

Beyond Feminist and Womanist Hermeneutics: Some Critical Remarks on the *Bosadi Approach* of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele)

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ABSTRACT

For almost thirty years, Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) has advocated the need for a unique African approach for women in biblical studies. Her African-South African hermeneutical approach, called the bosadi approach, includes not only problematising gender, race and class but also addressing colonialism, sexism, apartheid and HIV/AIDS issues, among others. Masenya uses local proverbs from her Northern Sotho context to interpret both grassroots women’s lives and the biblical text and her aim is to regain self-worth and self-identity for African women. This essay evaluates the bosadi approach by first placing it epistemologically within African biblical hermeneutics. Then, it presents some of the criticisms of the bosadi approach in its early reception. The critique involves arguments about the approach as primarily a local approach, about not being critical enough of oppressive elements in African cultures and about not being empirically based. Lastly, the essay highlights the significance of developing a specific African feminist hermeneutical approach and indicates that the bosadi approach can be an inspirational tool for interpretation also in other contexts to confirm and liberate women.

KEYWORDS: Bible, *Bosadi*, feminism, womanist, Masenya

A INTRODUCTION

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) has contributed widely to and influenced African feminist hermeneutics. In her central work that introduced the *bosadi approach*, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs*

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31: 10–31 in *African-South Africa*, she points out how colonialism and apartheid lead to oppression of and discrimination against women.¹ Masenya has written about these issues in several publications but this essay engages in dialogue mainly with her 2004 volume, as it systematically presents the main outline of her *bosadi* approach.

To name her new framework, Masenya employs the local Northern Sotho word *bosadi* meaning womanhood. The word derives from the word *mosadi* which means woman, married woman, wife. Masenya chooses the term *bosadi* for her framework as “the word *bosadi* describes what it means to be a woman in the Northern Sotho culture” and as it is well-known in many different African-South African languages.²

This essay aims to first place the *bosadi* approach in the context of African biblical hermeneutics. It will then present some of the criticism the approach received in its early reception. Lastly, this essay evaluates some of the influence of the *bosadi* approach.

B THE *BOSADI* APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

According to Masenya, patriarchal dominance has distorted the African view of women and she sees the need for an approach in biblical studies that can contribute to empower and affirm African women.³ Masenya describes her approach as “an African woman’s liberation perspective on the Bible” and rejects the limited scope of the terms feminist and womanist to describe the complexities of women’s experience in South Africa.⁴

It is important to state that African biblical scholarship is dominated by two contextual hermeneutical approaches—liberation and inculturation hermeneutics. The latter concerns text and culture, while the former focuses on social, economic and political matters. Feminist hermeneutics falls under the category of liberation hermeneutics and is particularly focused on women’s issues.

1 Feminism and womanism

Since the 1980s, feminist studies and views have flourished in the global guild of biblical scholarship. Despite the divergence in feminist approaches, the

¹ Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10–31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 122.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

renown biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims that it is possible to agree on some main features:⁵

- i. The Bible is written in an androcentric-kyriocentric language and serves patriarchal or, better, kyriarchal interests.
- ii. The Bible came into being in patriarchal/kyriarchal societies, cultures, and religions.
- iii. The Bible is still proclaimed and taught today in patriarchal/kyriarchal societies and religions.
- iv. In and through a critical feminist interpretative process, the Bible can function as a spiritual vision and a resource in struggles for emancipation and liberation.

Not everyone will agree with Schüssler Fiorenza's last point. Even though some would find it difficult to use the Bible for the purpose liberation, some main features can be used as a common ground for the various feminist approaches. Feminism can thus be described as an umbrella term that covers not only gender issues but also "womanist, liberationist, postcolonial, Asian, African or indigenous, Latina, queer, interreligious and transnational" perspectives.⁶ In recent times, feminist studies of the Bible have become a broad field that encompasses a variety of approaches. It goes beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on these.

It is common to differentiate between feminist and womanist hermeneutics and it is often argued that white feminists do not address the issues of black women properly.⁷ Feminist hermeneutics has therefore come to be known as the white women's engagement in gender issues whereas womanist hermeneutics is about and for black women and is the African American women's endeavour in both race and gender issues.⁸ Womanist hermeneutics, according to this view, can be described as "feminists by colour" in contrast to feminist hermeneutics which normally addresses white women's critique of sexism and patriarchy.⁹ Womanist hermeneutics focuses on gender, race, class and linguistic sexism issues which are the quadrocentric base for all translations

⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 9.

⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Between Movement and Academy: Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century," in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 2.

⁷ JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mothers' Garden: Discrete Sources of Reflection on the Cross in Womanist Christology," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Mitzi Jane Smith; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 94.

⁸ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 5.

⁹ Terrell, "Our Mothers' Garden," 94.

and interpretations of biblical terminologies.¹⁰ The goal of womanist hermeneutics is to change and transform reality in order to empower African American women.¹¹ Womanist hermeneutics recognises that there are multiple truths when it comes to interpreting biblical texts or contexts and reject the monopoly on truth held by malestream scholars.¹²

Masenya's primary focus, as already stated, is on the distinct experience of African women.¹³ She thus categorises her *bosadi* approach as an "African women's liberationist reading," which is part of the broader field of liberation hermeneutics.¹⁴ Additionally, her emphasis on maintaining positive aspects of both the text and the culture shows the relation of her approach to inculturation hermeneutics.¹⁵

2 Inculturation

In 1977, the Catholic Church introduced the term inculturation to describe how Christian mission redefined the Bible in different contexts and cultures.¹⁶ Justin S. Ukpong (Nigeria) is a major proponent of inculturation hermeneutics.¹⁷ Inculturation hermeneutics emphasises interpreting the Bible from an African perspective, taking into account African "culture, world-view and life experience."¹⁸ The approach was developed from an African encounter with the Bible by "utilizing the resources of the African socio-cultural context" and the goal is to read the Bible "with African eyes".¹⁹ Ukpong identifies two models of

¹⁰ Clarice J. Martin, "Womanist Interpretation of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Mitzi Jane Smith; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 21.

¹¹ Renita J. Weems, "Re-reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Mitzi Jane Smith; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 48.

¹² Mitzi Jane Smith, "This Little Light or Mine": The Womanist Biblical Scholar as Prophetess, Iconoclast, and Activist," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Mitzi Jane Smith; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 114.

¹³ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 4.

¹⁴ Madipoane Masenya, "A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31." Pages 145-157 in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 148.

¹⁵ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 123.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 58.

¹⁷ Knut Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2008), 19.

¹⁸ Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3.

¹⁹ Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes," 5.

inculturation hermeneutics in Africa, namely "Africa in Bible studies" which searches African presence in the Bible, such as in the Cush texts (cf. 2 Sam 18-19; Jer 38-39; Isa 18:2, 7; 43:3; 45:14; Ezek 29:10; Amos 9:7) and "Evaluative studies" which explores the interaction between the Bible and African indigenous religion and culture.²⁰ Inculturation hermeneutics seeks to not only interpret the texts into African culture and contexts but also make Africa and the African context the interpretive subject of the biblical texts.²¹

Masenya's *bosadi* approach describes womanhood in her Northern Sotho context through the use of local proverbs. The proverbs she uses depict women as mothers, wives, hardworking, argumentative, cowardly and incapable of leadership.²² Further, she examines perceptions of women by assessing the definition of woman, the relationship between genders and women as wives and mothers.²³

Masenya criticises the high dependence on Western traditions in biblical studies.²⁴ She therefore advocates a restoring of African culture, although acknowledging its potential for both liberation and oppression due to the history of colonialism and apartheid. The *bosadi* approach critiques oppressive elements of African cultures and argues that African traditional culture was sexist before colonialism, which further entrenched androcentric attitudes.²⁵ The *bosadi* approach aims to identify positive and negative aspects of the culture by focusing on three main aspects:²⁶

- i. *bosadi* and positive elements of African culture:
 - *bosadi* and ubuntu
 - *bosadi* and the significance of the family
- ii. *bosadi* and oppressive elements of African culture
- iii. *bosadi* and other oppressive forces

Masenya stresses the significance of ubuntu and family as positive aspects of African cultures. Ubuntu is a collective concept of selfhood, different from the West's individualistic view. Additionally, *bosadi* highlights the importance

²⁰ Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000): 7.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 128–140.

²³ Ibid., 141–143.

²⁴ Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Approach," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Mitzi Jane Smith; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 69.

²⁵ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 124.

²⁶ Ibid., 123.

of family relationships despite women's subordination in many African societies.

3 Beyond feminism and womanism

So far it has been shown that Masenya neither identifies herself as a feminist nor as a womanist. Instead, she develops her own approach that includes gender, race and class issues, in addition to issues of colonialism, sexism, apartheid, patriarchy, poverty, unemployment, landlessness, HIV/AIDS and xenophobia since the African holistic worldview, according to Masenya, encompasses all these aspects.²⁷ However, Masenya and her *bosadi* approach are influenced by both feminism and womanism.²⁸ For instance, due to lack of resources on "African women's interpretation" of Proverbs 31:10-31, Masenya applies the views of African American biblical scholars for instance for portraying the image of the woman in the text.²⁹

In her biblical analysis, Masenya examines the expectations placed on women from a historical perspective and sees the value of exploring the historical context in relation to the African context for a better understanding of the potential correspondences. She looks at the various roles that women have played in ancient biblical times, such as household managers, hardworking God-fearing wife and caring individuals. By highlighting the positive elements of her local culture, she intends to offer a liberating perspective.³⁰ Masenya emphasises the importance of analysing "literary or religious forms" in their historical context to reach a fuller understanding of the text in order to liberate African women.³¹ According to Masenya, the features of Prov 31:10-31 woman should not be viewed as a standard to attain. The *bosadi* approach affirms the dignity of all women, regardless of their roles or relationships.

Masenya states that her approach "is close to what Ukpong calls inculturation hermeneutics".³² Her work also benefits from the ideas of African American feminists, which she acknowledges in her writing.³³ However, she believes that it is important to move beyond both feminism and womanism to create a framework that is specific to the African context. The focus in the *bosadi* approach is all the time on grassroots women and their unique experiences.³⁴ As

²⁷ Ibid., 121; Madipoane Masenya, "A *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 146; Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences," 75 and 78.

²⁸ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 143.

³⁰ Ibid., 146–156.

³¹ Ibid., 143.

³² Ibid., 9; Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes, 4.

³³ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 30.

³⁴ Ibid., 120.

a result, the *bosadi* approach can be classified primarily as an African feminist hermeneutical approach which builds on the ideas of liberation (feminism and womanism) and inculturation hermeneutics.

C CRITICISM OF THE *BOSADI* APPROACH

Although the *bosadi* approach has been embraced and used in several other contexts than Masenya's own Northern Sotho, the approach has also been criticised. The following will present some criticisms of the *bosadi* approach in its early reception as found in the volume, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*.³⁵ The observant reader notices that this book is published a few years before Masenya's book *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31: 10-31 in African-South Africa* (2004). This points to the fact that Masenya's *bosadi* approach was developed in several publications also before 2004. However, as the 2004 publication presents her approach in the most systematised way, we have chosen the book, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31: 10-31 in African-South Africa*, as our dialogue partner in this essay.

1 *Bosadi* as a local approach?

In her article, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth", Sarojini Nadar (South Africa) essentially approves the *bosadi* approach and says that she does not fault *bosadi* as a theoretical approach as such, but rather considers it to be a locally-based approach.³⁶ As Nadar identifies as a South African Indian woman, she contends that she has no right to claim ownership of the Northern Sotho culture.³⁷ Subsequently, Nadar holds that she cannot apply the *bosadi* approach in her own studies. Contrary to Nadar, Tinyiko S. Maluleke (South Africa) argues that although Masenya incorporates local expressions and culture in her *bosadi* approach, it is not an ethnical approach as such.

2 *Bosadi* as an approach from above?

In his article, "African "Ruths," Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai", Maluleke argues that the *bosadi* approach is not applicable as an empirical method as it does not provide the researcher with tools for how to

³⁵ Musa W. Dube, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001).

³⁶ Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 159–175.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

pursue research based on this approach in the field.³⁸ Rather, Maluleke says, it can be applied in terms of its content and methodological principles. Additionally, he argues that Masenya's *bosadi* approach is frequently misunderstood and "not always argued well".³⁹

Similarly, Nyambura J. Njoroge (Kenya) criticises Masenya for not collecting empirical material from grassroots women to gain "firsthand" knowledge about the topic to be investigated.⁴⁰ To illustrate her point, Njoroge makes the case that Masenya overlooks the implications of "naming the Bible as a canon" in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Njoroge criticises Masenya for asserting that she is employing a comparative approach, but failing to demonstrate how this is accomplished in practice. Instead, Masenya supposes that her approach is representative of most Africans and inadvertently speaks *for* the grassroots women, according to Njoroge, rather than allowing their voices to be heard.⁴¹ Njoroge argues that in order to enable African readers to resist destructive attitudes and practises, one must search both the Bible and culture for identifying "value systems".⁴² She also argues that Masenya in her *bosadi* approach could have benefited from testing her claims with ordinary African readers after collecting empirical evidence.⁴³

Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie (South Africa) also argues that the *bosadi* is an approach that is communicated from a higher level. She describes Masenya's *bosadi* approach as a "gendered black biblical hermeneutics from a middle-class perspective".⁴⁴ Plaatjie argues that it is crucial to incorporate non-academic readers in research and criticises Masenya for applying her *bosadi* approach from her comfortable academic position. Instead of engaging face to face in empirical studies with grassroots women or other ordinary readers, Masenya speaks on their behalf, ultimately placing them in the position of "the subaltern who cannot speak".⁴⁵

³⁸ Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "African "Ruths," Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 237–251.

³⁹ Ibid., 243.

⁴⁰ Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Bible and African Christianity: A Curse or a Blessing?" in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 225.

⁴¹ Ibid., 226.

⁴² Ibid., 227.

⁴³ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁴ Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie, "Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible: A Case of Luke 2:36–38," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 127.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 127.

3 Does *bosadi* fail to address negative elements in African culture?

Maluleke argues that the *bosadi* approach is a “patriarchal construct with patriarchal functions and intentions” and that Masenya has failed to address the issue of gender inequality in African societies where men expect women to engage in hard work in the sun while they rest in the shadows.⁴⁶ Therefore, Masenya should have taken steps to address this problem. Maluleke also criticises Masenya for claiming that women get power from their hard work and asks what kind of power this means.

Along the same lines, Plaatjie describes the *bosadi* approach as inculturation hermeneutics with a focus on gender. She questions whether Masenya really has included “race, class, gender and cultural analysis” as she claims to do in her post-apartheid approach.⁴⁷ Plaatjie claims that Masenya fails to “affirm women without embracing patriarchal standards”.⁴⁸ In essence, Masenya’s attempt to define womanhood is influenced by the patriarchal values in her local context, which often view women as inferior and seek to maintain traditional norms. Before claiming that traditional practices liberate women, it is important to distance oneself from these male-dominated expectations, according to Plaatjie. Additionally, the use of local proverbs for justifying “women’s multiple roles” is problematic, Plaatjie says, as it fails to recognise the complexities and nuances of women’s lives and experiences.⁴⁹ Simply claiming the power of women as household managers is not enough, as this power is often a result of men’s labour migration. Plaatjie argues that it is important to understand and address the systemic forces that shape women’s lives in order to truly liberate them. She claims that *bosadi*’s adherence to patriarchal values makes it difficult to distinguish between liberation and subscribing to the male-dominated values of the Bible and the local context.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is not clear how Masenya uses the term race in her approach, although it could be argued that her “reclamation of African culture” is used to resist racism.⁵¹ The *bosadi* approach neglects to address the underlying structural forces that perpetuate economic inequality and is therefore inadequate to address the issue of poverty, particularly among black women, Plaatjie states.

4 *Bosadi* as an approach that fails to address negative elements in the Bible?

Maluleke criticises Masenya for not being critical enough of the biblical text and for engaging with it too positively. He argues that a more balanced approach is

⁴⁶ Maluleke, "African “Ruths,” Ruthless Africas," 243.

⁴⁷ Plaatjie, "Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible, 125.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁵¹ Ibid., 126.

needed and suggests one that acknowledges the difficulties women face rather than just presenting "positive and successful role models everywhere".⁵²

Plaatjie also claims that Masenya fails to address certain biblical issues in her work. For instance, it is unclear how Masenya compares the treatment of black people in South Africa with the concept of Israelites as God's chosen people.⁵³ According to Plaatjie, Masenya does not challenge the ideology that Israelites were a chosen people. Plaatjie further argues that the *bosadi* approach does not criticise the local and biblical cultures that allow and "authorise the oppression of women".⁵⁴

5 *Bosadi* as an approach that fails for claiming African stories as canonical?

Njoroge acknowledges Masenya's point that the stories of the Bible were initially presented orally long before they were compiled into one book. However, Njoroge is uncertain how Masenya defines the term canon and how she arrives at the claim that African stories are canonical and then connects these with the Bible. In other words, Njoroge argues that it is unclear how Masenya affirms African cultural stories as canonical.⁵⁵ She disagrees with the claim that African cultural stories can be classified as canonical, as most Africans consider the Bible to be God's Holy Word without questioning or analysing it critically.⁵⁶

D SOME INFLUENCE OF THE *BOSADI* APPROACH

In the previous sections, we have described Masenya's *bosadi* approach and placed it within African biblical hermeneutics. Further, we have presented some criticisms that have trailed the early reception of the approach. In this section, we present some of the benefits of the *bosadi* approach in African biblical hermeneutics.⁵⁷

1 Addressing oppressive forces in both the culture and the Bible

Inspired by the inculturation movement, African culture and religion are seen as essential resources in the interpretation of the message of the Bible and of developing African Christianity.⁵⁸ In Africa, there is a long tradition of identifying with the Bible and this is particularly documented in Old Testament

⁵² Maluleke, "African "Ruths," Ruthless Africas," 243.

⁵³ Plaatjie, "Toward a Post-Apartheid Black Feminist Reading of the Bible," 127.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁵ Njoroge, "The Bible and African Christianity," 224.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁷ See also Jorunn Bjerga and Knut Holter. "Sub-Saharan Reception of Masenya's *Bosadi* Approach," [Forthcoming in *OTE*].

⁵⁸ Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000): 4.

studies.⁵⁹ Since the development of the historical-critical approaches within biblical studies, Western interpretation of biblical texts has represented colonial views of Africa and African cultures and colonialism was often legitimised by the use of biblical texts. The Nigerian biblical scholar David Tuesday Adamo claims that African Bible scholarship needs to be decolonised.⁶⁰ According to Adamo, we cannot properly understand the use of the Bible, for instance, for therapy, protection and to gain success in African indigenous churches, unless we understand the African worldview and culture.⁶¹ Adamo argues that Western biblical scholars need to understand the difference between Afrocentric and Eurocentric interpretations of the biblical texts and to acknowledge that all interpretation is contextual: "African scholars interpret the Bible in the light of African tradition and culture, while Eurocentric interpreters read the Bible in the light of Euro-American tradition and culture."⁶²

Masenya's *bosadi* approach picks up on this and claims that colonialism and apartheid have resulted in oppression and discrimination.⁶³ Masenya also shows how the patriarchal dominance has continued to affect the African view of women strongly and accordingly distort the view of women. Masenya's *bosadi* approach is inspired by inculturation hermeneutics. This occurs not only by making African women and their experience the main subject of interpretation, but also by utilising historical perspectives of the text to examine resemblances in the contexts, with the aim of addressing oppressive forces present in both the culture and the Bible. By allowing the two contexts to illuminate each other, empowering and liberating aspects of the text can be revealed.⁶⁴

However, according to Masenya, the literature used in inculturation hermeneutics is written and defined not only by men but also by men mostly educated by western scholars, hence, her critique of the approach. Masenya argues that the continued dependence on Western perspectives can lead African scholars who were educated in the West to interpret the Bible from a position of power, similar to the apartheid theology. As a result, young African scholars may neglect Africa and the African context, including the experiences of the powerless. Masenya focuses on grassroots women, not on academic scholars, because these women relate their lived realities to the biblical text. The ordinary women trust and respect the biblical text as God's unchanging word and "tend to

⁵⁹ Knut Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa*, 2.

⁶⁰ David Tuesday Adamo, "Decolonizing Psalm 91 in an African Perspective with Special Reference to the Culture of the Yoruba People of Nigeria," *OTE* 25/1 (2012): 15.

⁶¹ David Tuesday Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), 8.

⁶² Adamo, "Decolonizing Psalm 91," 24.

⁶³ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 29.

⁶⁴ Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa*, 18.

accept its message unquestioningly," sometimes in ways that suppress rather than liberate them.⁶⁵ Even though Masenya is hesitant to classify the biblical text uncritically as "Word of God," arguing that it has been used historically and until recent times to suppress women, the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the authority of the Bible and the important role the Bible plays in the lives of African women, the Bible remains an important and positive asset for African women. The Bible is thus seen as both oppressive and liberative in the *bosadi* approach.⁶⁶

2 Need for an African approach for African women

As Masenya states, she felt a need to develop a new epistemology that fitted her context due to the tendency of, at best, ignoring women in biblical studies, or at worst, oppressing them.⁶⁷ As already noted, Masenya employs a well-known local Northern Sotho word, *mosadi*, rewrites its meaning and adapts it to define her approach as the *bosadi* approach. Further, Masenya claims that to classify her research as feminist hermeneutics is too limiting. Thus, she finds the womanist hermeneutics to be unsatisfactory. Masenya criticises the tendency of viewing South Africa through non-African eyes. She claims that even though there is an outspoken call to focus on African culture and the fact that the majority in South Africa is black, the view of the white minority remains dominant in the country. This is not only expressed in the daily lives of South Africans but also reflected in higher education, including theological and biblical studies. Masenya argues that the methodology used in African biblical studies tends to exclude Africa.⁶⁸

In their article, "What's in a Name? Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," Phiri and Nadar discuss the importance of naming local approaches. They argue that having too many names can create confusion and that it is not enough to simply call them feminist hermeneutics. However, they acknowledge the value of highlighting the African perspective, which in the past has heavily relied on the West. Phiri and Nadar conclude by agreeing that giving the local approaches new names is valuable in affirming the identity of African women. As such, Masenya's *bosadi* approach should be applauded.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁸ Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences," 69.

⁶⁹ Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," in *Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion and Philosophy: An Introduction for African Universities* (ed. James Amanze, Fidelis Nkomazana and Obed N. Kealotswe; Eldoret: Zapf Chancery Publishers Africa, 2012), 220.

Masenya sees the potential of her approach also in other contexts. Nadar's reluctance to refer to her work as *bosadi* can be challenged on this basis. Additionally, as a detailed prescription for use does not accompany the *bosadi* approach it can be as simple or sophisticated as the researcher desires and at any rate serving as a theoretical lens for developing new knowledge. Moreover, it can be applied to empirical material in a hands-on approach, assisting the researcher to understand how biblical texts can play a role in relation to oppression and liberation mechanisms in women's lives. Implementing Masenya's *bosadi* approach in other contexts than originally used can be both fruitful and problematic—fruitful in the way that issues regarding African women's rights and concerns are covered in a good way, but also problematic due to the naming of the current approach. Using the *bosadi* approach continuously in new contexts can provide a basis for new naming of the approach in every new context. The *bosadi* approach has been applied in empirical research in several contexts other than Masenya's Northern Sotho, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo,⁷⁰ in Botswana,⁷¹ in a South African Pentecostal context,⁷² in Tanzania⁷³ and in Madagascar.⁷⁴ For an overview of the use of the *bosadi* approach in these contexts, see Bjerga and Holter.⁷⁵

3 An approach applied from a privileged perspective?

Masenya is faulted for speaking on behalf of the grassroots women in her local Northern Sotho community. This critique is comparable to Spivak's argument that the so-called subaltern is in no position to speak for themselves, as described

⁷⁰ Marthe Maleke Kondemo, "Women's Security through Heterosexual Marriage in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: An African Woman's Reading of the Book of Ruth." (Master's thesis, University of South Africa), 2011; Marthe Maleke Kondemo, "In Search of Affirming Identities and Role Models: A Gender-Sensitive Re-reading of the Vashti and Esther Characters in the Book of Esther among the Mongo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo." (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Africa), 2015.

⁷¹ Felicia Ramaribana, "Reading Ruth for the Sake of Poor Rural Women: A Bosadi Womanhood Approach." (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg), 2012.

⁷² Lufuluvhi Maria Mudimeli, "The Impact of Religious and Cultural Discourses on the Leadership Development of Women in the Ministry: A Vhusadzi (Womanhood) Perspective." (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Africa), 2011.

⁷³ Hoyce J. Lyimo-Mbowe, *Feminist Expositions of the Old Testament in Africa (Tanzania) in the Context of the Office Held by Deborah in Judges 4 and 5* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015).

⁷⁴ Kjersti Wee, "'A Perfect Wife?' How Do Ordinary Malagasy Women Relate to the Text about the Good Woman in Proverbs 31:10–31?" (Ph.D. thesis, VID Specialized University), 2025.

⁷⁵ Bjerga and Holter, "Sub-Saharan Reception" [Forthcoming in *OTE*].

in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak".⁷⁶ Spivak claims that if the subaltern is female, it creates a double effect: "the subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read".⁷⁷ Masenya intends to focus on grassroots women instead of scholars. This is because these women are closely connected to real life situations and relate the texts to their lives and can read themselves into the biblical texts. According to Masenya, these ordinary women are the greatest assets and this approach cannot be applied in a comfortable academic context.⁷⁸

In response to criticism that she approaches her work from a privileged perspective, Masenya argues that, as a Northern Sotho woman, she is actually an insider in the context.⁷⁹ Her focus is on building genuine relationships with the women she works with, allowing for constant, spontaneous and natural interaction. She says that she reads, prays, rejoices and cries with these marginalised women, starting from their own experiences rather than from the biblical text. However, if Masenya had applied empirical methods in her research, her claim to lift the voices of the grassroots women of her own culture would have come across as much stronger, as the readers of her research then would have been more directly exposed to what the grassroots women actually say and not have their views filtered through the researcher's mind. Beyond Masenya, the *bosadi* approach has been pursued in empirical studies by other scholars.⁸⁰ One can thus argue that Masenya's approach has been validated and confirmed by others when it comes to its potential for letting people speak for themselves.

To sum up, the main goal of the *bosadi* approach is to liberate and empower African women. As such, the *bosadi* approach is an indispensable part of African biblical hermeneutics; it takes seriously the complex experiences and understandings of what it means to be a woman in African contexts and it considers the Bible to function potentially as a resource in women's struggles for emancipation and liberation. The *bosadi* approach identifies oppressive forces and considers historical contexts and readers' perspectives in order to encourage dialogue and uncover oppressive elements in the culture and the Bible. The *bosadi* approach goes beyond feminist and womanist hermeneutics as it involves a holistic African worldview including unique experiences of grassroots women with the aim to liberate them. The wide use of the *bosadi* approach outside Masenya's Northern Sotho community shows the approach's dynamic and

⁷⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman; New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁸ Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences," 75.

⁷⁹ Masenya, *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth?*, 9.

⁸⁰ Bjerga and Holter, "Sub-Saharan Reception," [Forthcoming in *OTE*].

flexible nature in its ability to generate new knowledge which can impact women's lives.

E CONCLUSION

The main goal for many feminists, womanists and scholars using the *bosadi* approach is to confirm, empower and liberate women readers of the Bible in a way that impacts their daily lives. In this essay, we have placed Masenya's *bosadi* approach epistemologically within African biblical hermeneutics and beyond feminist and womanist hermeneutics. Using the word beyond is appropriate as Masenya's *bosadi* approach speaks to the self-worth and self-identity of *African women* and not of women in general. Knowing their context from within, Masenya aims to confirm and liberate women from her own Northern Sotho context by using local proverbs in relation to biblical texts. She does this, according to her, by reviving the liberating aspects of the culture and the texts, while at the same time criticising oppressive aspects in these two contexts. Such an ambitious endeavour can be criticised and the *bosadi* approach has – amongst other points – received criticism for embracing biblical and Northern Sotho patriarchal values and for pursuing an approach from above.

Despite the substantiated and fair criticism of the *bosadi* approach, this essay commends Masenya for developing a specific African hermeneutical approach to confirm and liberate women. The *bosadi* approach fills a gap in African biblical hermeneutics in general and in feminist and womanist hermeneutics in particular, as it credits and interprets the specific life situations and experiences that serve as a basis for African women's encounter with the biblical texts. The *bosadi* approach can thus be an inspirational tool for biblical interpretation also in other contexts than the African-South African in order to confirm and liberate women. The wide use of the *bosadi* approach indicates that this is a dynamic and flexible approach that could be employed on a theoretical as well as on an empirical level.

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