

Masenya's Scholarship Legacy: *Bosadi/Bomwasi* Womanhood Hermeneutics and Its Appropriation in the Mongo Context

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Masenya's hermeneutic approach to the biblical text. Influenced by her postcolonial, apartheid, and patriarchal context, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) developed the bosadi (womanhood) approach to reading the Bible in a South African context. Bosadi addresses poverty, HIV and AIDS, sexism, racism, foreignness, classism, family, suffering, and African cultural practices. Bosadi, originating from African culture, redefines the role of African women by recognising their significant contribution as wives and mothers within their society. The bosadi framework also problematises and challenges oppressive traditional definitions and roles of women while affirming positive definitions, identities, and roles. It takes into account both the biblical context and the reader's context. While the bosadi concept highlights the significance of the family within the African setting, it challenges any death-dealing elements in the African family setting and the biblical text. In her reading, Northern Sotho proverbs are also used as a lens for a better understanding of the Old Testament and unlocking its reality. Masenya's hermeneutics is an African woman's effort to redefine and rename herself and her fellow women by urging them to call themselves by their own names and to carry out biblical interpretation through their voices. Masenya's bosadi approach is used in this paper to analyse Masenya's research scholarship legacy.

KEYWORDS: Masenya, bosadi, bomwasi, womanhood, Mongo, African women, poverty, patriarchy

A INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to elaborate on the *bosadi*¹ womanhood approach—a method that I have also adopted in my reading of the Hebrew Bible—in honour of Professor

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¹ Masenya uses *Bosadi* (Womanhood) as a term relevant to reading the Bible from a Northern Sotho/African woman's perspective. She draws the concept of *bosadi* from the Northern Sotho word *bosadi* (womanhood), an abstract noun derived from the word

Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), my promoter, a mentor, and a mother who has inspired me in many ways. Born in the South African apartheid context, Masenya has become known worldwide as a (South) African woman theologian. She is a Professor of Old Testament Studies (Hebrew Bible) in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and an active member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Not only is she the first South African woman to get a doctoral degree in biblical studies, but Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) is also the first black female to obtain a degree in Old Testament studies in Sub-Saharan Africa. She has received many research awards, including the UNISA Women in Leadership award (twice) and the National Research Foundation award/rating B. She is a member of the Academy of Science in South Africa and a Womanist Scholar at the International Theology Center, Atlanta, GA, USA. Influenced by her context of post-colonialism, apartheid, and patriarchy, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) developed the *bosadi* (womanhood) approach to reading the Bible in a South African context. She writes on different issues such as gender-based violence, social class, culture, empire, race, and ethnicity, access to resources and opportunities about the life or well-being of women. She reflects on the Bible and uses the *bosadi* notion to foreground her methodological approach. Masenya critiques culture and the Hebrew Bible in a way that affirms women as full humans. The present study uses the *bosadi* liberatory framework to analyse Masenya's theology and pay tribute to the academic contributions made by Masenya in the field of theology, which have contributed significantly to the liberation and empowerment of women. She is, and will remain, one of the most esteemed South African biblical scholars, a trailblazer for many on the African continent.

B THE *BOSADI* WOMANHOOD APPROACH

Regarding what prompted Masenya to develop the *bosadi* approach, Masenya stated:

Given this lack of scholarly as well as lay Biblical interpretation aimed at the liberation of women and the history of how we were defined as Africans in South Africa, I have been persuaded to develop an approach to the reading of the Bible, which will take into account the whole context of an African woman in our country, a method which is committed amongst others, to the African-ness of an African woman in South Africa.²

mosadi. The latter has the following meanings: 'woman,' 'married woman,' and 'wife.' The term *bosadi* describes what it means to be a woman in the African–South African context. For more on the notion of *bosadi*, read Masenya (2005).

² Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 10/3 (1997): 439–448.

As stated above, the lack of scholarly biblical interpretation aiming at the liberation of African women in South Africa has driven Masenya to propose a *bosadi* (Womanhood) approach, an African biblical hermeneutical approach to the reading of the Bible from her context, the context of the marginalisation and oppression of women. Western biblical interpretation emphasises text-oriented approaches. Masenya states that the latter has had little to do with the context of Bible readers. As a result, scholarly biblical interpretation has remained the luxury of a few academics. Though inspired by the feminist and womanist methodological frameworks, Masenya's³ decision to develop a new methodology for reading biblical texts, informed by her South African context, was motivated by the insufficiency of both feminism and womanism to address her particular African-South African context. Feminism, in her view, has racist origins, while womanism addresses the concerns of African American women. Such circumstances, though closer to those of African women in South Africa, are not the same.

South Africa has a strong patriarchal system that encourages men to dominate, oppress, and exploit women in the public and private spheres.⁴ As a social system, it often manifests as men holding disproportionate power and authority over women, leading to the subordination of women. These demeaning and dehumanising systems rooted in historical patriarchal structures and colonial legacies have created systems of gender discrimination, including the denial of women's rights, the forced separation of families through migrant labour, the objectification and sexualization of women, and persistent gender-based violence. These systems continue to affect especially black women economically and socially, contributing to high rates of sexual violence and placing women in dependent, vulnerable positions. It is deeply intertwined with historical factors, including colonialism and apartheid, which further entrenched these power structures.⁵ Apart from the effects of patriarchy experienced in the broader South African context, the *bosadi* approach (unlike womanism, for example) critically analyses the patriarchal African culture's subordination of women. Masenya critiques patriarchy's impact on women, particularly within religious and cultural contexts. Her work highlights how patriarchal structures, both pre-colonial and those exacerbated by colonialism and apartheid, limit women's agency and perpetuate inequality. At the same time, it also affirms the positive cultural elements. Masenya utilises *bosadi* (womanhood) theology, a South African feminist approach, to challenge these patriarchal interpretations and

³ Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 119–126.

⁴ Nelly P. Stromquist, *Women in the Third World: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Issues* (Garland Pub, New York, 2014), 567

⁵ Penelope E. Andrews, *From Gender Apartheid to Non-Sexism: The Pursuit of Women's Rights in South Africa*, (26 N.C. J. INT'L L. 693 , 2000) Online: <https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/ncilj/vol26/iss3/2>, 695–696.

advocate for women's liberation. The *bosadi* concept highlights the significance of the family within our respective African settings. Still, it challenges any death-dealing aspect within the African family setting and the biblical text.⁶ This methodological framework offers a new lens for reading and understanding women in a manner that represents them as human beings. That is, when we see women, we should regard them as human beings and look far beyond the sociological expectations attached to being a woman.⁷ Rooted in the context of African peoples, the *bosadi* offers a new definition of what it means to be an African woman by acknowledging the valuable role women play as wives and mothers in African settings. It looks deeper into the demeaning and dehumanising systems towards women by developing an awareness model that helps people view women in a manner that pleases God from creation. Similar to the Congolese context, in South Africa, women are objectified and dehumanised through violence and poverty, which are sustained through a system of oppression and exploitation that uses violent masculinities and misogyny. Certain practices and customs continue to be used to justify the unequal roles and the relationships between men and women in marriage, the family, the church and society. Family, school, church, and the workplace are social spaces that define and structure gender relations and where the question of women's identities and roles is discussed. The challenge is therefore to confront the institutional and legal barriers which confer inferiority on women, as well as customs and traditions which hinder their progress, and the relationship between women and men in all areas of life. It is essential to act on each of the space units to allow change in gender relationships and the distribution of power, thereby reducing women's passivity.⁸ Women should not be defined in terms of the ability to give birth but rather because they are created in the image of God, having equal dignity and worth, and value.

1 *Bosadi*, an African Biblical Hermeneutic of Liberation

As a methodology for the biblical sciences, the *bosadi* womanhood approach, an African biblical hermeneutic of liberation, critically analyses the biblical text and its context. The *bosadi* approach, a hermeneutic of suspicion, is needed when reading the Bible. Coming from the context where the Bible was subjectively used to support apartheid, Masenya states that, though it is true that the Bible is life-affirming, it should not be taken at face value. Caution should be taken in our approach to the Bible. Not everything within the pages of the Bible is life-affirming, she insists. Instead, while drawing on life-affirming narratives from

⁶ Maleke M. Kondemo, "In Search of Affirming Identities and Role Models: A Gender-sensitive Rereading of the Vashti and Esther Characters in the Book of Esther among the Mongo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo," (Doctoral Dissertation; University of South Africa, Pretoria. 2015

⁷ Madipoane Masenya, "An African methodology for South African sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (womanhood) approach," *OTE* 18.3 (2005): 741

⁸ Kondemo "In Search of Affirming Identities," 104

the Bible, theologians should be careful not to accept everything in it as God's word blindly. The *bosadi* considers the context of both the reader and the text. Hence, the *bosadi* approach uses historical-critical methods to enable the reader, as far as possible, to situate texts within their historical setting. It is worth mentioning that while applying the historical-critical and contextual methods, a *bosadi* reader should be careful to use Masenya words, not to use an "overdose" of one approach over the other. Masenya's aim in using historical-critical methodology is not to remain in the study of the biblical past, but rather to enable one to determine and point out the close similarities between the Hebrew Bible realities and African realities. Therefore, given its interest in the reader's context, the *bosadi* approach takes into account the reader's experience. We all bring our contexts and experiences to the Bible when we read and interpret it. It provides meaning and clarity to the intended message. It creates a relationship between the writer and reader, giving a deeper understanding of the writing's intent and direction. The *bosadi* recognises that we are all shaped by our contexts, and that our readings of the Bible influence our contexts. The Bible itself shows that God speaks specifically to specific people in specific life situations. Therefore, readers need to consider community realities to guide their reflections. As indicated by Segalo:⁹

Women have stories that remain untold; many of the transcripts of their lived experiences remain hidden as platforms for their voices remain minimal. Various contexts such as the home, the church and the workplace to name a few remain spaces that conditionally accommodate women's agency. It is therefore crucial that as we embark on our scholarly pursuits we acknowledge and use a gender lens that takes seriously situated life experiences of women within various contexts.

Nevertheless, the Bible should be read and understood first in its existing context to hear its distinct voice within its own literary and socio-historical context, thereby providing a theological resource from which to reflect on and engage with our social analysis.

Patriarchal interpretations have historically disempowered women, limiting their roles to wives and mothers and often providing justifications for violence against them. Issues concerning patriarchy, particularly in its multifaceted forms in differing women's contexts, need to be treated as a matter of urgency in our Biblical interpretation endeavour. Misusing or misinterpreting biblical texts can enable violence and discrimination against women, creating a critical need to re-examine these passages with new understandings. These oppressive elements in African cultures and traditions often manifest as the systemic subordination of women, including discriminatory practices,

⁹ Puleng Segalo, "Women, they too have story: Re-imagining the female voice and body," *Scriptura* 112, (2013): 1-10

stereotyping, restrictive widowhood rituals and property ownership, are not only considered in the context of the life of an African woman, but where possible, they are also identified in the biblical text. Therefore, when used, *bosadi* approach helps to identify similar characteristics between the African and the Israelite. While these points of resemblance are applied to empower people's lives, the *bosadi* critiques oppressive elements within biblical and cultural texts, and advocates for a redefinition of women's identities and roles, offering tools to challenge patriarchy and find positive biblical role models that resonate with African women's experiences. Unlike Western feminist approaches with their emphasis on the androcentric nature of the biblical text, the *bosadi* approach goes further to identify other oppressive elements in the text, such as racism, sexism, classism, poverty, foreignness, family, suffering and the African culture, among others, as factors which shape how an African woman reads the Bible.¹⁰ The *bosadi* approach emphasises the need to understand the Bible within the specific socio-historical context of Africa, and use African philosophies, proverbs, cultural frameworks, and storytelling as tools for interpretation.

Bosadi not only revives the positive elements of the African culture but also criticises its oppressive elements: "It presupposes that African culture was sexist even before colonialism. The latter only served to reinforce the androcentricity of the African culture."¹¹ In that line, Masenya uses African proverbs as a hermeneutical tool to unlock their ancient Israelite counterparts. *Bosadi* highlights that African-South African women read the Bible with faith and rely on its power to transform their lives. Like many African biblical hermeneutic approaches, the approach acknowledges the significant role the Bible plays as a spiritual resource in the lives of many African women Christian believers.¹² This element of faith may not be left out because, for these women, the Bible is the Word of God and is capable of transforming life situations. Such a view has enabled dangerous cultural sayings, reinforced by apparently similar sayings from the Bible, to be applied indiscriminately to powerless girl children and women. As already argued, the Bible and the African context contain life-denying and life-giving forces. Thus, the negative elements need to be challenged and resisted. In the same way, the positive must be embraced and used for the good of those on the margins of our African communities, particularly women.¹³

¹⁰ Masenya. "An African methodology for South African," 4.

¹¹ Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves," 447.

¹² Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "The Bible, HIV/Aids and African-South African women: A *bosadi* (womanhood) Perspective," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXI/1 (2005c): 187–20.

¹³ Madipoane Masenya, "The Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10-31. Rereading through a *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Lens," in *Theologie im Context von Biographie und Weltbild* (ed. Tobias Faix, Hans-Georg Wunch and Elke Meier; Marburg: Francke-Buchhandlung, 2005), 89–106

Bosadi hermeneutics also extends to broader issues of social justice, governance, and development, particularly as they affect African women. This includes addressing issues like HIV/AIDS and advocating for women's leadership roles in religious institutions. In her HIV gender-sensitive re-reading, Masenya¹⁴ address the social, religious, and gendered aspects of the HIV/AIDS crisis, particularly from the perspective of women in South Africa. Through her re-reading, she aims to shed light on the lived experiences of women, challenge harmful narratives, and promote more inclusive and effective responses to the pandemic. The fights against HIV and AIDS should be part of the effort of all people to promote life as a fundamental value. Patriarchy and related forces such as racism, classism, HIV/AIDS, and others are challenged by providing faith communities with life-giving biblical interpretations. The *bosadi* emphasises men's and women's joint efforts to liberate African women.

Concerned by the ecological degradation, Masenya has developed a nature-conscious reading as she addresses ecological concerns in the Bible. The *eco-bosadi* recognises the significance of taking into account the environment and non-human elements within biblical texts. She interprets the Bible as siding with the earth and affirming the need for the liberation of nature. This perspective aims to restore perspectives once silenced in biblical texts, particularly the Psalms, and to promote harmonious coexistence between humanity and creation. The "*eco-bosadi*" reading notes that African Mothers and Earth suffer a common abuse from the male drive for reproduction. An approach to the Bible that combines elements of faith and critique will help readers be wary of anthropocentric readings. Through the years, these readings have caused harm to Earth, especially to the non-male and non-human members of the Earth community. Masenya uses *eco-bosadi* to indicate the distinctiveness of her approach, which is mainly committed to addressing issues affecting African women and the Earth. By acknowledging the interconnection between women, children, and the land, one's focus turns from filling Earth to preserving Earth as part of our identity: "A society that does not value women is probably prone to disrespect nature as well. In other words, our attitudes towards women epitomise our attitudes towards nature."¹⁵ The *eco-bosadi* perspective sees the Bible as taking sides with the oppressed condition of Earth and aims at its liberation.¹⁶ To deconstruct our anthropological readings of biblical texts, readings that have

¹⁴ Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ndikhokele, V. Mtshiselwa, Dangling between death and hope: An HIV and AIDS gender-sensitive re-reading of Psalm 6. *Verbum Eccles.* 37/2 (2016): 1–8. Online: http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2074-77052016000200005&lng=en&nrm=iso.

¹⁵ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An Ecobosadi Reading of Psalm 127:3-5," in *the Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110–112.

perpetuated and continue to perpetuate the marginalisation of the environment and women, an earth-conscious reading of the Bible is needed. The "earth-conscious" reading of the Bible illustrated by Masenya's reading of the book of Job shows that such a reading enables the reader to appreciate and situate the problem of human suffering, not within a narrow human-centred view of life, but rather within the broader universe-oriented framework of God's care and sustenance for the whole of creation including humankind.

C MISINTERPRETATION OF *BOSADI*

Some critics point out that *bosadi* could be viewed sometimes as an idealisation of pre-colonial African culture, overlooking the oppressive elements that existed, particularly with regard to the role of women. By acknowledging revitalising the positive aspect of the African culture, the *bosadi* can fall into a form of idealisation, ignoring the oppressive aspects that dehumanise women. They question its relevance and applicability in the contemporary context, considering it too theoretical or disconnected from everyday realities. In sum, the critiques of *bosadi* highlight the challenges of constructing an African feminist theological approach that is both culturally respectful and relevant to contemporary realities. Such foregrounding of culture stems from the observation that culture has both negative and positive elements, and it is sufficient for its people as long as it satisfies their needs. *Bosadi* does not view all of African culture negatively; instead, it identifies and celebrates the positive, liberatory aspects while also critiquing and challenging the oppressive elements affecting African women. The *bosadi* does not idolise the culture, but instead, it revives the positive or liberatory elements. The *bosadi* recognises African women's significant contribution as mothers and wives within their society.¹⁷ Where necessary, it elevates the significance of the family. The latter has played and still plays a significant role in Africa. While one knows that the family has often been used to subordinate women, the significance of sound family relationships for society must be emphasised.¹⁸ Considering the notion of family as home, the *bosadi* approach views the home as a sphere of operation for anyone (both men and women) and not an exclusively female sphere. It suggests that there should be an even distribution of labour between members of the different sexes in the family, primarily when both husband-and-wife work in the public sphere. This will alleviate the burden that working African women experience today. The *bosadi* approach highlights that God created a woman to be a complete and active human. This means that her value as a human being needs to be appreciated beyond her gender. Though the *bosadi* is an attempt to resuscitate the African culture from the ashes, it does not idolise the culture¹⁹. In her engagement with

¹⁷ Masenya, "The Woman of Worth," 6

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89–106

¹⁹ Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian womanist reading of the character of Ruth," *Other Ways of Reading* (2001): 159–175.

the Hebrew Bible using the *bosadi* approach, Masenya addressed various issues of concern, such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, sexism, racism, foreignness, classism, family, suffering, and African cultural practices, as she re-read some Hebrew Bible texts. Masenya's hermeneutics is an African woman's effort towards redefining and renaming herself and her fellow women, equipping them with the ability to call themselves in their own names and carry out biblical interpretation using their own voices.²⁰

D BOSADI / BOMWASI : A LIBERATIONIST GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH

My appropriation of the *bosadi* hermeneutical approach is informed by the apparent similarities between the terms *bosadi* (Northern Sotho) and *bomwasi* in the Lingala language. I find the concept of *bosadi*, as developed by Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), fascinating and more relevant to the women's experiences in my local contexts. Mongo women have been victims of gender ideology in the Mongo society. Found in legends, narratives and myths, gender ideology relates what it means to be a man or a woman and suggests how each should behave in society.²¹ Influenced by my Christian background and commitment to women's affirmation and empowerment, the *bosadi* approach enables one to read the biblical text in question based on my position as a DR Congolese African woman. While it is rooted in the context of African peoples, the concept also seeks to redefine what it means to be a woman in that particular context. It values roles and affirms women's identities. Many Mongo women take the Bible as the Word of God, which is addressed to them directly and cannot be interrogated. The traditional way of reading the biblical narratives remains the only way, and it plays a major role in a Mongo woman's life. Therefore, a gender-sensitive provides a possibility to engage in a more liberative reading of the biblical text that offers Mongo women and DR Congolese women in general new ways of affirming their identities. *Bosadi* approach also succeeds in enabling these women to read the Bible in a way which affirms them. Since we are shaped by our contexts, and our readings of the Bible influence our contexts, community realities need to be taken into consideration to guide our reflection. Hence, through the employment of the *bosadi*, the gap between an academic and a grassroots Bible reader can be bridged. The *bosadi/bomwasi* enables one to acknowledge the role that the Bible plays in the lives of the Congolese women. It has proven helpful by critically analysing African and biblical cultures and by shaping a gender-conscious reading that considers both the biblical context and the context of the Bible reader. *Bosadi* approach acknowledges the integrity of

²⁰ Elivered Nasambu-Mulongu, "Bosadi: Madipoane (Ngwana'Mphahlele) Masenya's Contribution to African Women's Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Post-Colonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbitu and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 43.

²¹ Jeylan W. Hussein, "The Social and Ethno-Cultural Construction of Masculinity and Femininity in Africa," *African Study Monographs* 26/2 (2005): 59–87.

the text by allowing the text to speak for itself as much as possible. Practically, *bosadi* hermeneutics provides a framework for Congolese women to engage with the Bible in a way that is both critical and empowering, reclaiming their narratives and challenging dominant interpretations. While not directly claiming influence on the original biblical text itself, *bosadi* highlights the significance of Africa and Africans in the biblical narrative and its context. It also emphasises the importance of recognising the Bible's historical context.

With the *bosadi* approach, Masenya introduces women, especially African women, to a new way of approaching the Bible in a woman-friendly way. In other words, women can benefit from reading the text, no longer with strange eyes but with their own eyes informed by their own biblical hermeneutics.

In the DRC, the Bible is rarely questioned in church contexts, yet there is a pressing need for critical examination to support women's liberation, particularly for those identifying with female biblical figures. *Bosadi* approach advocates analysing both patriarchal African and biblical cultures, as readers' cultural backgrounds greatly influence interpretation. Biblical scholars are urged to challenge patriarchal ideologies by interrogating texts for their oppressive nature before exploring their potential for liberation.

The approach offers a new definition of what it means to be an African Congolese woman by redeeming and liberating those who are usually excluded because of marginalisation, exploitation or other forms of oppression. It values the role and status associated with womanhood by affirming her various identities: daughter, wife, mother, counsellor, politician, manager, and leader. Even in the context of those women who chose not to get married or to voluntarily not have children for many reasons, the *bomwasi* gives them dignity as full human beings, and that is not forfeitable and indestructible. Women are described as having equal dignity, being of equal worth and value.

This methodological framework gives a new lens for reading and understanding women in a manner that represents them as human beings. That is, when we see women, we should understand them as human beings, far beyond the sociological expectations attached to being a woman. The reading of the Bible that empowers women should begin by identifying the contextual challenges that oppress female child marriage, exclusion from education and other forms. *Bosadi* looks deeper into the systems that are demeaning and dehumanising towards women by developing an awareness model that then helps people to view women in a manner that pleases God from creation.

E *BOSADI / BOMWASI* REREADING OF QUEEN VASHTI IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Growing up as a little girl and a Sunday school lover, I was taught about Esther, a beautiful young girl who became queen because of her obedience. I was never told about Vashti, the disobedient queen who was also as beautiful as Esther, but I never stopped to consider Vashti's side of the story and her reasons for the refusal. Vashti was considered an arrogant, disobedient, foolish woman who should not have refused a minor request to attend a party by her husband. I do not remember ever feeling sorry for Vashti until I became more exposed to the scholarship world and read the book of Esther with a gender-sensitive lens.²² *Bosadi* approach made me discover a Vashti who was far different from the Vashti I knew from my childhood. Vashti's story is only one of many in the Hebrew Bible that portray women negatively. Women are depicted as evil even though they never had the chance to tell their side of the story. Unfortunately, such negative portraits of Vashti persist to this day in our churches.

For many women, for instance, the ordinary Christian women in my community, the true heroine of the book is Esther. Esther is praised for her humility and her obedience, while Vashti is criticised for her disobedience. Her behaviour can be imitated by women who promise to obey their husbands during their wedding ceremonies. However, for gender-sensitive scholars, the heroine of the book is not Esther but Vashti, who exercised the courage to say "No" to the demand of the king to display her beauty in front of his drunk guests (1:10–12). Vashti's story (Est 1:10–21) is a very short part of the entire narrative. Immediately after she was introduced, she disappeared from the story. Vashti is introduced during the second drinking party. She is identified as a queen, the king's wife. For being her wife, Vashti was regarded as the king's possession.²³ The king was free to do whatever he wanted with her without anyone questioning his actions. Queen Vashti is described as "a beautiful woman" (1:11). Her body was an object of delight to the king. Nadar²⁴ notes that the king summons Vashti to appear in her capacity as a woman – a sexual object. Her appearance before the king and his male guests was desired to confirm her value as a beautiful possession and to earn the king respect before his guests. The king sought to secure control of his domain. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's

²² Kondemo, "In Search of Affirming Identities," 127

²³ The Decalogue (Ex 20:17) lists a wife among a man's possessions, along with his servants and maids, his ox and his ass. The husband is called the ba'al or 'master' of his wife, just as he is the ba'al of a house or a field (Exodus 21:3, 22; 2 S 11:26; Proverbs 12: 4 and so on); a married woman is therefore the 'possession' of her ba'al (Genesis 20:3; Deuteronomy 22:22). Indeed, to marry a wife 'is expressed by the verb ba'al, the root meaning of which is 'to become master' (Deuteronomy 21:13; 24:1).

²⁴ Sarojini Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation," *OTE* 15/1 (2002): 121

command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him (Est 1:12). Vashti's actions caused her to be seen as a threat to the status quo and she was eliminated. Vashti was punished not so that all subjects would learn to obey the king's wishes but rather that all women would learn to obey their husbands. In other words, it was not the power balance between king and subject that needed to be established but the power balance of gender needed to be reconsidered. Vashti is banished so that all women could "treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike" (Est 1:20).

The Hebrew text quite clearly indicates that the king summoned Vashti when he was drunk (1:10) thereby implying that his actions were not quite rational and that her refusal to obey was justified. Nadar²⁵ therefore agrees with Clines that,

Vashti's power lies in the fact that she refuses the king with no apparent reason. She does not need to have a reason for she is under no obligation. Her power lies in her freedom to choose for herself, and I would add and the strength to face up to the consequences of that choice.

In the Mongo context, drunken men are usually aggressive physically and verbally. Though it is supposed that the actions of a drunken person proceed from preconceived ideas, he/she is also regarded as being out of their mind. It is common to see a drunken man abusing his wife or children in the public. Viewed in that light, Vashti's refusal was right and justified. Whatever her reasons were, Vashti decided to defy those rules. She had a higher view of female dignity and refused to place herself on exhibition as one of the king's trophies. She is an example in the Hebrew Bible of a woman who chose to act contrary to the will of her husband or men around her. She chose to keep her dignity by defying her husband's authority. Can one assume that Vashti experienced oppression and discrimination? Was she struggling to find a way out of an abusive marriage or situation? The silence of the narrative in that regard does not help us to confirm this possibility. Vashti's motive remains a significant gap for readers to fill. Vashti could not have agreed to lose her crown just to please herself. Something more important must have motivated her to do so. Vashti lost her status as queen and her role as wife for refusing to comply with the king's demand.

Just as it is today, in the Persian period, a good woman was an obedient wife (1:20), a beautiful young virgin or a concubine. She was expected to be a passive subject and to play the role imposed on her by culture as a submissive wife and an object of male sexual fantasy. However, female sexuality may also be used to assert some measure of control over men. Women have something they can give to men or deny them. When men desire or want women, they expect them to cooperate, as they hate to be turned down by women. As such,

²⁵ Ibid., 122

women who are sexually independent exert control over men and are therefore considered potentially dangerous and evil. Since Vashti refused to be an object of male satisfaction, the men agreed to find a way to stop all the Persian women from imitating her. As Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Bookholane²⁶ argue,

Vashti's ability to speak her own mind and thus challenge the notion of female submission cost her position as a queen. In a context in which women, irrespective of how close they were to power (cf. Vashti as the queen) were expected to submit even to the problematic demands of men/their husbands, Vashti's boldness in refusing to accede to such demands, should be lauded. She refused to be treated as a public pawn (objectivised) in the hands of her husband.

Vashti stood for justice, equality, security and opportunity for women in her society. She defined herself as a person with rights and dignity. Through her actions, she defined how a man (the king) should treat a woman. With Vashti, being courageous was not easy. In fact, courageous actions can be scary and may invite trouble, but facing most situations in life requires some amount of courage. Being courageous does not mean one is entirely free of fear. The value of courage is that it supports a person in the struggle for justice and change, allowing one to confront scary situations, stand up to powerful people, and defend one's beliefs.

Challenging the king cost Vashti the throne, a man's institution. Vashti's action, according to the narrative, had reinforced men's authority in the household (1:20), but, in my view, it awakened Persian men's awareness of women's dignity and self-image. A single woman was able to threaten men's authority and change their attitude, as demonstrated by Esther's uninvited appearance before the king and Zeresh's advice to her husband, Haman. Vashti's action illustrates the value of courage and the way courageous actions change lives and help create a more equitable and just society. Phipps (1992:94) shows that,

She has the feminist characteristics of assertiveness and independence, and she risks her life by refusing to be a sex object and a spectacle for intoxicated men. She bravely counters the patriarchal assumption that faithful wives should, when insulted by carousing husbands, swallow their pride and smile.

Can Vashti's courage, which caused her to pay a high price, be used in the affirmation of women's identities in today's modern DRC society, which is somehow similar to that of Vashti? Women continue to be limited and confined to their predefined subordinate roles as mother, wife, or daughter. A woman's body is seen as an object of sexual satisfaction. The society even today shows no

²⁶ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), and Bookholane, L. "Towards an Ethical Reading of the Hebrew Bible in the Fight against HIV and AIDS," *OTE* 24.1 (2011): 112

respect for the rights of women and girls. In DRC, the female body is used as a weapon (rape) in times of conflict. In societies where academic success or promotion in the workplace is not based only on the ability of a young girl or woman but on whether she grants the teacher or the boss access to her body, can Vashti be upheld as a role model for our children as we teach them to say "No" to adults who try to molest or harm them? Would it give a little more courage to women and girls to just say "No" to a boyfriend or husband who keeps pressuring them to have sex or do certain things against their will? In the midst of poverty and suffering, this is not easy, but it is important to find the courage to say "No" when we need to, not because it is easy, but because it is the right thing to do. The story of Vashti is being rewritten every day, urging women to stand and fight against injustice, oppression and marginalisation to help transform our societies into spaces where women can affirm their identities and rights as human beings created in God's image. Social justice is possible only when we defy injustice in its many forms.

Despite all arguments to the contrary, Vashti, in my view, succeeded in showing the people, particularly the men of her time, that women also have a will and can exercise it whenever they choose, irrespective of the consequences.²⁷ She refused to be constrained by her culturally defined role as a wife or mother. She wanted to be an independent and respected woman. Vashti was treated as a stranger in her own country and her marital home. Like one in exile, she was not a free citizen with her own rights. Reading through the story, it appears that even Esther had a more legitimate status than Vashti. Reading Vashti from a South African woman's viewpoint, Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele)²⁸ says, "even the narrator in Esther treats Vashti like a stranger to the Persian community." In her view, Vashti, the Persian woman, is portrayed negatively as a woman who shames her husband.²⁹ Her actions led her to suffer the consequences of her independent decision. Vashti's boldness causes her to suffer in a situation in which she was considered a woman in exile in her own home. Therefore, she is worthy to be viewed as an exemplary figure for her behaviour.

Vashti existed only in relation to her husband; she had no identity of her own. As soon as she decided to assert her identity, she was treated like a rotten fruit that ought to be removed from the basket before it spoiled the others. No

²⁷ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "A Small Herb Increases Itself (Impact) by a Strong Odour: Reimagining Vashti in Esther in an African-South African Context," *OTE* 16/3 (2003): 341

²⁸ Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "A Small Herb Increases Itself," 338

²⁹ Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Theirs Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours Is a Necessity! Reading Vashti in Esther as African Women in South Africa," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist Challenges to Historical Critical Interpretations: Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (eds. CV Stichele and T Penner; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 179–194.

one sympathised with her or showed her mercy. She did not get a second chance. She was disposed of, and there was neither a place for her in her father's house nor a family member or friend to defend her. Once her hand was given in marriage, she lost her place in her father's house. Vashti became marginalised and was treated as an outsider to the Persian community. She did not even have the chance to defend her actions. No one would listen to her side of the story because of her status as a wife. Women in the Persian Empire lived in a dependent state associated with their femininity, while autonomy and power were associated with masculinity.

Vashti is a feminist hero who opposed the male power structure with what little independence she had.³⁰ Many women, according to Mckenna want to make Vashti the heroine of the story because her actions are more suitable to our times: "She is the valiant woman who stands up for herself in the face of husband or any man who owns her as a piece of chattel, accepting banishment rather than to obey an insulting command."³¹ Vashti serves as an example for women because even in the face of banishment, she refused to comply with a dehumanising command, and many women and men over the centuries have followed Queen Vashti's example of choosing exile over compromise. Though Vashti disappeared from the story, her deposition should not be regarded as a loss. Vashti chose to hold on to her dignity rather than the throne, demonstrating that certain things in life are more important than wealth, power, or influence. She therefore maintained her individuality by refusing to be the object of male desire.³²

Vashti left a legacy which many women in a patriarchal society today would not dare to leave. Vashti agreed to lose the power and honour bestowed on her as a queen to save her dignity. She defined herself beyond her identity as a wife. Though she was banished, her departure did not erase her from the scene; she became more present than absent. Her legacy was what guided Esther and made her much wiser in her dealings with the king. She exposed the king's behaviour, and without Vashti, there would not have been an Esther.

A liberationist gender-sensitive reading demands that the people of God create a new kind of community. We are to do that by redeeming and liberating those who are usually excluded because of marginalisation, exploitation or other forms of oppression. The improvement of women's conditions will result from a change of mentality that must take place first, but not exclusively in women. *Bosadi* approach has proven to help reread the biblical story of Vashti in Esther. It acknowledges women's valuable role as wives and mothers in the African

³⁰ Alice L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988), 214–215

³¹ M. McKenna, *Leave Her Alone. Queen Esther and Vashti* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 125

³² Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies," 121

setting and emphasises the significance of the way in which a woman is created by God to be a full and active human. This means to appreciate her value as merely a human being, beyond her gender. Recognising a human being beyond gender constructs or ideologies would mean recognising a woman as a human being of worth.

F CONCLUSION

Bosadi approach is an African woman's effort to redefine and rename herself and her fellow women. This approach encourages women to call themselves by their names and to carry out biblical interpretation through their voices. *Bosadi's* hermeneutical stance entails resisting patriarchal ideologies in biblical and African oral canons by constructing a space of liberating interdependence across cultures, genders, ethnicities, races, sexualities, religions, nations, cultural worlds, and the environment. Masenya argued that the Scriptures must be read "through my African eyes and not through Eurocentric eyes."³³ *Bosadi* womanhood hermeneutics is one of the tools African women need to read biblical texts.

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³³ Madipoane Masenya, "The Bible and women: Black feminist hermeneutics," *Scriptura* 54 (1995):155.

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