Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation

Sarojini Nadar  (Univ of Natal)

ABSTRACT

Suffering bodies are indeed high on the agenda in the Book of Esther. As Timothy Beal (1997:2) points out, the losers in the story end up ‘dethroned, banished, disenfranchised, dead in a pile, or impaled on a stake’. The suffering bodies are intricately tied up with issues of gender, power, sexuality, ethnicity and identity. By deconstructing oppressive gender and ethnic assumptions in my literary reading of the two major female characters I show how the text of Esther can be read as an empowering and liberating text for women in suffering contexts in South Africa. The majority of South African women view the Bible as a crutch on which to lean in difficult times. Yet the issues that preoccupy scholars about Biblical narratives are also the issues that affect these ‘ordinary’ women. Texts like Esther can impact women living under the triple oppression of race, class and gender in a very direct and pervasive manner. A reading such as the one undertaken in this paper is meaningful not only to the academic, but also to the ordinary (woman) reader. My analysis comprises literary, postmodernist and South African womanist methodologies.

A INTRODUCTION

I invite you to come along with me for a journey back in time. It is the year 1483 in Ghana, just off the West African coast. The scene is Elminah Castle; a fort set up by the Portuguese for the purpose of slave trade. In a room seven meters by six meters wide 150 women wait. They wait. They have been waiting for two months already. They have been waiting here for two months already. They have been waiting for the ship from Portugal to arrive to take them to their new home. But, today the waiting is different. Today not only are they waiting for the ship to arrive, they are also waiting to see the outside after two months of being locked up in this room this room that is filled with the stench of urine, faeces and menstrual blood. The soldiers open up the gates and
let them out, one by one. They walk slowly, the chains around their ankles inhibiting their movements even further. They smell each soldier and wonder if he was the one that raped their sister last night. They carry on slowly until all of them are out in the open breathing fresh air after two months. They stand in the centre of the courtyard. Slowly they lift up their eyes to see the governor standing on the balcony. They try to fight the feeling of ambivalence raging inside them. They should look their best. After all, whomever the governor chooses, will have to have a bath, a hot meal, and possibly a change of clothes. So they try really hard to forget what the events of the night with the governor will entail ....

I ask you now to join me on another journey even further back in time. This time the year is (approximately) 477 BCE, in Persia. All the young and the most beautiful virgins in the land of Persia are gathered. They are also waiting. They each wait for her turn to be sent to the king. They have been waiting for a year now. They have had cosmetic treatments at the house of Hegai, the eunuch. They also try to fight the ambivalence raging within them. After all, whomever the king chooses will become the next queen of Persia. And who doesn’t want to become queen? Nevertheless, the choice is not theirs to make. It is the king’s. So they try really hard to forget what the night with the king will entail ....

My opening illustration dealing with the suffering bodies of women is not a fictitious story. I visited Elminah Castle on a trip to Ghana in 2001. Even more horrifying than the atrocities perpetrated against human life, was the fact that in the midst of all the suffering stood an edifice of worship—a church. Apparently it was built by the Portuguese originally. However, when the Dutch took over the slave trade they could not worship in the Catholic Church so they converted it to a market and built their own Dutch Reformed Church upstairs, directly above the dungeon wherein the women were kept.

There are many dungeons that lay beneath our religious discourses. In them the suffering bodies of countless women from the beginning of time can be found. How is it that we find suffering bodies of used and abused women right from Biblical times into our very own century in the midst of people that claim to be religious, in the midst of people who engage in religious discourse? In this paper I argue that a big part of the answer to that question lies in the document that feeds the religious discourse, in this case the Bible. Because of its openness to interpretation the Bible is neither an independent nor a stable unit. It has been the subject of interpretation for centuries, and in contexts such as the one from which
I come it has been used as normative for the way in which people live out their lives. I suspect that this is also true for the majority of professing Christian communities in South Africa. A question that arises out of this is how does this attitude towards the Bible affect women? Elsa Tamez (1995:63-64) points out that in Latin America, ‘on the one hand, old-time anti-women customs of Hebrew culture have been declared sacred; on the other hand, certain texts have consequently been held up as biblical principles to prove that women’s marginalization is natural in daily life.’ This is also true for the South African Indian Christian community from which I hail. To take this question to its logical conclusion then, is to ask what do we do with these Biblical texts that seemingly find justification in other spheres such as culture and society as well? I have argued elsewhere that simply to throw out texts that question the dignity of women or to reject the Bible as a sexist document is an irresponsible move by feminist and Biblical scholars (Nadar 2000). This is because, as Masenya (1997:16) argues, ‘for the average African-South African Christian Bible reader, the Bible is regarded as the Word of God capable of transforming life and addressing different life situations, not simply a scholarly book to be critiqued.’

The fundamental difference between the interpretive strategies of faith communities and the interpretive strategies of the academy is that faith communities begin with a belief in the authority of Scripture. As a scholar of the Bible I live out this ambiguity and find myself oscillating between the world-view of my faith community (which largely comprises poor and marginalised ordinary women readers) and the world-view of the academy. The critical tools that I have inherited from the academy have helped me to ask questions of the Biblical text that I could not have asked before. However, those same critical tools also serve to limit my interaction with my community of women, because those tools often alienate them. As a socially engaged Biblical scholar it is important for me to contribute towards the social transformation of my community, therefore as a South African Indian womanist Biblical scholar I want to seek out methods of Biblical interpretation which are appropriate to my context. Postmodernist methods could help bridge the gap between academic scholarship and faith communities’ ways of reading, with a view to social transformation, precisely because postmodernist methods acknowledge the contextual nature of interpretation, irrespective of whether the Bible is taken as authoritative or not.

Reading the Biblical text in a postmodernist way overcomes the limitations of
both historical criticism and new criticism (both of which are valued enterprises of the academy) especially for scholars wanting to generate meaningful knowledge for living as Christians in the South African context. A postmodernist reading insists that the reader acknowledge her/his context at the very outset. However, as a socially engaged Biblical scholar one cannot be ‘content with (simply) an admission of contextuality’. Being a socially engaged scholar means embracing and advocating context. ‘Commitment to rather than cognisance of context is the real issue’ (West 1999b:51). Although postmodernist methods advocate the cognisance of context in interpretation, they do not allow for the commitment to context. Therefore other methods of interpretation beyond postmodernism need to be sought if we are to answer the question raised at the outset of my paper namely, the reason why suffering bodies of women are still found all over the world, and especially in South Africa despite the religious discourses that pervade our society. My argument therefore is that unless we find in John Pobee’s words ‘new eyes for reading’, we will continue to find the dungeons of suffering bodies of women, beneath our religious discourses, because of the inherently sexist and patriarchal nature of the controlling text and the contexts in which we encounter the text. Postmodernism has offered us a clue how to find these ‘new eyes’ for reading, but I still do not think that it has the solution, precisely because it stops at the point of cognisance of context. We have to find a method that not only takes cognisance of context but is committed to it as well. In fact the Nigerian scholar Denis Ekpo quoted in Quayson (2000:87) argues that Africans do not need postmodernism as a solution to the problem of contextuality:

For cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified, human reason in the past nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the post-modern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason, of man, of history, etc., on the one hand, and of a return to, or a rehabilitation of, obscurity, the unknown, the non-transparent, the paralogical on the other hand, cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears to be for the European man. In fact it cannot even be seen as a problem at all…Nothing therefore stops the African from viewing the celebrated post-modern condition a little sarcastically as nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of the bored and spoilt children of hypercapitalism.

What Ekpo is essentially arguing is that African interpretation always encompassed what scholars are now calling the ‘post-modern condition’. I would argue that ordinary women readers of the Bible have also always encompassed the
‘post-modern condition’ for the simple reason that their interpretations have always been based on life experience. For example, Cone (1990:31) argues that ‘it matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors.’ The subalterns therefore have always spoken, from their own life experiences. As socially engaged Biblical scholars, I think our task is to listen critically to these voices of the subalterns not just in our communities but within the text as well.

Taking into consideration my argument that the academy should be in direct dialogue with the faith community if we are to bring about true social transformation, the aim of this paper is to engage with the text of Esther in ways that can bring about liberation, especially to women in suffering contexts in South Africa. I do this through a deconstructive analysis of gender, power and sexuality norms that are prevalent in the text. There are many varied contexts of suffering that women of all races and cultures find themselves in. However, I speak, as only I can, from the perspective of the South African Indian Christian community. I state overtly and make no apologies therefore, that the hermeneutical choices I make within my reading of the characters of Esther and Vashti are informed by my ideological position as an Indian woman.

Reading, Castelli et al (1995:302) argue,

is an ethical act that involves an encounter between reader and text, an encounter that is always situated within individual lives and institutional systems. This means that some readings are ‘better’ than others. Better ideological readings are those that support and encourage positive social change that affirms difference and inclusion.

It is my hope that the reading of the characters of Vashti and Esther that I offer below will be this kind of ‘better’ reading - a reading that supports and encourages positive social change, especially in a community such as mine where ordinary women consciously seek to identify with the characters in the Biblical text.

B READING VASHTI

Many of the views embodied in the narrative are ‘expressed through the characters, and more specifically through their speech and fate’ (Bar-Efrat 1989:47). The fact that the characters ‘carry forth’ the voice of the narrative,
however, does not mean that they cannot emerge as individuals and autonomous beings with personalities. In the case of Vashti the temptation to treat her as a mere plot functionary, a necessary evil that must be eliminated so that we can get on with the main story, is even greater because Vashti is not even given a voice. We only know of her via the narrator, and the information that is given is sparse. So, the formalist and structuralist argument that the major characters, like the minor characters in Biblical narrative, serve merely as plot functionaries or agents, functions well in the case of Vashti. In my reading of Vashti, however, I resist the formalist and structuralist impulses because they preclude the possibility of viewing characters as real persons and prefer to see them as just literary constructs.¹ I prefer to offer other strategies for reading her character.

1 Strategies for reading the character of Vashti

The Book of Esther documents the story of Vashti in its first chapter. But, Vashti is an oft forgotten character in the story. Timothy Beal (1997:16) argues that the reason both scholars and students alike forget about the character of Vashti is that they read the first chapter much in the same way that a formalist Biblical scholar would. In other words they read the story of Vashti only as a prologue or prelude to the story. They see her as a character that essentially has to be dispensed with in order to make space for the real and permanent cast members.

The reasons that some ordinary South African Indian women provide for forgetting Vashti are somewhat different. They assert that when they have read the Book of Esther in a woman’s Bible study group or when they have heard it preached from the pulpit, they are told that they should not identify with Vashti. Esther and Vashti are set up as binary opposites to each other. Esther is portrayed in a positive light while Vashti is portrayed in a negative one. This identification of Vashti as a negative character finds continuity with Indian cultural notions of the role of a wife in relation to her husband. There are several Indian proverbs that support the world-view that a woman should be obedient to her husband in spite of any circumstances. ‘Kanavane kann kannda deivum’, (the husband is the wife’s god in sight by worshipping her husband she actually worships God). ‘Kallanalum kanavan pullanalum purushan’, (a husband even if he proves himself worthless as a stone or grass, still has to be honoured and worshipped as husband). In the minds of women who have been brought up on these proverbs (or in the case of South African women, the mindset behind these proverbs) Vashti may be
seen as a very negative character. When Vashti is seen in a negative light it is easier to eliminate her from the text, to make space for her positive foil, Esther. In spite of the cultural and Biblical baggage, however, when given the option of seeing Vashti in a positive light the women have indicated that they actually find it extremely liberating. In fact some of them even said that they always felt secretly saddened that they had to look at Vashti in this light, but they did not dare articulate their feelings because that would mean questioning not just the authority of the Bible, but the authority of the culture as well.

There seems to be then, an ambivalence surrounding the character of Vashti. On the one hand, there is an ideological force that encourages us to forget about her, to erase her from the text, but there is another force that simultaneously urges us to remember her, to reclaim her spirit, and to celebrate it. As an intellectual activist it is this force that persists in my reading of Vashti. In the analysis that follows I find ways ofrediscovering Vashti for if we can reclaim the importance of the story of Vashti to the narrative as a whole then we can begin to understand how it can be liberating for contemporary women. I now offer a few strategies for reading the character of Vashti. These strategies are not intended to be exhaustive.

a Vashti’s story is important

A first strategy is to recognise that the story of Vashti as recorded in chapter 1 is an integral part of the story of Esther as a whole and contrary to popular and scholarly belief, it is not simply meant to be a prologue or an exposition that can be discarded after its function is served. Most literary short stories comprise a conventional structural plot, which in simple terms can be described as the beginning, middle and end; or in literary terms the exposition, complication and resolution. Most scholars and ordinary readers alike come to the conclusion, therefore, that chapter 1 which is the story of Vashti is simply an exposition. An exposition, however, usually carries mere details of time, place and setting. But, as Clines (1998:5) points out, Vashti’s story is not just an ordinary exposition that details time, place and setting. On the contrary we are presented with a mass of background that outlines in detail the symbolism of power as personified in the king’s and the advisers’ actions. It also outlines the absolute power of the male ruling class and how this male ruling class deals ‘with those who dare to disobey, whatever motivation drives them to do so’ (Wyler 1995:115). So, the story of Vashti is not simply a prologue or an exposition, but an integral part of the story.
Its function is to set up the power relations inherent in the narrative. Clines (1998), Wyler (1995) and Beal (1997) all argue convincingly that the impact of the ethnicity based conflict found in the bulk of the narrative is felt most acutely because of the gender based conflict with which the story opens. The power relations in the story and the absolute power that is held by the royal males is established as a response to the disobedience of one individual. Hence, the reader can only understand the absolute nature of the power relations operative in the text because of the story of Vashti.

b  Vashti is not defeated

A second strategy to reclaim Vashti as an important figure in the narrative and to appreciate her character is to recognise that Vashti’s deposal is not a defeat. At face value chapter 1 might seem to praise the might of the Persian patriarchal system and its ability to marginalise a woman that dares trying to be in conflict with that system. However, the very nature of the way in which that marginalisation occurs makes it almost laughable. As Beal (1997:16) asserts, on the one hand, chapter 1 exposes the ‘vulnerability of the patriarchy that it is presenting, and, on the other hand the extremes to which the male will go in order to maintain the woman-as-object’. Beal goes on to argue that Vashti is neither object nor subject, she is what Kristeva (1982:4) terms ‘abject’. The abject is that which is ‘neither subject nor object but that which disturbs identity, system and order it does not respect, border, positions and rules’. Therefore as the text ‘makes a farce of royal masculine power relations, it encourages identifications with that royal power’s ultimate abject’, who in this case is Vashti. Understanding the vulnerability of the power that the males claim to be absolute contributes a great deal towards recognising that a system, which is as vulnerable as that, is one that is unstable. Jones (1982:437) makes the point that we should not object to the way in which women are treated in the book because to do so would be to miss that the ‘objectionable features of the book are deliberate absurdities which the author has used skilfully ... the author is not praising the Persian court, but laughing at it’. Although I can see the motivation for Jones’s call for a recognition of the humour in the book’s opening chapter, especially with regard to the way in which the women are treated, I nevertheless have to wonder whether the humour that Jones is advocating remains when the issue turns to one of the genocide of an entire ethnic group. Yes  the ruling class’s insecure power is laughable but it is also
lethal. As South African readers our antennas immediately go up with such an interpretation, especially given our painful past of random killings based on arbitrary factors such as race, class, gender and ethnicity. Hence, as plausible as Jones’s argument might sound, it is precisely the instability of the Persian court that makes the situation more dangerous. As was shown in the case of Vashti, this kind of unstable and vulnerable power leads to irrational and harmful decisions that affect not only the perceived perpetrator but an entire class of people— in Vashti’s case, all the women in the empire, and in Mordecai’s case the entire Jewish nation.

c Strength and courage

A third strategy for reading the character of Vashti in a way that can be empowering is to recognise and appreciate the strength and courage that Vashti as a female character possesses. This is difficult to do since the text offers very scant details of Vashti. All we know is that she is beautiful enough for the king to want to show her off and that she is disobedient with regard to the king’s request that she appear before him. Because the narrator provides us with so little clues about her character and because her voice is denied to us in the text, we have to reconstruct the character of Vashti from her actions only. This is not difficult to do since Vashti’s singular action or rather non-action speaks volumes about her character. Her singular non-action is enough to get the king and all his advisers not just to depose her but also to pass a decree, charging all women to obey their husbands. The decree, apart from highlighting the vulnerability inherent in the absolute power of the royal patriarchy also, serves to show that Memuchan and the king are not afraid of Vashti, the queen. They are afraid of Vashti the woman. When the king calls Vashti, he does not call upon her to appear before him and his drunken friends in her capacity as a queen. He calls her to appear in her capacity as a woman—a sexual object. The king is subject and needs everyone in his kingdom to be under his subjection. Vashti as Cohen (1996:105) argues was certainly no fool. She knew that the king’s objective in staging the vast and great banquet was to demonstrate his wealth, power and authority. And yet, Cohen (1996:105) goes on to argue, ‘she was prepared to dismantle in an instant the king’s entire carefully constructed façade by demonstrating to the world that she was a liberated woman.’ She does so with the conviction that her dignity is more important to her than the king’s display of his power. She simultaneously ensures her position as an individual and not as the object of the male ogle.
A fourth strategy for understanding the character of Vashti is to understand her through a matrix of an honour and shame value system. Laniak (1998:36) argues that the purpose of the king’s banquets were occasions for the king to honour himself. Thus, he argues that the western reader (and I suppose that this precludes us as African readers) needs to understand that when Vashti disobeys ‘the king’s most valuable possession was jeopardised ... thus when Vashti is expelled it is neither indiscriminate punishment nor unthinking retaliation. It is the publicly demonstrated, logical consequence of her disobedient (dishonouring behaviour)’. Laniak’s arguments, like Jones’s, focuses on the king’s motivations for his behaviour. The king’s reaction to Vashti is therefore compliant with the king’s perception that unquestioning honour and deference should be bestowed upon him. My problem with Laniak’s argument is that the king’s reaction becomes justifiable to the extent that his honour becomes the frame of reference against which we are supposed to judge Vashti’s actions. Consequently, as in all major traditional interpretations Vashti’s need to preserve her own honour gets sacrificed on the altar of the king’s honour. In fact Laniak (1998:41) almost suggests that Vashti should have obeyed the king since ‘this was not a demand to do something difficult or dangerous. The issue at stake was more a matter of symbol than substance.’ This kind of interpretation is extremely dangerous and opens up the text to justification for the abuse of women. In a country like South Africa where the statistics of violations against women are unacceptably high, I think that such an interpretation is unacceptable. The honour and shame matrix is a suitable strategy for reading chapter 1 provided and only if we give equal weight to the honour of Vashti, and her need to preserve that personal honour.

To conclude our examination of the character of Vashti we should ask the question that Clines (1998:11) asks does power truly reside with the males in the story? I would argue that the strategies I offer for reading the character of Vashti invites us to consider that it does not. As Clines goes on to argue ‘Vashti’s power lies in the fact that she refuses the king with no apparent reason. She doesn’t 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.

C CHARACTERISING ESTHER

Claiming Esther as a liberating figure for gender, class and ethnic oppressive
contexts is not as facile to do as it was in the case of Vashti. This is because, unlike Vashti, Esther seems to be no radical feminist. In fact, feminist scholars are quick to point out that in comparison to Vashti Esther only possesses humility, beauty, grace, loyalty and obedience while Vashti possesses dignity, pride and independence. Esther also operates within the sphere of the court, therefore one could argue, like Mosala (1993) that she operates from a completely high-class setting and therefore there is little possibility that poor women can identify with her. And although Esther is herself Jewish she at first denies this identity, but then goes on to save her people by revealing her identity. In the end however, she exacts the same fate if not worse on the people that wanted to destroy her nation in the first place. These character traits do not make for good reading of the character of Esther and it seems unlikely that we could view her as a liberating figure. However, I argue, in my analysis of the character of Esther that it is possible to find liberating elements within her character. In undertaking this task I run the risk of being labelled what Mosala (1993:4) calls a ‘liberal humanist’ Biblical scholar. The defining characteristic of this oppositional approach, Mosala asserts, has not been the fundamental disapproval of oppressive Biblical texts, (which he claims as I asserted before have inherent oppressive ideologies) but its disapproval of the interpretation (my own emphasis) of these texts. I self-consciously accept this title of liberal humanist for two reasons. The first is that if we are, as Biblical scholars, going to help in the process of positive social change in our communities then we have to take seriously the absolute didactic and authoritative significance that the Bible holds for our communities. To revolt or struggle against the text, as Mosala (1993:5) advocates, is not a reading strategy that will be readily acceptable in my community of ordinary women readers (and I would suspect in other communities of faith as well). The second reason is that while offering a critique of the gender, ethnic and class politics in the Book of Esther (though I would not call my critique a ‘revolt against the text’), I still maintain that Esther negotiates the system to her advantage, and therefore traces of resistance can be found in her character. The tone of the resistance however, is not a loud, polemic one, but a subtle, subversive one.

Mosala (1993:6) argues that an African woman’s interpretation of Esther should encompass three phases. The first should be polemical, ‘in the sense of being critical of the history, the devices, the culture, the ideologies and the agendas of the text and of itself’. The second phase should be ‘appropriative of the
resources and victories inscribed in the Biblical text as well as its own contemporary text’. The third phase will be projective ‘in that its task is performed in the service of a transformed and liberated social order’. Ironically, though, Mosala’s reading, although elsewhere advocating a hermeneutics of appropriation and transformation, stops at the point of suspicion. In my reading of the character of Esther, although I will be suspicious of the patriarchal nature of the text, I also want to be appropriative and try to uncover the resources and victories inscribed in the character of Esther. This appropriative task is performed in the service of a transformed and liberated order. So the strategies which I offer for reading the character of Esther are not exhaustive, they are simply strategies with the aforementioned goal in mind.

1 Strategies for reading the character of Esther

a Debunking false dichotomies

The first way to approach this task, I think, is to take Esther out of the false dichotomy that she has been placed into both by the text and by our encounters with the text. By this I mean that we should steer clear of setting up Esther and Vashti as binary opposites or as foils to each other. The text woos us into this dichotomy in chapter 1:19 which reads ‘and let the king give her royal position to one who is better than she’. Feminist scholars have been drawn into this dichotomy by arguing that Esther is not better than Vashti, it is Vashti who is better than Esther, because she is independent and strong as opposed to Esther whose only saving qualities are her beauty and cookery (see Clines 1998). Ordinary readings have also been drawn into this dichotomy, but on the other end of the spectrum. They argue that Esther is better than Vashti because she was obedient and she reaped the rewards for her obedience, namely the salvation of her people. I want to argue that analysing Esther in this dichotomous way, over and against Vashti is not helpful. In fact as Bach (1997:2) argues ‘when female literary figures are analysed solely against each other, too much cultural otherness is dropped out and a self-referential loop is created’. She goes on to argue that ‘part of the ideological effect of the text is to splinter the power of women and the most efficient way of accomplishing this effect literarily is to isolate women from each other’. This dichotomy is not restricted to scholarly readings only. In fact women in ordinary communities of faith also maintain that they are usually presented with a choice of either Vashti or Esther. Given the negative way in which Vashti is presented they usually have no choice but to choose in the same way the king has chosen
Esther as the ‘better’ woman. However, Vashti’s character, as I have shown in my reading is not one dimensionally negative. Similarly, Esther is also not a one-dimensional character. Therefore, if we are to move beyond being suspicious of her character towards being appropriative and re-envisioning her character it is imperative that we isolate Esther from this false dichotomy that has been set up for us by both the text and its subsequent interpretations.

b Monolithic ideology?

The second strategy that I want to offer for the reading of Esther is similar to the way in which Mieke Bal reads the character of Eve in the creation story. She maintains that even though her interpretation of Eve might show Eve in a more positive light than do most common uses of the text, this does not suggest that the text itself is feminist, feminine or female oriented. In a similar vein, by looking for the resources and victories inscribed in the character of Esther, my aim is not to suggest in any way that Esther is a feminist, or that the text itself is feminist or female oriented in its outlook. However, the power that Esther gains in the end, raises the question of how powerful the male gaze really is and subsequently the male’s apparent control of the female body? In other words as Bal argues reading this way means that we have to ‘account for the nature and function of a sexist text that is related to an ideology that cannot be monolithic. Efforts to make it so, both on the parts of the text and its interpreters are the more desperate, since theirs is an impossible aim’ (1987:110). Essentially I agree with Bal, and I think that a non-monolithic ideological outlook is a feature of Biblical narrative in general. Moreover, a close examination of the text of Esther shows very clearly that it is not monolithically and ideologically patriarchal. I think that to apply what Bal is saying to the text of Esther means that we have to see that it is not only the males in the Book of Esther that wield the power of the politics of sexual ideology. Yes it is only by being an object of the male gaze that Esther becomes queen, but it is also by using her knowledge of the power of the male gaze that she is able to save a nation. Chapter 7 very clearly illustrates not only her knowledge of the system of male dominance but her ability to negotiate within the system to get what she wants. In 7:3, note her language very carefully: ‘If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me ....’ This language of complete and utter deference to the king might seem on the surface to be conceding to the power of the dominator. However, things cannot be as
simple as they seem. It is strange that Esther should ask the king whether she has won his favour because we already know that she has. Out of all the women in the harem he has chosen Esther as his favourite (although for her performance in bed), so when she asks him if she has won his favour she already knows that she has. As for pleasing the king, we know that she has done that also, for he would not promise her half of the kingdom if she had not pleased him. Her language of feigned obedience and deference shows that Esther knows, from Vashti’s experience that the king requires public displays of obedience. Esther co-authors if you like this official transcript that shows ideological hegemony to be secure. ‘The official transcript of power relations is a sphere in which power appears naturalised because that is what elite’s exert their influence to produce and because it ordinarily serves the immediate interests of subordinates to avoid discrediting these appearances’ (Scott 1990:85). It is easier for Esther to get what she wants by allowing the king to think that she is a willing participant in his power game of dominance.

c  **Mirror on the wall?**

A third strategy which I propose for reading Esther is to analyse her reaction to the male gaze. Alice Bach in responding to Brenner’s (1995) article which compares Alice in Wonderland to the story of Esther suggests that in Esther it is the prettiest who wins. This would give the impression that this is a beauty contest. That it certainly is, but it is also a sex contest. What happens to the bodies of all the virgin women who we are told in chapter 2:14 go into the king’s palace at night and return in the morning, and do not return to the palace again until the king decides that he has ‘delighted’ in her and wants to see her again? The bodies are violated, made to be objects of desire. Bach argues that the battle in the Book of Esther is a battle for escaping the looking glass, the gazed at female position. Alice slips past the looking glass, the fixed male gaze. Esther is caught in the gaze but Bach concedes that she then ‘uses whatever power the game has given her to checkmate Haman’. I contend that it is not just Haman that she has checkmated but everything that male power represents. Male power is related to the matrix of male honour and shame. In the case of the king his perception of honour and shame is paradoxical. For example, it does not seem problematic for the king that he had violated the bodies of all the most beautiful women in his kingdom for approximately four years before he decided which one he wanted to make his
queen. What is problematic for him, however, is if another man decided to do the same to his wife. This violation questions not the honour of the woman but the honour of the man. So, in 7:8 the king is not mortified that he thinks Haman is violating Esther, but he is mortified that Haman could dishonour him enough to do it in his presence, in his house. Would ignorance have been bliss? Would it have been okay for Haman to violate Esther’s body as long as it did not question the honour of the king as long as it was not *imi babayit*, ‘in my own house’ as the king so vociferously maintains. Derby (1994:118) asserts that *babayit* is the funniest word in the Bible since when a whole nation’s survival is being threatened all the king can think of again is holding on to his status and power as a royal male. So, a woman’s body once again becomes the scapegoat for the power struggles between men. However, Esther knows that the only power that she has within this patriarchal game is her body. The king’s obsession as we have learned from the first chapter is to assert his power by maintaining his subjectivity over and against a woman’s body as object. This manner of dominating was the one way in which he showed that he was in control. What the king (and usually this is typical of those who possess the mindset of dominator) does not understand is that the dominated can and does play the game in the public realm, to keep up appearances, but in the process of playing the game the dominated can turn the situation to their advantage. This, Esther does, by activating the hidden transcript of her own powers of persuasion and rhetoric, including as Bronner (1998:7) points out an ‘accurate, intelligent, political assessment of the king’s likely reactions’. Ironically, then the king’s hold on power based on his position over and against the woman, as object is exactly what is used to manipulate him. Esther, then manages to work within the system of dominance, and achieves what she determined to do in the first place.

d  Dealing with ethnicity and class

Esther’s request for a second day of killing in 9:13 does not sit comfortably with South African readers, especially since the request is for the ‘other’ race which is not ‘chosen’ to be put to death in their own land (Masenya 2001:27). There are other ways that scholars have chosen to get round this vengeful act of Esther’s. Fox (1991:203) suggests that all of chapter 9 is an expansion of a few sentences in an earlier version, and here ‘literary values are less important than liturgical purposes. Esther’s request for a second day of fighting results more from the need
to explain an existing practice than from any literary conception of her personality.’
Jones (1982:180) argues that the second day of killing is only a ‘deliberate hyperbole ... and those who are offended by the blood and by the so-called Jewish nationalism are either literalists or acting as if they were.’ I, personally do not find either Jones’s or Fox’s arguments helpful. I think that even if the request was just for literary effect, we who live with the Bible as ‘sacred scripture’ have to live with the effects. The killing of fifty-five Palestinians and wounding of a further 170 on 25 February 1994, by Baruch Goldstein, after just celebrating Purim by listening to the annual reading of the Book of Esther, in his local synagogue, perhaps indicates the transcendent effects beyond the text.² Esther’s undesirable actions here show what happens to power when it becomes corrupted. Even feminist scholars should not be excusing her behaviour. However, in understanding her character in this way we should not pass judgement on Esther the woman, since men also abuse and corrupt power.

Mosala’s objection to the Book of Esther is that it is a court tale. Poor and marginalised women therefore will find it difficult to identify with the character of Esther. However, Esther was not always queen. In fact she was in one of the most disadvantaged positions a person could be in. She was exiled, an orphan and a woman. She is an outsider. White (1989:167) argues that ‘with no native power of her own owing to her sex or position in society, Esther must learn to make her way among the powerful and to cooperate with others in order to make herself secure. She uses whatever means are available for her to survive in such an environment where the laws of the king are irreversible. Even her actions can be criticised for not being revolutionary, I think that she shows how one can transcend class boundaries without getting thrown out of the system completely. It was a matter of survival.’

D CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that Biblical scholarship cannot remain within the vacuum of the academy, especially given the absolute power that the Bible holds for women in ordinary communities of faith. I have also argued that as womanist Biblical scholars we cannot afford to live within the palace of the academy, and feed ourselves for breakfast, lunch and dinner the food of theory, methodology and imported scholarship. This imbalance is bound to cause us indigestion, especially since we do not only live within the palace, but after the day filled with
the menu of theory is done, we venture out of the palace to our realities. In this reality outside the palace we find the suffering bodies of women, who are marginalised not only by their own realities but the realities of the religious discourses and its interpretations which have been so imbalanced that it has caused them indigestion. Reading and understanding the text in the more balanced way that I have proposed will perhaps prove to be more empowering for South African women who live in oppressive contexts, exacerbated by oppressive interpretations of Biblical texts. The strategies itself hopefully have provided a more balanced diet, of reality and experience for breakfast, theory for lunch and methodology for dinner. Hopefully my paper has also shown that by taking seriously the voices of the subaltern within the text and our own context, that breakfast is the most important meal of the day!

NOTES

1 See for example Chatman (1978:119) who argues that we allow characters to emerge as persons, not mere functionaries of the plot.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sarojini Nadar, School of Theology, University of Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville 3209, Republic of South Africa. E-mail: nadars@nu.ac.za