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Toward a biography of Isicamtho poet, Isabella Motadinyane
by Sizakele Nkosi

Abstract

This article introduces the Soweto-born poet Isabella Motadinyane to the world of literary criticism. As the first woman to write and perform poetry in Isicamtho, the vibrant township language, Motadinyane's contributions remain largely unrecognised in South African and global literature. Her posthumous *Complete Poems*, re-published in 2016, capture the complexities of black womanhood during and after apartheid – while reflecting the images, sounds and movement of urban life in Soweto.

Through a reading of her poems "Touting taxi" and "Rope sa motswetse", this article fills the gap in critical engagement with Isicamtho poetry and the voices of female struggle poets. Motadinyane's use of language, deeply rooted in the musicality of township life, brings a distinctly feminine perspective to the ghetto. At the same time, her poems address broader issues of community, eroticism and survival. Her Africana womanist stance and spiritual perspective further enrich her contribution to South African literature, yet the lack of scholarly attention underscores a significant gap in literary recognition.

By focusing on the feminine ghetto experience and the intersection of race, gender and community in Motadinyane's work, this article contributes to the broader conversation on African women's literature and the complexities of urban black life.

Introduction

Isabella Motadinyane, born in 1963 in Soweto, emerged from the vibrant yet challenging township environment, a space defined by racial segregation, urban poverty and political unrest. Motadinyane became the first woman to write and perform poetry in Isicamtho, the township language that carries the oral histories, struggles and vibrancy of urban black life. Her poetic voice, rooted in Soweto's streets, fused the spiritual with the everyday. Yet, despite her pioneering role, her work remains largely unacknowledged in academic literary circles in South Africa.

Motadinyane's poetry aligns with the tradition of struggle poetry, which emerged in response to apartheid and the various systems of oppression in South Africa. A struggle poet typically addresses social, political and cultural injustices, often writing about the lived experiences of marginalised communities. In Motadinyane's case, her poetry reflects the struggles of black women in South Africa, particularly those navigating both racial violence under apartheid and patriarchal oppression within their communities. Motadinyane's life was tragically cut short when she died in 2003 at the age of 40, in Orange Farm, a township in Gauteng, an untimely death due to complications from a stomach ulcer. This article aims to introduce Motadinyane to the world of literary criticism, emphasising her unique position as a female Isicamtho poet. Through a close reading of two of her poems, "Touting taxi" and "Rope sa motswetse", this article will demonstrate how her work reflects the lived realities of black women in post-apartheid South Africa, using language as both defiance and healing. Additionally, it will provide a necessary biographical sketch to contextualise her writing within the broader literary and political landscape of Soweto.

Biographical sketch

Born in Mofolo, a section of Soweto named after the Sesotho novelist Thomas Mofolo, Motadinyane's childhood was shaped by the township's rich but turbulent environment. Raised by her grandmother, she adopted the surname Motadinyane, though she would later discover her biological roots in the Mabalane family of Meadowlands.

Her early education ended at grade five, yet this did not hinder her growth as an artist. Motadinyane's creative abilities blossomed through her involvement in music, performance and writing. She was a co-founder of the Botsotso Jesters, a poetry performance group established in 1994, which introduced a new wave of township poets to the broader South African audience. Her works were published in collections such as *We Jive Like This* (1996) and *Dirty Washing* (1999), which later formed the foundation of her posthumous compilation, *Bella* (2007), later republished as *Complete Poems* (2016).

As a *thwasa*, a *sangoma*-in-training, Motadinyane drew on her ancestral roots and spiritual connections to guide her work, blending the spiritual and political in her depictions of urban township life. Her poetry reveals the struggles of black women, the indignity of ghetto existence and the communal search for solutions to social issues.

Isicamtho: language as defiance

Isabella Motadinyane was the first female to write and perform poetry in Isicamtho. Her poetry reflects the politics of being both black and a woman during and after apartheid – an experience rarely explored in South African literature. Soweto's history is deeply tied to South Africa's larger narrative of racial segregation and land dispossession, which ultimately shaped its language and culture. The 1913 Natives Land Act forced black people into labour migrations, and with Johannesburg's industrial rise, the influx of black labour led to further segregation under the Urban Areas Act of 1923, pushing black communities to the townships.

Soweto, as a meeting point of different languages, cultures and music from across the country, became a fertile ground for the emergence of Isicamtho, a language born out of urban and ethnic diversity. Motadinyane used this complex language to strengthen her poetic voice, making her poetry a reflection of the urban multilingual experience of township life.

The intertwined history of language, land dispossession and cultural oppression in South Africa remains one of the critical struggles against white supremacy. The apartheid government discredited and sought to destroy indigenous languages through institutional racism, leading to the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976, when over 200 students were killed in protests against the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in schools. Language, both then and now, remains a powerful symbol of identity – carrying the knowledge, culture and heritage of black communities.

Isicamtho became part of the language of resistance, allowing poets like Motadinyane to craft an inclusive, rebellious and culturally significant form of expression. As the first woman to write poetry in this language, Motadinyane, alongside her mentor and life partner Ike Muila, confronted the divisions separating black people through language and ethnicity. Writing in Isicamtho gave them common ground where all African languages, including English and Afrikaans, could coexist and harmonise.

As Isicamtho evolved through the 1950s, 60s and 70s, it became a predominantly male language, reflecting male-dominated spaces like the streets and taxi ranks. However, Motadinyane rebelled against the gender divide by openly defying societal norms, such as drinking beer – an activity

traditionally associated with men in black society. For her, even these personal acts became political, embodying defiance against the strict gender norms imposed on women.

Language, as a living thing, constantly changes, and for poets like Motadinyane, there is no such thing as 'correct' English or Sesotho. For Isicamtho poets, 'incorrect' becomes the creative norm. As writer Robert Berold observes, a poet's intuition embraces the multiple meanings and evolving associations of words. In her poetry, Motadinyane masterfully weaves Isicamtho, Sesotho and elements of Tsotsitaal, pushing linguistic boundaries and making language a critical tool of poetic and political defiance.

Through her Isicamtho poetry, Motadinyane demonstrates the characteristics of Africana Womanism, a theoretical framework centred on family, community and survival developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems (2004). This article understands Motadinyane's storytelling, activism and vision as family-centred. Her womanist worldview comes through clearly in her use of language, her commitment to her community, and her resistance to both racial and gender-based oppression.

What makes her poetry particularly compelling is that it reflects the language closest to her lived reality – a language that mirrors the complex and layered experiences of Soweto township life.

A womanist lens: defining Africana Womanism

Coined by Hudson-Weems, 'Africana Womanism' is distinct from mainstream feminism. While feminism primarily focuses on gender inequality, womanism foregrounds the experiences and struggles of African women in relation to race, class, culture and community survival.

Hudson-Weems argues that Africana Womanism is rooted in family-centredness and acknowledges the interconnected struggles of both men and women in black communities. In contrast to traditional feminism, womanism does not place gender issues above racial or cultural oppression but instead sees them as intertwined. The philosophy of Africana Womanism emphasises the importance of harmony between men and women, as well as the collective survival of the black community. Women are celebrated for their resilience, nurturing roles and central position in the family.

Womanism, therefore, views the healing of the community as a collective effort that requires addressing both gender-based oppression and the systemic issues of racism and economic inequality. For Isabella Motadinyane, this manifests in her poetry, where she critiques patriarchal systems while at the same time addressing the struggles of black women in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Touting taxi

In "Touting taxi", Isabella Motadinyane offers a powerful portrayal of urban life, filled with movement, music and the chaos of the township. Through short, rhythmic lines, she captures the disorder and energy of daily life in a taxi, a setting that symbolises the broader socio-political landscape. The poem moves between scenes of commuters, the touts calling out stops and the layered sounds of conversation, all against a backdrop of crime, poverty and culture.

"Touting taxi" opens with the chaotic, rhythmic energy that mirrors the vibrancy and disorder of township life:

Touting taxi
topsy
turvey
pep talk
from Zola
to Jozi
music background
loud and loud
pep talk

The repeated phrase ‘pep talk’ initially draws our attention to the movement of conversation within the taxi. The journey from Zola to Jozi (Johannesburg) is accompanied by loud music and fast-paced dialogue, typical of township taxi rides. Here, Isicamtho becomes the pulse of the poem, representing the urban experience and its overlapping sounds, conversations and movements.

The poem opens with the chaotic energy of a taxi ride, reflecting the topsy-turvy nature of life in the townships. Here, the feminine voice emerges, not only as a narrator but as an observer of the indignities of township life. The constant thuggery, as she writes, is framed through a womanist lens, where the up-and-down movements of the taxi mirror the lives of black women navigating a world of violence, poverty and overcrowding.

Consider the lines:

ke bona dibono	*I see buttocks*
ke sa bone	*without seeing*
beng ba tsona	*whose they are*

Motadinyane’s feminine perspective comes through sharply. The sexualised body of the commuter is dehumanised, reduced to buttocks, with no sense of individuality or dignity. This dehumanisation is not merely physical but speaks to the broader systemic oppression that black women face, particularly in urban spaces. The feminine voice in this instance is both a witness and a victim, observing and experiencing the daily indignities of the township.

Later in the poem, she writes:

drinking beefeaters
eyes off
melting bazookas

Here, the feminine voice critiques the alcohol consumption that pervades the township, symbolising both escapism and the numbing of pain. The reference to Beefeaters – an alcohol brand – becomes a metaphor for the colonial legacy that continues to poison black communities. The physical image of melting bazookas highlights how violence, alcoholism and the lingering effects of colonialism intersect.

The taxi, as both a literal and symbolic vehicle, carries these multiple layers of meaning, where communal suffering and survival coexist. The poetic rhythm mirrors the physical movement of the taxi ride, bouncing from one vivid image to another. Motadinyane then shifts into Sesotho, invoking the deeper spiritual tones of her language. The poem escalates in imagery, symbolising the chaos, crime and religious tension in the urban landscape, before shifting into a reflective close. It highlights the disjointedness of township life while maintaining a thread of personal and communal responsibility.

The lines

cross pollination
Christianity charged
short cut corner
Magomosha style *tsotsi style*

reveal the ways in which faith and survival tactics have merged in the urban township context. The feminine voice here observes the complex intersection of religion, crime and the struggle for survival in a place where the rules are constantly shifting.

Motadinyane's poem closes with a melancholic reflection on the disorder of life in the taxi and the broader township. The feminine voice remains both a participant and an observer, embodying the resilience of women navigating a world of constant upheaval. Motadinyane's voice gives space for the emotional complexity of the experience – where survival is intertwined with pain, but also with hope for something better.

Rope sa motswetse

As in "Touting taxi", the Sesotho poem "Rope sa motswetse" expresses Motadinyane's critique of gender roles and the patriarchal structures that define women's lives. The title refers to the thigh of a new mother – a term that carries deep cultural significance in Sesotho culture. It symbolises the physical and emotional weight carried by women, particularly as they move between life and death in childbirth, and the ongoing labour they perform within the home.

A *motswetse* is a mother who has just given birth, and *rope sa motswetse* is also the name for the Basotho blanket given to women when they become mothers. This blanket represents protection and care, but in the context of Motadinyane's poem it also becomes a metaphor for the burden placed on women and the responsibility that men must share in restoring peace and balance in the community.

Motadinyane's voice emphasises how women are kept inside the house, labouring, while men remain outside, disconnected from the daily struggles that women endure. In the poem, labour refers not just to childbirth but to the daily, unrecognised work that women perform. The poem opens with a clear division of gender roles:

Basadi matlung
banna ntle
ho qaaka mona
(Women indoors
men outdoors
there is a problem here)

In Rampolokeng's English translation, opposite the original Sesotho, the lines

banna akgelang
pelo ya morena
(men throw out
the heart of the king)

frame the men's actions as a detachment from their emotional responsibilities. The masculine voice here emphasises how men have removed themselves from the emotional and moral obligations they

hold within the community. However, in Motadinyane's original Sesotho voice, these lines have a more generous meaning. They call on men to embody the heart of a king – to engage with empathy, kindness and emotional accountability. Her feminine perspective stresses that the role of a king is not just to lead but to protect and nurture the community, sharing in the emotional labour that women often bear alone.

This contrast between the masculine and feminine voices – where Rampolokeng emphasises detachment and physicality, and Motadinyane highlights the need for emotional presence – reveals a deeper difference in how gendered responsibilities are perceived. Motadinyane's voice is a call for men to act with the kind-hearted responsibility of kings. This is not just a demand for physical protection but a plea for them to carry the emotional weight of their role in the community, showing care and accountability.

Another moment of divergence between the masculine and feminine voices comes through in these lines, again with Rampolokeng's translation:

> mosadi a tswa a kgenne
> a jele sekaja
> (a woman came out angry
> in full flight)

While the translation emphasises the immediate reaction of the woman's anger, Motadinyane's Sesotho voice delves deeper into the emotional build-up behind that anger. The feminine voice reflects the frustration of years of unrecognised labour, a long-simmering response to patriarchal oppression. The woman's anger is not momentary but is rooted in the weight of daily struggles – her frustration with the unequal balance of responsibilities in the household.

In the poem's later lines, the Basotho blanket becomes a metaphor for the intimacy and protection that women are denied:

> phate tsa lahleha motseng
> tjhaba sa hloka kgotso
> (blankets got lost in the neighbourhood
> the nation was without peace)

The blanket, symbol of care and intimacy, represents trust and protection in the community. When the blankets are lost, it indicates the loss of dignity and the breakdown of relationships between men and women. The feminine voice connects this imagery to the violence and violation of women's bodies, highlighting how the failure to protect women leads to a broader societal breakdown.

Motadinyane's conclusion, where she calls for rain,

> Morena hlwella dithaba
> o kope kgotso ho ramasedi
> rapedisa pula Morena
> (king climb the mountains
> ask for peace from the almighty
> pray for rain king)

carries deep spiritual significance. Rain, here, symbolises cleansing and restoration, a return to balance after the harm inflicted on women. This is not just a call for physical rain but for a spiritual healing of

the community – a restoration of dignity and peace. The feminine voice emphasises that the responsibility of healing lies not just with women but with the entire community, and especially with men, who must reclaim their roles as protectors and nurturers.

A final word on Motadinyane, womanism and Isicamtho

This article has explored the contrasts between feminine and masculine writing in poetry, focusing on styles and approaches that differ beyond traditional gender definitions. Rather than examining gender alone, it has looked at how feminine writing in Motadinyane's poetry emphasises emotional engagement, empathy and communal responsibility, while masculine writing often foregrounds physicality, detachment or power. This distinction allows for a deeper understanding of how poets like Motadinyane balance these energies to convey the complexity of urban and spiritual life.

My biographical sketch is still in its early stages, and further research is needed for a fuller narrative of Motadinyane's life and contributions. As her work is explored more deeply, it will also provide an opportunity to further define Isicamtho as a form of poetry, music and a culture of defiance. Motadinyane's voice, though under-represented in literary circles, is essential for understanding the intersections of language, race, gender and urban life.

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Notes

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Isicamtho is a language that enables the flow of communication among speakers of different languages. My doctoral work involves defining Isicamtho and Tsotsitaal beyond their linguistic features and differences.

My understanding of womanism is gleaned from Asante's (2004) *Afrocentricity. The Theory of Social Change* and Hudson-Weems' (2004) *Africana Womanist Literary Theory*.

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