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Doing Theologies of Survival with Beverly Haddad

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10 | **Doing Theologies of Survival with Beverly Haddad**

Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse

Abstract

Beverly Haddad is a blend of three worlds. She is a woman, a priest and an intellectual-activist for women's rights and dignity. Her contribution to the theological and developmental discourse opposing the oppression and marginalization of African women is unquestionable. She was amongst the pioneers of women ordination in the Anglican Church, thus helping in the claiming of the right and place of women in the priesthood. Then she spent years as an academic, teaching and researching in the area of women, church and development, with the aim of discovering the role of the church and theology in the empowerment of marginalized women both in the church and in society. Her work focused on what Sandra Pertek (2022:201) calls "capturing the strength of survivors in coping with severity of exploitation." These being African women. This article is an appraisal of Haddad's contribution to the development of an appreciation of theology as a tool of building resilience in women's groups so as to transform them from victims of oppression to agents of freedom and liberation. It will demonstrate that Haddad's theology is interwoven with her developmental and ecclesiastical struggles, which emanate from the experiences of other African women with whom she is in solidarity.

Keywords: Survival, theology, resilience, priesthood, Beverly Haddad, Manyanos

Introduction

I first met Beverly Haddad at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg Campus, in 2009. Before that I did not know anything about her or her work. I had just joined UKZN to pursue my doctoral studies in Biblical Studies. I was attracted to her because of the work she had done with grassroots women in Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg, whose voices had never been heard. That was because my PhD required

that I develop a Pentecostal feminist hermeneutic using grassroots women whose voices remained on the margins of society. There was a paucity of published work in this area. I then gravitated towards the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method of reading the Bible with women which Haddad had already been doing for a number of years. I found her work helpful because it recognizes that women have resources of resilience, drawn from the Bible and their faith. Since then, I have remained appreciative of her work and regarded her as my dialogue partner in grassroots-based feminist hermeneutics.

It is common and documented knowledge that almost everywhere in the world, women are victims of multiple challenges ranging from the social, economic to the political. The church has been complicit to the oppression of women. Haddad noted that:

For centuries the patriarchy of the church has provided the almost solely male leadership with a measure of power that enables abuse, or at least collusion in abuse of women to continue unabated (2003:155).

This situation is even worse for African women who have always been victims of cultural and religious practices that relegate them to the margins. Influenced by patriarchy, religious teachings, and cultural perceptions on gender division of labour have contributed to women's economic disempowerment and dependence on men (Paulo 2010:43). Haddad's work argues that these practices and perceptions should diminish, as they no longer suit the changing situation in Africa where violence against women is pervasive (Haddad 1998:15). Gender-based violence is all-pervasive in South Africa as thousands of women are subjected to violence in their homes, workplaces and communities. This violence threatens their lives and the lives of their children (Haddad 2002). However, Haddad's work, unlike that of other theologians, does not end there. It goes on to suggest that women have remained resilient in the face of all forms of oppression as they have used their faith and church groups as resources from where they draw strength to face their experiences of marginalisation.

Beverly Haddad is one of the first women to be ordained in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. She was not just a passive beneficiary of the church's decision to ordain women, but she was in the trenches, fighting the church to ordain women. Although the church had ultimately approved the ordination of women, Haddad continued to build her academic career by focusing on the plight of marginalized women in the

church. This makes it imperative for us to reflect on her contribution in the liberation of women through this essay. Her journey in both the academy and priesthood is informed by her conviction that that like men, women are created in the image of God and are endowed with the abilities to lead the church and society at all levels. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to explore Haddad's contribution to the development of women's theology of resistance and resilience. The following questions will guide the essay: who is Beverly Haddad? What is her approach to the teaching and practice of theology as an activist-intellectual? How has she sought to use theology in the quest to contribute to the liberation of grassroots women? What has been her contribution to the fight against the HIV&AIDS pandemic?

Methodology

Two methods of data collection form the methodology that was employed in this study. These are archival research and oral research through informal interviews. Informal interviews were conducted with former students and colleagues of Haddad. This was after I had intensively read her works and engaged with those who also read it and appreciate her work. The research is validated by the fact that most of the information that was collected from her and the interviewees was corroborated by archives both from the church and secular institutions. Most of the information that was received be it from the interviewees was "compared with and verified with each aspect mentioned in this paper" (Matsaung & Selokane 2002:44).

Gender, Development and the Church

One of the defining moments in Haddad's career as a priest and activist intellectual was when she moved to Pietermaritzburg and worked as an assistant priest in at an Anglican Parish in Vulindlela for 4 years (1996-1999). It was during this time that she had access to rural semi-literate women who formed 90% of the congregation. It was whilst working in this context that she began to reflect on her ministry from a "gendered lens" (2005:428). Haddad defined gender as "socially constructed and culturally defined differences between men and women, which are usually identified through a set of role expectations of men and women (2005:429). Whilst working there, Haddad observed the complex ways in

which women's wellbeing is affected by a variety of problems both as individuals and as members of communities. She observed that:

What soon became apparent to me, was that social and economic problems touched women in a particular way, in ways that were all too often linked to stereotyped images of their roles as wives and mothers subordinated within family system (Haddad 2003:428).

As a result of this observation, Haddad argued that development must consider the specific experiences of women; it must be gendered. Reflecting on her experiences of working with women in the community of Sweetwater's, whilst doing her research she observed that:

These four years entrenched my conviction that we cannot talk about the effective mission in the church in a context of enormous development needs without doing so from a "gendered" perspective. For too long the church has been slow to acknowledge its complicity in supporting the patriarchal status quo of society within all cultures and traditions and, in so doing, has failed a large sector of its membership (Haddad 2003:428).

Haddad (2001:16) went further to observe that poor and marginalised women have theological resources they utilize for their survival within their context of poverty. These are found within the context of religious women's networks. She argues that these networks constitute an important source of survival and are where poor and marginalised women take control of their lives.

One of Haddad's outstanding contributions to the field of feminist theology is that she focused her work on promoting the voices and experiences of "ordinary" marginalised women. These are women from the church and those from the margins of society. Whilst mainstream feminist scholarship concentrates on affluent academic women, Haddad supplements this work by listening to the voices of non-academic women to underline their conspicuous silence and enable them to become victors instead of remaining victims of oppression. Referring to her own work Haddad said:

The question of hope has great influence on the resilience of the women in the church and academia. Outrage and hope lead to the activism that drives feminist scholarship and its commitment to social change... this activist thread in feminist scholarship has not always been rooted in the voices of poor and marginalised women in South Africa. My work is inherently activist with a strong emphasis on, firstly, amplifying the voices

of women outside of the academy and, secondly, the importance of the mutuality of the relationship between the academic researcher and the women she works with (Haddad 2002:6-7).

Doing Theology in Community with Others

One of the key characteristics of Haddad's theological engagement is that it is not done in isolation from other women theologians. Unlike most of her peers, she tends to work with other women in curving her theology. Two groups have been significant in her theological discourse. These are the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the Women's Manyanos. It is from these groups that she has found both her intellectual homes and dialogue partners. I would like to reflect on them, so as to locate her theological discourses.

Haddad and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Haddad has been an active member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians for a number of years. Through the Circle, African women were drawing resources from themselves and scriptures to reflect on their situation and experiences. Drawing from a diverse body of theologies from the various faith traditions, Islam, African, Christian, Hindu and Jewish, they discovered and taught that women too were people of worth and dignity. Haddad argued:

Their work has stood against the image of African women as poor, helpless victims in need of support and aid. Instead, there has been a strong tradition within the Circle of foregrounding notions of dignity, strength, resilience and independence (Haddad 2021:3)

It is in this group that she found her intellectual home or community, through which her works could be inspired and in which her own struggle as a woman could be discussed and disseminated. Referring to the Circle she once wrote:

In assessing Circle publications as a whole, it becomes clear that at the heart of this body of work lies three assumptions. Firstly, women seek to be in egalitarian relationships with men who bring dignity and respect. Secondly, women assert their agency to achieve this goal and in so doing bring healing and wholeness to both groups who are transformed

through this process. Thirdly, women assert their agency in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. However, what is less clear is how these assumptions relate directly to economic issues facing African women (Haddad 2021:2).

The solution to the quagmire faced by women for Haddad, is that they need to take responsibility to free themselves from oppression. She wrote:

Women need to begin to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse, and disenfranchisement within the church (Haddad 2003:155).

Reflecting on how her theological work fits in the broader project of the Circle, she went on to add that:

In assessing the body of Circle work, including my own, there is little evidence of systematic analysis of the intersection of culture and patriarchy with the globalised economy that in turn reflects on how economic systems impact African women's lives (Haddad 2021:2).

Through the Circle, African women demonstrated their own abilities and work of liberating themselves. They were not waiting for others from outside, such as white feminists or men to work for their liberation. Rather, they were agents of their own liberation. This required that anyone who wanted to be involved in this struggle must start by recognizing and appreciating the agency of African women in their liberation. Haddad said African women theologians would themselves understand their work to be liberative as they assert the agency of women (Haddad 2003:154). Therefore, for the women theologians of the Circle, theology became an asset of liberation instead of the tool of oppression as it has been used from time immemorial. In this sense it is an asset in the hands of women to be used for their empowerment. A sentiment also expressed here, "Being outcasts in their own continent and in their own churches is a uniting experience among the Circle theologians and it prompts them into creating theology that liberates" (Vähäkangas 2011:9). So, Haddad emphasizes that liberation is no longer needed as such, but that transformation is needed in today's Africa. In her words, there is a need to deconstruct the old and reconstruct the new (Haddad 1998:5).

Manyanos as safe spaces for grassroots women

Haddad has always maintained that “Ordinary women have been making a way out of no way for generations. They have not been passive. They have talked theology; they have lived theology, Haddad calls these theologies “theologies of survival” (Haddad 1998:17). It is not surprising then that when she focused on how women in South Africa responded to the missionary endeavour through subversive actions, she developed an appreciation of the work done by the *Manyanos*;¹ a woman led prayer union and movement in South Africa where “The women gather in their various groups away from the public church and its dominant discourse.”² According to Haddad, *Manyanos* need to be recognised as an influential space for indigenous women (Haddad 2004). Further, the *Manyanos* should be seen as a site of struggle, survival and a form of resistance and victory over different forms of domination as they overcome the oppression of men by men. It’s a fact that women face patriarchal domination in the church and in society. So the women challenge some of the patriarchal practices in the church by voting other women into leadership positions. Haddad writes that the activities of the *Manyano* such “extempore prayer” and “preaching and the practice of fundraising using stokvel principles” are “the unique characteristics of the *Manyano* that forms the resistance to ecclesial and patriarchal domination and enable literal survival by marginalised women.” (Haddad 2004:11) In another article Haddad observed the significant role that is played by the *Manyano* in the lives of women by saying that:

The *Manyano* movement is a key site where poor and marginalised women are taking control of their lives in an attempt to alleviate their lives from the reality of poverty. (2003:429)

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- ¹ The women’s *Manyano* is the women’s group, usually uniformed that is found in most of the mainline denominations, Methodists, Anglican, Lutheran and UCCSA. They meet once a week usually on Thursdays to pray and encourage one another as women. They have different topics and activities ranging from personal stories of Joy and pain, dancing and singing hymns, food preparations, to running business and women empowerment, affirmations and motivation.
- ² Haddad Beverly (2004). “The Manyano Movement in South Africa: Site of Struggle, Survival and Resistance.” *Agenda Empowering women for Gender Equity* (61), Religion and Spirituality 4-13.

Haddad observed that women have their own incipient theologies which they use for their survival, and it is the responsibility of women theologians to analyse these theologies. She said, “For academic women engaged in theological discourse, it is imperative that the survival theologies of marginalised women be recognised” (Haddad 2004:4). Her observations are congruent with Tinyiko Maluleke’s (2000:31), who spoke of “African women’s theology that is ‘engaging in the most passionate, the most vibrant and the most prophetic forms of praxis...’ For Haddad it is in the *Manyano* movement that women actively take initiative and resist different forms of patriarchal oppression so that they are no longer victims but agents of their own survival. The *Manyano* also demand that women be afforded dignity and respect. Haddad celebrates The Manyano’s demand for respect for women because they are intentional about representing women’s aspirations in meetings and structures of the church which are heavily patriarchal. In addition to encouraging women to join the ministry and ordination the Manyano caucuses to vote for women who aspire for higher offices to ascent to those positions of influence (Haddad 2021:3). As an activist-intellectual researcher in a community with the experience of working with *Manyano* groups, Haddad calls for combining theory and activism. She emphatically states the importance of the very presence of the activist-intellectual which helps to assist the community in its search for a balance between the Gospel and cultures (Haddad 2006:153-154). In her other article, Haddad observes that the Manyano may have problematic aspects to it, however, “It is a safe site of struggle for survival against death and patriarchal oppression and resistance to dominant ecclesial forces, and thus poses certain challenges to the agenda of academic feminists” (Haddad 2004: 11).

Haddad’s Contribution to Women’s Theology

Like most scholars, Haddad has made a tremendous contribution in the development of women’s theology and the theology of development.

Haddad as an activist-intellectual

I understand Feminist Theology as that branch of theological reflection which seeks to understand the issues and dynamics around development from a theological perspective. Haddad understands and appreciates this theology because of its ability to “bring the voices of marginalized women into the public space or audience” (Haddad 2004: 5).

In all of her works, she writes positively about women and how they have been endowed with gifts and talent just like men. She remains a consistent critique of patriarchy, but doing this inside the church instead of turning her back from it in spite of patriarchal tendencies. Her theology is diametrically opposed to the dominant one which places man at the centre of theological anthropology. Using both the pen and the pulpit she proposes a theology that is aimed at challenging the dominant religious discourses that promote gender discrimination both in the church and in society. Having studied and worked in the Cape in the difficult years of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, Haddad was introduced to feminist theology early in her ministry as an activist. For her, theology must be in solidarity with the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized women. Therefore, Haddad's journey and feminist theology enable women to forge what feminist theologians refer to as a "blossoming theology." Sarojini Nadar regards blossoming theology as a metaphor for women's theology characterized by changes, growth, transformation for a corporeal theology born out of women's bodies and their suffering (Nadar 2002:157). Haddad has lived, taught, written, practiced and preached blossoming theology from the moment she was appointed to start an Anglican congregation in Cape Town till her retirement from full-time academic work.

Haddad as an activist-priest

Haddad's work on church and development with specific focus on women started in Cape Town, traversed the world but continues to influence and shape African women, including those in her hometown of Pietermaritzburg especially those belonging to the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Natal. Although she initially belonged to an Anglican Church that did not ordain women, dominated by oppressive theology and culture, she became a champion of gender equality that led to the transformation of the status of women in the church. Contrary to many women of her day, she did not just follow the norm of being satisfied by being a submissive, pious member of the church, but rather became a maker of free women through her work as an intellectual-activist, academic and priest. I submit that Haddad has emulated the work of Mercy Oduyoye, who "instituted a struggle against patriarchy in the church, which led to the ordination of women, but also encouraged women to remain in the church and fight their struggle from within, rather than remaining subservient or abandoning it" (Kumalo 2021:67).

Haddad is worth reflecting upon as an outstanding woman theologian in Africa, not only because of her experience as a woman of color but also because of the work she did to move the church and theology from being patriarchal and oppressive to women.

Haddad an HIV&AIDS Activist amongst ordinary women

When HIV infections were at their highest, Haddad was clear in her articulations that women were greatly affected by HIV and AIDS because of patriarchy. She writes that “It is now well documented that the HIV epidemic disproportionately affects women more severely than men for a number of biological and social reasons (Haddad 2013:2). Haddad’s sentiments are affirmed by Masenya (2017:120) who writes that one of the reasons women are disproportionately affected by HIV is because of intergenerational relations which authorises older men to be in sexual relationships with younger women and adolescent girls. Because of their higher socio-economic status, older men are able to give material things to younger women and therefore control how sex is had which may include sex without using protection (Masenya 2017). Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS infection is also prevalent because women are vulnerable to rape and abuse as they search for economic survival. Women are often times forced to engage in sexual relations at gunpoint. In a study among displaced migrant women, Pertek (2022) notes that some of his respondents witnessed other migrant women dying from sexual exploitation. In these women described feeling powerless, with many losing control over their lives and lacking any real support (Pertek 2022:5). This sexual exploitation is one of the factors that increases women’s vulnerability and prevalence of HIV infections among women.

Haddad is probably the first woman theologian to refer to the HIV pandemic as “the new Kairos for theological work in South Africa” (Qiao *et al.* 2019:S35). Haddad built on the works of other scholars to develop resources for resilience. For instance, in her essay “We Pray but we Cannot Heal’: Theological Challenges Posed by the HIV/AIDS Crisis” (2006:80-90), she proposed Qiao’s “Six major resilience resources including first, internal strength second, religion and spirituality, third, hopefulness about life and future, fourth, self-awareness and self-care; fifth, social support from family and community; and sixth, HIV-related health facilities.

In addition, Haddad has focused most of her academic work on the interface between gender-based violence, HIV and the church. She asserted that:

My own early work on the link between gender-based violence and the HIV pandemic was an attempt to call the church to address the intersections of patriarchy, culture and church practice to ensure the well-being of women (Haddad 2002).

She goes on to say that:

It was also a call to women to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse and disenfranchisement within the church (Haddad 2021:4).

Faith as a Source of Resilience

Religion in general and prayer in particular, has been used for survival by African women. Haddad asserts that religion for poor and marginalised women in South Africa is not a panacea for their suffering, but rather an active weapon they use in their resistance to their oppression. Survival theologies are acts of resistance and resources for development (Haddad 2003:441). Several scholars agree with Haddad that religion and faith can be sources of survival, resistance and a resource for development. For example, in his study, Pertek (2022) submits that prayers and direct relationships with God, derived from their [migrant women's] spiritual capital, were most cited in helping respondents survive unspeakable hardships. Only a minority mentioned reading religious scriptures, as these became unavailable in displacement. In addition, most women facing food scarcity fasted to get closer to God and have their prayers accepted. The power of faith in survival is also demonstrated by Paulo (2010:61) who, like Haddad, holds that women's commitment to women's group prayer meetings indicate that those prayer groups are places of safety where they feel more comfortable to share their issues with one another and together pull resources to assist those facing more difficulties. For instance, Qiao *et al.* (2019:S39) observe that in her research which was carried during the times when HIV/AIDS infections were in their all-time high that "the majority of the participants relied upon God, prayers, faith and spirituality to overcome life challenges. They expressed their need for prayers and for God to see them through their situations" (Qiao *et al.* 2019:S39).

For many, trusting in and praying to God in situations of sex trafficking, smuggling, and kidnapping were strategies to cooperate with God through seeking his care and stronger connection (Pertek 2022:8).

Hence for Haddad, faith brings hope, comfort and healing in the face of illness. Women are “provided with strength, they are able to carry out the physical demands made upon them in the everyday practices of their lives” (Haddad 2000:282). The mutual care offered by women who have heard one another’s voice, who have heard each other’s pain in public prayer has long been a major drawcard of Manyanos” (Gaitskell 1995:220). Pertek (2022:2), likewise observed that;

Prayer, turning to God, and church were essential elements of their coping processes in the aftermath of trafficking, alongside work that enabled contentment and focus.

Pertek (2022:10) further observed that;

Most women also hoped that contact with a respected religious figure would allow self-validation of their pain and progress toward religious closure of spiritual struggles. They needed reassurance from sacred knowledge beyond their reach to clarify internalised beliefs associated with abuse experienced. Without access to prayer spaces or religious texts, and with a minority fearing sanctions for spoken-out-loud prayers in Libyan detentions, survivors would intensify “inward worship” through individual silent prayers (Pertek 2022:7).

Paulo (2010:66) agreed with Haddad, Pertek and Qiao that;

Women’s commitment to women’s group prayer meetings has some indications that the group is a place of safety where they feel more comfortable to share their issues with one another and together pull resources to assist those facing more difficulties.

Speaking out is one way of resisting and restoring life among women. Women became victorious through speaking out. Haddad (2000:367-368) noted that;

Women began to speak openly in the group about sexual matters such as rape and the virginity testing of their daughters, about women’s oppression through widowhood, polygamy, and being forced to live after marriage with her husband’s family. They not only articulated what was previously unspoken, they also at times enacted through role playing overt liberatory resistance actions, such as mass community action to stop rape in the community. They disseminated information amongst other women in the community about the dangers of AIDS and virginity testing, speech which had been practised in the group beforehand.

These prayers of women reveal their daily life experiences, particularly their daily struggle to survive food crises and poverty, based on their faith in God. They identify of God as the one who sides with them by meeting their spiritual, economic and health needs (Paulo 2010:69). “Therefore, there is understanding among women that having faith does bring positivity” (Haddad 2003).

CONCLUSION

This chapter reflected on Beverley Haddad’s work as an intellectual-activist with a commitment to reflecting on African Women’s resistance, resilience and survivors of gender-based oppression. Her story is one of a continuous struggle against the complicit collaboration between religion and culture in the oppression of women, especially on the African continent. Her commitment to the Theology and Development Programme was a form of resistance. Her contribution there is twofold: First, she has raised our awareness to the complicity of the church and culture in the perpetuation of patriarchal tendencies. Second, she raised our awareness on the strength of African women to survive exploitation and oppression both in church and society. Third, she taught us that the church can be a safe space that natures women’s resilience and agency as they engage in struggles against all forms of oppression. Indeed, she has not only seen women becoming victors instead of victims of patriarchy in the church and society, but she has contributed in their struggle to free themselves.

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