

Intersectionality and the Oppressive Incidents of Women in the Old Testament and the South African Context

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ABSTRACT

The oppression of women and young girls in the biblical texts, with special reference to the Old Testament, mirrors the oppression of women and young girls in the South African context. Such oppression of women and young girls continues to engulf everyone, directly or indirectly in the South African context. Thus, this article aims to examine certain incidents in the Old Testament in which the subjugation of women is a pertinent subject. This shows that the oppression of women in the Old Testament is not so different from the oppressive incidents that continue to sabotage the social lives of many women in South Africa. Intersectionality is utilised herein as a qualitative research technique to appreciate these oppressive incidents as a source of data, while African feminism is employed as a theoretical framework to examine these incidents. Among other issues, it becomes clear that male-orientated structures are the driving force behind women's oppression and require reasonable solutions to the conundrum.

KEYWORDS: African feminism, Intersectionality, Old Testament, Oppression, Women

"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (Audre Lorde).

"It is important to teach our female youth that it is okay to say, 'Yes, I am good at this,' and you do not hold back" (Simone Biles).

A INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament, as a religious and historical text, reflects the patriarchal social structures of ancient times in which women recurrently faced various

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forms of oppression. Throughout the biblical narratives, women are frequently depicted as subordinate to men, with limited agency and subjected to societal expectations and norms.¹ The oppressive treatment of women is patent in multiple instances such as the depiction of women as property, the normalisation of polygamy and the silencing of their voices within religious and legal contexts. For instance, the practice of levirate marriage, which obligated a widow to marry her deceased husband’s brother, exemplifies the indifference to a woman’s autonomy and agency.² Over and above this, the concept of female purity and the associated rituals such as menstrual restrictions, highlight the control exerted over women’s bodies and reproductive capacities.³ These dictatorial portrayals and practices in the Old Testament mirror the male-orientated ideologies of the time, perpetuating gender disparities and limiting the opportunities and freedoms of women. In the same vein, while there are certain purity laws and rituals related to women, there are also purity regulations that apply to men. For example, circumcision is a significant ritual for males in the Old Testament. It was a sign of the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham. Male infants were circumcised on the eighth day as a symbol that they belonged to the community of Israel (Gen 17:10–14). Similarly, Lev 15 also discusses male emissions, stating that a man who has an emission of semen is considered ritually unclean until evening. As with menstruation, there were purification rituals to undergo to restore ritual purity. Thus, it is perceptive to acknowledge that the Old Testament describes various sacrifices and rituals that men as well as women were required to perform. These rituals were often conducted by priests who were predominantly male and they were central to maintaining the religious purity of the community.

While the Old Testament contains narratives of extraordinary women who displayed courage and resilience, other scholarly discourses show that their stories continually exist within a framework that upholds male dominance and perpetuates gender-based oppression.⁴ Thus, women’s voices and

¹ Fundiswa A. Kobo, “A Womanist Pseudo-Spirituality and the Cry of an Oppressed African Woman,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 74/1 (2018): 1–7. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-e83a3564d>.

² Levirate marriage is still practiced in other African countries such as Uganda, Kenya, Malawi and other state regions.

³ Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *JAAR* 41/1 (1973): 30–48.

⁴ Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, “Deliver Us from Patriarchy: A Gendered Perspective of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and Implications for Pastoral Care,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41/1 (2020): 1–8; Bernadine Y. Waller, Jalana Harris, and Camille R. Quinn, “Caught in the Crossroad: An Intersectional Examination of African American Women Intimate Partner Violence Survivors’ Help Seeking,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 23/4 (2022): 1235–1248; Caroline Yih, “Theological

perspectives are frequently marginalised or absent altogether, as biblical texts predominantly focus on male protagonists and their experiences. For instance, the narratives repeatedly reinforce traditional gender roles, depicting women primarily as wives, mothers and caretakers and relegating them to domestic spheres. While certain differences between genders could have biological or evolutionary roots, the challenge arises when societal expectations rigidly confine individuals to specific roles based on their gender. In fact, rigid gender roles may restrict individuals from pursuing their interests, talents or career aspirations simply because these pursuits are not traditionally associated with their gender. Similarly, when gender roles are strictly defined, it habitually leads to unequal opportunities for men and women. This could potentially manifest in areas such as education, employment and leadership roles. This confinement limits their opportunities for personal and professional development, relegating them to a subordinate position in society. Beyond this, instances of sexual violence and exploitation, such as the case of Tamar in 2 Sam 13, underscore the vulnerability and victimisation of women in biblical narratives. While there are glimpses of resistance and subversion by certain female characters, the prevailing depiction of women in the Old Testament perpetuates a patriarchal system that suppresses their agency, restricts their choices and reinforces societal norms that uphold their oppression. This is enough to underline the subjugation of women in the Old Testament.

In the same way, South Africa is a country with a multifaceted history that has had a profound impact on the experiences of women and young girls. For instance, apartheid, a system of institutionalised racial segregation and intolerance, was a defining feature of the country for several decades.⁵ While apartheid officially ended in 1994,⁶ its legacy continues to influence social, economic and political structures, including the oppression faced by women and young girls.⁷ During apartheid, women and young girls, particularly those from the lower racial and ethnic groups, endured intersecting forms of subjugation due to their gender and race. In fact, the apartheid regime enforced a male-orientated social order that prioritised the interests of white men,

Reflection on Silencing and Gender Disenfranchisement," *Practical Theology* 16/1 (2023): 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2108822>.

⁵ Winnie T. Maphumulo and Busisiwe R. Bhengu, "Challenges of Quality Improvement in the Healthcare of South Africa Post-Apartheid: A Critical Review," *Curationis* 42/1 (2019): 1–9.

⁶ It stands to reason that whereas apartheid formally ended in 1994 in South Africa, there are still lingering elements of racial subjugation and discrimination. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the official end of apartheid in 1994 denoted the end of racial disparities.

⁷ Shaina Hutson, "Gender Oppression and Discrimination in South Africa," *Essai* 5/1 (2007): 26.

relegating women, especially black women, to the margins of society.⁸ Black women faced systemic discrimination and violence, while also bearing the thrust of poverty and minimal access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities.⁹ As a result, Gender-Based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in South Africa and elsewhere in the global village. High rates of rape, domestic violence and femicide continue to plague the country, with women and young girls from marginalised communities disproportionately affected.¹⁰ The confluence of race, class and gender amplifies the vulnerability of women and young girls, particularly those living in impoverished townships and rural areas.¹¹ In parallel, black men who were politically active against apartheid faced severe repression. Activists were arrested, detained without trial and subjected to torture. Many black leaders were imprisoned for their anti-apartheid activities.¹² It was during this period that the apartheid regime employed brutal tactics to suppress dissent and men were repeatedly targets of state violence. The police and military organised raids, massacres and extrajudicial killings to maintain control.

The Old Testament and South Africa represent distinct historical and cultural contexts where women faced various forms of oppression. In the Old Testament, women are recurrently portrayed as subordinate to men, subject to patriarchal norms and deprived of agency and autonomy, as previously said. Similarly, in the context of South Africa, women and young girls have historically experienced intersecting forms of oppression due to gender, race and class. The legacy of apartheid, with its institutionalised racial discrimination, further marginalised and disadvantaged women and young girls, particularly those from marginalised racial and ethnic groups, as mentioned earlier. Thus, the convergence of patriarchal norms, historical injustices and socio-economic imbalances creates a complex web of oppression that significantly affects the lives of women in the Old Testament and in South Africa.

⁸ Helen Moffett, “These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them: Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *JSAS* 32/1 (2006): 129–144.

⁹ The fact that black women in South Africa were predominantly oppressed by white men does not entirely excuse many black men who also oppressed and transgressed against women. Black women were oppressed by anyone, at any given point.

¹⁰ Moletsane, Relebohile, “Using Photovoice to Enhance Young Women’s Participation in Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education,” *Comparative Education* 59/2 (2023): 239–258.

¹¹ Thabo Msibi, “Denied Love: Same-Sex Desire, Agency and Social Oppression among African Men Who Engage in Same-Sex Relation,” *Agenda* 27/2 (2023): 105–116.

¹² Sakhumzi Mfecane, “Decolonising Men and Masculinities Research in South Africa,” *South African Review of Sociology* 51/2 (2020): 1–15.

Despite the presence of oppressive narratives and systems, both the Old Testament and South African contexts offer glimpses of resilience and resistance by women. In the Old Testament, stories such as those of Esther, Ruth and Deborah underscore the agency and bravery of certain women who challenged the prevailing norms and played crucial roles in their communities. To the same degree, in South Africa, women such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Fatima Meer, Helen Joseph, Thuli Madonsela and many more, have been at the forefront of the struggle against oppression, proactively participating in anti-apartheid movements and advocating for gender equality and social justice. In addition, many unpopular and unknown women have played a significant role in challenging apartheid and male-orientated systems. Women-led organisations and activists continue to challenge oppressive structures and fight against GBV. Efforts to promote women's empowerment, advance gender fairness and address intersecting forms of oppression have gained momentum in both contexts. By acknowledging and amplifying the voices and experiences of women and by challenging oppressive systems and norms, there is an opportunity to advance inclusive and equitable societies that uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their gender, race or social background.

With this brief background to context, this article aims to employ an intersectional research technique to probe and understand the oppressive incidents faced by women in the Old Testament and the South African context, exploring the complex interplay of gender, race, class and historical factors that contribute to their marginalisation and oppression. In other words, the intersectional research technique will appreciate certain incidents of women's oppression in the Old Testament and in South Africa as a source of data. The objective is to examine methodically and critique the depiction and treatment of women in the Old Testament, identifying oppressive incidents and the patriarchal structures that contribute to their subordination and limited agency, while further delineating the very same phenomenon in the South African context. Ultimately, this article draws on concepts such as patriarchy, colonialism and systemic discrimination in order to uncover and comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of women's oppression in both contexts. The next section will focus on the relationship and convergence between the Old Testament and South African context.

B CONVERGING CULTURE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SOUTH AFRICA

An interrelationship between the cultural milieu of the Old Testament and of South Africa must be conceptualised and contextualised in order to present a balanced discussion and juxtaposition. The convergence of culture between the Old Testament and South Africa is a subject that produces intriguing parallels and intersections. While there are significant differences in time, geography

and definite ethnological contexts, exploring the converging dimensions provides insights into consolidated themes, challenges and dynamic forces as well as how such shared dimensions could be affecting women. One component of convergence between the Old Testament and South Africa is the presence of prescriptive societal structures and patriarchal norms. Both contexts exhibit strong patriarchal systems that prioritise male authority and dominance, continually relegating women to subordinate roles.¹³ For example, in most black South African cultures, *lobola* is a traditional practice whereby a man pays a bride price to the family of his prospective wife as part of the marriage process.¹⁴ This practice is still prevalent in many communities today. Essentially, *lobola* is regarded as a way of affirming the value of the bride and her family, but it also mirrors the patriarchal nature of society, as women are recurrently perceived as commodities to be exchanged between families.¹⁵

In the Old Testament also, there are examples of patriarchal customs that prioritise male authority and involve the exchange or payment of women. In the story of Jacob and Rachel in Gen 29, Jacob worked for his uncle Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage. However, Laban deceived Jacob and gave him Leah, Rachel’s sister, as wife. Jacob then had to work an additional seven years to marry Rachel. This narrative underscores the idea of women as objects to be acquired through labour or payment, advancing the patriarchal norms of the time.¹⁶ In both *lobola* (in the South African context) and the biblical example, women are positioned as passive recipients of these customs, underscoring their subordinate roles within the societal structures. Although the concept and philosophy of *lobola* in both contexts are quite complex, it is not the aim of this scholarly discourse to delve into these complexities. With this in mind, it is clear that these practices reinforce the perception that women’s worth is tied to their exchange value or their ability to fulfil prescribed gender roles. These practices perpetuate the patriarchal

¹³ George Aichele, “The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4/4 (1997): 70–74.

¹⁴ Ruele, Moji. “Contextual African Theological Interpretation of *Ilobola* as a Gender Issue in the Era of Globalisation,” in *Lobola (Bridewealth) in Contemporary Southern Africa* (ed. L. Togarasei and E. Chitando; Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59523-4_21.

¹⁵ Mlamli Diko, 2020, “Uphononongo Nzulu Lwamasiko Nezithethe Kwiincwadi Ezichongiweyo zesiXhosa,” Unpublished Masters dissertation, Rhodes University [cited 4 June 2023]. Online: <http://vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/PdfViewer/vital:38420/SOURCE1?viewPdfInternal=1>.

¹⁶ Rannu Sanderan, Daniel Ronda, Robi Panggarra and Andrew Buchanan, “Unnale Melo’s Theology and Peace Study on the Concept and Reality of Peace in Toraja Culture,” *Jurnal Jaffray* 20/1 (2022): 38–57.

systems that prioritise male authority and ascendancy, obstruct women's agency and contribute to their subordination.

In addition, in the Old Testament, patriarchal values are evident in the depiction of men as heads of households and leaders within their communities, while women are continually depicted as wives, mothers or objects of male ownership.¹⁷ In the same vein, South African societies have historically upheld patriarchal norms that confined women's roles predominantly to the domestic sphere and subjugated their voices and agency.¹⁸ In certain indigenous South African communities, this idea continues to be prevalent. However, the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa (at the time of writing this article), has on various occasions, stressed the importance of gender justice and the need to address patriarchal norms and practices. He has emphasised the significance of women's empowerment, the riddance of oppression and the promotion of women's rights in South Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. Cyril Ramaphosa has acknowledged the detrimental effects of patriarchy on society and has called for collective action to dismantle patriarchal structures and create a less prejudiced society.¹⁹ This implies that vocalising women's challenges is crucial for advancing the awareness and understanding of gender disparity, promoting social change and working towards a less prejudiced and inclusive society where all individuals have equal opportunities and rights, regardless of gender. Ignoring or downplaying these challenges impedes gender equality and limits the potential for positive societal transformation.

Another point of convergence is the presence of colonisation and its impact on ethnological issues. In both the Old Testament and South Africa, the influence of colonial powers has left lasting legacies. For example, in the Old Testament, the Israelites experienced periods of colonisation and foreign rule, which influenced their ethnological and religious mores. A case study that supports the influence of colonisation and foreign rule on the ethnological and religious mores of the Israelites in the Old Testament is the Babylonian captivity or Babylonian exile. The Babylonian captivity refers to the period when the Babylonian Empire, under King Nebuchadnezzar II, conquered the Kingdom of Judah and exiled a significant portion of the Jewish population to

¹⁷ Gale A. Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline," *JBL* 139/1 (2020): 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1391.2020.1b>.

¹⁸ Some communities in South Africa continue to embrace this tradition that views a man the head of the family and a woman as subordinate.

¹⁹ Thinandavha D. Mashau, "Reimagining Gender-Based Violence in the Eye of the COVID-19 Storm and Beyond: A Practical-Missiological Reflection on an African Family through the Lenses of the Biblical Narrative of Tamar," *Religions* 13/5 (2022): 394.

Babylon in the sixth century BCE.²⁰ This occurrence followed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, marking a significant turning point in the history of the Israelites. During the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites found themselves under foreign rule and they were subjected to cultural assimilation by the Babylonians.²¹ The Babylonian Empire sought to impose its own ethnological, religious and societal practices on the exiled Israelites in an attempt to destroy and weaken their identity and integrate them into Babylonian society. This included promoting Babylonian gods, customs and rituals. The influence of Babylonian culture on the exiled Israelites can be seen in various dimensions of their religious and cultural practices.

For instance, the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament contains significant references to the Babylonian religious context and includes visions and practices that reflect Babylonian influences. The prophet Ezekiel, who was among the exiles, incorporated elements of Babylonian imagery and religious concepts into his messages.²² Over and above this, the Babylonian captivity had a perennial impact on the development of Jewish religious traditions. It was during this period that the Israelites began to gather and codify their sacred texts, which essentially formed the basis of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament.²³ The experience of exile and foreign rule influenced the theological and cultural reflections in these texts. This case of the Babylonian captivity serves as a notable example of how foreign colonisation and rule influenced the cultural and religious practices of the Israelites in the Old Testament. It illustrates how external influences may potentially shape and transform a community's identity, belief systems and traditions, reflecting the convergence of cultures and the complex dynamic forces between colonisers and the colonised. In particular, the displacement of the Israelites from their homeland and the disruption of their societal structures contributed to the mistreatment of women in the context of the overall upheaval and challenges faced by the community. Similarly, during the Babylonian exile, there were cultural exchanges between the Israelites and the Babylonians. This led to the homogenisation of certain Babylonian practices, including those related to gender roles and the treatment of women.

Correspondingly, South Africa's bitter history includes colonisation by European powers, which imposed their values, social structures and norms on

²⁰ Adrian Kelly, “The Babylonian Captivity of Homer: The Case of the ΔΙΟΣ ΑΠΙΑΘΗ,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 151/3 (2008): 259–304.

²¹ Jan Schnell, “What Constitutes the Gathered Eucharistic Assembly?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50/1 (2023).

²² Amos Perlmutter, “Patrons in the Babylonian Captivity of Clients: UNRWA and World Politics,” *International Organization* 25/2 (1971): 306–308.

²³ Erik Herrmann, “The Babylonian Captivity (1520),” *Lutheran Quarterly* 34/1 (2020): 71–81.

indigenous populations – South Africans. In fact, colonisation cluttered traditional cultural systems and often reinforced patriarchal and oppressive practices, leaving a lingering impact on gender roles, power dynamics and societal norms. An instance that supports the impact of colonisation on gender roles, power dynamics and societal norms in South Africa is the implementation of the apartheid system and its policies. The apartheid regime not only perpetuated racial imbalances but also advanced patriarchal and oppressive practices. Women, particularly black women, faced traversing forms of oppression based on race and gender, as their rights and agency were further subjugated.²⁴ Apartheid legal frameworks restricted the movement and economic opportunities of black women, intensified traditional gender roles and advanced the notion of white male superiority. This instance foregrounds how colonisation and the subsequent apartheid system disrupted traditional cultural systems, continued patriarchal norms and deeply entrenched gender disparities in South African society.²⁵

Furthermore, the convergence of Old Testament and the South African cultural contexts can be observed in the struggle against oppression and the emergence of social movements. Both the Old Testament and South Africa have witnessed resistance against oppressive systems and the rise of movements advocating for justice and impartiality.²⁶ In the Old Testament, narratives of liberation and prophets calling for social justice reproduce the collective struggle against oppressive powers. Similarly, South Africa's history is marked by the fight against apartheid, with the emergence of various anti-apartheid movements such as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Umkhonto Wesizwe and the pivotal role played by black South African women in the struggle, among many others. These movements sought to contest the oppressive systems and bring about transformative change, echoing the spirit of resistance found in the Old Testament. While acknowledging these cultural convergences, it is essential to recognise the distinct historical and social contexts of the Old Testament and of South Africa as a country. They are separated by thousands of years and have unique cultural dynamics and specific manifestations of oppression. At the same time, it must be underlined that in this article, the attention is on the incidents of oppression of women in the Old

²⁴ Lisa K. Micklesfield, Estelle V. Lambert, David John H. Sarah Chantler, Paula R. Pienaar, Kasha Dickie, Julia H. Goedecke and Thandi Puoane, "Socio-Cultural, Environmental and Behavioural Determinants of Obesity in Black South African Women: Review Articles," *CJA* 24/9 (2013): 369–375. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC145270>.

²⁵ Mlamli Diko, "The Racial Hierarchisation of the isiXhosa Language in South Africa: A Post-Colonial Discourse," *IJBSS* 12/2 (2023): 598–607.

²⁶ Mlamli Diko, "Ncedile Saule's *Umlimandlela* (at the Cross-Roads) as a Witness to Colonial and Apartheid Lexicology in South Africa," *IJBSS* 12/2 (2023): 569–579.

Testament and in South Africa. In addition, it is important to consider first the research methodology and theoretical framework that underpin this scholarly discourse and this is done in the next section.

C RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs intersectionality as a qualitative research technique in which certain incidents or instances in the biblical text will be elicited as a primary source of data to argue against similar social realities in the South African context. It must be stated that this article does not focus on a specific biblical text given that there may be several biblical versions of the same incident. Instead, the focus is on the incidents that depict the oppression of women irrespective of the biblical versions.²⁷ Intersectionality is a crucial research technique that accepts the interwoven nature of social identities and systems of oppression.²⁸ Using intersectionality as a research technique for the subject of the incidents or instances of oppression of women in the Old Testament and the South African context allows for a profound scrutinisation of how multiple forms of oppression transect to configure women’s experiences of subjugation and discrimination.²⁹ In the Old Testament, intersectionality provides a monacle to examine how women’s experiences were formed based not only on their gender but also on their social stature, ethnicity and cultural context. For instance, women from disadvantaged groups in ancient Israel, such as widows, foreign residents or slaves, encountered compounded forms of persecution due to their intersecting identities. For this reason, understanding these convergences enables a more multifaceted view of how different power structures and societal ethos impacted women differently based on their exclusive social positions.

Similarly, in the South African context, employing intersectionality highlights the unique challenges encountered by women due to the convergence of multiple systems of oppression. Black women, for example, have experienced typically the intersection of gender-based prejudice and racial oppression under apartheid. Intersectionality, therefore, helps to illuminate how their experiences of oppression are shaped not only by their gender but also by their racial identity and socio-economic status, contributing to their oppression

²⁷ The interest of this article is not in determining the biblical version which depicts the oppression of women better than the other.

²⁸ Ann Phoenix and Pamela Pattynama, “Intersectionality,” *EJWS* 13/3 (2006): 187–192.

²⁹ Elena A. Windsong, “Incorporating Intersectionality into Research Design: An Example Using Qualitative Interviews,” *IJSRM* 21/2 (2018): 135–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1268361>.

and limited access to resources and opportunities.³⁰ In the examination of biblical texts, intersectionality is a valuable qualitative research technique, as it allows for intricate analysis of the experiences of individuals and groups in the biblical narratives.³¹ By examining the intersecting axes of power and identity, researchers uncover the complexities and multiple layers of subjugation and privilege present in biblical narratives. In the scholarly interpretation of the Old Testament, intersectionality as a qualitative research technique is valuable for examining the various social identities and their interactions as essential components of analysis. It goes beyond a singular focus on gender or any single category and recognises that individuals and groups are shaped by the intersection of multiple personalities and systems of power. This perspective highlights that the experiences of individuals cannot be fully understood by examining one aspect of their identity in isolation. Rather, it is essential to consider how these different aspects intersect and how the intersecting systems of power affect their lives and opportunities.

Intersectionality remains important as a qualitative research technique and so does the African feminist theoretical framework, given that it makes it possible to explore women's issues in the African milieu and, in particular, the South African context. African feminism, as a theoretical framework, provides a formidable perception through which to evaluate and understand the oppressive incidents faced by women in the Old Testament and the South African context, particularly, when applying an intersectional technique as a research methodology.³² African feminism appreciates the distinct experiences of African women within their specific historical, cultural and social contexts and acknowledges the interconnecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation that they face. In other words, African feminists stress the need to address the interconnected forms of discrimination and subjugation that affect women, acknowledging that their struggles cannot be separated from broader societal structures and power subtleties.

In this article, when probing the incidents of oppression of women in the Old Testament, African feminism helps to comprehend the ways in which gender-based intolerance connects with other forms of oppression such as religion. It recognises that the experiences of women in the Old Testament cannot be understood outside their broader social, economic and political

³⁰ Carla Rice, Elisabeth Harrison and May Friedman, "Doing Justice to Intersectionality in Research," *Cultural Studies↔Critical Methodologies* 19/6 (2019): 409–420.

³¹ Chris Chapman, "Resonance, Intersectionality, and Reflexivity in Critical Pedagogy (and Research Methodology)," *SWE* 30/7 (2011): 723–744.

³² Meghan A. Potasse and Sanni Yaya, "Understanding Perceived Access Barriers to Contraception through an African Feminist Lens: A Qualitative Study in Uganda," *BMC Public Health* 21/1 (2021): 1–13.

contexts. In fact, by using an intersectional research technique, African feminism elucidates how the intersection of multiple identities configures the oppression and marginalisation of women in biblical narratives, challenging the notion of a single, monolithic experience of womanhood. In the South African context, African feminism is crucial for understanding the complex subtleties of oppression faced by women. It pays careful attention to the historical legacies of colonisation, apartheid and patriarchal norms that continue to influence the lived experiences of South African women in contemporary contexts. In short, African feminism acknowledges the closely connected nature of various forms of oppression including gender, race, class and culture.³³ It provides a framework for examining the specific ways in which gender oppression intersects with racial discrimination, economic imbalances and other systems of power in South Africa. With the aforementioned research technique as well as the selected theoretical framework in mind, the next section focuses on the oppression of women in the Old Testament.

D OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The story of Dinah in Gen 34 is read from the perspective of African feminist theory, which seeks to probe power subtleties, gender roles and the experiences of women in African contexts. From an African feminist lens, this narrative of Dinah exemplifies the pervasive issue of sexual violence and its profound impact on women’s lives. The narrative depicts Dinah as a victim of rape, a violent act that violates her bodily autonomy and strips her of agency. This is reflected in the excerpt below (Gen 34:1–4):

Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and raped her. His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, “Get me this girl as my wife.”

The aforementioned text underlines the vulnerability of women to sexual violence and the urgent need to address the power imbalances that enable such abuse. The passage further sheds light on the intersectionality of gender and other forms of oppression, as Dinah’s position as a woman from a different culture and ethnic group and as a member of a marginalised community further exacerbate her vulnerability. Shechem, a prince of the Canaanite city, wields power and privilege, which enables him to exploit Dinah without consequences. The lack of consequences for Shechem’s action underscores the

³³ J. Miguel Imas and Lucia Garcia Lorenzo, “A Postcolonial and Pan-African Feminist Reading of Zimbabwean Women Entrepreneurs,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 30/2 (2023): 391–411. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12931>.

lack of accountability on the part of many in positions of privilege and power. This impunity potentially perpetuates a culture of impunity for perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault. Consequently, this power disparity, according to the African feminist theory, is emblematic of other social structures that promote GBV and create an environment where women's rights are routinely violated and downplayed. African feminist theory emphasises the importance of recognising and challenging the patriarchal systems that uphold these power discrepancies. In effect, the subsequent actions taken by Dinah's brothers to seek vengeance, which may be viewed as a form of protection, also reflect a society that recurrently gives credence to male honour and control over women's autonomy. This illustrates the necessity to challenge and denounce societal norms and ethnological practices that prioritise male power and control, as they contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence.

Thus, addressing sexual violence requires a multi-faceted approach that includes legal reform, education and changing societal attitudes. African feminist theorists argue and champion the creation of comprehensive legal frameworks and policies that safeguard women's rights and provide survivors of sexual violence with access to justice and support.³⁴ Additionally, African feminist theory stresses the significance of amplifying women's voices, narratives and experiences in sexual violence discourse. This includes creating safe spaces for survivors to share their narratives and advocating for their agency and autonomy. By centring the experiences of women, their perspectives and needs may potentially guide the development of more effective strategies to combat sexual violence and address the underlying power disparities. When viewed through the lens of African feminist theory, the story of Dinah in Gen 34 illustrates the pervasive issue of sexual violence and the compelling need to address powers that sanction such abuse and oppression. Specifically, the negotiations between Dinah's male relatives and Shechem in the aftermath of the assault raise questions about agency and consent. The absence of Dinah's voice in these negotiations underscores the marginalised position of women and the need to challenge societal norms that downplay their agency.

Thus, African feminist theory helps to highlight that the issue of forced marriage is another point of concern in the Old Testament. Using an African feminist lens to read the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judg 11 uncovers the themes of forced marriage, the disregard for women's autonomy as well as the normalisation of patriarchal control. This story depicts a tragic situation in

³⁴ Sylvia Tamale, "African Feminism: How Should We Change?" *Development* 49/1 (2006): 38–41; Eyayu K. Bayu, "A Comparative Analysis on the Perspectives of African Feminism vs Western Feminism: Philosophical Debate with Their Criticism and Its Implication for Women's Rights in Ethiopia Context," *IJSA* 11/4 (2019): 54–58.

which Jephthah’s vow results in the catastrophe to fulfil the terms of the oath. This underscores the vulnerability of women in a society where religious vows and obligations take precedence over individual well-being and consent. The story of Jephthah’s daughter is found in Judg 11:29–40.

The story of Jephthah’s daughter exemplifies the tragic consequences of a misogynistic system that determines women’s lives by the actions and decisions of men. Jephthah, as a judge of Israel, makes a vow to God that if he is victorious in battle, he will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house to greet him upon his return. Unfortunately, his daughter is the first one to come out, and despite her innocence and youth, she becomes the fulfilment of her father’s vow. From the African feminist perspective, arranged marriage, which is often not directly negotiated with the affected individual, is considered a form of GBV and a transgression of women’s autonomy. In many cases of arranged marriage, individuals, especially women and young girls, may have limited or no say in the choice of their life partner. The absence of free and informed consent can be a direct violation of their autonomy and personal agency. Ultimately, when individuals are forced into marriages against their will, it can have severe consequences for their mental health. The emotional distress resulting from being compelled to make a life-altering decision can lead to anxiety, depression and other psychological challenges. Considering the aforementioned passage, Jephthah’s daughter is voided of her agency and voice, as she becomes a mere “object” to fulfil her father’s vow. Her life is determined and sacrificed for the sake of a promise made by a man and it highlights the lack of control women have over their own destinies. The story further shows that women’s lives are determined by men and the inherent power imbalances within male-orientated structures. Jephthah’s covenant is accepted without question by the community, demonstrating the unquestioned authority and dominance of men over women. In essence, women are reduced to passive recipients of decisions made by men, denying them the opportunity to shape their own lives and make choices that align with their own desires and aspirations.

Moreover, African feminist theory stresses the necessity to challenge and overthrow patriarchal systems that advance violence against women and young girls and deny them agency. This story serves as a reminder of the importance of empowering women and young girls, promoting gender liberty and challenging oppressive social norms that impede women’s opportunities and subject them to violence.

Correspondingly, exploitation and economic abuse become pertinent subjects in the Old Testament. For example, in reading the story of Ruth and Naomi from the perspective of African feminist theory, it is important to acknowledge the wider context of patriarchal structures and economic

exploitation prevalent in society – the Old Testament, as the text of Ruth 1: 1–5 shows.

This biblical narrative of Ruth and Naomi serves as an impactful example of the vulnerability faced by widows in that society. Widows were repeatedly left without financial support and were dependent on male relatives for survival. In the case of Ruth and Naomi, both women found themselves in a position of economic adversity and had to navigate a society that subjugated and downplayed their needs. In fact, Naomi's loss of her husband and her sons left her in a vulnerable position. She lacked the ability to inherit property or engage in economic activities independently. This situation compelled her to rely on her male relatives and, primarily her daughter-in-law to provide for her well-being. Ruth, her daughter-in-law, faced a similar predicament. Ruth's commitment to supporting Naomi is a significant dimension of the story. In her determination to alleviate their economic torment, Ruth takes on the role of a gleaner in the fields. Gleaning was a practice in which the poor and subjugated, such as widows and foreigners, gathered leftover crops from the fields after the harvest. By engaging in gleaning, Ruth exposes herself to the mercy and goodwill of the landowner. This dimension of the narrative unmask the economic exploitation and precariousness faced by vulnerable women. Ruth's position as a gleaner highlights the limited options available to her and the reliance on the goodwill of those with economic power. She is subjected to the whims of the landowner who could choose to provide or withhold assistance at his discretion.

The above observations and interpretation show that African feminist theory catalyses the power attributes at play in this story, considering the intersectionality of gender, economic status and social hierarchy. It critiques the patriarchal structures that limited the agency and economic independence of widows such as Naomi and Ruth. It also calls attention to the importance of understanding the socio-cultural and historical context in which these women lived in order to grasp fully the intricacies of their experiences. In addition, African feminist theory accepts the strength and resilience demonstrated by Ruth as she navigated these challenges. Her commitment to supporting Naomi mirrors the agency and solidarity that African feminist philosophy often emphasises. Thus, Ruth's actions challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the importance of women supporting and empowering each other in the face of economic exploitation and vulnerability.

In line with the previous scholarly debates, it is important also to pay meticulous attention to the story of Sarah and Hagar in Gen 16, which provides a lens for evaluating the consequences of patriarchal power on women, using an African feminist framework. In this biblical narrative, Sarah, who is unable to conceive, makes the decision to offer her maidservant Hagar to her husband Abraham as a surrogate. This act mirrors the patriarchal perception of women's

value being tied primarily to their reproductive capacity. Sarah, as a woman in a patriarchal society, is constrained by societal expectations that prioritise fertility and motherhood. This means that by offering Hagar as a surrogate, Sarah attempts to fulfil her societal role and secure her own position within the patriarchal structure. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the ability to bear children was closely tied to a woman’s social standing and having descendants was crucial for maintaining a family’s honour and legacy. Sarah, by offering Hagar as a surrogate, may have attempted to ensure her social status within the community. In the same vein, this story also underscores the complexities and challenges that can potentially arise from attempting to fulfil societal expectations without considering the implications. The relationships of Sarah, Hagar and Abraham become strained, leading to tensions and conflicts that have lasting consequences.

Nevertheless, this act of reducing Hagar to a mere vessel for procreation exemplifies the objectification of women within patriarchal systems.³⁵ Hagar’s agency and autonomy are disregarded as she is treated as a means to an end, solely valued for her ability to bear children (fertility). In other words, her individuality, desires and emotional welfare are completely downplayed in the process. This highlights the power undercurrents at play, as women are objectified and reduced to their reproductive capabilities, confirming their subordination and marginalisation.³⁶ Moreover, the mistreatment and abuse that Hagar experiences after becoming pregnant reveal the innate imbalances and violence perpetuated by patriarchal systems.³⁷ Sarah’s resentment and anger towards Hagar and Abraham’s willingness to approve Sarah’s mistreatment demonstrate the ways in which male-orientated power dynamics can be used to legitimise and fuel the oppression of women. For example, Hagar is subjected to physical and emotional abuse, forced to flee from her oppressors and is subjugated as a vulnerable outsider. Accordingly, in an African feminist framework, this narrative invites one to examine in a robust way the intersecting power subtleties of gender, race and class. Hagar, as a maidservant and likely a woman of African descent,³⁸ occupies a trivial position in society due to both her gender and her social status. The narrative text underpins the specific vulnerabilities faced by African women in patriarchal systems where

³⁵ Gijs Beets, Joop Schippers and Egbert R. Te Velde, “The Future of Motherhood: Conclusions and Discussion,” in *The Future of Motherhood in Western Societies* (ed. G. Beets, J. Schippers and E. Te Velde; Dordrecht: Springer, 2011). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8969-4_13.

³⁶ Robert J. Edelman, Michael Humphrey and David J. Owens, “The Meaning of Parenthood and Couples’ Reactions to Male Infertility,” *BJMP* 67/3 (1994): 291–299.

³⁷ Thomas B. Dozeman, “The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story,” *JBL* 117/1 (1998): 23–43.

³⁸ Yvonne Sherwood, “Hagar and Ishmael: The Reception of Expulsion,” *Interpretation* 68/3 (2014): 286–304.

their experiences of objectification, exploitation and abuse are compounded or intensified by racial and economic factors.

In sum, the aforementioned interpretations illustrate the various forms of abuse and oppression experienced by women in the Old Testament. African feminism, as a theoretical lens, helps scholars to uncover and understand how these incidents intersect with factors such as gender, power, socio-economic status and cultural norms, which further exacerbating women's vulnerability and oppression. Therefore, by recognising the intersectional nature of women's abuse, one can develop a more comprehensive view of the complexities surrounding GBV and work towards creating a more equitable and just society. With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that the oppression of women in the biblical narrative is a reflection of the same conundrum in some modern societies, with special reference to South Africa. This is discussed in the next section.

E OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The oppression of women in the Old Testament mirrors the oppression of women in South Africa. The physical abuse of women, commonly known as GBV, is a pervasive issue in South Africa and examining it through the lens of African feminism uncovers the complex factors that contribute to this challenge. In South Africa, high rates of GBV, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault and femicide, continue to plague the lives of women and young girls. According to statistics and the available body of knowledge, South Africa has one of the highest rates of GBV in the world. This violence is profoundly rooted in patriarchal norms that uphold male dominance and control of the bodies of women and young girls. Women are often subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse in intimate relationships as well as in public spaces. This includes unreported cases of GBV that remain unknown and unsettled.

For example, the case of Anene Booysen, a 17-year-old girl who was brutally raped and murdered in 2013, underlines the severity of GBV in South Africa.³⁹ Her case drew national and international attention, inflaming conversations about rape culture, victim blaming and the urgent need for action to address violence against and oppression of women. Another example is the #TotalShutdown movement that emerged in South Africa in 2018.⁴⁰ This movement, driven by African feminist activists, aimed to bring attention to the epidemic violence faced by women and young girls and to demand action from

³⁹ Floretta Boonzaier, "The Life and Death of Anene Booysen: Colonial Discourse, Gender-Based Violence and Media Representations," *SAJP* 47/4 (2017): 470–481.

⁴⁰ Awino Okech, "Feminist Digital Counterpublics: Challenging Femicide in Kenya and South Africa," *Signs: JWCS* 46/4 (2021): 1013–1033.

the government and society. Its activities included protests, marches and campaigns to raise awareness about the oppression of women and young girls and demand accountability by perpetrators of such. This means that African feminism stresses the confluent nature of women’s experiences of abuse in South Africa. Women from marginalised groups, such as black women, transgender women, women with disabilities and women in rural areas, face compound forms of discrimination and violence. For instance, the case of the corrective rape⁴¹ targeting lesbian women in South Africa demonstrates the intersection of GBV, homophobia and sexism.

In contrast, it should be noted here that corrective rape is a disturbing phenomenon that has been reported in South Africa and other parts of the world.⁴² It refers to the act of raping someone, typically a lesbian or bisexual woman with the intent to “correct” or “cure” their sexual orientation. This is an oppressive act towards women and the homosexual community, which is rooted in deep-seated homophobia, misogyny and patriarchal power dynamics. One incident that gained significant attention is the story of Eudy Simelane. Eudy Simelane was a prominent South African footballer and homosexual activist. In April 2008, at the age of 31, she was brutally raped and murdered in KwaThema, a township near Johannesburg, South Africa. Eudy Simelane’s case highlights the intersection of different forms of oppression faced by homosexuals, particularly lesbian women, in South Africa. It is believed that her rape and murder were motivated by both homophobia and misogyny, as she was targeted specifically because of her sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴³

The case of Eudy Simelane, among many others, sheds light on the patriarchal powers that perpetuate violence against women and homosexuals. In South Africa, as in many other societies, traditional gender norms and rigid expectations of heterosexuality are deeply entrenched. These norms often define women’s worth and relegate them to low-grade roles, fostering male dominance and control of the bodies and sexuality of women and young girls. Corrective rape, as experienced by Eudy Simelane and many others, serves as a violent tool to assert patriarchal power and enforce heteronormativity. It is an attempt to punish and “correct” individuals who challenge gender and sexual norms, particularly those who identify as lesbian or bisexual women. Eudy Simelane’s case evoked widespread outrage and drew attention to the urgent

⁴¹ René Koraan, “Corrective Rape of Lesbians in the Era of Transformative Constitutionalism in South Africa,” *PELJ* 18/5 (2015): 1930–1952.

⁴² Lea Mwambene and Maudri Wheal, “Realisation or Oversight of a Constitutional Mandate? Corrective Rape of Black African Lesbians in South Africa,” *AHRLJ* 15/1 (2015): 58–88.

⁴³ Thabo Msibi, “Not Crossing the Line: Masculinities and Homophobic Violence in South Africa,” *Agenda* 23/80 (2009): 50–54.

need to address oppressive incidents and homophobia in South Africa. It contributed to increased activism and advocacy efforts to combat corrective rape, promote homosexual rights and raise awareness about the bisecting forms of oppression faced by marginalised groups. Efforts to address corrective rape in South Africa have included legal reforms, community-based initiatives and the establishment of support networks for survivors. However, challenges remain, including the underreporting of cases due to fear of stigma, inadequate access to justice and support services and the persistence of deeply ingrained social attitudes. Probing case studies, such as Eudy Simelane's through an African feminist framework, throws light on the broader social, cultural and political context in which oppression against women and young girls occurs. It helps to delineate the need for comprehensive strategies that challenge patriarchal power constituents, promote gender equality and create safe and inclusive spaces for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. African feminism emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach to address women's abuse in South Africa, including legal reforms, education, community support and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. It calls for challenging detrimental gender norms, promoting women's rights and agency and ensuring that survivors have access to safe spaces, resources and support systems. By centring the voices and experiences of women, African feminism provides a critical framework for understanding and eradicating women's abuse in South Africa and elsewhere in the global village.

F CONCLUSION

The link between the oppression of women in the Old Testament and in South Africa underlines the pervasive nature of patriarchal power and the ways in which it manifests in different societies and contexts. By probing the oppression of women in the Old Testament, as exemplified by the story of Sarah and Hagar, a historical precedent for the subjugation, objectification and marginalisation of women within patriarchal systems is established. This narrative reflects unequal power relations and the reduction of women to their reproductive capacity, underscoring the objectification and mistreatment that can result from patriarchal norms and expectations.

Drawing a link with South Africa, one can observe that the oppression of women and young girls, including GBV, intolerance and the imposition of gender norms, persists in contemporary society. This includes the occurrence of corrective rape, as discussed earlier, which reveals the ways in which patriarchal power dynamics intersect with homophobia to further oppress and marginalise lesbian and bisexual women. The parallel between the oppression of women in the Old Testament and South Africa underscores the enduring nature of male-orientated structures and their detrimental impact on women's lives across time and different cultural contexts. It underscores the point that patriarchy is not confined to a specific era or geographical location but it

operates as a pervasive system that perpetuates gender disparity, violence and the devaluation of women and young girls.

Furthermore, this connection highlights the importance of recognising and challenging male-orientated power dynamics and their manifestations in different contexts. It calls for a collective effort to dismantle the structures and belief systems that advance the oppression of women and young girls, both within religious and cultural traditions and broader societal systems. The nexus between the oppression of women in the Old Testament and South Africa serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender inclusivity and the necessity for intersectional approaches that consider the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression. It urges us to work towards creating societies that value and empower women and young girls, challenge patriarchal norms and promote social justice for all. In conclusion, engaging in discourses that pursue the liberation of women and young girls is central, as it addresses enormously entrenched gender imbalances and empowers them to assert their rights and aspirations. These discourses contest societal ethos and structures that advance discrimination and violence, calling for a more inclusive and equitable society. Ultimately, liberating women and young girls enables them to live fulfilling lives, constructively contribute to their communities and advance the cause of gender equality on a global scale, with special reference to South Africa.

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