynamic and like real life and well matched with the action and setting of the book. They are neatly individualised and typified - all in one, and this lends them plausibility. This is for instance true of any one of them such as Matong, Sello, Kerotse, Mapule, Monna wa Peipi and Ngaka Bodila. Each gives an impression that he is an individual with his own idiosyncrasies while at the same time all of them can be identified as people whose behaviour is conditioned by the urban environment. Their outlook and general style of life is typical and coincides with such an environment - whether they be females or males, children or adults.

Characters in this book are divided into main groups according to the two plots. The first plot has main and minor characters. The main characters are Potso, Kedibone and Kerotse. The themes of the book are revealed through their actions and interactions. In this plot unlike the second one, Potso is referred to by name. The minor characters are Potso's mother and sister, ngaka (doctor), and mooki (nurse). These are kept in the background and are not referred to by their names. The reader is not even given their description. They help to characterise the main characters and to unravel the plot through their actions and speeches. For instance, it is through ngaka and mooki that the reader is made aware that Potso had been talking in a dream or state of semi-consciousness since his admission to hospital after his assault by unknown people. The following words exemplify:

--- Ka botsa mooki gore ke tsile jang mo kokelong; mme ka utlwa mafoko a a gakgamatsang. Gore ka Matihatso a beke e e ka kwa pele ke ne ka selwa mo mmileng gaufi le ntlo ya tshipi. Go bonala gore ke ketekilwe ke batho...

- - - -, Fa a sena go tshega a ba a gelola keledi, a re, "Dipuo tse o di buileng!" Ka tshoga.

"Ntliha o ka bua Mmoni a seyo. Ke raya gore rona re tlhwaetse dipuo tsa lona fa lo tswa mo maibing-.

"Ke buile ka reng?"

"A wa re ke santse ke itse. Bangwe a ne e le boKedibone le boKerotse le bo . . . ke lebetse gore ba bangwe ke bomang. e ne e le maina a mantsi fela".<sup>11</sup>

[I asked the nurse how I came to the hospital; and I heard amazing words. That on the Saturday of the week before the previous one I was picked up on the road near the church. The indication was that I had been assaulted by people - - -.

After laughing thoroughly, she said, "Things you have said!" I got scared. "Why couldn't you have rather talked in Mmoni's absence. We nurses are used to the sort of things you say when you come to."

"What did I say?"

"Do you think I can still recall? Some were Kedibone's others were Kerotse's and - - - I can't recall who the others were. It were so many names".<sup>12</sup> (Author's translation)

It is by ngaka and mooki that we get to know that the author's persona, namely Potso, had been dreaming



---mme ka utlwa ba sebaseba ka lobaka lo loleele gangwe le gape ngaka e botsa ka lentswe le le supang gore ga e dumele mafoko a mooki. Fa e sena go keleka dikwalo tsa me ya tswa. Le ena a e sala morago. Ka itse gore ga nkitla ke tlhola ke utlwa o ne a ya go reng gonne tsotlhe ke maitlhome - maitlhome fela.<sup>12</sup>

[--and I heard them whispering to each other for a long time, with the doctor now and again asking in a voice that showed that he did not believe what the nurse was saying. After inspecting my medical records he moved out. And she followed him. I knew that I would never hear what she was going to say because all this is hallucination - mere hallucination.<sup>12</sup>] (Author's translation)

The underlined words tell us that the story of the book is a dream and they are the closing statement of the entire novel. In case the reader has not been aware that the narration has been couched in a dream, he is being alerted and made aware.

The characters of the second plot are also divided into main and minor ones. The minors are further subdivided into two, those who support the main characters and those who oppose them.

The main characters are bana ba sekolo sa Modikwadikwane sa Mathabe and Olebile, their leader, Mmoni, Diale, Motlagole, Leta, Mapule, and Mosimane wa Olanti. The minor ones are the two groups of gangsters, Magapela and Mawelana. The former were the supporters and the latter the antagonists of Olebile's party (main characters). The conflict between them develops the plot. The protagonists are: Same, Rooi, Shimane MmaagweShimane, MmaagweDiale, MmaagweMotlagole, and Ngaka Bodila. The antagonists are: Monna wa Peipe, Matlole, Matong (Morwa Matlole) Legae and Mmami.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we ask ourselves as to how Go sa Baori stands in relation to the statements of the three authorities cited at the beginning of the paper. All their statements accommodate it. The work has a rich meaning which is well supported by its structure - and also an action which has a thematic value and probability. There is a wide range of experience offered within its world and as such it sheds enough illumination on life. In it, the author does not fake the findings of his own experience hence his integrity as a novelist sticks out clearly. His view of life as expressed in it squares with the facts of life as they are. Its intelligent reader feels challenged to question his view of life and to revise and amplify it after reading the text. For what it is, it has found itself a prominent position in the tradition of the Tswana novel.

#### Footnotes

1. Gordon, E.J., Writing about Imaginative Literature, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., New York, 1973, p.6.
2. Schroder, M.Z., "The Novel as a Genre", in P. Stevick (ed.), The Theory of the Novel, Collier Macmillan, London, 1967, p.12.
3. Allen, W., Reading a Novel, Dent, London, 1963, pp.31-32.
4. Ibid., p.32.
5. Allen, op.cit., p.33
6. cf. with S.J.J. Lebetho, Mosele, Van Schaik 1972; Morabaraba, Van Schaik, 1974 and M.T. Manileng, Motihogole, Van Schaik 1977; Mangome, Van Schaik, 1975.
7. Go Sa Baori, p.118.
8. Ibid., p.74
9. Go Sa Baori, p.3.
10. Daiches, D., The Novel and the Modern World, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1973, p.24.
11. Go Sa Baori, p.122
12. Ibid., p.123.