Your Body is not your own: A Political Theological Engagement with Gretha Wiid's Patriarchal Interpretation of Ephesians 5:22-23

Dion A. Forster
Department of Systematic Theology and Ethics
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

Why does Gretha Wiid call upon her predominately white Afrikaner female followers to submit themselves unquestioningly to the sexual will and social authority of their husbands? Why would some of these women willingly give over their bodies and their agency to be considered "Worthy Women of God"? This paper engages the founder of the "Worthy Women of God" movement, Gretha Wiid's, interpretation of Ephesians 5:22–23. It aims to explicate the political theology that underpins and informs Wiid's patriarchal hermeneutics by placing it within the cultural, political, racial, and gendered context of a changing South Africa. In order to do so we shall consider the ways in which Wiid has interpreted Ephesians 5:22–23 in her publications, public addresses, and DVD / Video materials. By understanding her tacit political convictions, one can gain a clearer understanding of her hermeneutic strategy, and the reception of her patriarchal theology among her predominantly white, middle class, Afrikaner, women followers. It will be argued that her political strategy is diametrically opposed to the ethical intent contained in Ephesians 5:21–33.

Keywords: Feminism; Gender; Sexuality; Patriarchy; Oppression; South Africa; Political Theology; Ephesians; Apartheid; Whiteness; Worthy Women of God

Introduction

In 2017 an adapted version of Margaret Atwood's book *The Handmaids Tale* aired as a television series (cf., Atwood, 2011). It was an instant success. It resonated with the concerns of many women around the world, particularly those in America during the Trump era, who were increasingly concerned about the role that religion was playing in conservative politics in general, and body politics in particular.

The title for this paper is taken from a poster that advertised the television series, it shows the female lead character, Ofred, with the words, "Your body is no longer your own."[1] The poster captures the frightening relationship that exists between religion, politics, sex, and gender, in patriarchal political theologies.

In 2019, an article was published with the title, *Taking 'the Sex Thing' Back in South Africa: Worthy Women Bargaining for a Place in Utopia* (Forster & Stander, 2019a). The article focussed on the patriarchal theology of a popular South African Christian

---

[1] Ofred is the main character in the novel. She is a 'handmaid', a woman who is fertile in an increasingly infertile world. She is an unwilling surrogate, in other words, her body is used by powerful couples to birth their children.

speaker, named Gretha Wiid, and the movement that she started called the *Worthy Women of God*. This movement, and its founder, are the primary focus in what follows. A central question is, why would Gretha Wiid call upon her predominately white Afrikaner female followers to submit themselves unquestioningly to the sexual will and social authority of their husbands? Moreover, why would some of these women willingly give over their bodies and their agency in order to be considered *Worthy Women of God*? In an attempt to answer at this question, this article will consider Gretha Wiid's, interpretation of Ephesians 5:22–23. It aims to explicate the misshapen political theology that underpins and informs Wiid's patriarchal hermeneutics by placing it within the cultural, political, racial, and gendered context of contemporary South Africa. We will focus on the ways in which Wiid has interpreted Ephesians 5:22–23 in some of her publications, public addresses, and DVD / Video materials. By understanding her tacit political convictions, one can gain a clearer understanding of her hermeneutic strategy, and the reception of her patriarchal theology among her predominantly white, middle class, Afrikaner, women followers.

The letter to the Ephesians and Political Theology?
So, let's begin by asking what the letter to the Ephesians is about? There is some consensus that the general theme of the letter aims to remind the Ephesian Church, and its members, of the universal role of Christ in creation. Ralph Martin writes, "Ephesians sounds the note of celebration that the Lord of the church's worship rules the entire universe and that in him God has a plan to embrace all the nations and all orders of existence" (Martin, 1992:1).

By all accounts, this is a deeply political theology. It is a theology that deals with the understanding of metaphysical images (and their accompanying beliefs), while seeking to understand how communities (and the individuals in those communities) should structure their lives around those images, texts, and beliefs (Scott & Cavanaugh, 2008:2). In this sense, we can recognise that all religious texts have either some implicit, or explicit, political orientation. They either unknowingly express a set of religious, cultural, and material convictions that form the foundation or superstructure for a way of life (implicit political theology), or they advocate for such a foundation or superstructure to establish a particular way of organising the social and material world toward a religious or moral end (explicit political theology).

In this regard, it can be argued that the letter to the Ephesians has both an implicit and an explicit political theology. It contains and advocates for a way of ordering the world under Christ that has clear political convictions and intentions. The author of the letter to the Ephesians has a clear understanding that Christ has achieved a cosmic victory over all evil. Yet his eschatology grounds him in the reality that the "church and the world are plagued by evil powers which must be resisted and overcome" (Martin, 1992:1). Hence, the letter is full of instructions on how the Ephesians are to relate to Christ and to the world (from which seductions, dangers, and false teachings emerge). It is in this context that the pericope on Christ, the Church, and the Family, (Ephesians 5:21–6:4), from which Wiid extracts one of her primary emphases (vv. 22–23) emerges. In this pericope, individuals, and families, who make up the Church, are to witness to Christ's holy cosmic order, by submitting themselves "to one another, out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). God's cosmic purpose of renewal is represented in a structure of

mutual respect and submission, which is to be carried from the home, into the Church, and then into broader social relationships (6:5–9). The intention is for all of humanity and creation to be properly ordered under the headship of Christ.

It can be claimed that Wiid's interpretation (which we shall discuss and unpack in a later section), draws upon and then perverts the political theology of the letter to the Ephesian church. Yet as we shall argue, she places a misguided and false political direction upon the text, and in so doing perverts one of the theological trajectories that is implicit in the political intention of the letter to the Ephesians.

An Overview of the *Worthy Women of God* movement

The *Worthy Women of God* movement is a female-only Christian social movement in South Africa which, similar to Angus Buchan's *Mighty Men of God* movement,[2] promotes a theologically informed discourse of male headship and female subordination within a concomitant family and societal structure. According to Gretha Wiid, (the founder of the *Worthy Women of God*), and Angus Buchan, (the founder of the *Mighty Men of God*), husbands have God-given roles as kings, prophets, and priests in their homes. Wives are admonished to submit themselves to their husbands to fulfil their role as helpers (Pillay, 2015:61–62). This is based on Wiid's (and also Buchan's) interpretation of Ephesians 5:22–23 (NRSV): "Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior."

They also appeal to texts such as Genesis 2:18, which we will not discuss here. Wiid promotes the idea that it is the wife's duty to enable her husband to take up his (rightful) position as head of the household, doing so as a representative of Jesus Christ (v.23) (Pillay, 2015:34–35, 39). This is primarily enacted by women adopting a submissive role in the home, among the family, and in society (v.22) (Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:1–7; Pillay, 2015:34–43). In her public speaking engagements, videos, and publications, she often points out that confident, assertive, and independent women undermine the authority of men, and could threaten their self-image and confidence, and in doing so destabilise the relations of power in the family, and indeed in society as a whole. It is suggested by the *Worthy Women of God* movement that when the correct order in the family is established it will lead to the restoration of true Christian "order" in South Africa (Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:1, 2015:86; Pillay, 2015:34–35). In particular, Nortjé-Meyer points out that Wiid's understanding is that "the instruction for wives to submit to their husbands comes from the Lord" is in accordance with her interpretations of 1 Cor. 11:3 and Eph. 5:22 (Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:4). This is not only a theological claim (coming from the Lord); it is also a theological claim that has a political intent (the Lord instructs women to take responsibility for establishing a hierarchical order in the home with Christ at the head, followed by the husband as King, and the wife as a helper of her husband and servant of Chirst). Hence, there is an understanding that the personal has an impact upon the political (Oloka-Onyango & Tamale, 1995:691). This is a highly spiritualised form of dominion theology and complementarianism (Nortjé-Meyer, 2015:86; Archer & Archer,

---

2   cf., Jackson, N. 2009. *Women Get Own "Mighty Men*", *News24 / City Press*. Available at:
https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Women-get-own-Mighty-Men-20090716 (Accessed: 23 May 2018).

2019:66–90). What is also interesting to note is the introduction of women's agency within the patriarchal structure. We will discuss this in greater length later in the paper.

The patriarchal nature of Wiid's theological and social views are most clearly explicated in relation to her views on sex and sexuality.[3] As we shall see, this is one way in which she emphasises women's agency and power to initiate and control, to enact what she believes is the desired political structure for both the home and broader society.

According to Wiid, husbands, in this case white Afrikaner men, are in dire need of social, psychological, and spiritual affirmation (Nortjé-Meyer, 2015:90). This affirmation is facilitated through a wife showing honour and respect to her husband's identity and will as a man, a leader, indeed a "King". Everything that a wife does in the marital relationships and the structuring of home life should empower her husband to answer one fundamental question: "Am I man enough?" (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008). It is the duty of a wife to address her husband's emotional and physical needs in such a way that it enables him to give a positive answer to this fundamental question, and in doing so to affirm his masculinity (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008).

Wiid uses various Biblical texts to justify her views (cf., Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:1–7). She promotes the notion that wives who enable their husbands to feel "man enough" are faithful to the Biblical expectation of a Christian wife, and can thus be considered "worthy women of God".[4]

She claims that it is the Lord that expects a wife to submit to her husband. What is interesting is that in all of the *Worthy Woman* materials that were surveyed, there is no reference to mutual submission between a husband and wife (i.e., Ephesians 5:21).[5] It is almost as if that section of the passage does not exist for her.

In Wiid's schema, a woman is only "worthy" in God's eyes if she is obedient to the gender roles and social expectations of womanhood, and being a wife, that Wiid interprets to be communicated through a particular hermeneutic approach to certain Biblical texts. These Biblical expectations can be summarised as follows:

- A woman shows her worth by constantly boosting her husband's ego in front of other people (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008),
- A woman shows her worth by making their husband feel desired, and by never saying no to sexual intercourse or sexual activity (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008),
- A woman shows her worth by calling her husband a "king" (she even advocated that she build him a "throne"), even in times when his actions, attitude, or social standing could not be related to "Kingly" characteristics, such as wealth, power, wisdom, social standing, authority, etc.

---

[3]   Please see, (*Eva se lyf DVD 1*, 2008; *Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008; *Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 1*, 2009; *Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 2*, 2009; Wiid, 2012)

[4]   Voelgoed. 2014. *Om jou man sy affair te vergewe. Voelgoed* (blog), 6 October 2014. Available at: https://voelgoed.co.za/om-jou-man-sy-affair-se-vergewe-2/ (Accessed 28 May 2018); Wiid, *Eva Se Lyf DVD 1*; Wiid, *Eva Se Lyf DVD 2*.

[5]   There is some debate about the splitting of the pericope, whether it begins with 5:21 or 5:22. Some scholars, however, indicate that it is not sensible to start at v.22 since it does not contain a verb, and the verb from v.21 needs to carry over to make v.22 meaningful, cf., (Martin, 1992:67)

- In summary, if a woman shows her worth by being socially and sexually submissive to the will of her husband, she is a "Worthy Woman of God" (*Eva se lyf DVD 1*, 2008; *Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008).

Wiid has an over-simplified approach to the lives and identities of her followers and promotes essentialist ideas about both male and female gender identities and sexuality (Stander, 2016:126). According to her essentialist view on sexuality, men are naturally and primarily visually stimulated, and driven purely by lust and instinctual sexual desire.[6] She suggests that men were created by God to respond to women who they find visually attractive and who show them attention (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008). In developing this view, Wiid warns women that men are the targets of a world filled with lusting women who try to steal their husband's attention. Hence she says that "[w]omen … should view all other women as enemies and potential rivals for their husband's bounty" (Thamm, 2009). Thus, it is the wife's responsibility to present herself in such a way that her husband remains faithful to her (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008). Not only should the wife present herself in a visually attractive manner, she also bears responsibility to take "the sex thing" back to ensure that her husband remains interested in her. This is, once again, an example of how she views women's agency and power within the patriarchal hierarchy. Wives should hand over "their bodies and their sexual decisions completely into the hands of men" (Radloff, 2010; Nortjé-Meyer, 2011: 5). However, rather than seeing this as a disempowering act, it is presented as empowering, since it strengthens her husband's ego and so empowers him to take up his "rightful place" as king in the home, and prophet and priest in the public sphere (he is confident to act politically). So, women are to take "the sex thing back", using sex and desire as a mechanism of control and ego-building for men. Wiid thus advises women to wear sexually appealing underwear, to apply adequate make-up and to shave their legs, and to engage in creative and sexually adventurous practices to satisfy their husbands (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008; *Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 1*, 2009; Wiid, 2012:132).

Should a wife fail to meet her husband's emotional and physical needs, the wife is, according to Wiid, the one who is to blame if her husband spends too much time at work or has an extramarital affair. What makes this patriarchal, gender essentialist, theological and social construction even more harmful is that Wiid claims that, since it is the responsibility of wives to ensure that their husband's masculinity is affirmed and that he does not stray sexually, men are justified in seeking affirmation of their manliness elsewhere when they are not satisfied at home (*Eva se lyf DVD 2*, 2008; *Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 2*, 2009). Nadar and Potgieter, Nortjé-Meyer and Stander use feminist critical theological lenses to point to the oppressive nature of Wiid's theological teachings (Nadar & Potgieter, 2010:141–151; Nortjé-Meyer, 2015:86; Forster & Stander, 2019a:4–6). They argue that her approach reflects a patriarchal dominated religious worldview and also that it can lead to devastating consequences for the women who are her followers, their families, and broader society.

---

[6]   cf., Thamm, M. 2009. *Back to the Kitchen?*, *Back to the Kitchen?* (blog). Available at: https://www.w24.co.za/Love/Relationship/Back-to-the-kitchen-20090804-2 (Accessed 28 May 2018); Wiid, *Seks in Die Huwelik – Jou Lus, Las of Liefde? DVD 2*.

How popular is the Worthy Women of God movement?

Given the oppressive nature of the theology of the *Worthy Women of God* movement, it is surprising, even perplexing, how such a movement could be so popular among certain women. Moreover, it is surprising that such a harmful theology is promoted and sustained by a female leader. One could argue that men, who benefit socially, emotionally and sexually, might espouse such an abusive theology. However, it seems strange that a woman would advocate the subjugation of the rights and freedom of other women, and that these women would willingly give themselves over to such ideals and practices. Wiid has not only built up a successful 'ministry' which includes workshops and conferences attended by thousands of women; she is also frequently seen on women's affinity programs on television, conducting radio interviews, running school camps for girls, and conducting marriage seminars. All of this is reinforced by the popularity of her DVD recordings and books. Her popularity among white Afrikaner middle class women is further evidenced in that *Worthy Women of God* conferences, previously only held in Pretoria, were expanded to venues in Cape Town in recent years due to the demand for her seminars and products (Nienaber, 2015). In August 2022, a poster circulated that advertised a conference in Stellenbosch that would, "restore daughters, equip women, activate wives, and lead mothers".[7] The conference was apparently extremely well supported. Why would women support and perpetuate beliefs and practices that are oppressive to women?

An overly simplified view of the feminist subject

The oppressive political theology presented by the *Worthy Women of God* movement can easily lead to an over-simplified understanding of the reasons for its popularity. In such a view, Wiid is simply perceived as a shrewd religious entrepreneur who promotes her oppressive theology for the sake of her own economic gain and popularity. Her followers can, in a similar fashion, be regarded as mere victims in need of conscientisation.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson, however, urges feminists to reject overly simplified approaches to the feminist subject, woman, by pointing out the nuanced, complicated and often disputed nature of the subject of gender objectification and abuse (Fulkerson, 1994:3–4). In her book, *Changing the Subject,* she suggests that feminism has often restricted itself exclusively to women who identify with theologies of liberation and feminism. In other words, some feminist scholars focus on women who see themselves as oppressed and in need of liberation. In instances when the experiences of women who do not fall into these categories are taken into consideration, they are often classified as part of a group of women who are in need of a process of conscientisation. Such women are regarded as unknowing victims who desire to be emancipated from norms and practices that are considered oppressive. This is not always the case. Hence, Fulkerson argues that in order for there to be a more wholistic liberation for all women, it is important to widen the scope of feminist discourses to consider the experiences of women who may be uninformed of, or even opposed to, the goals and aims of what would traditionally be considered feminist theologies or liberationist theologies. Fulkerson's approach calls for a much more critical and nuanced approach to the

---

[7]   See, ("REAL Conference for Women with Aletté Winckler and Gretha Wiid", 2022)

complexities and ambiguities of women's experiences, in a variety of contexts (Fulkerson, 1994:3, 7).

This approach helps one to critically consider why women would accept overtly patriarchal hermeneutics in relation to texts from the Bible, supporting, and perpetuating oppressive movements, practices and norms, despite having liberating alternatives available to them (Mahmood, 2005:2). Hence, when considering why the *Worthy Women of God* movement is popular amongst white, middle class South African women, the complexities and ambiguities of the lives and contexts in which these women live must be considered.

All human action and choice is formed against a horizon of meaning (Taylor, 2004:23; Ward, 2018:10). In this instance, it is necessary to consider the contexts in which South African women form their identity and shape their theological, social, political and economic lives. In the next section, we shall attempt to do this with a specific focus on the intersections which exist between race, class and gender, showing how these lay the foundation for Wiid's political theological hermeneutics.

Patriarchy, Politics, and the democratic South Africa

The contemporary South African context is filled with ambiguities and complexities related to ongoing struggles in the spheres of racial identity, gender relationships and economic class. Three decades after democracy dawned in South Africa, race struggles and racism still form part of the lived experiences of black and white persons (Forster, 2018:1–13). The legacy of apartheid has left South Africa with a reality of inequality in power dynamics where white South Africans dominated the economy, media and many social institutions (Morrell, 2001:16; Gibson, 2006:82–110; Bowers du Toit & Nkomo, 2014:1–8). The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 ushered in certain changes to these power dynamics. In the decades since then, these changes have had drastic implications for the economic, social, and political realities of white South Africans (Cakal, Hewstone, Schwär & Heath, 2011:606–627). This is particularly evident among white Afrikaners who, in a climate of identity politics, are frequently held liable for the ongoing political and economic ills in South Africa. While aspects of this may be true, the consequences for the identity and social standing of this population group are significant (le Roux, 2014:1–16; Forster, 2018:1–13).

The shifting socio-political reality of white Afrikaners "was described as that of one who was in power, to one who was willing to share power, to one who was finally powerless" (Fourie, 2008:239). Some white persons express a real or an assumed sense of loss, as white privilege and white supremacy are rightly challenged and dismantled (Jonker, 2015:92–110; Smit, 2017:66–87; Timms, 2017). This sense of loss is most often expressed as a loss of "power, of status, of economic, social and political advantage" (Vincent, 2006:356). As van Wyngaard points out, there is a myth that is operative in some contemporary white communities, that "white people are now the oppressed group in society" (Van Wyngaard, 2016). This myth is frequently tied to a loss of power, social status and privilege as a result of policies such as Affirmative Action in the workplace, Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment, race-based quotas in sport, and other such things. "The crumbling of apartheid exposed the differences in the supposed homogeneity of Afrikaners and, simultaneously, caused Afrikaners as a whole to suffer a crisis of identity" (cf., Steyn, 2001a:85–103, De Klerk in b:75). This led to individuals

perceiving their identity as under threat of dissolution and, therefore, they attempted to defend themselves against any form of otherness (Vincent, 2006:356). Whiteness is thus experiencing a crisis where the changing context necessitates the formation of new identities (Van Wyngaard, 2012:47). As can be expected, these transformations have also had a significant influence on both theology and gender formation in South Africa.

Gender, race and class can be regarded as social constructs that are fluid and, therefore, can change over time according to shifting historical circumstances (Rieger, 2013:199; Van Der Westhuizen, 2018:1–3). It is important to remember that intersections exist between gender, race and class and that race and class have an influence on gender identity formation, gender perceptions, and gender expressions among men and women (Connell, 1995:35–39, 75). The transitions and transformations that South Africa and South Africans have faced since 1994 have had an impact on perceptions of gender and gender identities. The relationships between women and men, amongst women, and amongst men, have changed as society itself has changed (Steenkamp, 2016:313–317).

When considering South African masculinities, Morrell et al. suggest that they "both reflect the region's turbulent past and have been the cause of the past" (Morrell, Jewkes & Lindegger, 2012:12). During the apartheid years, white Afrikaner men "espoused an established masculinity which was authoritarian, unforgiving and unapologetic" (Morrell *et al.*, 2012:17). This, paired with white men living in exclusively white suburbs, being "assured of jobs", and "who had family homes, stable environments, status and political influence" (Morrell, 2001:22), formed a hegemonic white Afrikaner masculinity that Du Pisani describes as "puritan":

> Initially the puritan ideal of Afrikaner masculinity was expressed in the image of the simple, honest, steadfast, religious and hard-working *boer* (farmer): the personification of puritan moral values and work ethics ... Patriarchy, the rule of the father, was justified in all spheres of society in terms of biblical texts ... Puritan Afrikaners viewed the male-headed family as the cornerstone of a healthy society ... The Afrikaans churches have held the view that the male head of the family should fulfil a priestly function, by not only providing his family with material things, but also looking after their spiritual well-being (du Pisani & Morrell, 2001:163–164).

Men were seen as bread-winners, protectors, and decision makers. "Power was exercised publicly and politically by men" (Morrell, 2001:17–18). Moreover, this form of "masculinity nestled comfortably in the patriarchal Afrikaner family though it also showed itself adept at responding to change" (du Pisani & Morrell, 2001:22–23).

Shifts in gender identity have, however, taken place as a result of the changing socio-political factors in South Africa since the dawn participative democracy:

> While elements of the previously hegemonic Afrikaner nationalist idea of what it is to be a man remain influential, the transition period has created a much more fluid situation in which the precise outlines of the hegemonic norm are difficult to distil (Vincent, 2006:356).

Nadar points to a crisis of masculinity experienced specifically among white Afrikaner men in the post-apartheid South African context. She states that the essence of Afrikaner masculinity "defined by heterosexuality and conservatism with regards to race and gender, although remaining relatively intact during apartheid, began to be seriously challenged in post-apartheid South Africa" (Nadar, 2009:557–558). According to her, this crisis has come about because "the nature of white Afrikaner hegemonic masculinity is being challenged by the democratic order ushered in, in 1994; by an increase in acceptance of diverse sexual orientations; and not least of all by a steady rise in women's emancipation" (Nadar, 2009:557).

Patriarchy, Whiteness and Worthy Women?

It stands to reason that changing contexts impact the social roles and identities of both women and men. Women are often perceived in a one-dimensional way, as victims of male oppression. Of course, it most often the case. Yet, the reality of women's oppression is more complex than that. Women sometimes play a role in the oppression of other women. At times, women benefit from the oppression of others. Ruth Frankenberg, in *White Women, Race Matters,* shows that in some instances women can derive forms of benefit from social oppression. She considers the lives of various groups of white women who were influenced by years of racism (Frankenberg, 1993:42–45). Racial privilege can take on a numerous forms, for example, "educational and economic inequality, verbal assertions of white superiority, the maintenance of all-white neighbourhoods, [and] the 'invisibility' of (black and Latina) domestic workers" (Frankenberg, 1993:69).

The lives and identities of women are also shaped and influenced by race, meaning that "white women's sense of self, other, identity and worldview are also racialized" (Frankenberg, 1993:245). For white women "the benefits of whiteness came mainly through being associated with white men, who were 'the ones who constructed white history'" (Frye in Steyn, 2001b:19). What is clear is that white women also benefited from the oppressive system of apartheid.

These women, however, occupied a complex decentred position in the construction of whiteness.

> As both female and white, white women belonged to the group that white men needed to draw on for mates if they were to perpetuate their privileged species. White women could therefore enjoy second-hand feelings of superiority and supremacy as well as the hope of becoming equal, or being able to participate first-hand within the structures of dominance (Frye in Steyn, 2001b:20).

Nederveen extrapolates this complex intersection of gender and race in South Africa saying:

> White men's domination and control of white women are an essential part of their maintaining racial dominance. Whiteness needed to create docile bodies, both of its women and of those it marked as excluded. Treacherous white women were (and are) considered a threat to the continuation of the superior race. For this reason,

control of their women's sexuality was an important component of the white narrative (Nederveen in Steyn, 2001b:21).

So, while white women have been influenced by, and have benefited from, racism in South Africa, their history has also been marked by patriarchy and female subordination (Botha & Dreyer, 2013:1). It has been argued that the complex process of female subordination in South Africa has caused white women to seek the approval of both the dominant male culture and God (who is most frequently viewed as male in such patriarchal religious structures) by accepting an inferior position in the household and society. Since the first half of the twenty-first century, women have been subjected to the role of the housewife and, therefore, restricted to tasks associated with domesticity, mothering, child education and subordination (Botha & Dreyer, 2013:2–3).

This reality also led women to be more active in the lives of their families than in pursuing their own aspirations. This in turn promoted female dependence on men (Botha & Dreyer, 2013:3). While some women opposed this process of female subordination and gender roles, the majority of women resisted any social (or theological) change that would alter socially accepted norms and standards. As such, many women rejected what they viewed as liberal or progressive forms of theology and social structuring as both theologically problematic and socially undesirable (Botha & Dreyer, 2013:2–3).

Research conducted on a sampling of both women and men further discovered a perception that "South African society would be better off if men were to reassert their power over women and if traditional gender roles and relations of dominance-submission were reinstated" (Shefer, Crawford, Strebel, Simbayi, Dwadwa-Henda & Cloete, 2008:174).

The *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI) is a measure that is used to asses hostility and benevolence towards women within a society. Hostile sexism is operative when women are not only seen as inferior to men but are also viewed as a threat to the dominant (rightful) position of men. Benevolent sexism "emphasizes that women are special beings to be cherished and protected and is measured by beliefs such as: A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man" (Shefer *et al.*, 2008:159). Benevolent sexism, when coupled with hostile sexism, is referred to as "ambivalent sexism". Women who submit in such cases (for example, staying in an abusive relationship to maintain family cohesion) are often perceived positively in their communities and their actions and choices are validated (Shefer *et al.*, 2008:159). The research finds that high levels of ambivalent sexism are present among both women and men in South Africa. Benevolent sexism and hostile sexism operate in complimentary ways to sustain patriarchy: "hostile sexism punishes women who challenge the status quo, while benevolent sexism rewards those who accept conventional gender norms and power relations" (Shefer *et al.*, 2008:160).

It can be argued that members of the *Worthy Women of God* movement have been influenced by prevailing notions in the South African social imagination related to racial segregation and patriarchal notions of female subordination. With the similarities between the *Mighty Men* movement and the *Worthy Women of God* movement taken into consideration, it is important to note that "for many (if not all) of Buchan's followers South Africa's 'societal problems' are a result of societal changes post 1994" (Pillay, 2015:34). The insecurities experienced by white South Africans' loss of privilege, the

erosion of social, cultural and linguistic prominence, and the unmasking of the destructiveness of whiteness have led to a social and religious urge to exercise power and control in areas where it is possible to do so. One visible example of this desire for social power is the emphasis on the restoration of what these communities have traditionally regarded as the nuclear family.

This is evident in the theological teachings of both Gretha Wiid and Angus Buchan (Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:3) With the relationships between white Afrikaner women and their male counterparts (many of whom are adherents of Buchan's *Mighty Men*), it can be argued that members of the *Worthy Women of God* Movement share the coherent theological and social commitments to the restoration of the family as a means to restoring their desired social, political and economic construction of contemporary South Africa.

The *Mighty Men* movement can be seen, in part at least, as "a backlash movement driven by fear of losing power and control in times of change" (Pillay, 2015:34). Both Buchan and Wiid tell their audience members that when wives submit to their husbands, encouraging them to take up their position as head of the household, the societal problems of South Africa will be resolved. The consequence of such social transformation, they claim, will lead to South Africa becoming a "Christian country" – a reality which is presented as both desirable and an aspect of God's will for the nation as understood in interpretations of Ephesians 5:22–23 (*Eva se lyf DVD 1*, 2008).

The followers of the *Worthy Women of God* movement are operating within a context of social change and uncertainty. They, also, are experiencing a perceived loss of privilege and power. Therefore, they want to secure God's special favour (their privileged position in South Africa) and restore South Africa to their idealised memory of the past (when white privilege and white power were not called into question). This is deeply telling of their political theology; it displays an element of white exceptionalism couched in a racist theological and moral worldview. Thus, just as white men in South Africa are experiencing a crisis with regards to their whiteness and masculinity, white women living in South Africa are also experiencing a crisis of identity and meaning.

In large measure, this is as a result of their relationship to, and reliance upon, white men who in the past dominated South African society and were able to exercise economic and political power. Although the white women living in South Africa and attending Wiid's conferences have themselves been subjected to male oppression and domination, they have also benefited from the apartheid system.

It is therefore clear that the context and experiences of the female followers of the *Worthy Women of God* movement are filled with ambiguities that shape their perceptions of gender relations, gender identity and their position in society.

Political theological hermeneutics and women's submission to men

Louise Kretzschmar is a South African feminist theologian who distinguishes between "internalised oppression" and "external oppression" (Kretzschmar, 1998:173). Internalised oppression is operative "when the oppressed accept or internalise the negative perceptions that those in power have of them. The powerful develop the system and define the roles that they wish others to play in these systems" (Kretzschmar, 1998:173). Internalised oppression happens when oppressed persons give into the

oppressive expectations and roles of the oppressors. When oppressed persons believe that oppressive "perceptions, customs and systems" are acceptable, they "have internalised the system that is oppressing them" and start to live by the norms of that system (Kretzschmar, 1998:173). Individuals often enhance and perpetuate their own subordination, "[i]nternalised cultural schemas reinforce men's view that their behaviour is legitimate and persuade women that their lot is just" (Fuchs Epstein, 2007:16). Women who have internalised oppression resist change and do not identify with what is presented to them as an over-simplified feminist subject, woman. These women can sometimes be seen rejecting feminism and the feminist agenda to emancipate women from female subordination. Women who find themselves in this position defend patriarchal perceptions and norms are "dissatisfied with their own sex and believe men when they denigrate women" (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:19).

Despite shifts in the strategies employed to maintain female subordination, it has become clear that sexism and patriarchy have significantly shaped the lives of white South African women – including the members of the *Worthy Women of God* movement. The ongoing experience of female subjugation may cause them to internalise the oppression that they have experienced and to buy into systems of oppression, believing that patriarchal notions of female subordination and male headship are good for them and for society. Indeed, they believe that this is how God intended society to be structured. This is certainly how Wiid understands and interprets Ephesians 5:22–23, as we discussed earlier.

Kandiyoti suggests that "the forms of consciousness and struggle that emerge in times of rapid social change require sympathetic and open-minded examination, rather than hasty categorization" (Kandiyoti, 2009:284). Moreover, different forms of "patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (Kandiyoti, 2009:284). Mercy Oduyoye even suggests that in some instances, some women are "acting in self-interest, they are protecting their own survival, saving their own faces and avoiding the taunt, blame and ridicule of society" as they submit to patriarchal notions and practices (Oduyoye, 2001:107).

Patriarchal bargaining is an example of an approach in which women's agency is recognised, even though it functions in oppressive situations. Women are not only subjected to patriarchy, but also make use of patriarchal norms to gain certain benefits in society (such as social status, security, or safety). Kandiyoti notes that some "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints" (Kandiyoti, 2009:284). "Patriarchal bargaining" refers to the fact that individuals don't only submit to rules and scripts that regulate gender relations, but they also contest, redefine and renegotiate these terms.

Liberating alternatives can result in significant losses for women (security, identity etc.). Hence, some women may be willing to use their agency to support men in adopting patriarchal standards, holding their end of the bargain, when patriarchy is under threat – "protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety" (Kandiyoti, 2009:283). The idea of moving away from, and questioning, patriarchal assumptions can also cause anxiety when the liberating alternatives do not provide immediate security or sustainable alternatives.

According to Kandiyoti, class, caste, and ethnicity influence the strategies that women choose within patriarchal contexts and are therefore fluid. She notes that a "systematic analysis of women's strategies and coping mechanisms can help to capture the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural, class-specific, and temporal concreteness and recall how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt and conflict with each other over resources, rights and responsibilities" (Kandiyoti, 2009:285). Patriarchal bargains don't only inform the rational decisions of women but also the "unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural milieu" (Kandiyoti, 2009:285).

Kandiyoti's notion of patriarchal bargaining therefore seems to offer one possible way of understanding why the *Worthy Women of God* movement is so popular among white middle class Afrikaner women, and why Wiid and her followers adopt such an oppressive patriarchal Biblical hermeneutics in relation to Ephesians 5:22–23. Second, as was noted, Wiid's instinct for a political theology is not entirely out of step with the authorial intent of the letter to the Ephesians, which sought to establish a theological political order in society. However, she perverts that political structure of mutual respect by proffering the subjugation of women and girls. So, in relation to the Bible and ethics, or at least the way in which passages from the scriptures are used to build moral and religious views that inform political positions, we can see that Wiid is placing her own political agenda and commitments 'on top' of the text. While one can understand why and how this is being done, it remains theologically and ethically problematic for her to do so.

Conclusion

The intersections of race, class and gender within South African society, and the significant social changes which are taking place under democracy, suggest that Wiid and the members of the *Worthy Women of God* movement are facing some political and social insecurity. These white South African women are bargaining for a political reality related to the privileges accorded from apartheid, and they are doing so from a position of uncertainty and crisis in an attempt to reclaim control and a sense of security by means of their faith. It is important to consider the position of white Afrikaner women in relation to that of white Afrikaner men.

> The crisis of masculinity and whiteness experienced by white, Afrikaner men in South Africa as a result of a perceived loss of power and security also has an influence on the status, security and position of women in the South African context. All white people in South Africa operate from a place of white privilege, so that white women's lives and identities are, like their male counterparts, strongly influenced by their position within the race and class schema in South Africa. Although white women mainly received benefits of whiteness, especially in the history of South Africa (and today) through their association with white men, they also experience a sense of loss as a result of the weakening position of the white men with whom they associate. White women experienced a sense of 'second hand superiority and supremacy' as a result of the racial divides of the apartheid era, which was lost in the transition to a democratic South Africa (Stander, 2016:121–122).

This notion forms a good foundation for understanding Wiid's political hermeneutics in relation to Ephesians 5:22–23. Her interpretation of female submission promises women a "utopian life" as a result of submitting to their husbands, which she believes is God's ideal structure for family life (Forster & Stander, 2019b:5). In this idealised patriarchal theological worldview husbands will not only be loving, attentive and faithful, but they will also regain a sense of social security and social control. As a result of this, Wiid postulates that wives will also regain a sense of control and security vicariously living through husbands who have been enabled to take back their positions as rightful heads of their households. Furthermore, Wiid suggests that female subordination will not only lead to better circumstances in households but that the larger South African context will also become safer for them, and will be transformed into what Wiid refers to as a "Christian country". However, as we have argued, her political theological hermeneutic reading of Ephesians 5:22–23 has dire consequences for the identity, agency, and theology of South African women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archer, M. & Archer, K.J. 2019. Complementarianism and egalitarianism—Whose side are you leaning on?: A Pentecostal Reading of Ephesians 5:21–33, *Pneuma* 41(1):66–90.

Atwood, M. 2011. *The handmaid's tale*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

Botha, A. & Dreyer, Y. 2013. Huwelik en huweliksrolle in Afrikaanse kultuur en kerklike konteks, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies,* 69(1):1–9.

Bowers du Toit, N.F. & Nkomo, G. 2014. The ongoing challenge of restorative justice in South Africa: How and why wealthy suburban congregations are responding to poverty and inequality, *HTS Theological Studies* 70(2):01–08.

Cakal, H., Hewstone, M., Schwär, G. & Heath, A. 2011. An investigation of the social identity model of collective action and the 'sedative' effect of intergroup contact among Black and White students in South Africa, *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50(4):606–627.

Connell, R.W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Eva se lyf DVD 1. 2008. Carpe Diem Media, Vanderbijlpark.

Eva se lyf DVD 2. 2008. Carpe Diem Media, Vanderbijlpark.

Forster, D.A. 2018. Translation and the politics of forgiveness in South Africa? What Black Christians believe and White Christians don't understand. In *Society for Ricoeur Studies, Stellenbosch University*, Stellenbosch University. 1–13.

Forster, D.A. & Stander, S. 2019a. Taking "the sex thing" back in South Africa: Worthy Women bargaining for a place in Utopia, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa (JTSA)* 164:4–22.

Forster, D.A. & Stander, S. 2019b. "Worthy Women": Sexual bargaining for a place in utopia–or dystopia? Available: https://www.counterpointknowledge.org/worthy-women-sexual-bargaining-for-a-place-in-utopia-or-dystopia/ [Accessed: 12 June 2019].

Fourie, W. 2008. Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa: The self in terms of the Other. In A. Hadland, E. Louw, S. Sesanti, & H. Wasserman (eds.). *Power,*

politics and identity in South African media: selected seminar papers. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Frankenberg, R. 1993. *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. London: Routledge.

Fuchs Epstein, C. 2007. Great divides: The cultural, cognitive, and social bases of the global subordination of women, *Sociological Review* 72(1):1–22.

Fulkerson, M.M. 1994. *Changing the subject: Women's discourses and feminist theology*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Gibson, J. 2006. Overcoming apartheid: Can truth reconcile a divided nation? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 603(1):82–110.

Isherwood, L. & Stuart, E. 1998. *Introducing body theology*. vol. 2. London: A&C Black. Google Scholar [2016, April 06].

Jackson, N. 2009. Women get own "Mighty Men". *News24 / City Press* (Johannesburg). 16 July. Available: https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Women-get-own-Mighty-Men-20090716.

Jonker, F. 2015. We were looking for our men in the faces of stars : soap opera and Afrikaner masculinities in Egoli : place of gold. *Image & Text : a Journal for Design*. 26(1):92–110.

Kandiyoti, D. 2009. Bargaining with patriarchy, *Gender & Society* 2(3):274–290.

Kretzschmar, L. 1998. Gender, women and ethics, in *Questions about life and morality: Christian ethics in South Africa today.* Pretoria: J L van Schaick Publishers, 169–184.

Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Martin, R.P. 1992. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon: Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Morrell, R. 2001. The times of change: Men and masculinity in South African, in R. Morrell (ed.). *Changing men in Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press. 4–40.

Morrell, R., Jewkes, R. & Lindegger, G. 2012. Hegemonic masculinity/masculinities in South Africa: Culture, power, and gender politics, *Men and Masculinities* 15(1):11–30. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X12438001.

Nadar, S. 2009. Palatable patriarch and violence against wo/men in South Africa: Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference as a case study of masculinism, *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 102:551–561.

Nadar, S. & Potgieter, C. 2010. Liberated through Submission?: The Worthy Woman's Conference as a case study of Formenism, *Journal of Feminist Studies in religion* 26(2):141–151.

Nienaber, M. 2015. Mans moet dié saamtrek liewer vermy [Men should rather avoid these gatherings]. *News24 / City Press* (Johannesburg). Available: http://www.netwerk24.com/nuus/2015-02-07-mans-moet-di-saamtrek-liewer-vermy [2015, October 04].

Nortjé-Meyer, L. 2011. A critical analysis of Gretha Wiid's sex ideology and her biblical hermeneutics, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(1):7. DOI: 10.4102/ve.v32i1.472.

Nortjé-Meyer, L. 2015. A movement seeking to embody support of patriarchal structures and patterns in church and society: Gretha Wiid's Worthy Women movement, *Ecclesial Reform and Deform Movements in the South African Context* 4:86.

Oduyoye, M.A. 2001. *Introductions in feminist theology: Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Oloka-Onyango, J. & Tamale, S. 1995. The personal Is p0olitical, or Why women's rights are indeed human rights: An African perspective on international feminism, *Human Rights Quarterly* 17:691–731.

Pillay, M. 2015. Mighty Men, Mighty Families: A pro-family Christian movement to (re) enforce patriarchal control?, in *Ecclesial Reform and Deform Movements in the South African Context*, vol. 4. Stellenbosch: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA. 34–43. Google Scholar [2015, November 20].

du Pisani, K. & Morrell, R. 2001. Puritanism transformed: Afrikaner masculinities in the apartheid and post-apartheid period, in *Changing men in Southern Africa.* Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press. 157–176.

Radloff, L. 2010. Masturbation is a sin? *News24 / City Press* (Johannesburg). Available: http://www.women24.com/LoveAndSex/SexAndSizzle/Masturbation-is-a-sin-20100301-2 [2015, October 04].

REAL Conference for Women with Aletté Winckler and Gretha Wiid. 2022. Available: https://www.quicket.co.za/events/177009-real-conference-for-women-with-alett-winckler-and-gretha-wiid/ [2023, April 05].

Rieger, J. (ed.). 2013. *Religion, theology, and class: Fresh engagements after long silence*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

le Roux, A. 2014. 'We were not part of apartheid': Rationalisations used by four white pre-service teachers to make sense of race and their own racial identities, *South African Journal of Education* 34(2):1–16. DOI: 10.15700/201412071137.

Scott, P. & Cavanaugh, W.T. 2008. *The Blackwell companion to political theology*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 1. 2009. Brits Production, Brits.

Seks in die huwelik – jou lus, las of liefde? DVD 2. 2009. Brits Production, Brits.

Shefer, T., Crawford, M., Strebel, A., Simbayi, L.C., Dwadwa-Henda, N. & Cloete, A. 2008. Gender, power and resistance to change among two communities in the Western Cape, South Africa, *Feminism & Psychology* 18(157):157–182.

Smit, R. 2017. The husband's perception of his changing role in the dual-earner family: The South African experience of the White Afrikaner Husband/Father, in C.D.H. Harvey (ed.), *Walking a tightrope: Meeting the challenges of work and family.* London: Routledge, 66–87.

Stander, S. 2016. Patriarchal inscribed bodies: A feminist theological engagement with body and sexuality in the "Worthy Women movement". Masters Thesis. University of Stellenbosch.

Steenkamp, H. 2016. A marriage made in heaven: The functioning of patriarchy and nostalgia in Boer soek 'n vrou, *Communicatio* 42(3):313–337. DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2016.1216459.

Steyn, M. 2001a. Whiteness in the rainbow: Experiencing the loss of privilege in the New South Africa, in C.V. Hamilton, L. Huntley, N. Alexander, A.S.A.

Guimaræes, & W.J. Boulder (eds.), *Beyond racism: Race and inequality in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States.* London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 85–103.

Steyn, M.E. 2001b. *"Whiteness just isn't what it used to be": White identity in a changing South Africa.* New York, NY: New York State University Press.

Taylor, C. 2004. *Modern social imaginaries.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Thamm, M. 2009. Back to the kitchen? Available: https://www.w24.co.za/Love/Relationship/Back-to-the-kitchen-20090804-2 [2018, July 12].

Timms, M. 2017. Fokofpolisiekar's deconstructions and reconstructions of Afrikaner identity. M.A. Northern Arizona University. Available: https://search.proquest.com/docview/1994444093/abstract/BF331B092A334CEA PQ/1 [2019, May 03].

Van Der Westhuizen, C. 2018. *Sitting pretty: White Afrikaans women in postapartheid South Africa.* University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Van Wyngaard, G.J. 2012. Race-cognisant whiteness and responsible public theology in response to violence and crime in South Africa. Unpublished Thesis. University of Pretoria.

Van Wyngaard, G.J. 2016. White theology in dialogue with Black Theology: Exploring the contribution of Klippies Kritzinger, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72(1):1–9. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v72i1.3033.

Vincent, L. 2006. Destined to come to blows? Race and constructions of "rational-intellectual" masculinity ten years after apartheid, *Men and Masculinities* 8(3):350–366.

Voelgoed. 2014. Om jou man sy affair se vergewe. Available: https://voelgoed.co.za/om-jou-man-sy-affair-se-vergewe-2/ [2018, July 12].

Ward, G. 2018. *Unimaginable: What we imagine and what we can't.* London: I.B.Tauris.

Wiid, G. 2012. *Onblusbare liefde.* 2nd ed. Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem Media.