


The practices of radical refusal in biblical feminist interpretation and black study

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Dates:

Received: 20 Oct. 2021

Accepted: 15 Feb. 2022

Published: 29 Mar. 2022

How to cite this article:

Mokoena, L.L., 2022, 'The practices of radical refusal in biblical feminist interpretation and black study', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2398. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2398>

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Gender-specific frameworks detect androcentrism in biblical texts and create a methodology and a reading practice of reading the stories of women not only as by-products of their environments or religious figures but also humanises them through radical forms of storytelling. The method is followed through by recovery and revisionist readings. These modes of interpretation and examination amongst many (i.e. literary, social and historical) aim to retrieve and revive women, their stories, ways of being and living and experiences from the claws of redactional and ideological criticism and conventional theological constructs of meaning, which subsidise their erasure. It is the contention here that cinematic narrative storytelling of women's stories, experiences and ways of being both in antiquity and contemporary should not be embraced as merely accidental. Literal archives about women's lives and experiences should be engaged alongside fictional and religious narratives. These narratives are all encompassing as they are observed through the lens of othering as examined through the prism of what Magubane calls 'social relations, rather than psychological dispositions only' as determinative factors of how bodies are seen and perceived and not only as rhetorical devices. Therefore, this article sets out to be a reading that traces methodology and integrates critical fabulation as a possibility of engagement from critical race theory into the Old Testament.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article sets to create a discourse between methodologies in Old Testament Theology, biblical feminist ideologies, using critical race theory as interdisciplinary focus, critical fabulation, cinematic narrative analysis as conceptual frameworks in an effort to add to the arsenal of disobedient epistemes.

Keywords: archive; critical fabulation; biblical feminist interpretation; gender-sensitive frameworks; Sadiya Hartman.

Biblical feminist interpretation: The ruse of analogy?

What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the narrowest perimeters of change are possible and allowable ... For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (Lorde 1983:93).

There have been a number of analytical tools and hermeneutical frameworks which will be divulged into later and since the inception of what Masenya (2014:189) called 'gender-identified biblical frameworks' in the early eighties: a moment best characterised as an epistemic rupture or epistemic disobedience. Scholars have continued to emerge from the undercommons of biblical studies no longer acceptable to be fugitives of knowledge produced about them but not by them or with them: a task taken upon with questioning and enthusiasm to disrupt and disobey.

The emergence of these frameworks that had their own share of unique challenges, advantages and disadvantages gave rise to modes of reading attempting to disobey by not 'mimicking Eurocentric frameworks' introducing unique differences to be embraced. Lorde (1983) said:

the failure of academic feminists to recognise difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become defined and empower. (p. 100)

The author (2021:50) makes a similar argument elsewhere quoting Weems (2003:21) that we have 'different intellectual heritages, political baggage and privilege [emphasis added] and social assumptions'.

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

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One of the visible signs of different intellectual heritages is interpretation, from unique grounded contexts to produce grounded knowledge. Before its canonisation, biblical feminist interpretation had roots in the creative imagination and theorisation of women bearing the yoke of systematic exclusion from their daily lives and in religious spaces. This is an important observation to make because it is easy to believe that its emergence is signaled by it becoming an institutionalised theory of contestation. Before we assume and designate (appropriately so at times) labels such as 'pathfinders' and 'coiners of terms' black women have already been aware of their asymmetrical positioning in society and understood that there is something fundamentally wrong with the organisation of social arrangements concerning them (i.e. Lorde 1983; Masenya 2014).

The institutionalisation and canonisation of biblical feminist interpretation was an indication that there existed a notable gap in official discourses, which enabled the theorisation and pathological study of the social and intimate lives of women in their absence – a gap that could be observed with an array of things, such as methodologies, storytelling, presence, visibility and access. As Masenya (2014:189) observed, the desire to 'fit in' is not only a challenge for teenagers but a human exercise entirely as it is also found in the academic operational spheres. In our particular context, this gap created a fragmented theological discourse resulting in what Perdue (2005:8) called the 'collapse of history', which is also featured in the title of his book – a title that is a double-edged sword as it presupposes two things that marginal studies have nauseatingly come to undo an established order and yet affirm that indeed, the established order should be disrupted.

It is in his seminal work *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (2005) that Perdue observed that the consideration of biblical feminist interpretation was a form of 'inclusion and consideration' in the process of reconstructing. The author is suspicious of the wording around the title because it wants to assume that biblical feminist interpretation is not an equal contender in the market of ideas but an afterthought-granted space on a full bus. He relies on the work of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Carol Meyers as the genesis of 'feminist history', which is also quite telling given the extensive diverse archive that exists.

Early feminist historians such as Fiorenza, Meyers and others represent a particular mode of reading, which sought to (1) expand the significant sociohistorical role women played in the history of ancient Israel and the early church and (2) articulate a critical feminist hermeneutic as both a research tool into the past and an interpretative method for present theological discourse (Perdue 2005:108). While the generation before them was mainly concerned with the critique of patriarchy, it hardly undertook the task to evaluate critically the systematic representation (Perdue 2005:104).

As she notes in her own words:

I set out to explore the problem of women's historical agency in ancient Christianity in light of the theological and historical questions raised by the feminist movements in society and church and to do so in terms of critical biblical studies. (Fiorenza 1994:14)

The methodology of this kind of gender-sensitive framework has various means of concluding this task, namely the hermeneutic of suspicion and the exposition of the nature of language (Perdue 2005:105). This then makes sense why the subtext to Fiorenza's seminal work *Memory of Her* is 'a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian Origins', indicating to us that it is not only an excavation study but also a reconstruction of methodology.

Fiorenza observed that in the collective memory of Christianity, the roles and stories of women are often virtually forgotten. It is argued similarly elsewhere that after erasure, the roles and narratives of women can also be used to enable sexist and racist cultural expressions because texts are cultural entities performing in a cultural paradigm (Fiorenza 1994; Mokoena 2021). A case in point in both cases is the woman who anointed Jesus in Mark 14:9 and Jezebel and Mrs. Job. Fiorenza argued that to be more palatable to a Greco-Roman patriarchal audience, although the verse reads: 'And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (14:9), exegetically this narrative is disputed, redacted and often read in the background whereas it should have also taken a central place in the proclamation of the gospel.

A 'prophetic sign-action' like that of a woman anointing Jesus to fall through the cracks of the gospel, indicated in the bigger scheme of things of systematic erasure and the retelling of such narratives is indicative of reconstructive methodologies. These methodologies stand not only as banes but also as indictments and lay a charge against the established order through practices of radical refusals.

We can therefore conclude that early non-intersectional, race and geographically neutral attempts before the move to post-colonial, Bosadi and Womanist readings of biblical texts mainly aimed their focus on the following aspects (Fiorenza 1994):

1. A historical-critical study of texts presupposes that the 'setting in life' (*Sitz im Leben*) is important to understand the formation of texts and their world. This method is basic to any biblical historical reconstruction.
2. Critical observation and conceptual development of a feminist hermeneutic that attempted to explore the history of women in biblical religion. This is to avoid being apolitical, ahistorical and androcentric as those pitfalls are possible to have a constructive dialogue between text and context.
3. The preceding developments were able to clear the blurred line easily crossed between androcentric academics and historical neutral quests. This then introduced a new

interpretative paradigm. A heuristic approach aimed at human reconstruction. Maleness has always been the barometer and to be a woman was to exist on the periphery, the heuristic feminist paradigm sought to acknowledge everyone as being human. It extended to men, women, different classes and social standings and races.

While earlier conceptions were effective in achieving their own goals, the conversation can continue. There emerged other modes of reading preceded by the gender-identified frameworks of the eighties: A movement that has primarily been heralded by black women in Africa and the diaspora. It assumed the form of womanism in the black radical tradition and *Bosadi* (womanhood) in African gender-sensitive hermeneutics specifically in South Africa. They both assumed the same position in the neighbourhood market of value although they were subjected to certain critiques, at times warranted. No ideology worthy of engagement is immune from critique.

Charges were laid at the feet of womanism for not understanding unique African contexts and being oblivious to its global positioning as that of a position of power, alluding to geopolitics of knowledge yielding no activism (Kobo 2018:78). Adherents of womanism thought of *Bosadi* as grudging for inclusivity or some form of colonial affirmation denying it its epistemic uniqueness as a worldview. *Bosadi* and womanism, however, stand as autonomous responses and discourses, which remain as necessities today, even in the face of contestations (Kobo 2018:79). In this discourse, black humanity intersects with gender differences as social locations play an important role in the production of texts.

Intramurally, there also emerged frameworks across regional and tribal lines, which were not comfortable with mainstream assessments. Biblical scholar Makhosazana Nzimande, for example, employs an *Imbokodo*, post-colonial, post-apartheid approach to the Hebrew Bible. This mode of reading is an attempt to move away from imported frameworks and aims to create a pure worldview that interrogates how multiple systems of oppression intersect and converge on the bodies of black women in the South African context (Makhosazana 2005).

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) who is the forerunner for the *Bosadi* (womanhood) approach explains that although the roots of *Bosadi* are located in Northern SeSotho, her concerns are both local and global. The primary task however remains to answer questions asked by her immediate context as she deals with a complex she calls the 'insider/outsider' conundrum every subject with double consciousness can relate to. Her specific focus then becomes hermeneutic that confronts life-denying forces exacerbated by legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Masenya 2014:189–204).

Kobo interrogates androcentrism from the prism of black liberation theology by not only asking how heavy the yoke of

patriarchy is on black women but also how that struggle against it cannot be divorced from the general struggle for liberation. Kobo contends that there are hierarchies even within the discourse of black liberation theology, which in itself still employs pervasive use of androcentric language. Kobo is an adherent of womanist theology and locates it within liberation theology. A necessary intervention when one looks at the landscape of discourses in liberation theologies that sometimes lack a rigorous assessment of intersectionality between race and gender in the pursuit of the liberation of black people as a whole. She identifies these deficiencies and offers a contesting critique against them and even a critique against womanism itself! Kobo's (2018) work largely borders on resistance against what she calls pseudospirituality guided by a spirit of refusal. A rich concept is worthy of a separate examination (Kobo 2018).

Social location gender-sensitive discourses also became projects of excavation, re-creation and the writing of oneself into existence, they are a poesis of some sort, an ode to the forgotten, intentionally silenced and epistemically dead. Convergences are being made, congruences formed and interlocutors at ideological loggerheads and methodologies disobeyed. These disobedient methodologies transcended the institutionalisation of the discipline and also engaged the grassroots: the ordinary lives of black women and even the wayward of society.

What can be detected in these modes of readings and many more that exist is that the quintessence of these modes of readings was to ask, what is it to be human? How do we relate intramurally after being alienated because of systematic fragmentation? How do we theorise about our ordinary lives? Should we even have a pathological view of ourselves after being objects of study throughout history? How do we become interlocutors within our oppressors when they are unwilling to engage us equally but want to assume the president's complex? They weaponise scientific disciplines, ethnographers and anthropologists alike. More importantly, how do we disrupt, undo and fall apart to come together? How do we affirm our humanity?

Ours has become a task to either reconstruct the archive or abolish it together. How do we dig for ourselves, how do we emerge from the undercommons of history because the echoes of the chorus that forms the very essence of our denied humanity is like a spectre haunting us? Will we recognise ourselves should the archive burst open and confront us back? How do we construct and facilitate that dialogue? It requires a critical fabulation: a poesis.

Critical fabulations and black study: *Wayward Live Beautiful Experiments*

The author wants to make a connection between modes of reading in biblical feminist interpretation (BFI) and those that exist in the black radical tradition and not so much to induct

one into the other but to assist in building a future archive. As we continue to figure out ways in which we can undertake this mammoth task of reconstructing our lives, it requires a manifesto: the downtrodden *le bona ke batho*. As typically the plight of blackness with the question of womanhood and feminism is characterised by negation, death, silence and dismemberment and othering, here we are confronted with noise and chanting. Bodies are howling, the chorus is loud and the archive is speaking.

The primary function of revisionist and recovery readings has been that of diagnostic and pathological examinations and then offer a radical reimagination. However, an engagement with the archive requires an interaction with the print material and imagination and bodies as the primary source for discourse before any diagnosis can take place. This is a cinematic approach to black study as it requires us to sit first and observe.

Magubane asks, which bodies matter? An important question given that the principle of examining the social and intimate lives of black women has centrally been through othering, making them objects of studies and deregulated subjects in their narratives and fugitives from their own stories. Magubane (2001:817) stated correctly with Sarah Baartman, as a case in point, that analysing differences has historically been through deconstructing the 'othering' process. The pitfalls of this principal exam are, it assumes a few things, that there exists a prototype which is the standard host and is used as a point of reference and that the primary content producer and distributor for the poetics of the flesh of black women exists first in anthropological and ethnographic canons.

It is for this reason that practices of radical refusal in writing are what Mignolo (2015) talking about the work of Sylvia Winter calls 'epistemic disobedience' because:

[T]he rules of the epistemic canon, and according to racial mandates, if you have been classified in/as difference, then you are required to submit and assimilate to the canon *or* remain outside. (p. 106)

Madipoane writes about this insider/outsider complex that persists.

A refusal to follow these pathways opens up a practice of rethinking and unraveling dominant worldviews, which the author argues can also be those we have found refuge in for a long time but now realise that they only serve half the purpose. These canons are put in place to filter, construct and construe meaning as we have it about the social arrangement and visibility of black women and their stories and how their bodies are seen. It seals a stamp and engraves a mark, the mark of stasis, death essentially becomes *her*.

Critical fabulations are what the author may borrow from Ronald Judy (1994) as 'resistance through canon formations' a new archive is being curated. The author borrows only the phrase to appropriate it for his use given that Judy's use of

the phrase was a critique against the canon of the black intelligentsia. An argument he divulges in depth is his essay 'On the Question of Nigga Authenticity' citing that the building of aesthetic canons in the black radical tradition is based on the belief that we can 'write ourselves into existence'. In that process, 'In writing the death of the African body, Equiano's 18th-century slave narrative gains voice and emerges from the abject muteness of objectivity into productive subjectivity' (Judy 1994:211–230). An exercise that bears the question of the limits of possibility given that blackness is a symbol that 'cannot enable representation of meaning because it has no referent' (Judy 1994:211–230). Wilderson (2010) observed that the subterfuge often becomes elusive symbolic resistance as an aspiration for productive subjectivity because the slave has no authenticity and no ontological integrity to claim.

Wilderson further suggested that black study as an academic field is constantly threatened by the ruse of analogy assumed that black studies in themselves are indexical (exist on the margins) in institutions, they assume fugitivity as they have no ontological status. Therefore, they cannot delimit a 'unique object field', how then do critical fabulations disrupt the genealogy of reason given all that has been said.

The struggle of capturing the lives of ordinary women is that their existence is perceived as meager in dominant discourses and not pedestrian of an independent examination unless if it is from within the broader discourse of the discontents of blackness: An act not wholly abject given that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Critical fabulation as a storytelling function possesses intimately the capacity to trace into the archive. Hartman (2008:2) said it is to retrieve what lays dormant without committing further acts of violence through our narration. Hartman aware of the limits of possibility alluded to by Judy and Wilderson on the ontology of black study argued that this form of storytelling is predicated on impossibility, it is to 'listen to the unsaid, translating misconstrued words and refashioning disfigured lives – and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers and fragments of discourse'. The delimitation of such a study then becomes, if we can borrow from Lorde (1983), a biomythography or as the author would like to term it, a poiesisography of the tamed where experience becomes the subject of interpretation, a study on the making of the formation as Hartman (2008:3) said 'there is no one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage'.

What Saidiya Hartman does in *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments* is a case in point of critical fabulations, which dig into the archive. Stories of ordinary women existed in open rebellion, although their existence is limited to 'not more than a register of *their* encounter with power' through surveys, monographs of sociologists, trial transcripts, reports of investigators, social workers, prison case files and

psychiatrist (Hartman 2008:3, 2019:15). As a fugitive text that offers a counter-narrative, Hartman (2019:15) best described it as text that 'elaborates, arguments, transposes and breaks open archival documents so they may yield a richer picture of the social upheaval that transformed black social life in the 20th century'.

In the first book of *Wayward Lives* 'She makes an errant path through the city', Hartman (2019:13) narrated the story of 'A Minor Figure' a 'nameless' Negro girl. She is only identifiable through continuity, familiarity and invisibility as:

[F]ragments of her life are woven with the stories of girls resembling her and girls nothing like her, stories held together by longing, betrayal, lies, and disappointment. The newspaper confuses her with another girl, gets her name wrong. (p. 13)

This sort of familiarity that Hartman describes in crisp terms is not one to be craved or envied rather, because her familiarity is a mark in the semeiotic order, she's a Negress. That is the only name she can be publicly identified with.

The subject of familiarity, continuity and invisibility is central to understanding that although she is a *Negress*, Hartman (2019:14) argued that not knowing what to name her, there are common names for mixed-race women, names reserved for the dark, such as 'Peaches, Sugar Plum, Pretty Baby and Little Bit' names that 'hold the past at a safe distance, to forget what grown men did to girls behind closed doors'. Names that create a scene for the safe escape of culpability and reiterate that black bodies are invisible, fungible and disposable.

She and many other black or dark women can easily fit into the boxes of each of those names because of what Spillers (1987:66) called the 'signifier that has no movement in the field of signification,' which is ethnicity. The primary function of ethnicity that bears in it 'fatal and dangerous effects' is a 'mythical time' which enables the writer to 'perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once'. The hegemonic function of ethnicity as Spillers argued is that 'the human body becomes a defenseless target, for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor'. These markers residing on the arrested figure, which is the *Negress* culminate in a chorus, a chorus Hartman (2019:29) called the 'symphony of anger'.

Hartman draws our attention to a portrait found in the archives, the portrait is that of a minor figure in the literal and symbolic sense architecturally reclined on a sofa in the attic of a studio, her life defined and shaped by sexual violence, another child welfare case number, a pervasive narrative. Hartman (2019:34) redirected the gaze from the stillness of an image towards *her story* and not her symbolic positionality by reconstructing the experience of a 10-year-old Negro girl from scenes of violence and writes her a love letter and all those who have been harmed (Saidiya 2019). Shadowed by a marker, the real girl is lost, she is found

wanting, she remains a minor figure when everything around her is 'loomed large'.

The inhibited body and the flesh are now a crime scene of gratuitous and incongruous violence. It replaces the critical faculties to feel, be, live, exist with terror, anxiety and anguish. The mark makes the impossibility of black self-possession resolute (Carter 2008:47). The mark polices the arrested subject and pathologises them.

A radical refusal of the mark or marking becomes an interruption, and now the marked woman extends her lament and proclaims, 'this *world* needs me, and even if I was not here, I would have to be invented *in anyway*' (Spillers 1987:65). The invention of the subject is a reiteration of the margin and centre relationship. A relationship marked by symbiotic relations; the marked subject is necessary for the centre to hold. Carter's analytical tool of melancholy makes it possible for us to understand the forces at work of being a necessity for the survival of the world whose margins are framed by your existence.

It is this interruption that informs the formation of a canon of resistance, the preoccupation is not only a dig into the archives to counter dominant narratives but also to write a history of the present and to dramatise the production of nothing.

Intimate lives and theories

It is noteworthy that in the assessment of dominant modes of reading in biblical feminist interpretations and critical fabulations in black study is the practice of radical refusal: a practice that seeks to revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence (Hartman 2008:4). To revisit the scene of subjection is 'to enter a mortuary it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold' (Hartman 2008:4). In the first attempt, the emergence of interruptive methodologies in biblical scholarship is to engage with the religious texts as androcentric texts and then later a retelling of both the individual and collective history. The corpus is a memoir of religious texts as areas of contestations and to interrogate the illusiveness of stories about the intimate lives of women, which led to theory formation.

The second instance is not constrained to particularity but revisits scenes of subjection in their layers of meaning, layers of history and layers of re-readings. The critical revision becomes an ode to the young, queer, free lovers, radicals, anarchists and ghetto girls (Hartman 2019:16). They both disrupt the flow and order of conceptual history, they bring forth new and imaginative ways with which we can tell our stories and arrange our bodies. The quintessential task of critical fabulations is the refusal to be governed or to be arrested by bureaucratic canon formations and language veiled and animated as enlightenment.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

L.L.M. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards of research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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