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3 | Bosadi Theology of Masenya Madipoane (Ngwana 'Mphahlele)

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Abstract

The 1980s and 1990s are the formative years of gender-specific frameworks in biblical feminist interpretation. Scholars used this opportunity to formulate the unintelligible and the muted through interesting dialectics to fashion an archive without imitations of frameworks that excluded them and treated them as subjects. Amid these conditions of creating and understanding, Madipoane Masenya heralded a moment in this period and seized an ideological opportunity to jump-start Bosadi Theology as a matter of intellectual insurgency. Masenya played around the tensions of race, patriarchy, sexism, classism, and even colonialism and Apartheid to examine the social and intimate lives of black South African women. It was a necessary intervention as it sought to contextualize South African black and African women's unique experiences. This intellectual insurgency resulted from the lack of correct antagonistic grammar that Euro-feminist frameworks provided. There was no way they could fashion the nervous condition of being black and being a woman and banishment. Those imported frameworks were gaslighting black women unleashing scandalous and boundless violence, and making it impossible for black women to be interlocutors in this ideation space. Theirs was a grammar of uncivil, gratuitous, and predatory ubiquitous violence through epistemic canons. Madipoane had a dilemma as a black intellectual, an enormous urgency regarding the spiritual, existential, and psycho-cultural dimensions of black women in South Africa. This chapter aims to trace the theological anthropology of Masenya, her sources of intellect, wisdom, and care for the quality of black women's lives through a liberatory framework of *Bosadi* Theology in the South African Biblical Studies scene.

Keywords: Bosadi Theology, biblical feminist interpretation, liberatory framework and Masenya Madipoane

Introduction: *Bosadi* is not a broad church

I have a particularly heightened sensitivity to liberatory frameworks that emerged for the benefit of black life. I say black life because to theorize about the Negro is to theorize about gender, so totalizing should not be taken to mean the absence of gender and even class contradictions. *Bosadi* is such a theory of freedom that also becomes the scene of abjection in theological terms for black life and women, although I will explain why I feel *Bosadi* totalizes the black experience. Bosadi becomes a valuable rubric for abjection and influences performance, studies, aesthetics, theorization, and engaged theories about black life, *ispo facto* black women within theology and beyond. Masenya (2005:179-194) has characterized *Bosadi* as "necessary" in *their hermeneutics was strange! Ours is a necessity!* A necessary intervention to combat "strange biblical hermeneutics." Masenya has always written from the premise of critiquing androcentrism, creating a focused interpretative lens. It looks on the surface that Masenya is simply critiquing patriarchy, but I argue that it is much more complex than a reducible category. Patriarchy has a host antagonism; in this case, imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It is important to frame this context so I can easily explain why Bosadi is not a broad church.

Bosadi is a black woman's standpoint, an interpretative lens of a woman who grows up in the early sixties of an anti-black regime committed to genocide because simply saying Apartheid does not quite capture the violence of such a regime, and since the word apartheid has been appropriated in so many ways around the world (i.e., Zionism and the occupation of Palestine), that also threatens how we come to speak about the white on black hatred in South Africa and our irreducible experiences. Globally Apartheid means systems of separateness and segregation, but within the South African context, it is separateness and segregation and discrimination based on skin color. I call this practice theoretical convolution, my own coinage that means; the geopolitics of knowledge of a concept that is reappropriated in different contexts to refer to oppression that symbolically infers the same idea but refers to oppression that ranges with its social practices based on ontology.

Theoretical convolution poses a few dangers in how we tell history and how we relate our personal experiences. Firstly, it takes away from those who have been harmed a portion of their voice, especially if this reappropriation takes part on a large scale that poses as a contender geopolitically

because that would mean more coverage. Secondly, it pays little attention to the particularities of ontology and how the universality of concepts without the sensitivity to differences perpetuates harm. Lastly, it fails to distinguish between intellectual preoccupation with ideas and experimenting with a freedom that challenges forms of existence. Indeed, multiple voices joining the discussion about oppression serve the purpose of delegitimizing and deprivileging mainstream positivist ideologies, but that should not be at the expense of subsiding erasure and maintaining categories of negation through liberalism.

Through the years, Masenya's works have received critical acclaim, world recognition, and interpretations, and it is, without doubt, she will go down in history as a pioneer. Her work has encouraged black women's resistance by challenging prevailing approaches to oppression in theology and civil society. Chief among many responses from *Bosadi* theology is generating a black consciousness in black women and MEN. *Bosadi* adopted, even without knowing at times, a heuristic healing approach that condemned patriarchy as a social disease that threatened both black men and women. Please note my instance of using black throughout because I want to argue that *Bosadi* is NOT a broad church. What is surprising, however, is what we have witnessed as we have with many black liberatory frameworks and ideas: their adoption by white people, in this instance, white women. Although we have biological similarities and experience contradictions that mirror one another, we do not share a grammar of suffering. This is a particular interest to note because if we agree that the host antagonism of patriarchy is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, then white women benefit from our oppression by being white.

The position of the white woman has been an interesting one in history because of her formlessness; she can be an oppressor and victim all at once. White women are complicit in black oppression and genocide, which should be noted because their engagement with feminism makes them look like a subordinate group and obscures their gains from oppression by being white people and not just white women, while black women are lesser human beings; that is the difference. Black women are oppressed because they are black and they are women; they deal with interlocking systems of oppression. That has been well documented and deliberated, and I don't wish to expound further on this debate, but it was necessary to note. Masenya writes that for black women and Bosadi to be reappropriated by dominant narratives that have enjoyed the luxury of

institutional honor is unfair. Bosadi is not just an abstract theory in the corridors of biblical historiography; it is a life-giving form of protest; it allows black women to dream and offers us comradery; Bosadi is a sacred text by a black woman for black women.

Between activism, religiosity, and the public sphere: the intellectual insurgency of Masenya I borrow the title for this subsection from a critical text titled Between Activism, Religiosity, and the Public Sphere: The Intellectual insurgency of bell hooks by Hue Woodson. An essential essay for genealogies of thought, I feel, pays the exact homage it does for bell hooks that I also wish to relay about Masenya, who traces her intellectual heritage, or "critical consciousness" as she calls it, to "early experiences in the Black church and with religion in general, to the extent that her role as an intellectual is predicated on "spiritual practice." (Woodson 2019:187).

Masenya, in a short auto introduction about herself, traces her critical consciousness to a "journey of struggle" (Masenya 2005:180). It is no big wonder what struggle she is alluding to; Masenya grew up in Apartheid South Africa. However, within the struggle of the regime that discriminated against and murdered you because you were black, Masenya, in the everyday occurrence of segregated bathrooms and living areas, realized that there was also separation based on gender and sex. So, Masenya grew up in a white male-dominated world. However, although places were reserved between black and white, dilapidated and well kept, male or female, white women entered where white men entered while in black spaces, the system primarily upheld and enforced the binaries. This was to create an essential tactic to divide and conquer amongst black men and women, alien residents.

Therefore, Bosadi must be inducted into the school of black abjection, black social life, and the social construction of black feminism thought. Masenya (2005:180) chronicles that it took her time to be able to appreciate the racial crisis she was born to as she says;

> My inability to realize the severity of the racial crisis was, in my view, caused by the fact that I could not interact with white folks regularly. Such an interaction could have enabled me to develop a better understanding of the evil nature of the apartheid policy. This policy advocated the separate development of people of different races, deliberately making one race the norm for all others.

This form of awareness thwarts one into an examination that requires the subject to discover their blackness. This is the case even for Fanon, who was thrown into his corporeal malediction through relationality, "Look, a negro!". I argue that Masenya lacked not an understanding or appreciation of the regime through relationality but an encounter with her corporeality through a process of negation. You are black because you are not white, not because you have not encountered white people, but because the anti-black system defines your humanity, thereby inferring whiteness as the totality.

Masenya experienced intersecting forms of oppression, including low-quality and state-sanctioned education that did not offer enough knowledge to transform society or address social ills. Geographically she lived in segregation, and all of these circumstances provided her with a reality that was deprived of humanity and hermeneutics that was out of touch with the realities of her people. She encountered a theology at the time that was predominantly white and male. Although theology at the time was characterized in this manner and was an exclusive exercise for the elite in ivory towers far removed from the people, she was still able to theologize about her reality by fashioning her grammar of suffering. She was a theologian long before she became one.

It is no surprise that religion was an anchor for black social life; it was a refugee ideology under oppression. Tracing her critical consciousness to religiosity meant that much of her criticism would be centered around discrimination and oppression in religious spaces. This is the space she was most drawn to and one that shaped her views about life and the world; this was her sociology. Within this context of oppression and radical practices of open rebellion through text and riot, a theology that would benefit liberation emerged not only for her but for black public and academic intellectuals.

The emergence of liberation theology was a way to cement the experiences of black people in the public archive and to theorize about the black experience concerning anti-blackness under religion. The dilemma of the black intellectual is always this, because of multiple and multi-faceted intersections of oppression, one seldom finds it challenging to define oneself with a niche; Masenya is not just an Old Testament scholar; she is a public intellectual, a proponent of black social life, a liberation theologian. Her formlessness meant she could stand in place for several issues, theorize, provide social commentary, protest, oppose, curate, and live all

at once. It is also essential to mention that she lived because black activism is often defined by protest in ways that can sometimes deny or take away one's humanity. She shares the same sentiment as she articulates (2005:182);

> At that point, I began a painful journey as I started fighting for the liberation of African- South African women through writing, speaking, and living.

Notwithstanding, Masenya, however, became particularly afflicted by patriarchal violence, as she mentions (2005:182);

> Perhaps it is no wonder that, in my case, it was only in the early 1990s that I became aware of the harsh realities of patriarchy in the academy and the churches. Once I was introduced to feminist and womanist theologies and biblical interpretation, I would never be the same again.

It is easy to argue that her focus was inspired by her biological realities, which I differ against because I do not believe that women choose activism of this kind; we are thrown into *Dasein* by virtue of being women, so we do not have the luxury to choose. She decided *what to do* about it, which separated her from the rest. And so, began the journey of being a theologian for Masenya.

"I would never be the same again." echoes Masenya; I want us to pay particular undivided attention to this sentiment as it will define the politics of Bosadi, interpretation, and implementation. In saying, "I was never the same again," Masenya should tell us if she has ever been to herself because she possesses a subjecthood that has been banished from the categories of what it means to be human. This is because the advent of curating an idea that will serve as the means to the end for your liberation is born out of alienation.

Masenya enters the academy and orientates her position as a curator of the black religious experience. Might I add this entry was not that of Palm Sunday, in Alice Walker fashion, "all her life she had to fight!" which does not come as a *groot skok* because she was disrupting business as usual, as she states (2005:182);

> I have fought in the academy, which remains both basically white and consequently foreign to the African context, six and also predominantly male and therefore less concerned with women's issues. I have also fought in the church, which, though black, remains male regarding its leadership and decision-making practices. It is a church that has continued to marginalize and push aside the female folk through foreign—

> mainly colonial, Apartheid, and male–biblical interpretations. I have fought in a predominantly African context whose male folk, although acknowledging the rights of people of all races enshrined by the South African constitution, in practice, still believe that the full humanity of women can only be affirmed in the public sphere of work and not in the realm of church or home. My struggle to establish the full humanity of African women in this country is motivated by my desire to discover my self-identity as a human being created in the image of God. It is inspired by the desire to call myself by my name and in my voice.

One cannot help but feel irked by the emotions conjured up by this quote that almost reads like a Rivonia trial speech because, generally, oppression is annoyingly sad, and reading how she had to struggle makes me appreciate her work more.

The rubric of Bosadi theology

Despite all the pushback, nothing could stop Masenya such that she even went on; fuelled by the desire to call herself by her name and to establish her and black women's humanity, she went on to do her Ph.D. in Biblical Studies, specialization in Old Testament titled "Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach." she explains this body of work as (2005:183);

> focused not only on the sociohistorical context of the text of Prov 31 but, even more importantly, on the contexts/social locations of African-South African women readers of biblical texts.

Masenya, while writing her Ph.D.-thesis, mentions that she sincerely appreciated the reader's critical role during the hermeneutical process. She is in line with the tradition of deconstructive scholars like Spivak and Derrida; her criticism of textuality and worlding deconstructs binary oppositions between the text and the world. The term worlding is a Spivak register "that refers to ways in which writing in general, or textuality, has provided a rhetorical structure to justify imperial rule" (Morton 2003:19). The Bible is an imperial text. We have seen how many imperial texts are instrumental and subsidize practices of erasure.

We observe in her narrative practices that she often uses the method of autoethnography, connecting her personal experiences to the broader social, political, and cultural contexts that have come to shape her worldview. Her citational and writing practices also reconstruct the myth

of objectivity and what scientific scholarship means. She describes her methods as "socially engaged with academics but also engaged with grassroots and communities." (2005:183). The dangers of ethnomethodology in social sciences and humanities is well noted; we are well aware of its risks since the way ethnography is composed, sometimes our narrative practices impose distortive interpretative frames on another people's experience.

I argue that Masenya was well aware of the risks of ethnomethodology since it is such a slippery slope, especially when we link such methods to discourses about theories of more significant socio-political questions, i.e., colonialism and imperialism. I argue this point confidently because, in Masenya, we find that she aims to delink from grand narratives through ethnomethodology instead of reading herself into texts. She uses the text as a blueprint to identify dominant representations of worlding; by identifying them, she now knows what does not fit into her reality, a process I call transparent representation unbinding. Masenya (2005:184) alludes to this and says, "Although the *mosadi* reader acknowledges the significance of the contexts that produced the biblical texts, the context of the modern female reader takes priority over the former."

The logical conclusion of transparent representation unbinding is the naming process; after delinking from grand narratives, one must compose a rigor and register that shapes their new reality. Masenya calls it Bosadi (womanhood) theology. A term that guides her hermeneutical practices and how she now engages with the text that once defined her subjectivity with negation and terror. The politics of etymology are not indexical to Bosadi theology since we need to ask, what's in a name? Why Bosadi and not something else? The easy answer is that Bosadi aligns with Masenya's ethical foundations and presents as the most accessible syntactical tool for deploying a concept.

A more comprehensive answer to the question is that *Masenya ke Mosadi* encapsulates a world of meaning. It is a placeholder for those whom the naming processes of grand narratives cannot conceive of. Masenya ke Mosadi becomes a clarion call and an invitation; *Ha Masenya e le Mosadi le nna ke Mosadi mos*? It snaps one out of proverbial slumber, creates a connection between worlds we conceive of as separate, and makes them collide. In this way, *Bosadi* also sets out its terms of relationality through sociogeny rather than phylogeny. Bosadi, in this manner, unmasks delusions of grandiosity imposed by false consciousness and bad faith.

Bosadi also creates relatedness through affirmation and indigenously, in her own words:

> Reclaiming the use of the Northern Sotho word *bosadi* not only makes sense to African-South African women at the grassroots level, women with whom I constantly interact, and thus naturally, it also succeeds in enabling these women to read the Bible in a way that affirms them, because the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of African-South African women.

Bosadi theology is faithful to its founding principles through form and style. Masenya as a teacher in an institution that was initially devised to disseminate thoughts of the elite and ruling class writes in intelligible language that is far removed from the complex strategies of language we encounter in the academy. She often writes in Sesotho and defies the rule of grammar by direct translation only when necessary and sometimes leaves the Sesotho as it is to contain its meaning, strategy, and impact within the text. Scholars that have engaged with Masenya, interpreted and even reproduced her work, have also taken to this practice as they are often found using SeSotho idioms and words and not directly translating phrases, as I have also done in this paper. That is her influence.

Since Bosadi is an encounter, encounters often depend on how we identify after encountering it. Naming is integral to theory and self-identification in Bosadi; it either gives us new names or makes us reclaim and abandon the ones we prefer. Self-defining is a crucial concept in Bosadi theology through a practice called radical withholding. A practice of refusing to be called otherwise and retaining one's identity. The situation of blacks in general but black women in particular in South Africa has been precarity and nervousness with relative autonomy and lack of agency. Understanding this situatedness for Masenya is essential for intellectual work; as such, how we define ourselves and reclaim our won histories and legacies becomes agitation for change.

The change such an endeavour envisions aligns with writing black women into existence and cements their roles in a history they have been written out of (Masenya 1995:189). *Bosadi* theology offers a rubric of agency, one that moves away from pathology as often; black women are pathologized more than they are humanized; therefore, Masenya supplies a rubric of affirmation that is in short supply.

The legacy of *Bosadi* theology in Biblical Studies

Bosadi has found resonance amongst a broad audience at home and abroad and has been reappropriated in myriad ways to mirror different realities, as Masenya (2005:183) explains:

> The word *mosadi* (woman) is also used in other African-South African languages, such as the Nguni (*umfazi*), Venda (*musadzi*), Xitsonga (*wansati*), and Setswana (*mosadi*), a fact revealing the essential commonalities of language and experience among the various indigenous peoples of South Africa.

It must be noted that Masenya does not share in my view of bosadi not being a broad church; Masenya has always been open to different interpretations and audiences. Be as it may, Bosadi theology has gone on to redefine, shape worldviews and make sense of realities. This is a view I partly share here, with the exception that it remains to be for the benefit of black life. Within the struggle for absolute autonomy, where prevailing narratives have failed to represent the realities of black people and women in particular, Bosadi has sufficed to offer an alternative and become a placeholder. As Masenya has emphasized in her work, Bosadi sought to correct the gender, class, and racial binaries and ineffectiveness by rewriting and redressing from below. For this reason, I premise black men and women as being in the underbelly before anyone else.

There are many ambitious projects about Masenya's works that I would not want to give attention to here as I am working on a separate project to address this and will only focus here on intellectual work that illuminates the sociology of black life through delicate processes of care and honor. I am unwavering in my position of reducing *Bosadi* to black people's experiences because, as a refugee theory, it is not just a collection of the best accessible scenarios, as we see in how euro-feminist frameworks present themselves and do not do much in terms of harm reduction. *Bosadi* expands and complicates the objectives of feminisms that are opaque and opens space to be more sensitive to questions of difference and intellectual heritages that are not mainstream.

In my view, Masenya's reputation as a theorist was sealed when black scholars began to cite her work, further highlighting her influence as a critical scholar (i.e., Mothoagae 2019; Baloyi 2019; Dube 2016; Mokoena 2021; Chisale 2020; Mudimeli 2014; Mtshiselwa 2016; Ramantshwana 2015; Olejede 2018; Phiri 2015). I am particularly elated about this because, due to centuries of epistemic violence and coloniality of knowledge, black

scholars have struggled to privilege their own through text; we often herald others as heroes and thought leaders, a practice we are unlearning. We also note how, generally, black scholarship is regarded as anarchist and in a state of constant rage, inducing nausea, suffering from institutional doubt, and lacking epistemic authority and honor.

The growing importance of Bosadi theology is of commendable proportions, and it has become challenging in a good way, of course, to do any work in Old Testament studies in South Africa without referencing Masenya. When the broader influence of Masenya is in the sociology of black life, a more focused impact of Masenya's work is on women's studies and feminist theory. She has increasingly been vocal in her criticism of global development and policies that affect women, which is noted in a number of her publications that speak to governance, education, and issues like HIV/AIDS (Masenya 2005; Masenya 2005b; Masenya 1997).

It is no doubt that Masenya's work will continue to influence and shape the worldviews of many upcoming young theologians. Her work represents critique for critical times and will forever remain relevant since we are in a constant state of impoverishment and a world that constantly needs vital analysis.

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