

AN AFROCENTRIC READING OF THE UNCHARACTERISTIC REQUEST FOR LOVE BY THE WOMAN IN THE SONG OF SONGS

Sampson S. Ndogo

Faculty of Theology
University of Pretoria
Private Bag X20
Hatfield, Pretoria
South Africa 0028

E-mail: samndoga@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The request for love and initiating love exchanges by the woman in the Song of Songs deviates from the norms of the day. Reading such audacity as promoting a feminine agenda perhaps says more about the reader's world than the world of the text. Nevertheless, in determining meaning there is an interplay between the world in the text, the world outside the text and the world of the reader. Adding an Afrocentric perspective to this dynamic opens the door for mutually enriching perspectives, in which ancient texts and modern African culture may be understood differently. Some steps in this direction are indicated.

INTRODUCTION

This article was prompted by an experience from the author's visit to Egypt in March 2013. The tour group had an audacious guide. Besides her commentary on the various tourist attractions Egypt had to offer, she expounded on interesting current affairs, drawing on her training as a journalist. It was meant to be a quick trip from the airport to the pyramids of Giza. However, the near impassable Sunday mid-morning Cairo traffic lengthened it – which proved to be a blessing in disguise. It afforded the tour guide time to comment on, among other things, the volatile political situation in Egypt since the demise of President Hosni Mubarak. More compelling was her prediction of the imminent deposing of the interim presidency of Mohamed Morsi. In the little over two hours that it took to get to the pyramids, the tour group was won over by the expertise and free-mindedness of the young woman, whom the author convinced to have a picture taken with him. It was at that Kodak moment, when he tempted to place his arm around her that she remonstrated: “No touching”. She explained that public

expression of any form of intimacy between a man and a woman was inappropriate, especially when unmarried. She then demonstrated the Egyptian hug, which involved standing next to each other while maintaining a respectable distance and then placing his or her arms across his or her own chest. No touching at all!

It turns out that such conservatism remains common across the Middle Eastern cultures from which the Egyptian norms are derived (Japher 2008:863-880). It is precisely the preservation of these norms, despite globalisation and the rapidity of cultural change, that the author found interesting for the purposes of this article. Egypt is particularly significant because of the correspondence between its love poems and therefore presumably its cultural norms with Israel's Song of Songs, as various scholars have demonstrated (Loprieno 2005:105-135; Sefati & Klein 2008:613-626). This article is an attempt to analyse a departure from the conservative feminine behaviour, consistent with the Middle Eastern ideals, that the woman in the Song of Songs seemingly portrays. Though this development has attracted interest from scholars, adding an African perspective is pertinent, because of the observable affinity in the cultural portraiture of womanhood, as well as the general lack of African scholarship on this subject. Nyiawung (2013:2) contends that "from an African point of view, 'traditional' exegetical approaches have seemed abstract because they do not appear to address the African people in their very context". This effectively calls for a shift from diachronic and synchronic approaches to include the context of the reader. In the past, this context was exclusively Western in orientation, because of the predominance of theologians from the United States of America and Europe. As a result, African or Asian contexts were not taken into account in readings of the text. Hence, Nyiawung (2010:3, cf. Akoto 2007:286) deduces "other contexts including Africa have been seen as "inferior" or "empty", thus ignoring the fact that New Testament texts for example are a combination of several cultural contexts (1st century Mediterranean context; Roman context and even the African context [Ancient Egypt])." In the present article, therefore, an Afrocentric approach refers to the reading of the text with African contextual realities in mind. This approach is not fully new, based as it is on numerous scholars who have published in this regard (see Snyman

2012:657-684; Omenyo & Arthur 2013:50-70; Akper 2005:292-313, Rathbone 2014:173-196, Kuwomu-Adjaottor 2012:575-579). What perhaps is an opportunity here is the contribution of African perspectives on the Song of Songs, which are not as widespread as one may wish to see. In the light of the above, an attempt will be made to draw a distinction between the world within the text, the world outside the text and the world of the reader as necessary for a multi-layered approach to the material in the Song of Songs. The discussion commences with the world within the text.

THE PERCEIVED WORLD WITHIN THE SONG OF SONGS

There is unquestionably a disparity between the world presented in the Song of Songs and that which is represented elsewhere in the biblical accounts. To begin with, the daring request for love by the woman in the Song of Songs (1:2-4,¹ 3:1-5; 5:6-8; 7:9-8:4; 8:5-7; 8:10-12) has attracted scholarly interest purely for its counter-cultural nature (Erzberger 2011:346-362) as well as its ideological premise for feminist readings (Brenner & Fontaine 2000; Walsh 1999:129-134). Hunter (2000:110-11) defines this as a protest song that, among other things, includes a refutation of the norms of Israelite social consciousness.² He continues that “even if the Song of Songs is interpreted as a metaphor, the reality of the language and its immediate “real life” references are such that it is perhaps surprising that it was even considered for inclusion among the “‘holy’ books” (Hunter 2000:11).³ Possibly the most surprising aspect of the real-life references in Song of Songs is, firstly, the open portraiture of the woman’s desire for love against the backdrop of a predominantly patriarchal society and, secondly, a conservative culture where sexual overtones by a woman are shunned if not punished. Hunter (2000:113; see Polaski 1997:64-81; cf. Exum 2003:301-316

¹ According to Tran (2011:2335), this request presupposes an existing relationship. If this is true, then the initiation of love is within the boundaries of the norms.

² Hunter’s view on “protest” against the attitudes of a patriarch-controlled society also takes into account the presentation as a playful alternative to dominant views, thereby constituting a positive “song of protest” within the corpus of Old Testament literature.

³ The inclusion of the book in the canon is a subject deserving its own discussion, as the allegorical approach was the main basis for its canonisation.

on the power plays within the account) contends:

In the centuries during which the Old Testament was produced, it is doubtful whether the role and status of women changed to such an extent that they became liberated enough to have a determinative effect on the prevailing attitudes towards sex, politics or any other subjects taken up in the books which eventually achieved a canonical status.

It is related to this perennially unchanging status of women that Hunter's idea of protest seems to hold water, particularly when one views, for example, the ongoing enlisting of women in the modern Israeli army, as described by Levy (2000:72, emphases added):

Israel is a unique case with which to illustrate the complex relationship between sexuality and soldiering. 18-year-old Jewish women and men have been drafted since the founding of the state in 1948, thus Israel is one of the few nations to have a sustained history of women in uniform. Yet even while they don their military uniforms alongside Jewish Israeli men, *young women in Israel have never been full or equal participants within the military*. They often perform supportive roles, serving as the nurses, psychologists, and clerks to the men. And the most valued role of the Israeli soldier – combat service – is an avenue that is formally closed to women. Thus, *while men may gain social political and economic capital through their service in combat units, women do not benefit from their army service in such a way*. Because of this unequal division of labour between the sexes within the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), as well as the common gendered portrayals in the mainstream media of men and women in uniform, the Israeli case may well illustrate some of the pitfalls of enlisting women into the armed force.⁴

This experience is simply highlighted to accentuate the fact that despite significant

⁴ Ljung (1989) explores the treatment of women and their social roles and the legislation affecting their status, which underscores the androcentric status quo.

changes in Israeli culture, including, for instance the shifting of the marriage age for women from after the first indication of puberty to the legal age of 17 (Weil 2004:79), men's and women's social roles have remained largely traditional.⁵ In fact, views expressing the alternative are simply radicalised and regarded as deviant.⁶

In view of these observations, the scholarly claim of reading the Song of Songs as a feminine composition is remarkable. Based on the argument that it invites readers to understand love and eroticism from a female point of view, it precludes such latent conservatism.⁷ This is particularly striking, keeping in mind the dominant patriarchal views and orientation of the world in which this text was composed, as Tucker (1983:323) comments:

In the Middle East, most of the chroniclers, poets, judges, and officials were males imbued with the patriarchal ideology of their own society; even materials drawn from folklore, anthropological studies, and oral history tend to rely on male informants and place greater emphasis on their explanations and interpretations.⁸

To add to this remark, Bergant (1994:33) opines:

It is remarkable that a society such as ancient Israel, which appears to have had such a strict sexual code of ethics, at least for women, would have produced or preserved a piece of literature such as the Song of Songs. This unique

⁵ See Bergant (1994:33) and Burrus and Moore (2003:25-52) on the gender relationship described in the Song of Songs. In the Mediterranean world, these conceptions engendered practices such as female seclusion and the veiling of women; practices that are still evidenced in certain cultures today, which again confirms the conservative nature of the culture.

⁶ See Morris's (2005:616-630) reflections on the attempt to situate radical feminism in public space.

⁷ Adinach (2010:296-312); Payne (1996:329-333) offers a balanced view. See also Polaski (2008:435-452).

⁸ Bird (1994:32) views the Hebrew Bible as "the sole epigraphic source for the eastern Mediterranean where women appear as literary creations of male authors or even faithful depictions of women in ancient Israel are accessible only through the mediation of male authors and redactors governed by communal processes of literary production and use in patriarchal society". It seems that patriarchal societies and even the Hebrew Bible were incapable of equal female depictions, simply because they are of masculine origin.

composition neither censors the unrestricted aggressiveness of the woman nor condemns sexual behaviour outside of marriage or betrothal.⁹

Thus, the perceived world within the text seems “unrealistic” in view of the norms presented elsewhere, in other texts or in prevailing ethical codes, as will be shown below.

THE REAL WORLD OUTSIDE THE SONG OF SONGS

It seems then from the above remarks that the world in the Song of Songs presents an exception to the norm. The closest to the initiation of love would be Ruth’s account. The narrator is careful to depict her stance with the assistance of Naomi, her mother-in-law, within acceptable social norms (3:18). Hughes and Laney (2001:107) posit that

the marriage of Ruth to Boaz (4:10) was similar to a levirate marriage. But due to the fact that Boaz was the brother of Elimelech (4:3) rather than Mahlon, it differed slightly from the law of Deuteronomy 25:5–10. The reference to Judah and Tamar (Ruth 4:12) recalled a situation in which the levirate responsibility was not honored (Gen. 38).¹⁰

Notably, none of the graphic erotic details found in the Song of Songs is depicted in Ruth’s account. In fact, Ruth’s initiative depends on Boaz’s positive response, which was not guaranteed as the nearest relatives’ redeemer held the prerogative (Ruth 4:1–12). In this episode the concern was not pleasure but livelihood, as Richards and Richards (1987:193) purport:

The story of Ruth also illustrates the meaning of the Hebrew word *ga'al*,

⁹ This is confusing in the sense that if, on the one hand, the Hebrew Bible is androcentric, how could it include compositions that feminist scholars could use in appreciation, affirmation or celebration of womanhood, on the other? Ndogo and Viviers (2000:1286–1307) raise the question of whose ideological reading is the best reading of the text, particularly where the text itself does not issue ideological questions.

¹⁰ See Matlock (2007:295–310) and Kiuchi (2002:21–45) on levirate marriage and its application in ancient Israel.

which means to ‘play the part of a kinsman.’ In Old Testament Law, a near relative had the right to act on behalf of a person in trouble or in danger. When persons or possessions were in the grip of a hostile power, the kinsman might act to redeem (to win release and freedom). The marriage of Boaz to Ruth involved buying back Naomi’s family land, and meant that their son would carry on Naomi’s family line.

The daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 and 36 also have a parallel account, where oversight within patriarchal society is addressed (see Mbuwayesango 2003:251-262).

Another incident worth mentioning is that of Tamar, in Genesis 38 (v. 7; cf. v. 9), who was widowed and remained childless, and was not to blame. She was entitled to the commonly practised levirate marriage, where the deceased husband’s brother continued the family line, though clearly the offspring would not be his (Dt 25:5-6). “Tamar may have been influenced by a Hittite law that held that when no brother-in-law existed to fulfil the levirate duty, the father-in-law was responsible” (Hughes & Laney 2001:20).¹¹ Because of an offence committed against the Lord where Onan, the brother-in-law, deliberately ensured that Tamar would not conceive, he was put to death (Gn 38:10). “However, Onan repeatedly used that law for sexual gratification. He took advantage of the situation, but refused the responsibility that went with it. So God took his life too” (Walvoord & Zuck 1983-85:88).

Judah, shaken by these developments, was understandably reserved about surrendering a third son. In spite of his verbal commitment, he simply employed delaying tactics further to frustrate his daughter-in-law (Gn 38:11). Tamar’s handling of the situation adds some deeper insights into the real world of the culture. She felt “she would have to take matters into her own hands if she were to be granted the rights of the levirate custom” (Walvoord & Zuck 1983-85:88) Her initiative (Gn 38:13-15) emanates from the realisation that her father-in-law was unwilling to fulfil the promise

¹¹ The story of Tamar and Judah deserves full and separate attention as it presents the awkwardness of pity and conspiracy on the part of both characters. Ravid (2002:257-266) offers interesting perspectives on the effect this account has on the reader.

he had made, so that she disguises herself as a prostitute,¹² thus initiating a sexual relationship with her unsuspecting father-in-law. In this world, prostitution was apparently practised, seemingly it was a well-established profession with its own rules of engagements (Gn 38:16-19), though, it must be added, such prostitution was unacceptable for married women and definitely for Tamar (cf. Proverbs 7:7-27). As formulated in Walvoord & Zuck (1983/85:88-89):

When the time seemed right, Tamar deceptively lured her father-in-law Judah into an immoral union with a temple prostitute, or so he thought (Gen. 38:15, 21). In pledge that he would send a goat for payment, he left his seal (which hung suspended from a cord around his neck) and his staff with her. When he tried to retrieve them through his friend Hirah (cf. v. 1), the girl was nowhere to be found. Again Jacob's family experienced deception – this time by his Canaanite daughter-in-law.

Carr (2000:238) provides insight into this permissible reality where men both married and unmarried could have sex with prostitutes, slaves and prisoners of war for non-procreation purposes. The proper view of sex for procreation and fidelity before marriage was therefore emphasised for women, viewed here as passive participants. A woman who initiated sex was depicted as dangerous, strange, and an adulterer (Proverbs 2:16; 5:3-6; 6:24-35; 22:14; 23:27-28). For this reason, Tamar gets into serious trouble when she is found to be with child, because legally she is still married. The punishment for her offence was death (Gn 38:24): "in patriarchal times, fathers seemed to have possessed the power of life and death over the members of their families. The crime of adultery was punished as shown in many places by burning (Lev 21:9; Judg 15:6; Jer 29:22)" (Jamieson et al. 1997; comment on Gn 38:24). Inevitably, "Tamar had won the right to be the mother of Judah's children, though in a deceitful way. Her action was desperate and risky" (Walvoord & Zuck 1983-85:89).

As the above shows, the social world outside the text does not present women with

¹² Understood here by the physical act of covering her face and stationing herself in the open (cf. Jr 3:2 may be implied in Proverbs 7:10).

daring and love-initiating moves without invoking societal disapproval. Women who got away with such audacious prompting were clearly counter-cultural. While it was permissible for prostitutes to seduce potential clients as part of their profession, texts that shed light on this equally register disapproval under normal moral guidelines (see Proverbs 6:24-27).

THE WORLD OF THE READER

The perceived world of the text, differentiated from the world outside the text, interacts with the world of the reader, which is always in the foreground. In the case of the present reader, the African context offers some interesting dynamics. First, love and eroticism are subjects that are not openly discussed in African cultures. The author's first language (Shona) does not have a functional language in which such erotic matters can be discussed; hence the avoidance strategy that simply labels them as taboos or mythical (see Masaka & Chemhuru 2011:132-148; Aschwanden 1989:49-118). Such reservations have made allegorical approaches to the Song of Songs convenient. Struggles with reading Song of Songs are not new, as Menn (2003:237-273) and Black (2000:302-323) reveal. The absence of African scholars' voices from Song of Songs scholarship is perhaps also a telling point. Could the lack of interest reflect cultural reservation in engaging with such explicit material? Could this also account for the fact that the author had never heard a sermon preached that was taken from Song of Songs?

In raising these concerns, the world of the reader comes to the fore; for example, the definition of womanhood has become difficult with the rise of feminist studies and the promotion of the feminist agenda in scholarly circles (cf. Bird 1994:91-103; Tribble 1978; Brenner 1993). Even an attempt by the present (male) writer to offer a working definition of "womanhood" may well attract criticism of androcentrism. It has to be said, however, whether perceived as right or wrong by contemporary ideological assessment, all cultures have norms that act as determinants for acceptable behaviour. In Middle Eastern and African cultures, love relationships were initiated by men; as

Carr (2000:237) asserts, men are “almost always viewed as the proper initiators of sexual activity”.

In a recent private conversation with a group of students, one of them remarked that she was finding relationships with men quite daunting. In this conversation, she named a specific man whom she liked. By her assessment, he seemed, inadvertently, stereotypical of male lethargy in registering or reciprocating her feelings, if not blatantly clueless. When asked why she would not rather make her feelings known, she responded that it was inappropriate to do so, because of the attendant risk of being labelled too forward and therefore of loose morals. It is from such a predominant African cultural code, which perceives it as unbecoming for a woman through her actions and/or verbal expressions to initiate a relationship with a man, that the woman in the Song of Songs can be viewed as counter-cultural.

In an essay arguing for the rethinking of Shona womanhood in Zimbabwe, Mungwini (2008:206) presents the case for the reconstruction of women’s identity; his proposal follows the traditionally determined womanhood idealised through two elements, belonging and producing:

To be one without the other renders one inadequate or incomplete unless one has been widowed for which case one may not be held to blame as this is taken as being beyond one’s control. Among the Shona it has been found out that women’s social recognition and sense of womanhood suffer greatly when they are not married or when they are married but cannot have children. In other words without children they cannot attain ‘motherhood’ as they will not have ‘produced’ although culturally society has tried to reduce the effect of such eventualities by extending the denotation ‘mother’ to any woman who is within the child bearing age and old enough to be a mother.

Although Mungwini admits to other ideals that complement the ones stipulated here, his study shows that the loyal subscription to these ideals remains undeterred among contemporary Shona women; hence the need for a revalidation. Amid the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, the rate of HIV infection is higher among married women than among unmarried women, his study reveals. This revelation presents a problematic identity,

naively accepted by women who simultaneously challenge these culturally assigned roles. In dissimilar, but corresponding ways, the studies by Gwarawanda (2011:196-218) and Blay (2011:7-46) of skin bleaching by women in Zimbabwe and Nigeria indicate their embracing of certain ideals for the sake of male attention. The conclusion is that women are both empowered and entrapped by the cultural norms they embrace and, at the same time, seek to break away from.

If similarly strained identities of women existed within ancient Israelite culture, the Song of Songs could conceivably represent a protest against negative, non-progressive ideals. The question however is: Does Song of Songs represent an ideal world or an “idealised” world?

IMPLICATIONS

A number of guidelines are worth considering here. They are broad outlines to what will be explored in further research:

The radical language of Song of Songs

The language of Song of Songs, in the real-life circumstances within which it was composed, is quite radical. As such, it is surprising that this composition that does not contain even a single reference to God would make it into the canon. This suggests unconventional approaches towards interpreting the composition. The lovers depicted in Song 8:8-9 struggle in a world governed by traditional moral rules, where the woman's brothers are responsible for guarding her sexuality, where a man can move about more freely than a woman (Song 5:2-7), where the woman can only wish for the ability to kiss her lover publicly (Song 1:2-4), and where she may be beaten and stripped by guards when she goes looking for him (Song 5:6-7). Whatever alternative dynamics might be envisioned in the Song of Songs, this is a depiction of a relationship that stands at odds with the rest of the social world. Moreover, one should remember that this text is not a transcript of an actual Israelite relationship – it is not “real”. Instead, it is a poetic vision of what might be real (Carr 2000:13).

Deviation from the norm in the portraiture of the woman

The deviation from the norm in the portraiture of the woman, in her expressions of desire for love (Songs 1:2-4; 3:1-5; 5:6-8; 7:9-8:4), in independently venturing into a risky public space (Songs 3:1-4), in defiance of her male siblings (Songs 8:8-11) and so forth represent the world within the text which, as has been observed, is not traceable in the norms of the day. Written within patriarchal society where the preferences of men in sexual matters was the norm, reading the Song of Songs through a modern emancipator's lens seems to impose perspectives the Song did not seek to alter.

A celebration of love: The uninhibited expressions of the heart

The Song is a celebration of love where mutuality in the exchanges between the lovers indicates unashamedly the uninhibited expressions of the heart. There is no agenda between the lovers, neither should any be tabled. The Song seems uncharacteristically to present a public stance on the expressions of a woman and a man in love. There is no holding back – is this not what love is like? After all, Song of Songs is a superlative!

The vulnerability of the woman

The Song does not depict the woman in a positive light all the time. She is vulnerable at times. She seems reserved about her swarthy complexion (Song 1:6a) and she is perhaps a victim of sibling rivalry (Song 1:6b; 8:8-9). When she ventures into the streets, she is in danger of being stripped and beaten (Song 5:7). However dominant as some think the woman in Song of Songs is, the text attempts to humanise her through these moments of frailty and vulnerability.

Alternative discourses

Comparable songs discovered by Middle Eastern ethnographers represent alternative discourses that are often daring and influential (cf. Carr 2000:242-243). Carr (2000:244) deduces that

this does not suggest that the Song of Songs is a transcript of an actual intimate exchange between lovers. Rather, it is an imaginative work that builds a poetic world based in part on the discourses known to its audience [. . .] Yet, the written imitation of non-public discourse had profound implications. For it took a depiction of what would normally be an intensely private exchange and resituated it in the public realm.

The question is whether there are similar compositions within the African heritage that can elucidate this phenomenon. The quest

focuses on *the context of the audience*, making use of the results from other methods of exegesis and applying them to the realities of the African context [. . .] It takes its roots from the contexts of biblical writings, before emphasising the relevance of the ‘message’ to the African people in their context. It is about how issues raised in the Bible can be interpreted and addressed within the social, cultural and religious context of Africa (Nyiauwung 2013:3-4, emphasis added).

Genre: Song

This account is a song, a genre prone to idealising reality. For example, in paying tribute to David’s slaying of Goliath, the women of Israel sang “Saul has slain his thousands but David his tens of thousands” (1 Sm 18:7), when in truth David had slain only one man. Love song genres, in which Ps 45 and Is 5:1-2 could be included, are “poetic units using explicit sexual elements intrinsic to the genre” (Carr 1981:101). It must be pointed out that the material does not display an overt didactic stance, but is simply concerned with the love relationship between the two lovers. In this portraiture of unbridled love, highly emotive language, sensual images and uninhibited initiatives are the norms. Procreation, which is the primary reason for marriage in the ancient Near East, does not even feature in the account. Political ideas, moral correctness and ideology are not the agenda of the Song.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Having attempted here to separate aspects of the world within the text, the world outside the text and the world of the reader, Song of Songs again presents itself as a song celebrating human love. Personal interest aside, what one has here is a mutual relationship seemingly devoid of theological or ideological orientation as textual premise. As Carr (1981:101) notes, “the push in much modern biblical scholarship to distinguish sharply ancient theological and modern critical interpretations says more about modern interpreters than about the dynamics of the Song and its ancient interpretations”. Still, a text is always interpreted, and adding African perspectives to the interpretational approaches is also about overcoming cultural discomfort on sexuality in order to hear the Song on its own terms. Thus, African culture and Song of Songs may enter into closer dialogue.

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