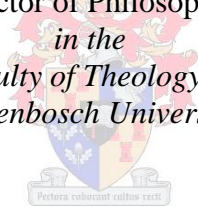


**ENCOUNTERING THE FEMALE VOICE IN THE  
SONG OF SONGS: READING THE SONG OF SONGS FOR THE DIGNITY OF  
KENYAN WOMEN**

by

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Doctor of Philosophy  
in the  
Faculty of Theology at  
Stellenbosch University*



Supervisor: Prof JULIANA CLAASSENS

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates one of the central aspects of a Kenyan woman's identity, namely the notion of sexuality, which unfortunately also underlies numerous socio-economic and developmental challenges currently confronting Kenyan women. The research shows that in Kenya, patriarchal ideologies are used to control the sexuality of women in the name of 'our culture'. Thus, it is and has been difficult for many Kenyan women to live with dignity as beings equally created in the image and likeness of God.

The study, therefore, sought to identify, expose, criticize, destabilize and to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. Patriarchal ideologies that have been used to mute the voices of Kenyan women on matters of sex and sexuality are challenged by introducing the voices of Kenyan women. The latter is done with reference to poetry that reflects the voices and experiences of Kenyan women as a means of expressing who they really are in the midst of a society that silences them. It is shown that, by means of poetry, the full power and energy of these women may be mobilized.

Moreover, the voices and experiences of Kenyan women offer a contextual re-reading of the Song of Songs for their dignity. The study presents the female voice in the Song of Songs (a text from a male pen) as responding in a new way to the patriarchal Old Testament society on matters of sex and sexuality. In the process, a twofold strategy is proposed with which negative perceptions of the sexuality of women in the worldview of Kenya may be addressed:

First, this study proposes that it is important to purposefully steer conversations regarding issues of sex and sexuality. The latter is done in the conviction that this is one way of creating a platform for addressing other gender-based injustices that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. Second, by focusing on Kenyan poetry, as well as on the female voice in the Song of Songs, there is a possibility of reconstructing positive aspects of the sexuality of Kenyan women, which may allow them to live with dignity.

To achieve the aim of this study, to re-read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women, an African Women's Theological approach is used within the broader context of feminist and womanist approaches to the Song. Through an African Women's

approach to the Song of Songs, the study asks how the female voice that spoke boldly in the patriarchal setting of the Old Testament can also be liberating in the Kenyan patriarchal setting. The female voice in Song of Songs presents issues of sex and sexuality in a new way. As such, it is proposed that the latter voice, read through the hermeneutical lens of Kenyan women's poetry or poetry on Kenyan women, has the potential to inform and therefore to transform the patriarchal setting of the Kenyan society. It is only if Kenyan women are empowered to negotiate safe sex and to express their sexuality on their own terms and conditions, that this will be fully realized.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie ondersoek een van die sentrale aspekte van 'n Keniaanse vrou se identiteit, naamlik die idee van seksualiteit, wat ongelukkig ook onderliggend is aan talle sosio-ekonomiese en ontwikkelingsuitdagings wat Keniaanse vroue tans konfronteer. Die navorsing toon in Kenia word patriargale ideologieë gebruik om die seksualiteit van vroue te beheer in die naam van 'ons kultuur'. Dit is dus moeilik vir baie Keniaanse vroue om met waardigheid te leef as gelyk-geskepe na die beeld en gelykenis van God.

Hierdie studie poog om patriargale ideologieë wat Keniaanse vrouens die reg om met waardigheid te leef ontnem te identifiseer, te kritiseer, te destabiliseer en te dekonstrueer. Die studie daag patriargale ideologieë uit wat gebruik is en word om die stemme van Keniaanse vrouens oor seks en seksualiteit stil te maak. Dit word spesifiek gedoen deur die stemme en ervarings van Keniaanse vrouens in poësie te gebruik (soms in die gedigte van manlike digters!) as uitdrukking van hulle lewens te midde van 'n patriargale samelewing. Dit word getoon hoedat hierdie gedigte die krag en energie van hierdie vroue kan mobiliseer. Meer nog, die stemme van Keniaanse vrouens bied die geleentheid tot 'n kontekstuele herlees van Hooglied met die oog op die erkenning en beskerming van hulle waardigheid. Die vroulike stem in Hooglied word verstaan as 'n nuwe reaksie op die Ou Testamentiese samelewing met betrekking tot kwessies soos seks en seksualiteit. In die proses word daar met 'n tweeledige strategie voorendag gekom waarmee die negatiewe opvattinge oor die seksualiteit van vroue in die wêreldbeeld van Keniaanse mans aangespreek kan word.

Eerstens word die noodsaak voorgestel van 'n doelbewuste rigtinggewing aan gesprekke oor seks en seksualiteit. Dit word gedoen vanuit die oortuiging dat dit een manier is om 'n platform te skep waar gelykheidsgebaseerde ongeregtighede wat Keniaanse vroue die reg op 'n menswaardige lewe ontsê aangespreek kan word. Tweedens, deur op Keniaanse poësie en die vroulike stem in Hooglied te fokus, word voorgestel dat die positiewe aspekte van die seksualiteit van Keniaanse vroue herkonstrueer kan word, wat dan kan meewerk om hulle met waardigheid te kan laat leef.

Ten einde bogenoemde doelwit van hierdie studie te bereik, word 'n Afrika-vrouebenedering toegepas in die lees van Hooglied. Dit vind plaas binne 'n breër konteks van Feministiese en sogenaamde "*Womanist*" benaderings tot die boek. Met 'n Afrika vroue benadering as leesstrategie, word aangedui dat en hoe die vroulike stem wat vreesloos in haar

Die patriargale, Ou Testamentiese konteks spreek ook bevrydend kan funksioneer binne die Keniaanse patriargale konteks. Daar word dus getoon dat die vroulike stem in Hooglied seks en seksualiteit op 'n nuwe manier aanbied. Gevolglik stel hierdie studie voor dat die vroulike stem in Hooglied, gelees deur die hermeneutiese lens van Keniaanse gedigte oor of deur vroue, die potensiaal het om die patriargale konteks van die Keniaanse samelewing eendersyds te ontbloot en andersyds te transformeer. Dit is slegs wanneer Keniaanse vroue bemagtig word om vir veilige seks te kan onderhandel en hulle seksualiteit op hulle eie terme uit te kan druk, dat hulle menswaardigheid ten volle gerealiseer sal word.

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to you my mother, Margaret Temuko. Your life, wise and kind words have kept me and sustained me. Even when I saw tears in your eyes during hard times, mother, you always smiled and said God is with us. Your strong faith in God is my source of inspiration. You are an example of the strength of a woman; you live and believe in the dignity, strength and voice of women. This has molded me and created a new identity in me. Your determination to protect and educate both girls and boys motivated me to write this dissertation. It is through your unconditional love, perseverance and determination to face even death for the sake of your children that has continued to sustain me in hard times. That is why in moments like these, I lift up my eyes unto God just to thank God for giving us such a good and wise mother. Mother, you are a good role model to me and my siblings. Your wisdom even surpasses that of King Solomon. I Love you Mama.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### *1.1 MOTIVATION AND BACKGROUND*

The first ‘serious’ sermon I delivered in one of the congregations of the Reformed Church of East Africa (Kayole Local Church in Nairobi Kenya), near (not in) a pulpit<sup>1</sup>, was from the Song of Songs. Early one Sunday morning, my husband, who is an ordained minister in the Reformed Church of East Africa and who is in charge of this particular congregation, asked whether I would preach. I said: “Yes, I will.” He was keen enough to thank me for accepting the invitation to preach and left the choice of the text I would preach on to me.

We went to church and he led the liturgy because I was ‘the guest speaker’. When it was time to welcome (me) the preacher, my husband did so and even prayed that God would use me in a special way. Then I said: “Our sermon today comes from the Song of Songs, 1:2-6: Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth...”, etc.). I started to read as I looked at the congregation. My husband was already looking down, avoiding the eyes of the people in the pews. Looking at the elders, I saw that most of them were also looking down. The women were just staring at me with curious expressions on their faces. The youth though, were alert and smiling. Putting on a brave look, I continued to read the text with confidence and then I started to preach.

In time, everybody was looking at me, nodding their heads and even uttering some affirmative verbal responses to what I was saying. My main theme came from the words of the female voice in Song 1:5: “I am black and beautiful; do not look down at me because I am dark...” With these words, I encouraged the congregation by saying that everyone has the power to reconstruct their own identity and that we should not allow our identities to be

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<sup>1</sup> The Reformed Church of East Africa does not ordain women. Most parts of the Church also do not allow women to preach. However, in some congregations women are allowed to preach, albeit not from the pulpit.



constructed for us by other people. “This way,” I said, “it is possible to see ourselves as created in the image and likeness of God and not in the images and likenesses that other people create for us.”

When we were back at home, I asked my husband: “Why did you look down when I started to read from the Song of Songs?” He answered that, “I thought, I have allowed you (a woman) to preach and you are preaching from the Song of Songs! I am finished! But when you were preaching, I was amazed to see that the Song has such a strong message to all of us.” One of the youths at the service afterwards accompanied us to our house. I asked him: “Why were the young people smiling when I read the Song of Songs?” He said to me: “Personally, I was wondering about what you were going to say from this romantic book. I thought you wanted to teach us about romance and I was afraid that the pastor’s wife has gone crazy.” “And...?” I asked the young man. He replied: “The sermon was very encouraging. I think the Song of Songs has great lessons that one can learn and I will take my time to read the Song again.”

The most important thing I learnt from this experience is that, when one speaks on a topic that touches on sex and sexuality, people may avert their eyes and pretend that they are not listening to what you are saying, but that you in fact have their full attention. When one speaks on a topic that touches on the sexuality of people, it is indeed possible to catch and keep their attention. In fact, after preaching, one of the elderly ladies in the church greeted me by saying: “Pastor, thank you.” To this I replied: “I am not a pastor! Are you talking to me or my husband?” She said: “I am talking to you. I just called you pastor.” This was a great compliment and I thanked her while keeping an eye out for whether one of the elders would scold her for calling me a pastor when I am not ordained. However, I did not hear any rebuke.

After this experience, I was inspired to further read on the Song of Songs. As I continued to read the Song, and especially interpretations of the Song stemming from the perspectives of women globally, I realized that in the Song, the voice of a woman is central. It is this new understanding of the Song of Songs that motivated me to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women.

The personal experience narrated above also inspired this study on reading the Song of Songs in light of Kenyan women's experiences.<sup>2</sup> The Song of Songs begins with the voice of a woman, who passionately calls upon her beloved male counterpart to kiss her with the kisses of his mouth (Song 1:2-4). As Cheryl Exum (2005:10) points out, throughout the Song, as in "Song 4:16, the female voice invites her male counterpart to come to his garden and eat its choicest and juiciest fruit." Moreover, the Song speaks about issues of sex and sexuality in what one may call plain and frank terms. It is because of this that Renita Weems (1998:164) underscores the fact that "readers attempting to read the Song for the first time or those who listen<sup>3</sup> to the Song being read especially in the pulpit for the first time are inadvertently astonished to discover that such a sexual provocative language and imagery can be found in the Bible."

Many issues surrounding sexuality is central to the well-being of all men and women and also to that of Kenyan men and women. Sexual language and sexual values in Kenya have continued to be transmitted through initiation songs and ceremonies, dances, proverbs, riddles, poems and other forms of oral narratives (cf. Murphy and Gipps, 1996:50). Physiologically one's sexuality is determined before birth and it remains part of who one is throughout one's lifetime. Thus, implicit in the centrality of sexuality is the fact that all people should have the choice to have a satisfying and safe sex life. This includes the capacity to reproduce safely and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so. This is to say that, if a woman also wants to have a sexual life beyond utility value, she should be empowered to choose to say and do so unconditionally. Thus, verbalizing issues of sex and

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Three of this study for a detailed discussion on the worldview of Kenyan men and its implications for their perceptions of the sexuality of Kenyan women. Patriarchy is particularly pointed out as the main concept that characterizes the negative worldview of Kenyan men and it is this worldview, in which issues of sex and sexuality are produced and reproduced that considers it taboo topics. .

<sup>3</sup> This might sound strange to non-African ears, but in Africa most Christian women do not have Bibles of their own. This means that they have to wait for the church service once in a week to hear the words of the Bible as read and interpreted to them. One danger of this is that words in a sermon are easily and uncritically equated to the words of God. Furthermore, even when the words of Scripture are misinterpreted, there is no opportunity to ask or to question. However, for those who have Bibles of their own and do know how to read, reading the Bible offers the opportunity to "transform themselves into characters in the Bible" so as to try and tell their own stories (see Kanyoro 2002:3257) in light of this.

sexuality remains core to the realization of the importance of and the value attached to sex and sexuality elsewhere, but especially in Kenya where issues of sex and sexuality continue to form the basis on which social classification in terms of power and hierarchies are determined.

However, being a highly patriarchal society, it still remains taboo to speak about sex and sexuality in Kenya. Here the patriarchal context continues to condition people, especially girls, to behave in certain ways in order to be perceived as 'decent'. To control the personality and the sexual behavior of women in Kenya, the process of socialization takes place within the family, but also in educational institutions and other social spheres. As such, sexuality in Kenya is still perceived as something mysterious and therefore hardly verbalized. Because of the ways in which sex and sexuality are handled, sexual acts that are not geared towards procreation are condemned and sometimes even harshly punished.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the voices of women in particular continue to be mute, even in cases where their sexual rights are violated, or even in cases of general injustices perpetrated against Kenyan women.

In Kenya, acts of sexual violence are a common occurrence. In *Kenya Nation Daily* report on Justice (August 17, 2013) by Mike Ssegawa and George Mune for example, it is possible to see that Kenyan women are exposed to sexual violence everywhere, including in hospitals while seeking medical treatment. These may be visual, verbal and/or physical acts of violence. While most stories of sexual violence against Kenyan women remain unwritten, they more often than not also remain unvoiced, as the voices of Kenyan women also continue to be silenced by the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender violence. In a recent example, on June 7, 2013, a burn victim admitted to the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in Nairobi decided to break her silence by telling her mother how a male nurse, who had been attending to her, raped her. When the truth of what happened to the woman was exposed, some women did stage a demonstration in the streets of Nairobi and near the hospital. However, the perpetrator's male colleagues decided to protect him. According to Caroline

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this study the words "sexual acts that are not geared towards procreation" refers to sexual acts performed by Kenyan women other than those that do not result in procreation (for example, acts for purely sexual pleasure). In Kenya, 'decent' sexual acts geared towards procreation are particularly limited to marriage.

Rwenji, “Kenyatta national Hospital suspends male nurse in rape scam.” *Kenya Daily nation*, June 28, 2013, they did this by claiming that the burn victim, who ‘claimed’ to have been raped, may have had hallucinations as a result of the drugs administered to her!

At first glance it seems that male dominance over women has largely contributed to men controlling the sexuality of women. Because of the power imbalance and gender imparity, men have continued to perpetuate violence against women in general and particular forms of sexual violence. In order to maintain the *status quo*, men have made sure that women are socialized to accept private (as in domestic) and ‘inferior’ roles in society, in the name of ‘our culture’. Mary Nyangweso Wangila (2007:26), for example, has observed that “during initiation rites, girls are taught to desire early marriage and to be submissive to their husbands or face physical discipline (wife battering).” According to Wangila (2007:26), “[g]irls are encouraged to be good homemakers and to persevere in difficult situations.” Unfortunately, sexual violence is understood by many women to be one of the difficult situations that they are expected to simply endure.

Thus, while sexual violence and other gender based injustices continue to be understood by many as the difficulty that Kenyan women are expected to endure not much has been done (particularly from Kenyan women’s perspectives) in the field of research to address such gender based injustices. That is why Wangari Mwai (2000:17) argues that in Kenya an analysis of institutions that facilitate effective interactions between the specific gender and successful relationships between both men and women continue to remain under researched. This study, therefore, seeks to pave the way for further research on the possibility of gender parity and, as will be seen, this will be done specifically by showing that poetry is one of the ways in which Kenyan women are given a voice regarding matters pertaining to sex and sexuality. In the process an interpretative framework for reading the strong female voice in the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women will be offered.

## ***1.2 RESEARCH FOCUS AND PROBLEM STATEMENT***

Sexuality underlies numerous socio-economic and developmental challenges currently confronting Kenyan women. However, as was referred to in the previous section, in Kenya, sexuality still remains a taboo subject. Furthermore, in most communities in Kenya, as

elsewhere, what constitutes a woman is a social construct, but here women are brought up to believe that they are the objects and not the subjects of sexual desire. For the most part, too, Kenyan society is highly patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy constitutes a societal system that is based on widespread gender disparity. In its most extreme form, the disparity serves as a breeding ground for gender violence, particularly sexual violence. Within such a context, one may rightfully ask whether there is any hope for Kenyan women to live lives of dignity.

Turning to the Song of Songs, from the outset, it is important to mention that it is rich in dialogue. In the Song one encounters the voice of both a man and a woman who speak to each other at an equal level. According to Exum (2005:4), for example, it is precisely this dialogical mode in the Song that creates the impression that one is overhearing the lovers speaking to each other and that one is also seeing their love unfolding. As opposed to most love poems, in the Song of Songs, the voice of a lover/s does not reach the audience from a single point of view (see Exum 2005:4). One may, therefore, say that in patriarchal settings like that of the Kenyan society, the Song of Songs by this very fact already constitutes a text with the potential to steer conversations on matters of sex and sexuality in the direction of dialogue instead of a (male-dominated) monologue. Dialogue should therefore also be the main strategy to be employed in this study to address injustices against Kenyan women, such as sexual violence.

At the same time, the dialogical nature of the Song of Songs and the equality between the lovers that it implies helps to address the question of power imbalance and one of the reasons why the voices of Kenyan women continue to remain silent is precisely because of existing power imbalances between genders. Dialogue is simply not possible when the voice of one party is mute – in a patriarchal society such as the Kenyan one – often in the name of culture. In terms of power relations, one may thus say that only if Kenyan women are empowered to speak, it becomes possible for dialogue to take place between men and women at an equal level.

In addition to the fact of the strength of the female voice reflected in the Song, the highly sensual language she uses has the potential to attract the attention of Kenyan people and to assist in creating a platform for addressing some of the injustices that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. The voice of the woman in the Song speaks within the

context of a highly patriarchal society, as do Kenyan poets, and about real life issues that are also very similar to issues that Kenyan women are struggling with.

As will be seen, this study not only focuses on the female voice in the Song of Songs, but it does so from a specific point of departure, namely from an African Women's Theology perspective. It is true that the Song has over the centuries gone through numerous interpretations and, while the Song continues to attract different interpretations because of the richness of the text in poetry, not much has been written or written in any detail about the Song of Songs from an African women's perspective. In fact, in contemporary Africa the Song is mostly interpreted from a male perspective. As Mpyana Nyengele (2004:248) has argued, "for centuries, the [whole of the] Bible has been interpreted by male theologians who have tended to make women invisible or have presented women negatively." Therefore, this study may fill this gap in research.

This dissertation will show how the voices and experiences of Kenyan women as reflected in poetry challenge patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate social disparities, gender imbalance and gender violence. It will be shown how Kenyan women often experience inhumane acts such as girl-child discrimination exacerbated through forced marriage, widowhood practices, social disparity, female genital mutilation, and gender based violence in general but particularly sexual violence factors contributing to the invisibility and inaudibility of Kenyan women.

In summary: In the Song of Songs, one encounters a woman who apparently has the power to choose, yearn, long, and look for her partner on her own terms. In this way, she constitutes a subject and not an object of sexual desire. To study the Song of Songs within a context where mere speaking about issues of sex and sexuality is taboo, contemplating how it (sex/sexuality) may be conceptualized and applied in different Kenyan communities would be taking a step towards creating a fuller understanding of sexuality. It is, however, noteworthy that, even though patriarchal ideologies continue to mute the voices of Kenyan women, the latter voices on matters of sex and sexuality may be found with the use of poetry. The abovementioned will serve as guiding principles of the primary research question addressed in this study, namely:

First, in what way may an interaction between the voices of Kenyan women as represented in poetry and the female voice in the Song of Songs act as a hermeneutical key toward understanding issues of sex and sexuality and, second, how may the Song of Songs be used as a conversational text on matters of sex and sexuality in order for the Song to serve as a resource for promoting the dignity of Kenyan women.

*In other words, the research problem addressed in this study concerns the ways in which, from an African Women's Theological perspective, the representation of Kenyan women's experiences and voices as reflected in Kenyan poetry may serve as a hermeneutical key for interpreting the Song of Songs with regard to issues of sex and sexuality, in a way that specifically allows the Song to serve as a resource towards the promotion of the dignity of Kenyan women.*

### **1.3 AIM OF THE STUDY**

In light of the above focus, the following aims will be pursued:

1. To show, with reference to experiences of Kenyan women as reflected in Kenyan poetry, how patriarchal settings and ideologies prevent Kenyan women from speaking about matters of sex and sexuality.
2. To find ways in which the female voice in the Song of Songs can serve as a platform to address issues of sex and sexuality in Kenya.
3. In order to do so, the aim is to use the voices and experiences of Kenyan women in poetry as a hermeneutical lens to read the Song of Songs.
4. To, therefore, propose a possible contextual re-reading of the Song of Songs that can be relevant for reading the Song and to do so with a view to promoting the dignity of Kenyan women.
5. To use poetry to give voice to Kenyan women and for it, in conversation with the Song of Songs, to mobilize the full power and the energy in Kenyan women's voices to, ultimately unlock their potential to challenge power structures that continue to compromise their dignity.

#### 1.4 METHODOLOGY

The voices of Kenyan women in poetry continue to be passed on orally from one generation to another. While most of the poems used in this dissertation contain the voices of Kenyan women, published Kenyan poems continue to be mainly the fruit of the labour of men. In fact the inequality suffered by Kenyan women is also reflected with regard to their access to the publication of their work. One way of addressing this would be to do an empirical study and in that way to access the lived experiences of Kenyan women. However, it serves the aims of this study well for it to rather take the form in terms of a research design and the methodology of a literature study. The reasons for this choice goes further than the mere fact that the Song of Songs as literature and specifically in the genre of a poem that makes contemporary Kenyan poetry a natural conversation partner for comparison to it.

An additional consideration for the study being a literature study focusing on poetry is that, although there are some Kenyan women poets and reference will be made to them (for example, in Binti Msham's "Daughter"), what is interesting for the purposes of this study is that one often also finds women's voices and experiences reflected in poems by *men* (for example, Okot p'Bitek's epic poem, "Song of Lawino" and J. Serunjogi's "The Journey" and "She Came to Cook" discussed in Chapter 4). This has interesting implications for this study as this is similar to the situation in the Song of Songs (see Chapter 5 section 2) where one finds a woman's experiences reflected in the poem written by a *man* and both feature the Song and the Kenyan (male) poems chosen in the study contain prominent and strong female voices within two highly patriarchal contexts.

Another important reason for the literary nature of this study is precisely because it is done from the perspective<sup>5</sup> of African Women's Theologies and also in conversation with

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study, this study will particularly adopt and use the term 'perspective'/ 'theology' (Singular) and not 'theologies' (plural). This is based on the fact that theological reflections of African women express specific and diverse global aspects depending on the point of women's' experiences and location (see Oduyoye 2001:9). Thus, this study particularly articulates woman's theological perspectives from a Kenyan context, which could also be a possible reflection of a context that could be a familiar reality to some African contexts in general. Deducing the word African Women's theology from the plural 'theologies' is also one way of acknowledging the fact that there are unique and diverse insights that come from individuals who come from contexts other than one's own, thus appropriating that which is different (see Oduyoye 2001:9). Thus, while this study



Feminist and Womanist theologies in general. African Women's Theology takes into account the diversity of the experiences of women in general and African women in particular. The significance of African Women's Theology is pointed out by one of its foremost exemplars, Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Oduyoye (2001:1) notes that "this [African Women's Theologies] is an approach of dialogue." In her opinion, the aim of African Women's Theologies "is to strengthen women's affirmations of their identity and a continued questioning of traditions that demean women in view of contemporary challenges that most African women are facing" (2001:1). In the name of being custodians of 'our culture', most women in Africa and in Kenya particularly, have remained faithful to their realities. Thus, real life stories, ordinary conversations and poetry have become their main way of articulating their theologies. In her aptly-named (for the purpose of this study) essay, "The missing voice: African women doing theology", Nyambura J. Njoroge speaks of the work and approach of the Circle of Concerned African Women's Theologians stating that:

African women theologians ... have attempted to be at the heart of where theology is being created, in the womb of the community of faith, to academically articulate what is being produced. For us, process and approach are as fundamental as content. As a result, we are interested in articulating the voices, cries, tears, fears, silences, images, songs, sermons, and prayers that are heard, seen and stored in the memory of the community of faith and in the society as people struggle to live out their faith. Our starting point is our individual and collective lived experience in dialogue with scripture and culture (1997:78).

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will be seeking to add a voice to the existing voices that have spoken from African women's perspectives; this particular Kenyan context will be approached with an open mind. This is an open mind that also seeks to be informed by other contexts. It is within this school of thought that this study will, in a unique way, bring together three approaches to the study of the Song of Songs: i.e. Feminist, Womanist and the African women's perspectives. Bringing the three approaches together in this study is also a way "of codifying women's diversities into symbols that appreciates some unifying experiences and values of women" (Kamitsuka 2007:5).

In this way, African women theologians have tried to work towards a social reality that can realize equality. These women have done this with perceptions and expectations hoping that there will come a time when there will be liberation of (also Kenyan) women.<sup>6</sup>

While this study will be undertaken from the perspective of African Women's Theology, the approach will also be in conversation with other Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs. This is particularly important because while "African women's theology places prior emphasis on the dignity of women, African women have largely benefited from theological reflections done by women globally" (Kanyoro 2001:162). In this study, it will be seen how all the three theological approaches (Feminist, Womanist and African women's theology) begin with the experiences of women, celebrating the voices of women and championing the dignity of every human being – Kenyan women included.<sup>7</sup>

As referred to above as well, an important issue is how to access these lived experiences. In Kenya, this a major obstacle to this is the unfortunate fact that an in depth empirical qualitative study is exceedingly difficult due to prevailing cultural practices that continue to be used to mute the voices of Kenyan women. As it will become evident in chapter three of this study, besides taboos, several cultural practices continues to be used to silence the voices of Kenyan women. Speaking on how most Kenyan women have remained faithful to their daily realities, Kanyoro (1996:6) has observed that "for generations it still is a taboo for women to tell stories of dehumanizing cultural practices." Kanyoro further states that "most women would rather remain silent about their own practices either as victims or perpetrators" (1996:6). Consequently, "harmful traditional practices are passed on as 'cultural values' from one generation to the other without being discussed, challenged or even changed" (Kanyoro 1996:6).

Another way, beside that of doing empirical research, is however found in a long-accepted focus within literature and feminist studies that believes that art – be it, for example, song, literary or visual art – does exactly that: it gives access to and reflects the lived

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<sup>6</sup> The word liberation is narrowly used in this study to imply the freedom to have full control over ones sexuality.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Two of this study for a detailed discussion on Feminist, Womanist and African women's approaches to the Song of Songs.

experiences of the artist or others depicted in the work of art.<sup>8</sup> According to Kathleen Crown (1996:653), since the 1960's there has been a marked appreciation in feminist circles for poetry in a move that questions the long-held view of poetry as something that has "for so long [been] associated with private emotions and lyric subjectivity" and which as a consequence has since seen poetry as part of a discourse on "civic ideals of democracy, equality, and access". Crown (1996:658) sees

[b]oth poetry and feminism, emerging at points of crisis, seek[ing] to transform the world by altering the very forms through which our culture apprehends, expresses, and knows itself ... poetry and feminism always reorient toward a yet unimagined future...

This is also true of Kenyan men or women poets. In a study on *The 21<sup>st</sup>-century Kenyan Female Poetic Voice*, focusing specifically on the work of Phyllis Muthoni, Njeri Wangari and Sitawa Namwalie, Patrick Kyalo Mutiso ("*The 21<sup>st</sup> century Kenyan Female Poetic Voice*," [erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/3338/Abstract.pdf?...1](http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/3338/Abstract.pdf?...1) [accessed July 12, 2013]), for example, states that:

Society projects the essence of its existence through its art and especially verbal art. Therefore, by studying a society's poetry, one can get an insight into the dynamics of its social cultural practices. As a verbal art, poetry provides a people with the platform for recording their daily experiences too. Owing to its brevity and precision in word choice, poetry is appropriate for responding with immediacy to all kinds of situations; be they of high hopes or of utter helplessness. In this way, it serves to mirror society by reflecting the reality of the country...

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<sup>8</sup> This method of accessing women's experiences have indeed been followed in various contexts by feminist scholars, not only in Africa (see, for example, the for study by Gabriel Bamgbose (2012) in Nigeria, but also further afield, for example, in Katherine Kia Tehranian's (2006) work on the lived experiences of Iranian-American women's experiences of migration and exile after the incursion of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The assumption on which Mutiso works is the conviction that a poem may not only serve to reflect the lived experiences within a society, but also that “the poetic voice [in fact serves] as a tool for carrying a poet’s social vision ...”

The above are reasons why in this study the Song of Songs is read from an African Women’s approach, but by using strong voices of Kenyan women reflected in poems. Additionally, given the fact that the primary conversation partners in the study include both the biblical text as well as also poetry, this necessitates the study to take on an interdisciplinary approach, that of both literary insights as well as insights from biblical scholarship. It thus also has to move beyond the boundaries of traditional methods of biblical interpretation such as, for example, a purely historic-critical study of the biblical text.

In line with Mutiso’s comment referred to above on poetry as a carrier of alternative social visions, this study will seek to expose patriarchy as a systemic and human construct used by Kenyan men to mute the voices of Kenyan women and to control their sexuality. It will be argued that patriarchy as such is responsible for the dehumanization of Kenyan women by providing a context in which sexual violence and other forms of injustice against women may be perpetrated.<sup>9</sup> A major concern of this study is thus to identify the ways in which Kenyan women in a predominantly male culture have been subjected to crippling and subordinate sex roles and how these function as normative within Kenyan society.

However, the study will also show not only how poetry reflects the challenge and effects of Kenyan patriarchy, but also how Kenyan women have triumphed against the odds to challenge patriarchy *with the use of poetry*. One way in which these voices may be strengthened is by reflecting on the female voice in passages from the Song of Songs.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, this study connects the female voice in the Song with a powerful transformative<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As used in this study, the word ‘dehumanization’ implies all gender-based injustices that are responsible for denying Kenyan women the right to live with dignity as children equally created in the image and likeness of God.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Song of Song 1:2-6, 2, 3 and 5:2-7

<sup>11</sup> The word ‘transformative’ in this case refers to the process of changing and reforming all patriarchal structures that are responsible for muting the voices of Kenyan women. This includes all structures that also disempower Kenyan women and hence, maintain gender imbalance and normalizing particularly sexual violence against Kenyan women.

vision of equality, gender justice and liberation to champion for the dignity of Kenyan women. This study therefore primarily suggests that the verbalization of issues of sex and sexuality may open up platforms for addressing other forms of injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. In this case, the Song of Songs becomes a platform for the steering of conversations on issues of sex and sexuality.

The steering of conversations regarding issues of sex and sexuality and its connection with and the promotion of the human dignity of these women, is therefore a major starting point for the realization of a vision of justice and dignity in Kenya. As such, the concept of human dignity will also remain important throughout this study as is reflected in the title, the research problem as well as the aims of the study. In fact, human dignity will serve as a hermeneutical framework for the totality of the study. For this reason reflection on what exactly constitutes human dignity from a theological perspective is needed.

### ***1.5 HUMAN DIGNITY AND IMAGO DEI AS HERMENEUTICAL FRAMEWORK***

As can be seen from the title, research problem and aims of this study, human dignity is an important concept in this study and the conviction underlying its importance is that Kenyan women are equally created in the image of God and thus possess an inherent, inalienable dignity rooted in their identity as human beings. In Chapter Six, I will discuss in detail how the notion of *imago Dei* in Genesis 1:27 relates to human dignity and how it provides the impetus for championing the dignity of Kenyan women. At this point though, it is important to come to some definition of the phrase and to show how human dignity will serve as a hermeneutical framework in the study.

Many people today employ the language of human dignity to express the belief, amongst others, that both men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. In Kenya, 80% of Kenyans profess to be Christian and to who have a high regard for Scripture (Wagget 2007: xiv). Thus, when the Bible says that God created human beings in God's own image, Kenyan Christians generally do not need any further proof of this. Not only in Kenya, but worldwide, biblical texts continue to be used normatively to promote human dignity (see Claassens and Spronk 2013:3). And, as Claassens and Spronk (2013:3) point out, "Scripture

can help the readers to discover who they are and what their construction of human dignity might entail.” The authors, however, also go further by stating that, the biblical text “can function not as a means of ending the conversation on *imago Dei* with an authoritative last word, but also as a way of opening up discussions to its transformative power.” Understood in this way, the concept of the *imago Dei* may offer Kenyan society a biblical transformative platform for addressing contemporary dignity-denying gender-based injustice (see Chapter Three of this Dissertation).

The concept of the image of God as basis for understanding human dignity is, however, not as straightforward as it may seem – even if there are interpretations which supports a straight forward understanding of it. The following are two such interpretations:

*First*, it is felt by some that the image of God ‘simply’ refers to the self-actualization of God through human beings. This can be understood to refer to the special qualities of human nature, which allows God to be made manifest in humanity. Here human beings are understood to be co-creators with God. They, therefore, become God’s instruments through whom God’s plans and purposes may be revealed and actualized. In this simplest understanding, therefore, the divine image is not a thing, but rather a process (cf. the discussion on De Lange’s views below). It is an actual orientation of our very becoming by which we image God in all our relationships. This means to live a liberating existence of communion with God, with one another and with all the creation. With regard to the sexes, it means that both men and women are core partners with God in continuing the process of becoming formed and by transforming unjust systems in the society. The latter systems are those that continue to deny some of God’s children the right to live with dignity (based on Mark S. Medley, 2002:16).

*Second*, human dignity may also be understood to ‘simply’ refer to God’s concern, care and love for humanity. In this sense it concerns an established relationality between God and humanity and among human beings. All human beings bear the resemblance to God and thereby to each other. Humanity as a whole, therefore, is called to respect and care for the *imago Dei* in each other (cf. Day 2012:72). Each human being is to be valued and cared for as if she or he ‘were God’ because all human beings bear the ‘imprint of God’s image’. Unfortunately, through unjust societal systems, many of God’s people are left with feelings

of emptiness and as if they are *not* created in God's image at all. According to Day, for example, this is why there is a need for individual and joint efforts to restore the image of God in all.

For Day (2012:72), one way of restoring the image of God "is through the process of liberation from oppressing and from being oppressed." God's love and care for humanity is one process in which God re-establishes the image of God in human beings, individually and cooperatively. In this way, both men and women may find and experience self-worth and identity based in the inherent goodness of being uniquely and irreplaceably created in God's image (Day 2012:71). From this perspective, too, any threat to the life of any human being touches on the being of Godself and all human beings may be understood to have an inherent value independent of their utility or function. Human beings, according to Day, also have special qualities that allow them to recognize that they have been created in God's image and this ability is supposed to provoke a sense of being responsible and caring for fellow human beings and for not hurting fellow humans.

Despite the above 'straightforward understandings of the notion of *imago Dei*,' it is indeed quite complex. Philip J Hefner (1984:330), for example, notes that "the concept of *Imago Dei* has been one of the most discussed and ambiguous phrases in the history of Christian theological reflection." According to Hefner (1984:330), the term *imago Dei* has been used to mean numerous things over the centuries and within each century to the extent that some theologians have even suggested that the term should be extracted from theological vocabularies. Even today, biblical scholars are not in agreement about the actual meaning of the notion of *imago Dei*. The latter is due partly to the fact that biblical traditions present a variety of diverse and ambiguous perspectives on what it means to say that human beings have been created in the image of God (see Claassens and Spronk 2013:3).

Some scholars, for example, argue that the concept of the *imago Dei* suggests a physical resemblance between human beings and God. Stanley J. Grenz (2001:186), for instance, proposes that the Hebrew word מִלְצָאִים implies that human beings bear the shape, resemblance, figure or shadow of God. According to Rabbinic interpretation, the physical resemblance of God is a sign of a deep connection between a human being with God so that, when a human being is injured, God is injured (Frymer-Kensky 2006:323) and, as Frymer-

Kensky (2006:322) argues, “the nature of human beings and of the human relationship with God affords at least a common theological language with which to think about the issue of human existence.”

In his discussion of the concept of the *imago Dei* in Genesis, South African Old Testament scholar Hendrik Bosman (2013:43) points out that in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world, only kings and pharaohs represented the divine and that the aspect of dominion linked to this (as is also found in Genesis 1:26-27) has over the centuries provided fertile ground for different interpretations of the *imago Dei*. According to Bosman, the fact that kings and pharaohs in the ANE were seen as their gods’ representatives on earth, they (kings and pharaohs) erected statues of them and placed these at the furthest reaches of their empires as a representation of their dominion over their subjects (see also Frymer-Kensky 2006:322).

In line of the above view, Frymer-Kensky (2006:323), for instance, also situates Genesis 1:27 within the context of God’s blessing which follows upon the creation of human beings (i.e., fertility and *dominion*) and humans as being the representatives of God, similar to the ANE view of kings. Over time, some extreme male-centered interpreters have unfortunately understood the words “and God said, let us make man” (Gen. 1:26) generically to imply that only man was created in God’s image, that the command to have dominion is also applicable to men only and implies in turn that dominion should be had over women as well as over the rest of creation. In patriarchal settings such as Kenyan society where the Bible is used as a proof text, a generic interpretation has been narrowly understood to mean that - *just that*: there exists a divine prerogative for (Kenyan) men to dominate (Kenyan) women.

Returning to the view of Tikva Frymer-Kensky and others, one implication of their view is that it implies a fundamental difference between human beings and animals. Here human beings are seen as 1) having the capacity to be reasonable in terms of distinguishing between good and evil; 2) having the power to dominate/rule over the earth; and 3) having been endowed with the capacity to interact creatively with the rest of creation and in a relational way with fellow human beings (see Frymer-Kensky 2006:323).

Bosman (2013:37) offers another helpful insight regarding the meaning of being created in God’s image according to the biblical traditions, by showing that broadly speaking



there exist a number of different discourses on the nature of humankind in the Old Testament. On the one hand, Bosman notes, one could argue that there only exists three short passages in Genesis 1-11 that describe how human beings are created in God's image (Gen 1:26-28, 5:1-3 & 9:6). However, on the other hand, as Bosman (2013:39ff.) shows, the *imago Dei* as a basis for human dignity is a theme that runs through the entire Old Testament. In this regard, James Luther Mays (2006:38-39), for example, points out that the theme of the *imago Dei* continues in the psalms, especially in the prayers of the psalmist who is yearning for an identity that is yet to be completed. According to Mays (2006:39), the theme of the *imago* in psalms should be understood against the background of a psalmist portrayed as a creature created and destined to represent God in God's own perfect image. For Mays (2006:39), God's people can represent and protect the image of God by not just knowing good and evil, but by being God's servants who choose to respect the dignity of every individual.

Some scholars are critical of the physical understanding of God as it relates to the issue of the image of God as was explained above. They argue that such a physical understanding only limits God to the human form. In fact, as was seen above, some (earlier) interpretations of Genesis 1:27 have in fact 'legitimately' limited its application to men only! (See Middleton 2005:206). Fortunately, many scholars who champion the view of equality for both men and women have come to understand Genesis 1:27 as resisting the patriarchy of its (the text's) social background and contribute in this way to an understanding that supports Genesis 1:26-27 as a text to be understood from a universal point of view and thus as affirming the dignity of both men and women.

As was suggested above, a key presupposition of this study is that if people understand themselves to be a reflection of God's image, this will not only inform and shape their own identity but also the way they treat one another (cf. Bosman 2013:51). Human dignity is one way of articulating the protection of the worth of the human person in its totality and this can be done through the overall concern for fighting against anything that has the potential to distort or weaken anyone's capacity to give or receive worth. In short, the ultimate theological justification of fighting for the dignity of both men and women is to be found in the inspiring vision offered by the *imago Dei* (Regan 2010:70).

On a further note linked to the above, are the efforts of Dutch ethicist Frits de Lange (2013:11) to associate the rhetoric of human dignity with a strong performative function. In doing this, De Lange (2013:11) also aims at linking the discourse on human dignity with that of the discourse on *justice* by arguing that one's dignity is denied when, for example, one's human rights are threatened and thus when justice is infringed upon. This would imply, for example, that when a (Kenyan) woman is sexually violated, her human rights have been also been violated as has her dignity, but also that her human dignity is related to all her other human rights, not only to her right to a life of dignity, but also her right to protection (especially against harmful cultural practices – see Chapter Three below); her right to self-expression; her right to self-care and to being taken care of; her right to making her own decisions; and her right to sexual autonomy.

With regard to the performative function of human dignity, De Lange sees human dignity as a process. For him, it is an actual orientation of our very becoming by which we image God in all our relationships. In this way, too, one may argue that all human beings are called to respect and care for the *imago Dei* in each other (Day 2012:72). Each human being is to be valued and cared for as if she or he 'were God' because all human beings bear the imprint of God's image.

Finally, human dignity is both inherent and inalienable and as such it cannot be taken away from anyone. The inherent aspect of human dignity touches on a person's intrinsic worth, a value of all people which they are born with. Human dignity is therefore not a privilege, but a right that has to be respected and protected. Human dignity is also inalienable in the sense that it cannot be bought, sold or transferred from one individual to another. Every individual therefore has the right to live a life of dignity and has a right to liberty. To understand human dignity as both inherent and inalienable therefore also means that the image of God exists in all individuals *whether one is aware of it or not*.

According to this understanding of human dignity, even in the midst of a highly patriarchal society, the lives of Kenyan women are precious and, as human beings created in the image of God, they should be given the opportunity to live with dignity (see Claassens and Spronk 2013:3). This is also true even if they, for example, by internalizing harmful cultural norms, do not realize it or are unaware of it. It is from such contexts and

interpretations of the *imago Dei* that this study seeks to pave way for an alternative reading of the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women. The position proposed here is that of defining the *imago Dei* in terms of the divine function and the relational aspect as provided for in Genesis 1:27.

The divine aspect implies that God has made God's nature manifest through the creation of both men and women in God's image. This entails the sacredness of the life of every individual; this means that when the body of a Kenyan woman is violated, God's own body has been violated. From a relational aspect, Genesis 1:27 presents this study with a potential for human dignity to be understood from a performative function (see De Lange 2013:11). That is, that, all human beings – Kenyan women included have the right to self-respect, be respected and protected – yet it is a process before this (self-respect, being respected and protected) can be realized in a patriarchal setting like that of the Kenyan society.

### ***1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY***

This study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One forms the introduction to the study. In it, the title of the dissertation, *Encountering the female voice in the Song of Songs: Reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women*, is explained and the rationale behind it is given – specifically with reference to the context of Kenyan patriarchal society. With reference to the biblical concept of the *imago Dei*, the link is made between the current study and the issue of the human dignity of Kenyan women or lack of the recognition thereof and its (human dignity's) function as hermeneutical framework for the study. This chapter, furthermore, shows how a very personal encounter with a text and a personal experience formed the inspiration for this current study, how it is translated into a workable research question, and aims and objectives of the study, and how and why the lived experiences of Kenyan women are taken as point of departure specifically with reference to Kenyan poetry.

In Chapter Two, the methodological approach referred to in Chapter One is further explicated. In the form of an overview of scholarship, an African women's approach to the Song of Songs is presented within the context of feminist and womanist approaches to the Song of Songs. This chapter exposes and criticizes the imbalances that exist in some male-

centered interpretations of this biblical book and proposes that the African Women's approach to the Song of Songs opens up new possibilities for one to read the Song from a contextual point of view. In this way, these women-centered approaches serve as a platform for contemporary readers to read the Song of Songs from a liberating perspective.

Chapter Three offers a detailed investigation of the worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of Kenyan women. It is shown that this worldview is embedded in patriarchal ideologies and practices that continue to silence the voices of Kenyan women in the name of 'our culture'. These patriarchal ideologies are shown to be responsible for denying Kenyan women the right to live with dignity as becoming creatures equally created in the image and likeness of God.

After exposing some of the patriarchal ideologies behind Kenyan male agendas towards Kenyan women, Chapter Four shows how, despite this, Kenyan poetry have been used to also identify elements of patriarchy that continue to dehumanize them. Specific Kenyan poems by or on women are reflected upon in the process. In this way one therefore sees the relationship between patriarchy and the reaction to it in Kenyan poetry and how patriarchy has indeed not succeeded in silencing the voices of Kenyan women after all.

Moving on to the biblical text, Chapter Five focusses on selected passages from the Song of Songs. The selected passages have one thing in common, namely that they represent the female voice. This chapter brings these passages, into dialogue with other specific Old Testament passages that present the sexuality of Old Testament in a negative way. This is done to show how the female voice in the Song of Songs is in fact responding in a new way to the negative Old Testament male worldview towards the sexuality of Old Testament women. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to reconstruct the female voice in the Song, so as to present it as a potentially liberating voice in Kenyan patriarchal society.

The study concludes with Chapter Six by once again referring to the theme introduced in the first chapter, namely the relationship between the dignity of Kenyan women and the biblical concept of the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 is revisited as the locus of the discourse on the men and women being equally created in the image of God and its relationship to human dignity. In light of this, it is showed that given the fact that patriarchal ideologies continue to prevent Kenyan women from living with dignity, the empowering and

de-muting of the voices of Kenyan women with the help of a re-reading of the Song of Songs is one way towards a holistic realization of their dignity. In other words, if the strong voice of a woman in Song of Songs joins the voices of Kenyan women, as heard in poetry, this may empower Kenyan women further. Finally, the chapter concludes with some suggestions for further study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AFRICAN WOMEN'S INTERPRETATION IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST AND WOMANIST APPROACHES TO THE SONG OF SONGS

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Song of Songs has a long history of interpretation. From this history, it seems that almost all ancient or medieval interpreters of the Song of Song could only appear systematic in their approach to the Song if they produced some sort of preface or introduction to their work (Norris 2003:1). According to Norris (2003:1) "It was customary to say something about the title, author of the Song of Songs and the place of writing in the traditional list of Solomon's writing." Similarly, in recent scholarship, it has almost become a tradition for commentators to begin their work by giving a brief history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs.

This is done in an effort to challenge particularly allegorical interpreters of the Song so as to argue that the Song of Songs is not, as the allegorical understanding of the Song favours, a song of love between God and humanity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Song's more recent history of interpretation has continued to be a fertile ground for commentators to cherish and to celebrate it as reflecting a love relationship between a woman and a man. Although the history of the interpretation of Song of Songs will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five, in this chapter, which serves as a literature review to the background of this study, I begin by briefly situating the history of the interpretation of the Song within a larger context of Feminist and Womanist interpretations in order to read the Song from an African Women's approach.

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<sup>12</sup> An interpretation can be understood as allegorical when the reader of a text takes the events of a narrative that are obvious and understands them in a symbolic way. This can apply to historical events, moral lessons, philosophical ideas or natural phenomena (see Longman 2001:23). One particularly good example of this is precisely the way in which early Jewish and Christian commentators understood the Song of Songs.

In the abovementioned process, much attention will be given to Feminist and Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs as a way of showing that Song has gained new insights in terms of contextual interpretation of biblical texts. In this chapter, the history of interpretation will also be done in a way as to expose the patriarchal context of the Song, but it will also reveal how the Song of Song has the potential to enhance or promote the dignity of Kenyan women. Consequently, this chapter clearly shows an interpretation that breaks away from the traditional allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs referred to above.

Throughout the centuries, people have wrestled with the question formulated by Kenton Sparks (2008:277): “Is the Song about human love, about divine love, or is it perhaps a political allegory?” Allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs take the surface meaning of the Song as a symbol of another level of meaning. A contrary approach, as shall become evident later in this chapter, is that of many contemporary commentators, especially Feminist and Womanist interpreters, who argue that the Song should be understood from a Literal/Natural point of view, which, according to Tremper Longman (2001:38), constitutes interpretations that attend to the literary features of the Song of Songs.<sup>13</sup>

Longman furthermore argues that Literal/Natural interpretations are “readings of the Song which resist the idea that the Song of Songs speaks in a coded language that implies something else other than what is implied in the words of the Song.” Literal/Natural interpretations, or one may also say, interpretations that focus on the literary dimension of the text, are interpretations that, according to Longman (2001:38), “affirm the presence of rich poetry in the text.” However, these interpretations also understand the Song of Songs as being a song that celebrates a love relationship between two human beings.

As was mentioned before, Feminist and Womanist interpreters in particular have been interested in reading the Song of Songs in terms of Literal/Natural interpretations. However, these interpreters also employ the Literal/Natural approach in order to read the Song in a way that exposes the patriarchal ideologies that are, for example, responsible for denying women

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of the literary features of the Song of Songs, see Patrick Hunt (2008:90-103).

the right to live with dignity. S.D. Goitein (1993:58-9), for example, points out that “the Song of Songs is a collection of love lyrics whose way of life is feminine.” Goitein (1993:59) further focuses on the erotic nature of the Song and the dominant voice of a woman in the Song. She does this to argue that the “Song possibly embodies a feminine composition.” Interestingly enough, Cheryl Exum (2005:65-66) cautions Feminist interpreters of the Song of Songs who propose that the Song of Songs possibly embodies a feminine composition. She argues that “the sex of the author cannot be deduced from the poem and that shifting the question from authorship to ‘voice’ as a means of identifying traces of women’s traditions in texts written and edited by men is risky.” However, of great concern to this study is that Exum does not account for the fact that the Song strongly appeals to real life experiences, especially when it comes to sex and sexuality – and the fact that most of the Old Testament literature stem from the tradition of oral transmission.

Along the lines of the view of Goitein, Klara Butting (2000:142) also argues that “the Song of Songs can be understood as a female literature and a product of women’s culture in ancient Israel.” Butting (2000:142) furthermore notes that, “in this dialogue between women and between lovers, biblical traditions have been taken up and changed, for the Song to give insights into a workshop of contextual liberation theology.”

The above perspectives are important in light of the purpose of this chapter, namely to show how Feminist and Womanist approaches are particularly helpful for developing an African Women’s perspective towards reading the Song of Songs. It will thus also become evident in this chapter that an African Women’s reading of the Song of Songs in the context of Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song indeed opens up new possibilities for reading the Song of Songs from a contextual point of view.

Feminist and Womanist scholars have been especially important in making it possible for one to see the importance of identifying with the female voice in the Song. Likewise, it may be possible for one who reads the Song from an African Women’s perspective to also appropriate the Song as a “women’s song”. The female voice in the Song of Songs is arguably an alternative voice to the predominant male voices regarding issues of sex and sexuality in the Old Testament. The female voice in the Song of Songs speaks, sings and whispers in a way that can be understood as exposing androcentric (male-centered) and



phallogocentric (male-oriented) conventions conditioned by the Old Testament texts. In this way, a new perspective on how to read Old Testament texts is revealed (Brenner 1993:14).<sup>14</sup>

## ***2.2 FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE SONG OF SONGS***

Before looking in more detail at Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs, it is important to first define what is meant by Feminist interpretations of the Bible. This will be done in light of the history of biblical interpretations to the Song of Songs,<sup>15</sup> thereby appropriating and locating an African Women's approach to the Song within this broader context of Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs.

Feminist interpretations of the Bible are diverse and multileveled. It is therefore difficult to come up with a precise definition of Feminist biblical interpretation. Feminist interpretations of the Bible also deal with many aspects that directly affect the dignity and humanity of every individual. According to Natalie K. Watson (2003:10-11) "feminist interpreters of the Bible focus not only on the content of scripture as authoritative; it primarily focuses on the interactive process of reading." This, in fact, is a process that creates meaning for both men and women especially in patriarchal settings like the Kenyan context, to participate in the God's community at an equal level as the people of God. Therefore, a feminist interpretation of the Bible is a process that takes seriously anything that has a direct impact on the dignity of any humanity as a people who have been created in the image and likeness of God. This is definitely also a perspective that an African women's approach benefits from. In short, Watson (2003:2-3) proposes that a Feminist approach to the Bible "is a critical, contextual, constructive and a creative re-reading and re-writing of Christian theology." Seen in this way, a definition of Feminist interpretation of Scripture in this chapter will be one that captures the diverse and multileveled issues that Feminist critics address.

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<sup>14</sup> Brenner (1993:12), for example, points out that the Old Testament has a setting in which "women are required to cooperate and identify regardless of their personal inclinations." Brenner (1993:12) further says that "males have enjoyed and still enjoy the comfort of being able to identify with the mainstream of interpretation as their very own." This makes it difficult for the Bible to be seen as liberating for women in settings where the mediators of the Word of God are men. Men, like all other human beings, read and interpret the Bible within the cultural parameters operating in their specific societies.

<sup>15</sup> See Longman (2001:20-47).

This multi-leveled character of Feminist interpretations of the Bible, may for example, be found in their identification of disempowering biblical interpretations that portray women, and particularly the sexuality of women, from a negative perspective. This is done so as to propose new readings of the Bible that emphasises the full humanity of women and a positive image of the sexuality of women.<sup>16</sup> This is part of the reason that Watson (2003:9) also defines Feminist interpretations of a text as “interpretations that takes serious the particular situations of the reader and some of the factors that construct it.” The latter factors are identified as “sex, race and the socio-economic situations of women” (Watson 2003:9). Defined in this way, Feminist interpretations of the Bible also expose the potential of some biblical texts to inform the context of the reader, but in a way that the context of the reader also has the potential to inform the text.

Thus far, we have defined Feminist interpretations of the Bible in a general sense. In particular, however, a Feminist approach to Song of Songs can be defined according to Susan Frank Parsons’ (2002:3) view of this approach as “a critical stance of biblical interpretations that challenges, redefines and reconstructs patriarchal gender paradigms that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant” and that “associate females with characteristics that society defines as inferior and auxiliary.” Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs are thus rooted in the assumption that every human being has the right to live with dignity as a consequence of being equally created in the image and likeness of God.

Feminist critics therefore negotiate for the dignity of every individual, male and female alike. They criticize patriarchal ideologies responsible for the dehumanization of women. Feminist critics argue that social relations such as class, race and gender are not eternally given by God as if some element of an order of creation. Social relations are rather social *constructions* that may be changed (see Parsons 2002:4). It is clear that Feminist approaches to the Bible do not operate in a vacuum. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (1993:9) have thus argued that: “Feminist theology operates in societal settings in a broadest context to expose societal inequalities rather than simply demanding equal access for women.” For Isherwood and McEwan (1993:9-10), Feminist Theology therefore, analyses

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<sup>16</sup> See Watson (2003:3-9).

society in all its religious and secular facets, serving as a vehicle for women to own and express individual and shared experiences without feeling ashamed or alienated.

It is from a Feminist perspective that Butting (2000:150) proposes that “desire for meetings, hidden possibilities for women, experiences of control, restriction and letting go of desire categorize the Song of Songs as a song of love and yearning.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast to allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs, Feminist approaches to the Song generally focus on the following aspects:

Firstly, regarding the poetic nature of the Song of Songs, the fact that some Feminist scholars underscore the possible oral transmission of the Song of Songs is of great significance. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Fokkelien Dijk-Hemmes (1993:79) for example, argue that “the Song of Songs bears all the characteristics of women’s poetry stemming from an oral tradition.” This is not something to which some male interpretations of the Bible have showed due recognition of. The value of the opinion of Bekkenkamp and Dijk-Hemmes is that it alerts one to the fact that there are several societies in which women’s experiences are still preserved and passed on orally through poetry. Poetry stemming from oral tradition is also a genre to which theologies of women’s liberations of some communities adhere.

This study acknowledges the possibility of oral transmission of the Song of Songs from a female voice in light of the fact that in most societies in Kenya, too, women use poetry to share and pass on personal experiences,<sup>18</sup> but also cultural issues embedded in patriarchal ideologies of the Kenyan society. At the same time, it is important to note that Exum (2005:66), for example, argues that “there is no way of proving that the Song of Songs is a

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<sup>17</sup> Alicia Ostriker (2000:43) comments about how the Song of Songs makes a clear break from the traditional presentation of erotic love in the Old Testament. The Old Testament seems to see erotic love as something that one should be cautious about. Ostriker (2000:43) says that “where the Old Testament concerns itself overwhelmingly with obedience, the Song of Songs inscribes an alternative story of voluntary love and pleasure.” Unfortunately, in Kenya, most communities do not allow women to voluntarily love. Instead many women are coerced into love relationships/ marital relationships.

<sup>18</sup> In Kenya for example, women are known for passing on information from one generation to another by word of mouth. In fact, among the Sabaot community for example, there is a special group of women called *chemetewek*, literally: the women of the head, who have a special ability to keep a long term memory of and the ability to recite from one generation to another, historical and other relevant information of the society.

product of women's culture." Even so, one does not need prove to see that even though the Song of Songs is a patriarchal text and or a poetic creation of a poet, the Song offers new ways of interpreting Old Testament texts from different contexts and particularly from an African Women's approach. As was mentioned in Chapter One, this study will also focus on poetic texts that reflect the female voice in the poetry of both women and men in the midst of a patriarchal society as this is closer to the situation that was the case in the Old Testament.

Secondly, Feminist interpreters like Exum (2005:1), argue that the Song of Songs is a poem about erotic love – the sexual desire between a man and woman. In the Song, the beauty of physical love is expressed in a language of seduction and intimacy. Thus, the Song is conveying a message of intoxicating desire that constantly leaves the two lovers in the Song yearning for the love of the other. Bekkenkamp and Dijk-Hemmes (1993:79), for example, point out that "eroticism takes a central place in the Song of Songs." In different societies, male traditions of biblical interpretation have predominantly given a complex picture of the sexuality of women.<sup>19</sup> In most cases, male-dominated interpretations of sex and sexuality have portrayed sexuality as something dangerous. Sex has been understood as dangerous, especially if it is a woman initiating sexual encounters. Such an understanding makes it difficult for one to see sexuality as something that can be enjoyed.

By interpreting the Song of Songs from a Feminist perspective, Bekkenkamp and Dijk-Hemmes (1993:83) note that such a reading shows that "sexuality is permitted and can even provide joy when the images of women are presented from a dignified perspective." Such an understanding is helpful for reading the Song of Songs from an African Women's perspective. In fact, because of patriarchal layers found in the Old Testament, some male-centered interpretations seem to even presume that the pleasures of bodily desires are something quite separate from God's plan of salvation history. However, Feminist interpreters of the Song of Songs have shown that erotic love is at the core of the dignity of every individual. Therefore, erotic love cannot be separated from God's history of salvation. In this regard, Butting (2000:151) has observed that "the Song of Songs contradicts the separation of erotic love from God's salvation history." Butting (2000:151) is convinced that

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<sup>19</sup> See Phyllis Trible (1978:72-73).

erotic love is part of Gods salvation history because “the Song of Songs is read in the synagogues in Israel on the Sabbath of the Passover week.” As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, in most sections of the Kenyan society, patriarchy manifests itself in extreme forms, for instance in sexual violence. Feminist approaches to the Bible may therefore inform an African reading that seeks to name, expose and challenge patriarchal ideologies that are responsible for denying Kenyan women the right to live with dignity.

Thirdly, the erotic content of the Song of Songs has allowed for Feminist interpreters to also celebrate the plain language of sexuality in the text. This is seen in the way the two lovers speak about issues of sex and sexuality openly and even publicly without shame. The celebration of the plain language of sexuality allows for the possibility of verbalizing matters of sex and sexuality in a different way.

Because of the way matters of sex and sexuality are spoken about without shame in the Song of Songs, Exum (2005:13) argues that “without the Song of Songs one would have thought that desire in Israel was something that was dangerous which needed to be suppressed.” Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs should also make it possible for one to see how patriarchy in the Kenyan society has been used to silence the voices of Kenyan women, especially regarding issues of sex and sexuality. In fact, one way in which some communities in Kenya have expressed the attitude of shame towards sex and sexuality is by creating taboos that guard the society against talking about matters of sex and sexuality, both in private and public. In other words, Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs have shown that it is not a taboo to speak about issues of sex and sexuality.<sup>20</sup> This way, Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs hold the potential for creating possibilities of speaking about matters of sex and sexuality in Kenya. This, too, can be a strong point of departure for an African Women’s approach to the Song of Songs.

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<sup>20</sup> For Tribble (1978:107), the origin of the beauty of sexuality is in Gen 2:25 where both man and woman are naked, yet they are not ashamed of each other. This shows that traditionally, a man and a woman have been created as responsible creatures when it comes to issues of sex and sexuality. This way, there should be no reason to be ashamed of speaking about or expressing issues of sex and sexuality as it is the case in the most societies in Kenya.

Fourthly, Feminist interpretations of the Song of Songs have shown the value of reading the Song from the perspective of different cultural settings with the goal of liberation in mind. When one reads most passages of the Old Testament one can encounter layers of cultural practices that express the attitude of men towards the sexuality of women.<sup>21</sup> Some of these cultural issues are directly connected with the negative portrayal of the sexuality of women. A good example of how women in the Old Testament are mostly portrayed as weak<sup>22</sup> vessels in society and the silent victims of societal injustices is the disturbing account of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. Indeed, already in Old Testament times, men were portrayed as having the power to take women by force and to rape them.<sup>23</sup> Feminist readings of the Song of Songs have exposed an imbalance in the traditional chain of cultural and social realities that were created by some Old Testament texts and some readers of the Song of Songs.

One instance where this has happened is where for instance, some male readers of the Song of Songs would try to justify what the watchmen do to the female voice in Song 5:7. Some men have understood this to mean that it is not right for women to walk alone at night. Some have even portrayed this incident of assault against the female voice as “an isolated narrow limitation of everyday life” (Keel 1986:35). However, Feminist interpreters having looked deeper into the text of the Song of Songs and having exposed some cultural issues that are left unexposed by a male-oriented readership of the Song they have shown that the problem indeed does not concern women walking alone in the streets at night and that this is not an ordinary incident. Feminist interpreters have argued that the problem is cultural aspects of society that continue to empower men while disempowering women. Feminist critics thus identify aspects of the societal setting of the Old Testament, which do not extol and dignify women (Brenner 1993:21).

It is interesting to note that one of the points of critique against Feminist commentators have been their so-called presumption of speaking on behalf of and for all women, i.e. across traditional contexts (see Mitchem 2002:4-5). Critics of Feminist

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, Genesis 38.

<sup>22</sup> See Tribble (1978:73).

<sup>23</sup> See Genesis 34 and the Song of Songs 5:7.

commentators argue that by presuming to speak for ‘all’ women, Feminist commentators turn a blind eye to the fact that the experiences of women are different depending on individual inclinations, communal and societal settings. With regard to this critique and in the context of this study, it is exactly the fact that Feminist theologies transcend limitations of traditional boundaries that should also be appreciated and celebrated. Feminist Theologies challenge patriarchal gender paradigms across all cultures that are responsible for the dehumanization of women whether they are in Kenya or anywhere else in the world.

Another example of Feminist interpretations of the Song of Songs exposing the imbalance in some male-centered approaches to the book is that, though most contemporary male-centered interpretations of the Song of Songs almost unanimously agree that the Song of Songs is a song of love between two human beings,<sup>24</sup> Feminist interpreters also pay especially close attention to the literary arrangement of the genre of the Song. Feminist critics have, for example, demonstrated how the sons of the mother of the female voice in the Song<sup>25</sup> serve as representatives of a male-dominated order and therefore constitute a patriarchal strand. According to Butting (2000:145), “the possible intention of the arrangement of the text is to show that the sons of the mother of the female voice enveloped the female voice and controlled her through forced labor.” Thus, for Butting (2000:145) the protest of the female voice in Song 1:6 can be interpreted as an opposition to the economic power of the sons of the mother of the female voice in the Song of Songs. This is arguably the power that is in most cases exhibited in different societies through the control of the sexuality of women.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, male-centered interpretations stemming from some Old Testament texts continue to portray men as superior and domineering. In contrast, women are portrayed as inferior and subordinate. In the Song of Songs, however, one sees that the voice of a woman dominates. This has given Feminist interpreters the opportunity to identify with the female voice in the Song. It is from this perspective that Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs

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<sup>24</sup> See for example, Dave Bland (2002:412), who makes it clear that that he does not believe that the Song is an allegory of God and Israel or of Christ and the Church, but a song of love between two human beings.

<sup>25</sup> See Song 1:6.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on this see Chapter Three of this study.

can be understood as elevating the social status of women. Instead of being perceived as temptresses, such approaches view women as initiators of love and therefore determinants as to whether love can be as sweet as honey or a bitter encounter.

On the other hand, in an important essay, “Ten things that every Feminist should know about the Song of Song of Songs”, Cheryl Exum (2005:65) again cautions against an easy appropriation of the Song of Songs as a female song. In her opinion, the Song of Songs may be a figment of male imagination. Exum (2005:65) thus imagines behind the Song a man who may have been obsessed by the sensual, naked appearance of a woman. For Exum (2005:65) ‘this man’ has therefore created a romantic image of a woman in poetry. She further argues that “what Brenner and Dijk-Hemmes refer to as gendered texts (1993) is as conjectural as a positing for a female authorship to the Song of Songs.” According to Exum (2005:65), “the characteristics of a feminine or female voice are difficult to distinguish from the characters of a male speaker in the text.” It is therefore also possible to see why Exum argues as was referred to above, that “there is no way to prove that the Song is a product of women’s culture” (2005:66).

Coming from a context in which the voices of women in poetry continue to be orally transmitted, one possibly sees a strong argument in Exum’s point of view. However, from Song 1:5-6 and Song 5:7, for example, it is evident that the Song of Songs gives evidence of the experiences of women. Thus, while it is not possible to prove that the Song of Songs is a woman’s song, it is also not possible to prove that the Song is a figment of the imagination of a man. In fact, some of the experiences in the Song (see for example Song 1:5-6 and Song 5:2-7) are experiences that most women in the Ancient Near East *and* current Kenyan society would identify with. What’s more, Exum’s Feminist interpretation of the Song offers a perspective that indeed challenges gender disparities in male/female relationships. This is because Exum (2005:65) points out that “the poet of the Song of Songs has created believable female characters and male characters exploring what it is like to be in love from both the point of view of a man and a woman.” But she does this “with great sensitivity to subtle differences between men and women” (2006:65).

In spite of Exum’s views, she nevertheless approaches the Song of Songs from a Feminist perspective. In doing this, she has given a liberating perspective to the interpretation



of the Song of Songs, particularly with reference to the equality of a man and the woman in the Song. She argues that the two lovers in the Song of Songs envision each other from an equal perspective (see Exum 2005:65). This goal is also shared by Brenner (1993:21), who argues that Feminist interpretations of the Song have redressed the traditional understanding of literary discourses in the Old Testament. They (Feminist interpretations) have done this by exposing the world that brought it forth. This includes the chain of cultural and social realities that were created and transported by the text, hence creating a possible world that allows all to live with dignity. The beauty of this approach is the possibility of seeing both men and women as equally created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27).

### **2.3 WOMANIST APPROACHES TO THE SONG OF SONGS**

Womanist approaches are particularly important for understanding an African Women's perspective to the Song of Songs. Womanist approaches to the Bible are approaches that take seriously the experiences of *African-American women* as a source of theological reflection.<sup>27</sup> From a contextual point of view, Womanist approaches to the Bible take serious issues of race and particularly racial discrimination, with a specific reference to the experiences of black women in America. Issues of skin color from an ethnic perspective are thus given a primary focus. A Womanist approach to the Bible can therefore be defined as an approach that contain the voices, the color and tone that speaks the tongue of black women in America.

According to one of the original and most influential Womanist theologians, Dolores S. Williams (1986:47-48), "a Womanist" approach to the Bible can be defined as an approach that looks at patriarchy from a wider perspective. In her opinion, patriarchy is a system that reflects the power of white men *and white women*, familial social ideological and political

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<sup>27</sup> According to Mitchem (2002:4), the experiences of women are diverse and dynamic, depending on time and context. In a way that alludes to the importance of taking serious the different, diverse and dynamic experiences of women as a source of and an important aspect of theological reflections for biblical interpretations. Mitchem further argues that "early feminists mainly identified patriarchy-male control, dominance and preference throughout all institutions of society – as the centre of gender oppression." For Mitchem, "this focus only met the needs of white women, with their histories limiting the relevance of feminism for black women in the United States of America who had a different experience of domination."

systems in which some white men and some white women, either by force, direct pressure or through ritual tradition, law, language, customs and etiquette, education and division of labor, determine what part black women shall or shall not play (1986:47-48).

Mitchem (2002:4) writes that “the voice of Williams emerged out of the concern that both Black Theology and Feminist Theology did not address specific concerns of black women in America.” It seems that in particular, the main concern for Williams is the way ‘early’ white Feminists used the term ‘patriarchy’. Williams (1986:47) in particular criticized “white Feminists for thinking that patriarchy is the major source of the oppression of all women.” For Williams (1986:47), “patriarchy is no longer just the power of men to oppress women. It is also the power of a certain group of females to oppress other groups of females.”<sup>28</sup>

Womanist approaches to biblical texts are therefore done with the conviction that there is a need for every individual to have the opportunity to add her voice to biblical interpretations by personally reading and interpreting the Bible. Understood in this way, one can see how Womanist approaches to the Bible may also inform the African Women’s approach to the Bible. This is particularly for contexts such as the Kenyan one where most women only hear the words of the Bible as read to them by others, especially during a church service, wedding ceremonies or during Christian burial ceremonies. In fact, in most parts of the rural areas in Kenya, many women do not know how to read and write. Additionally, even among those women who know how to read and write many do not have the motivation for reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves. This is because whenever they hear the words of the Bible as read to them from the pulpit on Sundays, at wedding or Christian burial ceremonies, the words that they hear, in most cases sanction the subordination of Kenyan women.<sup>29</sup> This way, it becomes very difficult for the interpretation of the Bible to reflect the experiences of Kenyan women from a liberating point of view.

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchem (2002:4) points out that: “Williams proposed that ‘demonarchy’ and not ‘patriarchy,’ would be a better descriptive term since men of any race, with the participation of white women are involved in oppressing black women in America.”

<sup>29</sup>This happens often, not surprisingly, especially in contexts in which churches that do not ordain women are a majority.

With the above in mind, one can understand Weems (1991:69) appeal that “it is the task and responsibility of marginalized readers today ... both female and male to restore the voices of the oppressed in the Kingdom of God.” This will allow the voices of the marginalized to speak and to directly address issues from of their experiences that prevent them from living with dignity. As Weems (1991:69) argues: “This can only happen when every individual is able to read and hear the text for themselves, with their own eyes and with their own ears.”<sup>30</sup> It therefore seems that for Womanist interpreters of the Bible it is not possible for one to experience the liberating power of the Bible if the Bible is only read to them by others.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Womanist approaches to the Bible emerge out of the personal life experiences of the lives of African-American women. Mitchem (2002: ix) points out that Womanist Theology offers opportunities for black women in America to read the Bible from their own contextual situations as African-American women. In this way, African-American women can fully participate in the theological process and dialogues constructed from interpreting texts of the Bible. Womanist interpretations of biblical texts therefore allow for the voices of Black American women to be heard and Womanist approaches may also inform an African Women’s approach to the Song of Songs in light of the importance of motivating all African women across the world to read the Bible for themselves and to speak out on their own behalf.

With regard to Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs, it is important to note, as was referred to above, that Womanist interpretations of the Song also emerged out of the

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<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, Weems (1991:69) also falls short of realizing that not only do we have people who do not know how to read, we also have in our societies people who do not hear and those who do not see; unless she is speaking about spiritual knowledge, eyes and ears.

<sup>31</sup> Weems (1991:67) argues that it is difficult for one to read the Bible and understand it in the same way that another person will understand it. This is because “how one reads or interprets the Bible depends largely on which interpretive community one identifies with.” Weems (1991:67) gives a clear picture of how communities (contexts) vary; a factor that can have a big influence on how one understands the Bible. She points out that for example “Christian American women belong to at least four communities of interpreters: America/ Western, African American, Female and Christian.” This means the each reader brings something into the text of the Bible during the process of biblical interpretation. Thus, if one is not represented, the voice of one reading has the potential to marginalize.

major concern that Feminist interpretations of the Song of Songs do not contain the color and tone that speak for the black women in America.<sup>32</sup> Womanist interpreters of the Song of Songs, however, argue that if Feminists are to speak for African-American women, they have to speak in a dynamic way, i.e. by also taking seriously the experiences of black women in America (Williams 1986:47).

To summarize thus far, Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs make an important contribution towards an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs. Womanist approaches are rooted in the important understanding that contexts differ. This helps one to see that any approach to the Song of Songs ought to be done with an awareness of the diverse, dynamic and multileveled experiences of women (and men). Womanist approaches to Song of Songs therefore hold the potential to challenge traditions that undermine the dignity of all women. In Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs, one sees the following key issues:

Firstly, from an ethnic perspective, Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs identify the female voice in the Song as a black woman. This way, Womanist approaches appropriate the Song of Songs as a black woman's song. Weems (1998:167), for example, criticizes commentators who generally shy away from attributing any ethnic importance to the dark complexion of the female voice. For Weems (199:166), it is the "blackish complexion of the female voice that made her the object of stares of her female companions, the daughters of Jerusalem (Song 1:5-6)." This ethnic emphasis found in Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs also informs an African Woman's approach to the Song.

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<sup>32</sup> At the centre of Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs for example, is Song 1:5. For Womanist interpreters of the Song of Songs, the voice in this verse is a voice of a black woman. Womanist interpreters argue that this clearly indicates that the Song can be understood from a racial perspective. However, most Feminist interpreters are not very certain about the real racial identity of the speaker in Song 1:5. In fact, some of them rather identify the female voice in the entire Song as a poet and the entire characters of the Song of Songs as imaginary creations of the poet (see Exum 2005:66). For Exum for example, the voice in Song 1:5 is not about her race as a black woman, but it is as a "result of working outdoors in the sun." "Otherwise", Exum adds, "There was no need for her to explain the reason behind her dark skin" (2005:104). Thus, there is no consensus among Feminist and Womanist scholars as to whether the Song addresses issues of race or not. However, the point is that most Feminist and Womanist interpreters agree that the Song of Songs *can* be understood as exposing (naming) issues of injustice – for example social disparity.

And, in this sense, an African Women's approach to the Song also benefits from Womanist approaches to the Song giving the former approach to the Song the opportunity to appropriate the Song of Songs as a black woman's song.

Secondly, one sees how socio-economic dimensions of race, class and income combine with categories of sexual preferences and physical ability in order to layer the complexities of the experiences of black women.<sup>33</sup> These complex mixtures have definitely generated particular theological responses.<sup>34</sup> These are responses that one would arguably call the response of black women to the Song of Songs in terms of black women's experiences. For Weems (1992:167), "the fundamental assumption here is that poets, like ancient and modern speakers, design their messages with a particular audience in mind." Weems (1992:167) further argues that "it is possible to instruct, challenge and correct prevailing assumption." The prevailing assumption here, one may say, could be racial discrimination and black patriarchy that worked together in order to suppress the liberty of black women in America, thus preventing them from enjoying their full humanity also with regard to their sexuality.<sup>35</sup>

Thirdly, Weems (1997:364-365) identifies the female voice in the Song of Songs as a voice that "deviates from traditional teachings regarding womanhood and modesty." In most traditions, womanhood and modesty implies that women cannot reveal their sexual feelings, neither in private nor in the public. It is therefore interesting to see that in terms of Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs, Weems (1997:365) argues that the female voice in the

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<sup>33</sup>Patricia Hill Collins (2000:130), for example, points out that "black women in America experience a highly visible sexualized racism so that the seeming intractability of the stigma of blackness in turn shapes possible responses to their theologies of sex and sexuality."

<sup>34</sup>See Mitchem, 2002:5.

<sup>35</sup>According to Mitchem (2002:6), it seems probable that it was and still is very difficult for black women in America to express or enjoy their sexuality fully as a result of racial discrimination and black patriarchy. Mitchem argues that "quite often, black women were and still are judged and treated harshly by the way they present themselves." Mitchem (2001:6) holds, that beyond the time of enslavement, black women in America were not, - and still are not, treated as normal human beings. It seems that Black women in America are still expected to emulate the Victorian image in order to prove their worthiness. Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs have revealed that in most cases, black women did not and in some cases still do not initiate sexual encounters. Most of them were and still are instead forced into sexual intimacy by some white and even some black men.

Song can be understood as breaking away from Old Testament traditions that restrict women from expressing their feelings in the name of womanhood and modesty.

One therefore sees that in this way, too, this interpretation can be liberating, especially in contexts where women and even men are only expected to behave in a manner that suggests that they are in love. In fact, according to Weems (1997:364), the female voice in the Song of Songs can be understood as taking “the subtle approach and extol[ing] the erotic happiness she has found – despite all of its complications and limitations.” For Weems (1997:363), “to open the pages of the Song of Songs is to put behind you that world of exceptional heroism, tribal conflicts, political disputes, royal intrigues, religious reforms and divine judgments and to enter the world of domestic relations and personal discourse.” In this way, one has the possibility of seeing that the Bible also extols personal and private lives of individual women, even in a patriarchal society.

Fourthly, Womanist interpretations also inspire some *white* women to take notice of the urge to challenge prevailing social prejudices in the American society. Carol Fontaine (2000:173) is one biblical scholar who uses a Womanist lens to also highlight the experiences of African-American women. She (Fontaine 2000:173) confesses that over time she “loved the Song more than before.” This is because she realized that one finds in American society a form of socialization that presumes that “there is a worse thing than being too pale in the midst of darkness”. This was her realization particularly in light of Song 1:5 read through the eyes of black women in America.

Reading the Song of Songs from the experiences of African-American women made her realize that some parts of the American society have been socialized to believe that “to be too dark; is a handicap too” (Fontaine 2000:173). This, too, is particularly helpful for an African Women’s approach to the Song of Songs as one is not only inspired by this to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women, one also sees the possibility of influencing and inspiring others to challenge prevailing gender injustices, which have continued to deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity.

For Fontaine (2000:173), the level of skin tone or complexion is not the problem in the socialization of American society; it does not matter whether you are brown, light skinned or just black. As long as you are from a black race, you are discriminated against and

therefore looked down upon by others.<sup>36</sup> Fontaine (2000:173) therefore reads the Song of Songs with a deliberate intention of “rethinking with the dark beauty in the Song of Songs, who though scorned by others proclaims herself the most beautiful.”

It is thus clear that Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs identify with the identity of the female voice in the Song of Songs from an ethnic perspective as a black woman. Womanist interpreters find in the female voice in Song 1:5 ‘the courage to be’. This, they argue, represents the ultimate refusal to be identified by the oppressive other from a racial point of view and they thus clearly identify with the female voice as a black woman who celebrates her racial identity. In this sense, Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs are reminiscent of a central theme of life abundantly – which is also important for the African Women’s approach to the Song of Songs. In the final instance, like Feminist approaches to Song of Songs, Womanist interpretations thus also resist racial injustices to focus on liberation leading to the dignity of all humanity.<sup>37</sup>

#### ***2.4 AN AFRICAN WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVE TO THE SONG OF SONGS***

In the previous sections, it was shown how Feminist interpretations have identified with the female voice in the Song of Songs. By arguing that the female voice speaks on behalf of the voices of women in the Old Testament, Feminist approaches to the Song of Songs have understood the Song as one that challenges patriarchal ideologies of the Old Testament. This way, the Song of Songs has created a platform for contemporary readers of the Song to also challenge injustices that continue to prevent women from living with dignity.

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<sup>36</sup>Speaking about racial discrimination associated with skin complexion, Diane R. Brown and Verna M. Keith (2003:123) have observed that because of racism and its divisive nature in American culture, both dark and light skinned women even today still continue to experience some negative reactions in their lives.

<sup>37</sup> Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs have been criticized however as being reactionary rather than a response-oriented theology. Even so, it is evident that Womanist interpretations of the Song of Songs also struggle to deal with the quest of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God — and consequently, the need for black women to live with dignity as Gods children despite their color. As we will again see in the next section, both Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs are valuable for an African Woman’s approach to the Song of Songs, which seek to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women.

It was further shown how Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs have used the experiences of African-American women in America to give the Song ethnic value. Womanist approaches have argued that the female voice in the Song of Songs is a voice that speaks for the voices of black woman. This way, Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs have opened up possibilities for reading the Song contextually in terms of the diverse and multi-leveled experiences of women.<sup>38</sup> It is of course clearly the case that the experiences of women across the world differ, depending on time and locality. However, one thing still needs to be acknowledged when one reads the Song of Songs: The voice of a woman dominates in the Song of Songs. This creates a possibility for women, despite differences in their contexts, to read the Song of Songs with a view to the liberation of and therefore the dignity of all women. It is from this context that one may argue that Feminist and Womanist approaches have made it possible for one to also read the Song of Songs from an African women's perspective.

Typically called "the mother of African Women's Theology", Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:9) notes that "the particular theologies of African women express aspects of global and African Christian theologies from the vantage point of women's experiences and locations." African Women's Theology therefore takes serious the particular locations and diverse experiences of women across continents. In this case, any approach to the Bible that does not take seriously the experiences of women regardless of location, cannot achieve the goal of liberating women and by extension, cannot claim to be pro-life. The experiences of many women contain some aspects of the consequences of living in unjust societal systems and traditions that have continued to deny them the right to live with dignity.

Interestingly enough, for the purposes of this study, Oduyoye (2001:10) also argues that African Women's Theologies take serious the fact that "African women accept poetry as a source of theology and so tell their own stories through poetry." "However," Oduyoye

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<sup>38</sup>For Katherine Clay Bassard (2010:7), a contextual re-reading of biblical texts by black women in America "is rooted in American chattel slavery and its biblical defense." "For black women," Bassard (2010:7) argues, "reading the Bible is not simply a matter of identifying with certain biblical texts and or characters in the Text. It is a cultural discourse." It is from this perspective that one may argue that Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs have opened up possibilities for reading the Song of Songs contextually.



(2001:10) continues, “African Women’s Theologies also study the experiences of other women including those outside their own continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten.” Speaking about how African women use poetry to raise their voices, Oduyoye (2004:14) points out that “creative writings by African women highlight much of what needs re-imagining in African culture. Through their poems, novels and drama they have offered analysis and critiques of African culture.” In Chapter Four of this study it will be shown how the voices of Kenyan experiences are reflected in poetry and how this also may be a source of criticizing patriarchal ideologies that continue to dehumanize them for instance in its reflection of their vulnerability to sexual violence.

It is important to clarify what is meant by the term “an African Women’s perspective.” In this study, the word “Africa” is, of course, used as a continental and contextual reference. “Africa” refers to a people living on the continent of Africa with their heritage and values as African people. In particular, this study approaches the Song of Songs with the Kenyan context in mind and interprets the Song of Songs from the perspectives of Kenyan women all of which, of course also have implications for men as well and how one understands the relationship between men and women.<sup>39</sup> Given the fact that Africa is large continent with multi-dynamic, multi-leveled and diverse contexts, the word “perspective” will be used with plural connotation in mind, in order to try and minimize assumptions and generalizations. On the other hand, there are also some commonalities in terms of the African experience. Therefore, the experiences of Kenyan women may in some areas be similar to the experiences of women in other African countries. This is because aspects of patriarchal

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<sup>39</sup> In the Song of Songs, there is equality between the two lovers in the Song (a man and a woman). Perhaps this is finally a biblical approach (from an African Perspective) that also gives attention to equality between the sexes as portrayed in the Song of Songs. It is the concern of Isabel Apawo Phiri (2007:158) that African interpretations of the Bible should not be seen as a “separate institution that examines the position of African women through the lens of the experiences of women and patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize women in isolation.” For Phiri (2007:158), caution needs to be taken in that “Africa needs a biblical approach that also recons with sexism in its widest perspective from both the point of view of women and men.” African Women’s approach to the Song of Songs does just that. It is an approach that recons with sexism in its widest sense. This is because it is the conviction of African women theologians that both men and women are equal. They are both created in the image and likeness of God. Men therefore have no right to dominate women.

ideologies are found in almost all African countries. In fact, one would say that patriarchy is at the centre of silencing the voices of women across all the African countries.<sup>40</sup>

The word “women” is used in reference to being a woman and interpreting the Song of Songs in terms of female experience that also would be as diverse as the many women who live on the African continent. Reading the Song of Songs as a woman, allows one to apply a cultural hermeneutics to the Song of Songs. In fact, as has been referred to repeatedly above, there seems to be a general consensus among most African women critics of the Bible that the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, contains some cultural issues and practices that are similar to those found in many African societies. This is also the case with reference to the Kenyan society.

In Kenya, most cultural issues and practices are directly responsible for the silencing of the voices of, and therefore the negative presentation of the sexuality of Kenyan women. In short, applying a cultural hermeneutics to the Song of Songs therefore allows and enables this study to basically interpret the Song of Songs from the thoughts and insights of African women from the diverse perspectives of African women. In this way, it becomes possible not only to cherish and celebrate liberating aspects of African culture, but also to, at the same time, name, expose and challenge any systemic aspects of the society that are responsible for the silencing of the voices of Kenyan women, as well as the negative presentation of their sexuality. A similar conviction is found in the view of Oduyoye (2001:12), who argues that “cultural hermeneutics enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberating.” However, she (Oduyoye 2001:12) also adds that, “one should realize that not everything in culture is liberating.” In this regard, Oduyoye (2001:12) highlights the importance of “taking one’s experiences seriously but also connecting it with other realities.” This means that the interpretation of the Song of Songs

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<sup>40</sup> Oduyoye (2004:14) argues that “in the face of Africans’ peripheral role in the world and the legitimate anxiety of her further marginalization presented by globalization, women are often under pressure to keep silent about socio-cultural aspects of life.” For Oduyoye (2004:14) there are African women and men who see any changes in women’s participation and questioning of their legal and familial status as a threat to stability. It therefore seems that the positive aspect of cultural hermeneutics is that the approach exposes such issues that silence the voices of women and also proposes ways of creatively dealing with them in a just and compassionate way.

from an African Women's perspective seeks to take seriously the issues of Kenyan women, but also to connect the experiences of Kenyan women to the realities of other women globally as well.

African Women's interpretations of the Old Testament begin by encountering patriarchal attitudes that are legitimized by socio-cultural discourses, which in turn are responsible for the construction of the attitudes that dehumanize (Kenyan) women. In Kenya, the negative attitudes that dehumanize women are perpetuated by negative representations of the sexuality of Kenyan women. In some communities in Kenya, for example, ritual sex is a social responsibility and the duty of a woman. A woman who fails to perform ritual sexual acts calls for communal catastrophe.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the idea of romantic love as a prerequisite for sex does not arise in communities that perform ritual sexual acts (see Chapter Three for further discussion on this matter). From a cultural hermeneutical point of view, an African women's approach exposes such cultural practices in order to pronounce their harmfulness to the well-being of Kenyan women.

In an African Women's approach to the text (Song of Songs, in the case of this study), not even God escapes inquiry. This is primarily the case when men presume to speak in the name of and on behalf of God. Some Kenyan men have done this in order to demand total submission (including sexual submission) of Kenyan women, even when it is against women's will. African Women's approaches to the Bible encourages Old Testament interpreters and particularly commentators of the Song of Songs to notice the cries of Kenyan women regarding issues of social disparity, gender disparity and gender violence. In this way one finds that an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs acknowledges and shares the concerns of Feminist and Womanist interpreters of the Song of Songs.

As has thus far been seen, despite its similarities with Feminist and Womanist approaches, African Women's approach is unique, in that it draws on particular and specific experiences of women from Africa that may in themselves represent similar themes, but not necessarily identical ones (based on Oduyoye 2004:15). An African Women's approach to the Song of Songs moreover offers a platform for addressing patriarchal ideologies from a

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<sup>41</sup> See Shisanya (2009:127).

biblical perspective. The Song of Songs therefore, also creates a good platform for addressing injustices against Kenyan women, sanctioned by patriarchal systems in the name of 'our culture.' Oduyoye (2001:13) for example, points out that "culture is frequently a euphemism to protect actions that require analysis." One need, as Oduyoye (2001:13) says, "to interpret one's own culture, engage in an inter-cultural dialogue and work towards cultural transformation."

From the above background to the African Women's approach, this study suggests six modes of interpreting the Song of Songs in accordance to this approach:

Firstly, an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs is pro-life, i.e., it challenges anything that threatens the fullness of the life of every human being. This includes a critique of anything that affects or impacts directly on the dignity of humanity. Thus, anything that hinders Kenyan women from living with dignity is against life and therefore an issue for African Women's theology.

Secondly, an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs seeks to name cultural practices that are used in the Kenyan society to nurture, sanction, perpetuate and transmit patriarchal ideologies that are responsible for the dehumanization of Kenyan women. Regarding this, Kimani Njogu (2008:8-9), for example, points out that gender inequality exhibited through forced and arranged marriages, violence against women (particularly sexual violence), female circumcision and wife inheritance continue to manifest itself despite many protocols, actions plans and strategies for fostering gender equality. An African Women's approach to the Song of Songs in this study offers a platform for naming and exposing the negative patriarchal ideologies that are responsible for preventing Kenyan women from living with dignity. In the Song of Songs, for example, the female voice chooses a partner and initiates a love relationship on her own terms and conditions. This is quite contrary to the situation in most Kenyan societies, where a woman has no right to choose a partner for herself and to enjoy a love relationship on her own terms and conditions.

If such socio-cultural issues that silence the voices of some Kenyan women are not exposed, some Kenyan women will continue to live lives of indignity. In the Song of Songs, one encounters the voice of a woman who sets the stage of a love relationship in which a man does not silence the voice of a woman, in fact, the voice of a woman dominates. Yet we do

not hear of a man complaining in the Song that the female voice is dominating. Thus, an African Women's interpretation of the Song of Songs holds the potential to determine a contextual theology from a cultural hermeneutical point of view.

Thirdly, an African Women's approach should criticize static cultural values and practices that present the *sexuality* of Kenyan women in a negative perspective. Some negative depictions of the sexuality of Kenyan women are social constructions based on fears of men. As social constructions these depictions may be changed. Nyengele (2004:160), for example, points out that "structural therapy's view of culture as a changing reality is in tune with African women's theological view of culture as something dynamic and not static." This is what an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs seeks to address by first exposing cultural values that are used to preserve and pass on negative male attitudes towards the sexuality of Kenyan women.

Fourthly, it is important for an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs to challenge patriarchal ideologies in order to destabilize the *status quo*. Power imbalances are often used to maintain themselves. In the case of the power imbalances between men and woman, this need to be challenged in a way that advocates; not replacing one form of power imbalance with another, but equality between the sexes. Nyengele (2004:20-21), for example, argues that "Kenyan women should refuse to conform to and at the same time resist the forces of evil that continue to relegate them to positions of powerlessness, silence and invisibility." In the Song of Songs, the desire of the female voice to enjoy a reciprocal love relationship with her beloved is a possible indicator of one who has resisted prevailing circumstances that perpetuate power imbalances.

The fifth mode of the African Women's approach to the Song of Songs is one of deconstruction.<sup>42</sup> By challenging or deconstructing patriarchal ideologies, one also

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<sup>42</sup>It is important to note that deconstructing ideologies that have been integrated into societal systems and legitimized to be pronounced as legal is not an easy thing. However, theologies from an African Women's perspective "are based on faith and hope" (see Nyengele 2004:173). This is the hope that sees beyond the unseen by preparing the ground for a better society exposing in order to deconstructing patriarchal ideologies that are responsible for denying Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. It is better to do something about the existing situations that dehumanize Kenyan women than to watch from a distance with hopelessness.

destabilizes the *status quo*. In the words of Nyengele (2004:21): “this means the deconstruction of rigid gender values which regulate human interactions.”<sup>43</sup> However, this deconstruction is done specifically in order to create room for reconstructing new images and identities for Kenyan women. Reconstructing new images and identities for Kenyan women thus forms the sixth mode for an African women’s approach to the Song of Songs. This way, it will be possible to “appropriate liberating traditional aspects and create new values which allows for both men and women to live with dignity” (Nyengele 2004:21). Accordingly, it is important to note that the interpretation of the Song of Songs from the African Women’s approach is rooted in its broadest sense in a commitment for promoting the dignity of all humanity.

Nyengele also (2004:28) observes that “the search for wholeness/ life by African women is certainly the search for the wholeness and well-being of all (women, men, and children, church, society and the whole of creation.)” In fact, in the Song of Songs one sees that the two lovers celebrate their love; but through the beauty of creation, creatures and environment. They enjoy the sweetness of their love through their perfected sense of nature: the animals, birds, flowers and trees. This shows that one cannot be complete/ whole without the other.

In short, as Nyengele (2004:20) argues, an African Women’s interpretation of the Song of Songs is an interpretation of liberation. “It is guided by the vision that seeks to free both men and women to live together in a partnership of equals”, especially when it comes to issues of sex and sexuality and, “this is a partnership in which both women and men are free to live with and relate in non-oppressive ways to one another” (2004:20). Thus, when one gender dominates the sexuality of the other, the whole personhood of the other is dominated. It then becomes difficult for a relationship of mutual understanding to exist and for both the sexes to live with dignity.

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<sup>43</sup>It is from this point of view that Nyengele (2004:71) emphasizes on the need to “expose and condemn cultural violence against women, systemic and normative inequalities between males and females in families and to redress the exclusion of women in decision making.” It is possible to see that these are specifically issues that directly touch on the dignity of Kenyan women.

## ***2.5 CONCLUSION***

In this chapter, we have seen how an African Women's approach within the broader context of Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs has the potential to open up possibilities of reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women. It may therefore be said that an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs seeks to read the Song with the aim of opening up conversations regarding matters of sex and sexuality in Kenya. Kenya is a context in which speaking about sex and sexuality is a taboo. This study proposes that when the Kenyan society opens up to speak about matters of sex and sexuality without being ashamed, then there is hope that it will be possible to address other patriarchal ideologies and injustices, which deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. For this reason this study wishes to elevate the experiences of Kenyan women in poetry as one means through which Kenyan women have an opportunity to expose patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize them.

Before turning to an interpretation of the text of the Song of Songs itself through the lens of an African Women's approach, it is important to first discuss the context(s) of the Kenyan society in which the Song of Songs will be read. Some of the cultural practices that are used to preserve and perpetuate patriarchy will in particular be outlined. Chapter Three will also show that patriarchy is a strong human construct and a systemic structure that within Kenyan society continues to be used in order to silence the voices of Kenyan women and to control their sexuality in the name of 'our culture.'

## CHAPTER THREE

### PATRIARCHY AND THE SEXUALITY OF KENYAN WOMEN

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two, we saw how Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song of Songs may inform an African Women's approach to the Song. Following an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs, this study will seek to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies that are responsible for the negative worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of Kenyan women. Interestingly in a study by Margarethe Silberschmidt (1999:75-87) she uses the context of the Kissi community in Kenyan to give a detailed discussion on the worldview of Kenyan men and their view of the sexuality of Kenyan women. She particularly uses marriage as an institution to point out that "marriage is one most important institution in which gender ideologies are produced and reproduced." "Marriage," she says "is fundamental for the construction of gender identity and sexuality; creating a close relationship between marriage and social values" (Silberschmidt 1999:75). As such, traditional Kenyan perspectives on marriage and relationships within it will be an important element of this chapter.

This chapter will also show how these patriarchal ideologies are responsible for muting the voices of Kenyan women, especially on matters of sex and sexuality in the name of 'our culture.' It seems that Kenyan patriarchal and societal structures indeed created a concentration of power in the hands of men and as a consequence have disempowered women. In many communities in Kenya, the muted voices of Kenyan women also continue to be a breeding ground for different forms of injustices such as sexual violence. Egodi Uchendu (2008:56) has pointed out that the number of rape crimes against women perpetrated by men in Kenya is a clear indication that masculine ideologies that enhance the dominance of men over women remain strong in the country.

Another example of how negative patriarchal worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women is portrayed plays out in injustice towards women is, according to Onyango (2008:61) found in the fact that "the male genitalia are always seen as a symbol of



domination. Thus while the female sexuality invites scorn the sexuality of men is celebrated” and this then explains why the voices that should have been raised against the excesses of sexual violence against women in Kenya are constantly silenced (Kanyoro 1996:5-7).

According to Waithera (2011: i), for example, “women in Kenya are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection because of powerful patriarchal structures that inundate women’s lives leaving them powerless, voiceless and disempowered.” According to Dianne Marie Green-Smith (2008:7), “it is estimated that 65% of all people living with HIV/ AIDS in Kenya are women”. Shisanya (2009:17) states that “nearly two-thirds of all HIV infections in Kenya are women.” “In 2005 alone,” Shisanya (2009:17) says, “the HIV prevalence in girls and women between 15-49 years of age was 8.7% while for men of the same age range it was only 4.6%. According to Shisanya (2009:17), “this disproportionate ratio whereby 1.9 females are infected compared to one male is higher than that found in other population studies.”

Notably, both Smith (2008) and Shisanya (2009) ascribe the vulnerability of Kenyan women to the influence of culture and patriarchal ideologies. Reflecting on ideology, power and sexual violence in Kenya, James Ogola Onyango (2008:60-61) observes that “over forty communities in Kenya are predominantly patriarchal.” “This is because,” Onyango (2008:61) says, “in these societies, the world view of men dominates and thus decides everything.”

It is in the name of ‘keeping to our culture’ that patriarchy has been the most powerful means through which Kenyan men have enhanced sexual control and domination of men over women. What complicates the issue is that Kenyan women have been socialized to believe that they are the custodians of culture.<sup>44</sup> It is from this context that Joe Jones (2002:158) defines patriarchy as the “systemic subordination of women to men.” She further argues that “it is that system of a social organization in which a man is understood to be superior over a woman and thus a natural head of the family.” Thus, being the custodians of culture, Kenyan women have been socially confined to the private sphere/household hence not claiming their rightful positions in society. In fact, in most communities in Kenya it is culturally perceived that a noble woman should not even be seen in public! In most cases, the public shpere is

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion on how Kenyan women have acted unconsciously to perpetuate stereotyped images to their own children in the name of being custodians of their culture, see Wanjohi (2005:21-30).

perceived to be the exclusive domain of men. This state of affairs is also clear, for example, from the following comment of Mwai (2000:16):

Scholars have adopted one of a number of theoretical bases that have been utilized to shed light on the status of the world of Kenyan women. Men are said to inhabit the public world of politics, religion and scholarship while women are confined to the private sphere of the home. Implicit in this dichotomy of public/ male, and private/ female is the assumption that power, viewed as belonging to the public/ political domain, is assumed to be a monopoly of men and that women, being confined to the domestic sphere are therefore powerless.

In this chapter different cultural practices that reflect a distinctive patriarchal ideology will be discussed from the perspective of three communities in Kenya, namely the Kikuyu, the Abaluhya and the Sabaot. These cultural practices will show the importance of understanding the link between gender relationships and cultural believes/practices. As Jane Onsongo (2011:14) points out, “in the Kenyan context there are customary laws and practices which determine the participation of women and men in the society.” As such, the discussion in this chapter will show how this is the case in the above three communities, but, in fact, that some of the issues reflected in the cultural practices of the three communities are also issues that many women in Kenya outside of these groups also struggle with.

By showing how patriarchy continues to shape the worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of Kenyan women, and in light of Kenyan women’s understanding of themselves as the custodians of culture, this chapter will in addition help to provide an overview of how patriarchal values are instilled in Kenyan boy and girl children. One will see how cultural values are carried on to the next generation through initiation ceremonies in particular, but also by way of other cultural practices thus perpetuating the control of Kenyan men over the sexuality of women and the view of women being of lower status than men. In the end, the value of this is to prepare the ground for accentuating the importance of reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women.

### 3.2 THE KIKUYU CULTURAL PRACTICE OF *NGUIKO* AND THE SEXUALITY OF WOMEN<sup>45</sup>

One cultural practice, known as the *Nguiko* among the Kikuyu community, is particularly reflective of this patriarchal ideology. According to Hannah Kinoti (1996:81), *Nguiko* “belonged properly to a post-initiation and a premarital period.” This particular cultural event among the Kikuyu is one in which “young men and women would enjoy the warmth of bodily closeness without the contact of the genitalia” (Kinoti 1996:81). The rules governing this cultural event, according to Kinoti (1996:81), are that “the contact of those parts of the body which facilitated procreation was to be out of bounds until after marriage.” There are four reasons why one may argue that this particular cultural practice from among the Kikuyu community was meant to control the sexuality of women.

First, the Kikuyu community did/does practice female genital mutilation (FGM) after the *Nguiko* ritual.<sup>46</sup> This particular initiation ceremony (FGM) was/is partly meant to control the sexual urges and therefore, the sexuality of women (Wangila 2007:46). This way, it is believed, after a woman is married, the absence of her husband will not lead her into having sexual pleasure with another man. To shed more light on the possibility that the *Nguiko*

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<sup>45</sup> According to Kinoti (1996:82), the word *Nguiko*; (*Ngweko* in Jomo Kenyatta 1965:150), “is derived from the verb *Kuguika*, which means to cover or to dress. The main idea was the pleasure derived from bodily contact of a young man and a young woman without sexual intercourse”.

<sup>46</sup> A detailed discussion on the issue of FMG falls outside the scope of this study, however commenting on the controversies surrounding female circumcision and the debate over the terminology that should be used, Wangila (2007:46) has pointed out several issues. First of all, she has observed that there are those who prefer to use the term Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This is a term that is in most case used specifically for female circumcision among the Kikuyu community. According to Wangila (2007:42), proponents of the term FGM argue that the term “best describes all forms of genital surgeries insisting that any definitive and irremediable removal of a healthy organ or tissue is inherently mutilation.” Those who prefer to use the term Female Circumcision (FC), on the other hand, “have rejected the use of the term FGM because of the bias associated with it” (Wangila 2007:47). “Western feminists who have preferred the term FGM,” Wangila (2007:47) further states, “are critiqued for projecting double standards by giving a blind eye to many bodily practices which prevail in the west, e.g. the piercing of the tongues, ears, noses, labia menorrhah, belly buttons; breast implants, face lifts and nose or lip reconstruction.” “Such critiques” according to Wangila, “claim that all mutilations in every culture should similarly be critiqued.” Secondly, Wangila (2007:47) also points out that “to avoid controversies, of terminologies, new terms have emerged which include: Female Genital Surgery, Ritual genital surgery, and sex mutilation.” For the purposes of this study, the term Female Circumcision (FC) will be used with specific reference to the Sabaot community for reasons that will be explained later in this chapter.

was/is meant to control the sexuality of women, the discussion of Mbiti (1967:128) regarding a similar practice among the Nandi community in Kenya will be helpful. Mbiti (1967:128) points out that among the Nandi community: “Long before the initiation and the beginning of the initiation when the girls are about ten years old, they have to sleep with the boys in places known as *Sikiroino*.”<sup>47</sup> Mbiti (1967:128) further points out that “this [practice] is obligatory and if the girls refuse it the boys may beat them without the intervention of the parents.” This particular cultural event, Mbiti (1967:128) informs us, “is meant to teach the girls how to behave towards men and how to control their sexual desire.” By analogy, *Nguiko* was/is also intended to control the sexuality of women.

Second, like many other Kenyan societies, the Kikuyu practice polygamy.<sup>48</sup> Within the context of polygamy, it is believed that it is especially important for the girls to go through this cultural practice in order to teach them how to control their sexuality as it will allow a polygamous husband to still visit the house of one wife, while the other wives patiently wait for him/for their turn. According to Kinoti (1996:82), in “Kikuyu conception; sex outside marriage especially if it is done by a woman was/is punishable by death.” One can only imagine that this will inhibit women’s urges to seek sexual satisfaction outside of marriage. However, a polygamous man is allowed to have multiple sexual relations while a woman is expected to control her sexual desire in order to please a (one) man. The *Nguiko* cultural practice is seen as one way in which, a woman is taught how to ‘control her sexual desire throughout the night.’

Thus, one sees the relationship between *Nguiko* and the control of the sexuality of women both before and after marriage as for the benefit of the self-interest of men. This too enforces the idea that the sexuality of a woman is in fact the property of a man. Kinoti

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<sup>47</sup> Defining *Sikiroino* from within the boundaries of the Nandi cultural practices, Mbiti (1969:128) points out that “*Sikiroino* is a house where girls and young men of a given village or group of villages may go and sleep at night.” Being part of the larger Kalenjin community just like that Nandi, the Sabaot people group also use the same term for the houses that are used for the same purpose.

<sup>48</sup>David Kagima (2009:124) points out that “Kikuyu culture [allows] a man to marry multiple wives”. Kagima (2009:124) says that he respects his father because the father upheld all Kikuyu traditions. “My father”, Kagima (2009:124) says, “practiced polygamy with three wives and I have 29 siblings.” The fact that this is a very recent documentation shows how serious the Kikuyu community take cultural norms. In this particular case, this is a cultural norm that serves to control the sexuality of women among the Kikuyu community as shown in the discussion above.

(1996:82) comments on the view that women are viewed as property for men and points out that among the Kikuyu, “a girl belongs to her parents and her extended family in her father’s clan until upon marriage.” Kinoti (1996:82) continues that “after marriage a girl belongs to her husband and the clan of her marriage.” One therefore sees that the Kikuyu has clear cultural practices meant to control the sexuality of Kikuyu women.

Third, virginity is highly regarded in the Kikuyu community. According to Kenyatta (1965:153), a girl among the Kikuyu community, “is expected to remain a virgin in the sense of having an imperforated hymnal membrane when she gets married.” Kenyatta (1965:153) argues that “any intercourse which may result in pregnancy before marriage is strictly forbidden.” To make sure that the *Nguiko* does not result in pregnancy, “*Nguiko* or fondling; was/is looked upon as a sacred act and one which must be done in a systematic and well organized manner” (Kenyatta 1965:150). According to Kenyatta (1965:150), this, for example implies that “the Kikuyu do not kiss girls on the lips as Europeans ... [who] are fond of kissing in public places.” Kenyatta (1965:150) notes that “the Kikuyu consider such public displays of affection vulgar and so all matters relating to sex are done according to a well-regulated code of convention.”

Thus, while virginity is upheld among the Kikuyu and this view may be seen as laudable, Carolyn Martin Shaw (1995:85) cautions there may be more to this view in that “wherever virginity is a custom, it brings prestige to the kinship group.” According to Shaw (1995:85), “prestige, associated with the attainment of socially valued goods, events or positions is an aspect of ideology, both representing and distorting reality so that virginity is seen as a woman’s virtue and men’s access to women.” In this way, Kikuyu men use virginity as a tool to access and control Kikuyu women’s sexuality, while Kikuyu women continue to uphold their virtue by respecting Kikuyu cultural norms in the name of, for example, *Nguiko*.

Furthermore, the virginity of young women also have economic implications for their families. According to Bryson Arthur (1998:65-6), “once a marriage contract is accepted it is sealed by the payment of part of the dowry. ... After the consummation of the marriage the virginity of the girl is proven by the demonstration of blood from the breaking of the hymen” or “by pregnancy and the birth of the first born baby.” It is these outcomes which will determine if the remaining dowry will be paid, according to Arthur. This shows that the

sexuality of women is 1) linked to the economic benefit that it gives to men and 2) to the potential of the procreation of a woman.

The above reflections on *Nguiko* also leaves one with many unanswered questions. The rules governing the *Nguiko* ritual were specifically designed by men.<sup>49</sup> Kinoti (1996:84) has argued that *Nguiko* “for contemporary Africa is meant to show that traditional African society has valued womanhood and motherhood.” However, in this study it is possible to see that the opposite is in fact the case - as *Nguiko* is meant to control the sexuality of women, hence reserving it for the enjoyment of men and procreation only. Furthermore, among the Kikuyu, a barren woman is treated as an outcast. A woman who is not able to have children of her own will not be given the proper burial ceremonies prescribed under the cultural norms of the Kikuyu people. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that sex beyond utility value among the Kikuyu is unthinkable.

Fourth, some Kikuyu proverbs also reflect the patriarchal attitudes regarding women’s sexuality. For instance, one of the Kikuyu proverbs clearly shows the scorn a barren woman receives as it says that “she whose children have died is better than she who is barren” (Wango 2009:257). In this particular proverb it is possible to see that the value of a woman’s sexuality is attached to her ability to produce children. In a patriarchal setting in which children belong to the father, it is right to say that such proverbs are only passed on from one generation to another for the benefit of men. This shows that even the value of the entire identity of a Kikuyu woman is solely attached to her reproductive abilities and not to any other contribution that she may make to society.

Moreover, in light of the discussion above it seems that only Kikuyu men have the right to enjoy sexual pleasure; women are often exposed to pressure to comply or to face sexual assault. For example, the Kikuyu also have proverbs that socialize men to use force

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<sup>49</sup>One finds that *Nguiko* is practiced primarily to fulfil the rules and regulations of the sexual relationship of young people among the Kikuyu. The rules are primarily prescribed by men and thus serve the function of controlling the sexuality of women. Understood this way, the pleasures of enjoying the warmth of the body parts of one another is not necessarily meant to bring pleasure to the two young adults. It is specifically done to fulfil the rules and regulations of the Kikuyu community concerning how to control the sexuality of women. The discussion on *Nguiko* has shown how this practice is used to carry on the control of the sexuality of women from one generation to another.

against women, while the proverbs socially construct women to be sexually submissive to men. One proverb that perpetuates sexual violence against women among the Kikuyu goes: “The resistance of women to something against their will is like a blunt shaver that refuses to shave” (Wango 2009:257). Unfortunately, such proverbs that perpetuate a negative worldview of men towards the sexuality of women keep on being orally passed on from one generation to another.

It is therefore evident that there exist cultural practices, norms, values and terms among the Kikuyu that perpetuate a negative worldview towards the sexuality of women. This calls for taking seriously a liberating and empowering approach towards the concept of sex and sexuality in the entire Kenyan patriarchal context. In the next section, it will be shown how social disparity in the Abaluhya community continues to perpetuate men’s dominance over the sexuality of women. In this community, too, social disparity continues to nurture a negative worldview of men towards the sexuality of women.

### ***3.3 SOCIAL DISPARITY IN THE ABALUHYA COMMUNITY***

Abaluhya communities are deeply patriarchal in nature (Cattell 2003:247).<sup>50</sup> According to Cattell (2003:247), “Abaluhya are a social and a political identity claimed by seventeen Kenyan ethnic communities.”<sup>51</sup> Even though diversity exists amongst the seventeen ethnic Abaluhya communities, they have some things in common. Cattell (2003:247) identifies one of the things that unite these communities despite their diversity, namely “patriarchy and the subordination of women.” Social disparity among the Abaluhya in Kenya is linked to male dominance over women. Shisanya (2009:126) for example, has observed that among the Abaluhya, “marriage gives men more power to control the sexuality of their wives.” Shisanya (2009:126) furthermore argues that “this power is reinforced through the payment of bride wealth that gives men ‘ownership’ of their wives.” Thus, many

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<sup>50</sup>Abaluhya are also known as Baluhya, Luhya or by the alternative spelling Abaluhya/ Luhya (see Cattell 2003:247).

<sup>51</sup>Cattell (2003:247) identifies the seventeen ethnic communities as the Bukusu (Kitosh, Vugusu), Idakho (Idaxo), Isukha (Isuxa), Kabras, Khayo, Kisa, Marachi, Maragoli (Avalogoli, Logoli) Marama, Nyala, Nyole (Nyore), Samia, Tachoni, Tiriki, Tsotso, Wanga (Bahanga) and Songa.

women have continued to suffer from, for example, sexual violence in marriages in the name of adhering to culture.

Cattell (2003:248-47) gives a detailed discussion on the measures that the Abaluhya have taken in the name of culture to reinforce the subordination of women. She notes, for example, that: "Gender differentiation is a strong characteristic of the Abaluhya culture and society" (2003:248-49). "Females and males are differentiated by attire, body ornament and postures, in work roles in the family and marital relationships; and in almost every aspect of life." According to Cattell (2003:249), it seems that girls are expected to show that they are different from men by, for example, bowing their heads before men, lowering their gaze and using a soft voice to almost everyone in the community. Men on the other hand are encouraged to exhibit postures of dominance and to use a voice that exhibits power, force and dominance. To maintain power imbalance, Cattell notes that "dominance and subordination are [also] enacted in seating arrangements." Cattell (2003:249) has observed that, "men sit on chairs while women seat on the ground with legs straight in front of them and crossed at the ankles." The main reason behind the seating arrangements is so that women do not expose their sexual parts to men, lest they lead men into temptation.

Several cultural beliefs/ practices have continued to perpetuate social disparity among the Abaluhya. The social disparity continues to be a breeding ground for the negative worldview of some Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women. According to Shisanya (2009:126), the Abaluhya practice "polygamy and other cultural practices such as widow guardianship allowing for multiple sexual partnerships."<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, "the culture of silence with the view to protecting men's families" as Shisanya (2009:126) points out,

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<sup>52</sup>Ogbu Kalu (2008:148) has observed that the African Instituted Churches (AIC's) are presumed to have opened up the space for women to participate in the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. However, it is worth noting that polygamy and other cultural practices which dehumanize not only the Abaluhya women but also many other women in Kenya are firmly sanctioned in African Instituted Churches in Kenya. This further perpetuates social disparity since social disparity continues to be sanctioned in the name of God. Sadly women who listen to the word of God as read and interpreted to them mostly by men are convinced that men have the authority to insure on behalf of God that Kenyan women respect culture. According to Kalu (2008:148), "women in AIC's are still restricted and controlled through the enforcement of Levitical prohibitions and gender ideologies sourced from Kenyan indigenous societies."



“prohibits many female survivors of sexual assault among the Abaluhya from seeking help or even speaking about sexual assault.” Some men have therefore interpreted the silence of women to imply that culture gives men the right to take a woman by force and to have sex with her on their (men’s) terms and conditions. Thus, while a man uses force to have sex with a woman, a woman’s ‘divine (!) duty’ is to submit.

Furthermore, in order to control women and their sexuality, which have the effect of perpetuating gender disparity, some men also ensure that they control the economic activities and income of women. Some men do this by deliberately not providing for the basic necessities of the family. This, of course, makes it very difficult for a mother to care for her children. Some women will therefore try to find a way of generating income. Women who have small scale farms try to practice small scale farming. Women will work hard on the farms to make sure that they generate income. This however also has a serious downside. Cattell (2003:250) has noted for example, that among the Abaluhya, “girls are highly valued for the labor they provide for the family.” When a man is looking for a wife to marry, priority is given to a girl who is hard working, especially on the farm. However, when it is time for selling the produce, it is the husband who receives the money.

In cases where the man does not directly obtain the income from the farm produce, he may ensure that he does not provide the basic necessities required in the house. This way all the money that the wife gets from the farm produce will be spent on the daily needs of the family. According to Shisanya (1996:62), “female control of the money from cash cropping is more commonly associated with expenditures on children and their education and on the domestic improvement.” Shisanya (1996:62), further points out that “owing to the economic gain from the efforts of women, Abaluhya men marry more than one wife for economic benefits.”

Thus, it is possible to see that, the value of a girl among the Abaluhya community is seen in terms of what value the girl will bring to a man. “For instance, a girl’s value is seen in terms of the bride wealth which benefits their fathers and brothers hence women’s humanity is reduced to a mere materialistic plane” (Shisanya 1996:62). All the investment that is done in a girl by her father is done with the intention of getting it back multiplied through her marriage. In short, according to Cattell (2003:250), “girls are valued for the ‘wealth’ (cattle

and money) their bride wealth will bring to their family, which in turn makes it possible for the brothers to also pay bride wealth so they can marry.”

If the girl happens to be well educated, the parents and especially the father and the brothers of the girl will demand a much higher bridal price, i.e. many more cows and goats. This they do even if the father of the girl did not economically contribute to her education! In contemporary Abaluhya society, “it is hard to find a man without a wife,” Cattell (2003:255) observes. This is not only because marriage is considered a rite of passage among the Abaluhya, but because of the economic gain it brings to that father of the girl. The stress that is laid on the amount of money or the number of cows and goats is thus a clear indication that a girls’ value is determined in terms of how much she will bring economic gain to her father and her brothers. Note: not to a girl’s mother or girl siblings as girls and mothers are completely disengaged from any bride wealth negotiations.<sup>53</sup>

After the girl is ‘properly’ married, that is, if all her bride wealth has been paid, the family into which she has been married also makes sure that they utilize her economically as much as they can, to get back what they have given to the parents of the girl in the form of bride wealth. Commenting on the socio-economic aspect of bride wealth, Shisanya (1996:62) points out that “for those who get married, the girl faces more challenges from two forces, from her natal and marital relatives. The father and the brothers demand the completion of bride wealth to enable her brothers to marry.” On the other hand, as Shisanya (1996:62) also points out, “the husband expects the wife to work hard on the farms to generate money for the family up-keep to compensate for the bride wealth that was paid to her father and her brothers.” In a case where a woman is employed, Shisanya (1996:62) further comments, “her salary goes directly to meet her family obligations ignoring her own needs.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See Shisanya (2009:126).

<sup>54</sup>This is a common practice among the Kisii in western Kenya too. Margrethe Silberschmidt (1999:44) for example, says that “when women get married women have to increase or at least maintain agricultural production, feed themselves and their children and perhaps other dependents, their absent spouses and sons while at the same time providing cash crops for exports or market sale.” This is an indication that social disparity, which is a tool that patriarchal societies use to control the sexuality of women, is not just a problem among the Abaluhya in Kenya. It is a problem that affects many other women in Kenya too.

The social-economic aspect of the life of a girl or woman in the Abaluhya community is, therefore, one strand of a well-organized patriarchal structure, which serves to perpetuate gender disparity and social disparity. Women will seldom have any extra income left to take care of herself and her own needs. In this way however, there not only develops an economic class distinction between men and women, but sometimes even also between women themselves. One would realize that those women who have triumphed against the odds to emerge at the top will have some extra income to take care of themselves. However, those who spent most of their time in the farms working under the exposure of the sun all day long will end up physically looking unattractive. The possibility of such women being looked down upon by the others is very high in such circumstances.

A further aspect of Abaluhya culture that influences the well-being of women is, according to Shisanya (1996:62), the fact that “women’s socio-economic struggles are worsened by the death of their spouses.” Shisanya (1996:62) notes that “Abaluhya widows are subjected to immense economic violence by the brothers-in-law.” The inheritance laws of the Abaluhya demand that the property of the deceased must be shared by close relatives. The widow has no say over the property of the husband, even if she is the one who has worked hard to bring wealth into the family. This custom has been subject to much misuse, especially in contemporary Kenya. This is because, in the name of keeping the property of the deceased within the family, the relatives of the deceased at times forcefully demanded to inherit the widow as well! In this way, the sexuality of a widow among the Abaluhya is kept directly under the control of the brothers or a partner of the deceased that has been identified by the tribal elders of a particular tribe.

According to Walsh, Jefferson and Sounders (2003:12), in Western Kenya, “women’s property rights are closely related to wife inheritance. Widows [are] not entitled to inherit property in their own right.” According to Walsh, Jefferson and Sounders (2003:12), it seems that being inherited seems to be the only way a widow among the Abaluhya can access the husband’s property or land.

Edwin Gwako (2002:9) for example, has observed that “Maragoli women farmers (one of the Abaluhya community) can only have indirect access to plots of land or the property of the deceased through their relationship with a man.” “Women are the key

farmers” Gwako (2002:9) notes. “However,” Gwako (2002:9) further says, “holders of titles to the land and controllers of income from farm products are men.” Thus, Abaluhya men control the sexuality of women through the socio-economic struggles of their women. Even though there are laws that protect the right of women to property ownership in Kenya, many women are not aware of this. It seems that to prevent women from claiming land and other property ownership, the Abaluhya in particular use customary laws.<sup>55</sup>

The discussion above shows that in Abaluhya society the excuse of keeping the property of the deceased within the family is used also to control the sexuality of women and thus to perpetuate social disparity. In cases where a widow agrees to marry a close relative of the deceased, she also will not be allowed to manage the property of her deceased husband. All the economic income associated with or generated by the property of the deceased will be directly controlled by the man who married his widow.

In cases where a widow refuses to be inherited via a close relative of the deceased and decides to remain within the family in order to manage the property of the deceased herself from within the family, she will not be allowed to marry a man of her choice or even to remain single. There will be constant visits from the relatives of the deceased who will forcefully demand to inherit her. Ultimately, when a widow continues to refuse to be inherited, all the property of the deceased will be forcefully taken from her and she will be evicted out of the house of the husband, together with her children.

Such a widow will in most cases find herself in dire circumstances facing total impoverishment with no material, social and economic support. This lack of economic support of such widows will further serve to perpetuate social disparity. Such a vulnerable state has in most cases led many widows to accept the custom of widow inheritance. Many widows continue to be subjected to customary laws for instance ‘cleansing’ rituals which involve having sex with a member of the deceased husband’s family or a stranger. What’s

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<sup>55</sup> For a detailed discussion on how many other communities in Kenya have used customary laws to prevent women from seeking constitutional intervention on land and property ownership see ([allafrica.com/stories/2011040312.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/2011040312.html)). In this source one also finds the information on how many other Kenyan women continue to remain ignorant of their right to property and particularly land ownership.

more, widows continue to be looked upon with suspicion as they are often considered evil and having the potential to bring bad luck to the family of the deceased.<sup>56</sup>

It is from the above and similar contexts that Shisanya (2009:10) discusses the relationship between the spread of HIV and AIDS and some cultural practices in western Kenya, a region where the majority of inhabitants are Abaluhya. Shisanya points out that, wife inheritance is one of the factors that have contributed to the rapid spread of HIV and AIDS among the Abaluhya. This is an indication that the Abaluhya uses some cultural practices to control the sexuality of women in the name of ‘our culture’. It is under such circumstances that one sees the relationship between patriarchy and the negative worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women. Naming and exposing such cultural practices in the Abaluhya community is therefore aimed at encouraging Abaluhya women to overcome the stereotyping by men. As Shisanya (1996:61) rightly points out “women must break through these established stereotypes with a view to establish their human dignity and reconstructing their identity even in the midst of social disparities.”

From the discussion on the social disparity among the Abaluhya, it is possible to see that there exist unequal treatment and perceptions of Abaluhya men towards women based on their gender. The discussion has further shown that social disparity arises from gender roles and hierarchical gender binary systems that reflect inequalities. These inequalities then manifest in numerous dimensions of the daily lives of the Abaluhya women – especially those regarding their sexuality. In the next section, I will highlight the terms and practices that the men among the Sabaot community use to propagate gender disparity and to stereotype women as ways to control the sexuality of Sabaot women and to perpetuate a negative worldview towards the sexuality of women.

### ***3.4 FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AMONG THE SABAOT COMMUNITY***

The Sabaots are a small Kalenjin community who live on the slopes of Mt. Elgon. Some of them live along the Mau escapement in the Molo constituency (see Throup &

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed discussion on the plight of widows generally in Kenya see ([www.the-star.co.ke/news/article-125765/plight-widows-kenya-dire](http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/article-125765/plight-widows-kenya-dire)).

Hornsby 1998:211). The Sabaot community practices female circumcision (see Mbiti 1969:127).<sup>57</sup> However, in addition to being performed as preparation for housewifery and adulthood, the Sabaot community also practices female circumcision to instil bravery in women, to harden a girl so that she may endure the hardships and difficulty that she might undergo at the hands of her husband and his family.<sup>58</sup>

The Sabaot girl will in most cases be brave enough to endure the painful experiences associated with female circumcision. However, this does not guarantee her social status in the society. She will still be viewed in terms of the value she will later add to the family of her husband through procreation. If she does not conceive children, she will be looked down upon and during circumcision ceremonies; the community will deliberately compose songs that reflect the mockery of the barren women in the community.

To help prepare the girls for such and other hardships in marriage, a variety of other songs are also sung to her during the ritual. One of the most prominent songs that are sung during circumcision ceremonies is: *Kechemcheme, Kechemcheme Chebeet; Yehoe cham-chama Chebbet.-Menget ganywa semeberisio-Chebet; yehoe Cham-chama Chebeet.* (In translation: 'We have to test a girl if she can sustain the pressure of sexual endeavors with her husband.') Apart from such songs, the preparation for a girl to be circumcised is a very painful experience. The night before the day of the operation, an appointed specialized woman stings the clitoris of the girl who will be initiated three times with a stinging nettle through the night before she is circumcised the following morning. This is expected to stimulate bravery in the girl, so that she can endure the painful process of circumcision. The following morning, the girl will be brought out and there will also be some two or three men present during the process who will have been appointed to stand by and make sure that the girl does not exhibit any signs of cowardice.

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<sup>57</sup> The word Female Circumcision has been used specifically in this context within the context of this particular initiation ceremony among the Sabaot Community. This is in line with the fact that the practice is done to women partly to enhance the bravery of a man in a woman. However, in some communities e.g. the Kikuyu, the practice is preferably called, Female Genital Mutilation (see Jomo Kenyatta 1939) (cf. also footnote 77 above)

<sup>58</sup> See Wangila (2007:26) for a detailed discussion on how female circumcision is used by deferent communities to harden women, so that the women from communities that circumcise girls can be prepared to endure the difficulty of a marriage life, including sexual violence.

During the operation, the girl lies with her legs wide apart before a crowd of onlookers. If the girl shows any signs of cowardice during the operation, it is the responsibility of the appointed men to step on her with their feet, pressing her to the ground until the operation is over. There are specific songs that will be sung to the girl who has shown signs of fear, ridiculing her such as *Chebutai-ee hoye hoyee~yehoeha ha-ha Mome sorin benthab-tenyoo Ha-haa*. (In translation: “The coward, the coward cannot eat the meat of our cow.”). In most cases men will not want to marry her as it is believed that the girl’s own children will also not be brave during their circumcision either.

Listening to the songs mentioned above, one encounters terms, actions and practices that express male views of women. Men also use such terms and practices to control the sexuality of women and to perpetuate a negative worldview towards the sexuality of women. It leaves no room for dialogue on what the Sabaot girl herself does not want or like. It is these terms, actions and practices that continue to perpetuate gender disparity among the Sabaot people. Furthermore, there is a general consensus among the Sabaot that female circumcision is also done to help control the sexual urges of women. Given that the Sabaot community is also pastoralist, men (husbands) will travel long distances in search of pasture and water for their animals without worrying that their wives will have sexual urges to be satisfied by other men.

Finally, as was the case in the other communities discussed above, the value of Sabaot women is also attached to the value they give in terms of producing children. This serves to show that Sabaot girls and women do not have the opportunity to make decisions regarding their sexuality and therefore do not enjoy their sexual encounters even in marriage. Because the husband will have fulfilled the entire dowry requirements demanded by the father and the brothers of the girl, this girl will not have a say in her sexual relationship with her husband. She will always give in to the sexual demands, terms and conditions of her husband, seeing as the husband has ‘paid for her sexuality’ by way of the dowry. Thus, the husband will also try to beget as many children as possible from that girl as it is believed that the more children one has, the greater the potential for labor in terms of tilling the land, so that the husband can gain economically through agriculture. With many children, the man will not have to hire people to till the land.

Commenting on the impact of female circumcision to the decision of the girl in marriage, Wangila (2007:27) has pointed out that “in communities where initiation rites are practiced, girls are encouraged to marry immediately after seclusion.” “This is because” Wangila (2007:27) says, “virginity, a basis for honour and a handsome dowry, is seen as an important gift a girl can grant her parents.” Wangila (2007:27) further says that “in some communities, girls are betrothed as early as ten years of age, and immediately after initiation rites they move in with their husbands.” Accordingly, in Sabaot society, for example, after a girl has been circumcised, preparations for her to be given out for marriage will ensue. In most cases the parents of the girl will choose a partner for her. The partner is often chosen according to his economic status. In such a case, the consent of the girl is not sought. After the partner has been chosen, the terms for the marriage will be discussed (without the participation of the girl), and the girl will be shown the man whom she is to marry.

In some cases, girls end up in polygamous marriages, which pose its own set of challenges to these girls. Among the Sabaot, in most cases when a woman in a polygamous marriage gives birth, the husband will move to the house of one of his other wives for a good number of years. When the husband returns to the woman who had given birth, he specifically does so with one aim, i.e., to impregnate his wife again and it thus happens that the husband again moves out and thus the cycle continues.

Among the Sabaot, female circumcision “is also widely believed to improve the fertility of a woman, thereby making a woman more attractive for marriage” (Abusharaf 2006:467). The fruit of the improved fertility is expected to be seen through the number of children that a Sabaot woman has. In most cases, the least number of children a Sabaot woman is expected to give birth to is nine. Whenever a woman gives birth to more children, terms such as *chebo~muren* (‘the daughter of a man’) are used to refer to her. Hearing such terms and encountering such practices, one sees that the identity of a Sabaot woman is determined by the value that she brings to a man through procreation. This way, it becomes difficult for a Sabaot girl to have power and control over her body and her sexuality.



### 3.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we saw how the patriarchal societal setting in Kenya continues to perpetuate male dominance over women. We have also seen evidence of socially-constructed norms that for long have served to silence Kenyan women. In the express words of Wangila, among the Kikuyu, for example, “a good wife is one who perseveres, does not answer back, expresses no opinion one who is seen but not heard” (Wangila 2007:26). These are the norms that have also continued to keep most Kenyan women restricted to the ‘private’ (domestic/family) sphere of life.<sup>59</sup>

Even though a number of Kenyan women attempted against the odds to emerge at the top of spaces socially reserved for Kenyan men, the patriarchal societal setting is yet to make space available for Kenyan women so that their voices can be heard. The patriarchal setting continues to be a stumbling block that hinders Kenyan women from expressing themselves freely everywhere, anywhere and anytime. Additionally, such cultural practices that perpetuate male dominance over women are very difficult to root out. Thus, while the negative worldview towards the sexuality of women continues to be passed on from one generation to another; patriarchy, the breeding ground of this negative worldview remains unchallenged and un-criticized. Patriarchy continues to be nurtured in the name of ‘our culture.’ Unfortunately, the cultural practices are also increasingly manifested in taking on new or modified ways in the contemporary society, ways that find expression in extreme forms of sexual violence against women, extreme forms of social disparity and gender discrimination against women.<sup>60</sup>

Even so as we will see in the next chapter and as happened in the Song of Songs the voices of Kenyan women may be heard and their experiences may be reflected in poetry. According to Mwai (2000:19), it is through poetry that the voices of Kenyan women may be

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<sup>59</sup> Among the Kikuyu community for example, “a good wife is one who perseveres, does not answer back, expresses no opinion one who is seen but not heard” (Wangila 2007:26).

<sup>60</sup> One of the daily newspapers in Kenya reports that a polygamous man killed his wife for allegedly having an extramarital affair. This is a clear indication that men in Kenya feel that the women have no control over their sexuality. It therefore seems right for a man to engage in multiple sexual relationships, while a woman is expected to control her sexual feelings. (See [www.standardmedia.co.ke/newmainsite/?articleID...story...man...wife...](http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/newmainsite/?articleID...story...man...wife...) [accessed October 23, 2013]).

found “express[ing] individual and collective feelings, attitudes and beliefs” In this way Kenyan women are heard taking “the ‘conflict and the disillusionment’ themes ... extended ... into new areas of social life, especially gender roles, bringing a female point of view to the issues of cultural conflict and economic change” (O’Barr 1987:57)..

## CHAPTER FOUR

### KENYAN WOMEN AND KENYAN POETRY

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

As was seen in Chapter One of this study, a primary methodological point of departure in this study is the belief, as proposed by Emmanuel Ngara (1990:7), that it is the history and social conditions of Africa that gave and gives rise to its literature, and in the words of Mutiso (2011:1), that “as a verbal art, poetry provides a people with the platform for recording their daily experiences” or: This chapter will present the voices of Kenyan women in examples from Kenyan poetry. This will be done with particular reference to the patriarchal contexts which even today, Kenya women struggle with.

It was shown in Chapter Three of this study that the systemic and social human constructs embedded in patriarchal structures are responsible for the negative worldview of many Kenyan men towards the sexuality of Kenyan women. The aim of this chapter is to show how, in spite of the patriarchal contexts with which Kenyan women struggle, one still finds the voices of Kenyan women expressing their experiences in the poetry in spite of a cultural milieu that continues to demand their silence. Through the poems, one may also better understand the Kenyan worldview, the images and the perceptions of men towards women.

Methodologically, the value of this chapter is that it serves as an entry point for encountering the female voice in the Song of Songs in the following chapter (Chapter Five) as it will be shown that the female voice in the Song of Songs is one that also uses poetry as a means of voicing issues pertaining to sex, sexuality and romantic love in her (also highly patriarchal) society.

As has been repeatedly shown in earlier chapters, even though some Kenyan women express themselves through poetry, in many communities in Kenya, women are not allowed to speak before men and especially not in public. Speaking on the need for women to break their long silence by way of writing, Kanyoro (1996:5) states that “if today African Women

are able to name the oppressive cultural aspects of their societies it has not come easily.” She continues by emphasising that, “[f]or centuries [Kenyan] women have continued to preserve cultural prescriptions which most of them believe, manage their lives” (1996:5). Precisely because of the fear of ‘break[ing] the taboos’, Kenyan women “continue to remain silent acting without questioning” (Kanyoro 1996:5).

In this chapter, one will encounter a selection of poems that portray the strength of the voices of Kenyan women across Kenya. Some of these poems will be the fruit of the pens of Kenyan women, however, some will be from the pens of male poets in which space has been created for women to speak. In the latter poems, such as the poignant, “She Came to Cook” by J. Serunjogi in section 4.3.5 below, the plight of a Kenyan mother in the midst of an abusive marriage finds expression in a heartrendering conversation with her son, presumably the poet when still a boy. According to Mwai (2000:14), it is through “women-specific ritual songs and poems that women’s poetic creations also harmonize the male/ female distinctions into a social whole.” Ultimately, this chapter proposes that poetry constitutes one mode in which Kenyan women may courageously act as agents of change in a society that constantly silences these very voices (see O’Barr 1987:57).

#### ***4.2 THE CONTEXT OF AND REASONS FOR THE CHOICE OF KENYAN POETRY IN THIS STUDY***

In order to understand the importance of the use of poetry in the Kenyan context as an authentic way of accessing the experiences of Kenyan women, it is worth noting that Jenifer Browdy de Hernandez, Pauline Dongala, Omotayao Jolaosho and Anne Serafin (2010:3) point out that [Kenyan] women are too often presented in scholarly and media accounts as passive, pathetic victims of harsh circumstances, rather than as autonomous creative agents who are making positive changes to their lives and the lives of others. In stark contrast to this, in the poems used in this chapter, one sees that Kenyan women are after all not passive and pathetic victims of injustice; that there may just be a long tradition of continued and relentless resistance from the margins against gender-based injustice. The poems in this chapter have been selected precisely to show how the voices of Kenyan women over time may be found in resisting acts of indignity while, at the same time, “project[ing] their social vision [and]

give[ing] their poetry a liberating function in society” (Mutiso, 2011:1). As such, the voices of Kenyan women through poetry may provide a platform of an interaction between gender, sex and sexuality.

This chapter, in fact, the study as a whole, has been undertaken on the assumption that the voices of Kenyan women in poetry articulate both the urgency and the importance of reception and production of poetry, and that the choice of poems in this study is also tied to the politics of intervention through writing (on the latter, see Linda A. Kinnahan, 2004:20). According to Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosho and Serafin (2010:7), writing is an essential element of effective resistance. Documenting resistance is a process of discovery, emancipation, reclaiming and reconstructing ones identity;<sup>61</sup> it is about reclaiming one’s dignity, privacy and freedom as a (Kenyan) woman and as a human being; it is about emancipating oneself from historical, structural and systematic abuse, oppression and discrimination; it is about discovering one’s inner strength, uniqueness and interdependence on others, collectively as women.

Unfortunately, because of the multi-layered patriarchal structures that continue to dominate the sphere of modern scholarship in Kenya, modern literary research is mostly still conducted by men in Kenya. Thus, it seems that the voices of women, often found in oral [Kenyan] traditions, have either been largely neglected in research studies or have been reflected upon by men. In his master’s study at the University of Nairobi, Patrick Mutiso (2011:1) laments that after a decade has passed, his was the first study to focus on the work of Kenyan women authors of the new century! Mutiso is, of course also a male scholar and the research that has been done on *written* Kenyan poetry has almost exclusively been done on the work of male poets – one of the few exceptions is the study done by Mwai (2000) also referred to in this study. Even in cases where oral traditions of female Kenyan poetry were written down in the past, this has also been always done by men.

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.osisa.org/buwa/regional/review-african-women-writing-resistance-contemporary-voices> [accessed July 18, 2013].

It remains a sad fact that, unlike in some other African countries – Nigeria and Ghana, for example – where women’s written poetry can even be accessed electronically,<sup>62</sup> the real voices of Kenyan women that have been documented in the past are scarce and difficult to access<sup>63</sup> as not only scholarly research on, but especially the production of (written) poetry has to a large degree remained a privilege of men. In fact, before 1972 there has been very little, almost no, written poetry produced by Kenyan women.<sup>64</sup> This does not mean it does not exist at all, though, and for this reason the selection of the poems used in this chapter range from as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>65</sup> to the present.<sup>66</sup> This is done partly in order to appreciate that the even if the opportunities were rare, there is a longstanding tradition of a need for Kenyan women to educate society on matters of sex and sexuality through their voices in poetry (albeit mostly orally).

The poetic creation of women even in oral transmission can therefore be understood as a sign of women’s consciousness of their marginalization, subjugation and oppression; a consciousness that may motivate them into taking a bold step in order to right the wrongs done to them (see Sotunsa 2008:2-3). One may say that these written and oral voices have triumphed against the odds to sustain the spirit of the resistance of Kenyan women against indignity. On the other hand, this selection across almost two centuries also shows that the patriarchal and dehumanizing context in which many Kenyan women find themselves has on the whole shown little improvement.

The choice of poems in this chapter was also determined by the way in which they reflect four core elements that may help one to understand the context of the voices of Kenyan women in poetry.

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<sup>62</sup> See examples of Nigerian and Ghanaian artistic creation in poetry in R. Victoria Arana (2008), Gloria MT Emezue (2008) and Ernest N. Emenyonu (2004) among others.

<sup>63</sup> Kathleen Fraser (2004:xiv) for example also shares the concern that women’s poetic creation continue to be neglected. Yet women poets continue to be marginalized in literary history and current formulations of poetics.

<sup>64</sup> See ([journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/9i/8\\_jama.pdf](http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/9i/8_jama.pdf) [accessed October 14, 2013])

<sup>65</sup> See the poem by Binti Msham, “The Daughter” in section 4.3.1 of this chapter.

<sup>66</sup> Some even suggest that the roots of this spirit of asserting the strength, resilience and resistance of women’s voices in poetry goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, albeit not in written form. Cf. Chipasula, 2009:7

First, is the poem's expression of the predicament of women as a marginalized section of society. In Kenya, as in many African countries the stratification of space is organised in such a way that the society puts men at the upper strata while women automatically are delegated to the lower strata. Confined to these strata, women remain represented as bad, even sub-human, only there to fulfil sexual needs of men; commodities and symbols of men's sexual pride and power; and the emotional and hysterical weaker sex. It is generally exactly by these kinds of stereotyping that gender inequalities in Kenya and other African countries continue to be justified (see, for example, Loise, 1999:834).

Second, the poems have been selected to reflect how poetry has continued to shape and reshape the notion of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. The voices of Kenyan women in this chapter unveils the prejudice underlying the creation and reception of the art of poetry, but also exposes how linguistic tools continue to be used to promote and transmit societal values at the same time provide people with a platform for recording their daily experiences.<sup>67</sup>

Structurally, according to Mutiso (2011:1), "owing to its brevity and precision in word choice, poetry is appropriate for responding with immediacy to all kinds of situations; be they of high hopes or of utter helplessness. In this way, it serves to mirror society by reflecting the reality of the country." In its brevity and precision, the voices of Kenyan women in poetry reveal a sophistication in overall transmission that 'cheats' their patriarchal context. The poems' preference for apparent short and simple diction, the conversational tone and the exemplary diversity portrayed in the experiences of Kenyan women in poetry, in this way serves as a counter-hegemony discourse against patriarchy in order to create space for women in a male dominated world of poetry. According to Kinnahan (2004:18), poets offer new histories and ideas about language, gender and create occasions for complex considerations of self, subject, gender and writing. This, too, is an objective of this study.

Third, related to the above is the fact that the poems were selected because of the colloquial nature of the language and cadence of the Kenyan women's voices found in them. The voices are multicultural, yet they are also inclusive, optimizing the connectedness of

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<sup>67</sup> See Kyalo in <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/3338> and Mutiso on <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/3338/Abstract.pdf?sequence=1> [accessed July 20, 2014]

Kenyan women, a connectedness that express the ultimate reality of the gender injustice that they experience. One element of this injustice is, according to Rasna Warah (2011:126), for example, domestic and sexual violence, which is a dominant theme in the stories and voices of many Kenyan women in poetry as in the poems in this chapter. However, the poems in this chapter also celebrate youthful unmarried love and project emotions, and in this they demonstrate that taboos can be broken in poetry (see Chipasula 2009:2).

Fourth, the poems have been chosen to reflect a sustained spirit of resilience and resistance against acts of indignity against Kenyan women. The voices of Kenyan women in this chapter is therefore a symbol of the importance of change, the need for the expansion of human choice and autonomy – especially in matters of sex and sexuality – and the elimination of gender stratification. Seen this way, one may understand that the Kenyan patriarchal context ironically has nurtured the spirit of Kenyan women’s advocacy for social equality.

Finally, all being said and on a positive note, there are signs that Kenyan women poets are slowly making inroads into a male-dominated world of published poetry. This is, for example, seen in the study of Patrick Mutiso<sup>68</sup> referred to above on the work of Phyllis Muthoni, Njeri Wangari and Sitawa Namwalie (also see James 1990:5 on an increased conscience among some Kenyan women since the 1980s of the communicative power of poetry on issues that directly and indirectly affect them). Today, Kenya as a nation is investing a lot in poetry. This is done, for example, through annual interschool competitions (Arthur Luvai 2004: ix). In the annual interschool competition, the school that utilizes poetry to inform society is crowned the winner. Owing to the power of voice in poetry, some of the radio stations in Kenyan have a special programme every Saturday on the power of voice through poetry.

It is hoped that the voices of women and girl children will use these opportunities to have their voices heard in a country where it is much needed. Additionally, both church and other societal institutions are increasingly allowing women to recite and sing poems at public gatherings. In recent years, the voices of Kenyan women in poetry have thus used these platforms to educate and sensitize the public on matters of sex and sexuality – for example

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<sup>68</sup> [erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/3338/Abstract.pdf?...1](http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/3338/Abstract.pdf?...1)[accessed July 28, 2014]



with regard to the spread of HIV/AIDS.<sup>69</sup> In light of this slow progress this study, undertaken from an African Women's Theological perspective and in conversation with the Song of Songs and selected poems in the Kenyan literary tradition, hopes to contribute to these small beginnings and to strengthen this discourse.

#### ***4.3 PRESENTING THE STRENGTH OF KENYAN WOMEN'S VOICES IN POETRY***

When one speaks of Kenyan women,<sup>70</sup> one should keep in mind the great diversity of women and the diversity of cultural practices they are subjected to in mind. Kenyans are a nation of forty-two tribes! Each tribe has her own vernacular language. This basically means that there are also about forty-two local languages in Kenya.

However, the main unifying factor for Kenyan people and by extension Kenyan women, has been observed as Kiswahili language.<sup>71</sup> Kenyans as a nation are therefore united by Kiswahili language in general. Furthermore, Kenyan women are characterized and therefore united by one thing in particular, and that is their love of poetry and even to be specific, this does not mean that all Kenyan women write and recite poems. Those who do not recite and or write poems have given their full support to those few women who do (see Gikandi & Mwangi 1974:140) and may contribute to the content or messages contained in the oral poetry that may eventually be recited in public and eventually may even be written down (see Healey 2005). And, since most of the poems are recited in Kiswahili language, it makes it possible for almost everybody to hear and understand what is being said.

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<sup>69</sup> See ([www.academia.edu/.../Songs\\_of\\_an\\_Epidemic\\_-\\_Responding\\_to\\_HIV](http://www.academia.edu/.../Songs_of_an_Epidemic_-_Responding_to_HIV)) [accessed July 28, 2014]

<sup>70</sup>Commenting on the socio-economic struggles of Kenyan women, Neal Sobania (2003:135) has argued that "Kenyan women provide the largest measure of labor both at the rural level and at the same time women are the backbone of the urban economy." For Sobania (2003:135), one of the factors helping to create this situation is that gender divisions of labor (those tasks assigned culturally to women; and those assigned to men), assigns productive and reproductive activities to women.

<sup>71</sup>Simiyu Wandibba and Joseph Thurania (2005:231) have pointed out that Kenyans use English and Kiswahili alongside other languages to communicate; English being the official language, whereas Kiswahili is the national language. Being a national language, Kiswahili serves as a unifying factor among the different communities in Kenya.

It seems true what Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1998:159) alleges, namely that poetry stretches people's imaginations. According to Wilson-Tagoe, "poetry activates the consciousness of people both as a reflection of the people's life and as a transcendental and self-igniting phenomenon." Poetry therefore remains a primary example through which Kenyan women articulate their stories of social struggles. Kenyan women have taken advantage of the fact that most people in Kenya love to read and listen to poems. They have therefore used poetry to express their opinions on everyday experiences and their surroundings. But Kenyan women have also used the art of poetry to artistically pass on information from one generation to another.

By means of poetry, Kenyan women have denounced traditional limitations responsible for the negative presentations of their sexuality, which often results in sexual violence.<sup>72</sup> Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (2006:245) for example, have pointed out that voices of Kenyan women in poems "condemn the Kenyan government for turning a blind eye to the plight of status-less refugees under its jurisdiction, but to also articulate their daily realities of life." Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky (2006:245) further say that these same Kenyan women's voices have also "acknowledged and appreciated the same government for willing to settle refugees even if it is in closed refugee camps." Kenyan women's voices have thus creatively utilized or have been utilized to speak through poetry in a society that has consciously or unconsciously silenced the voices of women.

Furthermore, through poetry, Kenyan women's voices seek to overcome pain. Poetry addresses the reality of sexual violence (that so often crushes the dignity of women) in ways that reflect a strong commitment to life.<sup>73</sup> In poems, one finds the urge for transformation that opens up possibilities for newness. This is a newness that hopes for a Kenyan community in which every human being can live with dignity. When Kenyan women speak through or in poetry, one sees that no amount of control or injustice can stop them from striving to live

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<sup>72</sup> For a detailed discussion on the traditional limitations that are responsible for the negative presentation of the sexuality of Kenyan women, which have perpetrated sexual violence against many Kenyan women, see Onyango (2008:59-63).

<sup>73</sup> To see how the voices of most Kenyan women have continued to reflect a cheerful and energetic view of life, even when one sees pain in what they articulate, see Kanyoro (1996:5), Story 1, obtained from an interview with Aliviza-kenya.

with dignity. It is often quite risky for a woman to speak in a patriarchal setting. But in the voices of Kenyan women in poems, these women are unequivocally saying that Kenya as a society is not complete until Kenyan women are also treated with dignity.

With this in mind what follows is a thematic discussion of selected Kenyan poems in which the voices of Kenyan women are heard. In the first section, one will encounter some love poetry, specifically poetry that prepares a girl for marriage. According to Leteipa Sunkuli and Simon Okumba Niruka (1990:50); in Kenya, “poems about love ... expresses[s] the art of seduction, praise, admiration nostalgia, anguish and loss.” The authors further states that there are also “poems that deal with dejection about the loved person or prepares one for the art of seduction.” According to Sunkuli and Niruka (1990:50), “these poems can be performed individually or in a group. The poems can also be performed privately or in the public.” In some cases though, poems expressing the art of seduction are taught by the mothers to their girls, usually in private.

Following the poem that sings about the art of seduction, are poems that deal with deferent real life situations that many Kenyan women would identify with. Some of the poems deal with the relationship between the concept of beauty and the worldview of some Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women; there are poems that deal with verbal, psychological and emotional violence, sexual violence, and the impact of domestic violence upon the children. All these themes have a common aim, namely to show how the relationship between patriarchy and the voices of Kenyan women through poetry and how the latter exposes the former.

#### ***4.3.1 Love Poetry and the Art of Seduction***

According to Renate Papke (2008:168), Mwana Kupona Binti Msham (ca. 1810 – ca. 1860) “is considered to be one of the early female poets of the nineteenth century.” She comes from the Swahili speaking community in Kenya. In one of her poems to her daughter, Binti Msham writes to prepare her daughter for marriage. In the poem “Daughter,” she indicates how one may speak without fear through poetry about issues of sex and sexuality. Binti Msham does this as she prepares her daughter for her mature, sexual life. As is known by now, in many communities in Kenya it is a taboo to speak about issues of sex and

sexuality in the ordinary Kenyan life.<sup>74</sup> However, here Binti Msham (almost two centuries ago!) uses poetry to speak about issues of sex and sexuality to her daughter. According to Papke (2008:168), what she in fact is doing is “preparing her daughter gently and carefully into the art of seduction”:

... Daughter,  
 Take this amulet and tie it with a cord  
 I will make you a chain of cord and pearl to glow on your neck  
 I will dress you nobly, a gold clasp too-fine,  
 Without flaw to keep with you always  
 When you bath, sprinkle perfume,  
 Weave your hair in braids strings jasmine for the counterpane,  
 Wear your cloths like a bride,  
 For your feet anklets; bracelets for your arms ...

In the poem “Daughter,” one sees that a mother instructs her daughter, who is in love. She teaches her how to dress in order to be attractive. It seems probable that Binti Msham as a mother takes part in making sure that her daughter looks as attractive as possible. This can be seen from the words “I will make you a chain of cord and a pearl to glow on your neck.” Apart from making decorative ornaments for her girl, the mother tutors her daughter on what to do after she has taken a bath. It seems that just taking a bath is not enough in Binti Msham’s view. For a seductive and romantic affair, she instructs her daughter to sprinkle perfume on herself and weave her hair.

In other words, every part of her body is important to make her as attractive and as lovely as possible. In this way, one sees the connection between love poems, issues of sex and sexuality, the art of seduction and a gentle way of passing on information. Thus, while Papke (2008:169) sees Binti Msham’s Poem as a “beautiful sensual feminine piece of poetry

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<sup>74</sup> The artistic creation of Kenyan women in poetry therefore enables Kenyan women to reconcile what the society teaches their daughters to see as an abomination to speak about. Kenyan women present the sexuality of Kenyan women positively by affirming that sexuality is a positive aspect of the identity of a woman. It is such a power of voice in poetry that continues to give some Kenyan women an unshakable confidence to find voice in order to name, expose and criticize patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize women.

about a mother's love and pride to her daughter", one could add that the poem is a deviation from "traditional beliefs that perceive love songs/ poems, as an exclusively male genre because it is traditionally believed that men must conduct courtship as an important prelude to marriage" (Chipasula 2009:7). One thus finds here a very early example of a women's perspective on love and sexual attraction, but also a very rare example of it having been written down. According to Chipasula (2009:7) there however exists a rich women's tradition of *oral* love poems – "many African folk traditions are rich repositories of women's love poems" – and may very well over the centuries inspired further oral love poem traditions and may even inspire contemporary African women poets to also write love poetry.

In the poem "Daughter," it is possible to hear the voice of a Kenyan woman who understands her society and therefore gradually prepares her daughter for this society. In the society of the Swahili-speaking community in Kenya (even today), if a girl (a married wife) does not keep herself as attractive as possible and in a seductive mood for her husband, the husband has the right to divorce her and marry another wife. This is done by only pronouncing *talaka* (divorce) three times. According to Hirsch (1998:3), for example, "The images of a Muslim husband pronouncing divorce and his persevering wife silently accepting the decree are ideologically salient subject positions in Kenyan Swahili society." Thus, from the poem "Daughter," it seems probable that Binti Msham knows all too well and probably made her preparation of her daughter for married life all the more important to her and made it imperative to include lessons on the art of seduction and sexual matters during her life in marriage. It is difficult to imagine that what one reads of here is an isolated case. In fact, what is expressed here in writing is probably something that has been expressed orally to generations of Swahili women on the eve of married life. In this way generations of Swahili mothers would have prepared their daughters for their entrance into a new stage of life within a patriarchal society where men held a negative worldview towards the sexuality of women.

Hirsch (1998:2) has argued that some poems stemming from a patriarchal setting of the Swahili society have *constantly* portrayed women as "victims of patriarchal Islamic Laws that regulate them into homes and behind veils." Notably though, is the fact that the poem "Daughter," shows that some Swahili women are not passive recipients of patriarchal ideologies. Papke (2008:168) therefore comments on the important role that poetry stemming from the experiences of women plays in shaping the future lives of individuals in a given

society. Papke argues that “poetry is the way we help give names to the nameless so that one can start thinking about giving names to the nameless.” Seen this way, poetry forms the basis through which Kenyan women get the opportunity to name and expose patriarchal ideologies that dehumanize women.

For Papke (2008:168), “children cannot dream unless they are nourished.” Papke therefore commends women for speaking through poetry “to feed their children with real food without which their dreams will not be different from the dreams of their struggling mothers.” One sees in the poem of Binti Msham, “Daughter,” the important role of poetry in the lives of Kenyan women to nourish and feed the future dreams of their children. This, some Kenyan women do not just do only for the sake of their own (girl) children, but for all their fellow women and for society as a whole by way of making a positive change to it.

#### ***4.3.2 Beauty, Gender and Sexuality in Kenyan Women’s Poetry***

The next series of poems are all parts of the famous “Song of Lawino”, an epic poem of eleven chapters or sections from the 1960s written in six parts by poet Okot P’Bitek (1931-1982). P’Bitek is by birth Ugandan, so one may wonder why he has been included in this study on Kenyan voices. There are several reasons for this. First of all, this poem is one of the most widely-read culturally-iconic poems in sub-Saharan. Furthermore, quoting Enwezor (1998:29-49), Mosoti reminds one – given the fact that Uganda and Kenya are neighbouring countries, that “since ‘Africa is made up of multiple and disparate identities, cultures and territories’ (Enwezor 1998: 29 – 49)” one may use “the regional approach [when studying African literature] as most nation-states in Africa are not necessarily homogenous ethno-cultural entities as their Western counterparts” (Mosoti, 2012:212). In fact, according to Mosoti, “P’Bitek’s style or approach and song school poetics in general consciously or unconsciously provide a crucial point of reference and sort of megatext, not just in Ugandan poetry but that of most East African poets” (2012:219) even resulting in several, in Mosoti’s

terms “contemporary ‘Songs’ of Lawino” (2010:221).<sup>75</sup>2012:12, especially in the way Africa, and in East Africa especially- published in 1966 in Luo (one of Kenya’s largest tribe), it was quickly translated into other languages, including English.

A second reason, besides the fact that P’Bitek also for a time taught at the University of Nairobi, is that the “Song of Lawino” and first published in 1966 in the Luo language, thus reflecting Luo perspectives and experiences. The Luo are found in Uganda, Tanzania and in Kenya, in fact they constitute the third largest ethnic group (13%) in Kenya, after the Kikuyu (22%) and the Luhya (14%).

In short, the “Song of Lawino” is a narrative poem told in which Lawino describes how her husband, Ocol, has taken a new, younger, more Europeanized wife. Ocol’s polygamy has been accepted by both Lawino and her community, but from her description it transpires that Ocol is shunning her in favor of his new wife. In the previous poem (“Daughter”), it was shown how it is possible to verbalize issues of sex and sexuality through poetry. In the Song of Lawino IV (P’Bitek 1972:47-50), one hears the voice of a woman employing poetry to address issues of beauty, gender and sexuality. In this part of the Song, it is possibly to see the relationship between the concept of beauty and the worldview of some Luo men towards the sexuality of women. According to Rachel Spronk (2012:3), “sex in Africa tends to be studied from a public health perspective.” Notably though, Spronk (2012:3) has argued, that “sexuality is also a particular sensitive conductor of cultural influences and hence, of gender, social, political and age divisions.”

Sex and sexuality continue to be a cultural breeding ground for gender, social and political divisions because sexuality has been used to determine factors that influence gender identity. According to Spronk (2012:2) “one can understand the interconnections between gender, sexuality, culture and personhood when one looks at the existing literature on sexuality in Africa and at the body of knowledge concerning gender and sexuality in general.” In the name of protesting against the Western influence against African culture for

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<sup>75</sup> For a detailed discussion of the value and the importance of P’Bitek’s “Song of Lawino” see Motosi, 2012:271ff.

example, most post independent African countries and especially Kenya in particular have continued to revive, preserve and pass on from one generation to the other cultural issues that continue to present the sexuality and identity of Kenyan women from a negative perspective. This is partly due to the fact that much of the literature continues to come from male writers. O'Barr (1987:56) notes that "the cultural conflict theme is so common that critics have developed typologies and shown how some authors have tried to create a new place for old believes and still others have idolized past cultural practices." Unfortunately, most of the cultural beliefs and practices which are revived in such literature continue to perpetuate for example misconceptions on matters of beauty and gender.

That is why Spronk (2012:2), argues that "sexuality is a public as well as a personal; affair involving communal concerns and individual desires." "Thus" Spronk (2012:3) further notes, "sexuality is crucial in the development of contemporary notions of selfhood among young people." As such, in using the Song of Lawino IV to show the relationship between gender, beauty and sexuality, one sees a possibility of how gender divisions are created through the people's opinions regarding the concept of beauty. Beauty, one would argue, is also a social construction. "As a result" Spronk (2012:141) says, "women often express an ambiguous attitude so as to conform to conventional notions of femininity, while actually undermining these conventions by trying to represent societal social constructions of the so called beauty".

In the Song of Lawino IV, for example, there is a constant use of the past tense "I was," and the present tense "I am not." The words "I was," and "I am," form the basis of understanding the song of Lawino IV. The poet uses past and present tense to show that in Lawino's view for her husband, her beauty is something of the past. In terms of age, for example, Lawino has now grown old and therefore she is no longer beautiful. Given that her beauty is something of the past, the husband seems to imply that the wife is no longer sexually attractive to him. However, for Lawino, her beauty is still radiant and therefore she is still sexually alluring. She is not just saying so in order to feel good, she says that she is beautiful because she can see her beauty shining smoothly in the moonlight (1972:50). In the Song of Lawino IV, "My Name Blew like a Horn among the Payira," she sings:

I was made chief of girls because I was lively



I was bright; I was not clumsy or untidy  
I was not dull; I was not heavy and slow  
I did not grow up a fool  
I am not cold; I am not shy  
My skin is smooth  
It still shines smoothly in the moonlight  
I was leader of the girls and my name blew like a horn  
Among the payira  
And I played on my bow harp and praised my love,  
Ocol, my husband, my friend, what are you talking?  
You saw me when I was young in my mother's house  
This man crawled on the floor! The son of a bull wept tears,  
Like a hungry child  
Whose mother has stayed long in the simsim field  
Every night he came to my father's homestead  
He never missed one night  
Even after [the sons of my mother] had beaten him...

Here one clearly sees the relationship between beauty, gender and sexuality. In highlighting the concept of beauty, the poet presents the voice of a woman who shines through her prevailing social status as dictated by her husband. The female voice in the Song of Lawino IV shows that because beauty is a social construct, it is possible to reconstruct the boundaries of what constitutes beauty for the other in order for one to also reconstruct one's own stand on the concept of beauty. Clearly, beauty and sexuality are interrelated, however, many African cultures have not helped women to be adventurous and expressive of their physical beauty and their sexuality, as they would have desired.<sup>76</sup>

Many Kenyan women have been socialized to believe that they are beautiful only if the male counterpart says so, or when a man pursues her in order to woo her for marriage or for a sexual relationship. One sees this in the words of the poem: "every night he came to my father's homestead." The male counterpart in the Song of Lawino IV came to visit the female

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<sup>76</sup>See Ojaide (1996:97).

counterpart because her skin was smooth and shiny as shown in the poem. Thus, the beauty of the female voice in the Song of Lawino IV one would say is past tense to her husband because they are now married. However, for Lawino, her beauty is not being measured by the standards laid upon her by her husband. Her beauty is present tense.

The Song of Lawino IV can therefore be understood as highlighting social disparity embedded in issues of beauty, gender and sexuality. The concept of beauty in relation to skin tone and skin complexion has had a lasting impact on the social status of some Kenyan girls and women. However, when one speaks about issues of skin color, the most obvious thing that comes to mind is the problem of racial discrimination. This has therefore presented most scholars with the opportunity to explore the subject of discrimination based on the treatment of and the socialization of Blacks and White people. As Hall (2008:46) points out, most people have “disregarded the issue of skin tone stratification” According to Hall (2008:46), “the favorability of a black applicant can be highly dependable on not necessarily their race as often assumed.” But skin tone complexion is also a factor.

It is against this backdrop that one would see that even girls and women with a lighter skin complexion would suffer from low self-esteem in case their beauty is associated with their sexuality. In most cases, some Kenyan men have been sexually attracted to girls and therefore married them because of their skin tone. This way, in case a man starts to chase after other women, the married woman will feel that maybe her skin tone is no longer attractive (i.e., light) enough. Unfortunately, in such cases many women have taken the blame upon themselves and tried to look for alternative ways of making their skin attractive – including cosmetically and medically dangerous processes . Some women have done this to possibly attract their male counterparts sexually.

Speaking about one’s effort to look attractive physically and facially, Hall (2008:93) points out that, in most nations “we have become obsessed with the quest to realize our beauty potential; a value system which also leads to harsh negative representations and interpretations of the body.” Unfortunately, “this conflict between what one wants to look like and what one actually looks like can make life very difficult particularly for women for whom the manic pursuit of physical perfection can lead all too often to chronically low self-esteem and eating disorders” (Hall 2008:93). That is why our female voice in the Song of

Lawino IV does not accept to suffer from a low self-esteem. Instead, she sees beyond what her husband sees in her. She believes that even after long years of marriage, she is still beautiful.

In the Song of Lawino IV, one in this way encounters the voice of a woman who is scolding her husband for ‘now’ turning a blind eye to her. She is scolding him for ignoring her because she now no longer glows like she used to when her husband was falling in love with her. In the Song, Lawino sings to mock her husband for ‘now’ looking down upon her. In this poem, the poet speaks in the voice of a woman who is exploring the tension between her present social status as compared to her social status when she was still glowing with a smooth and shiny skin. In Lawino one encounters the voice of a woman who is sharing her youthful experiences. These are the times when a young man was falling in love with her. She shares with the world how the love of her life pursued her.

Lowino’s words “Ocol, my husband, my friend, what are you talking? You saw me when I was young in my mother’s house ...” indicates a sharp contrast of the sexual status of the poet before and after she got married. It seems that the husband never missed even one night to look for her in her mother’s house, just because her skin was smooth and shiny. Additionally, the Song of Lawino IV presents a possible connection between male dominance over the sexuality of women and the happiness of most Kenyan women. The sexuality of a woman and therefore the happiness of many Kenyan women, can possibly be seen as depending on what makes a man feel good about her.

In the Song of Lawino IV, for example, one can see that the happiness of a woman depends on the tone and complexion of her skin before and after marriage. One can therefore say that if a man is no longer impressed with the appearance of a woman, he can despise her. This can therefore have a direct impact on a woman’s feeling of her womanhood because of her prevailing sexual status. In the Song of Lawino IV, it seems probable that the happiness of a man and therefore of a woman, depends upon her skin<sup>77</sup> complexion. In the poem,

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<sup>77</sup> In a detailed discussion on the relationship between the social status of a girl/ woman and her skin color, Hall (2008:74) points out that “television, film, internet and print advertisements; all feature white women with blond hair as not only ideal but the cultural imperative. Thus, white and light skinned people are rewarded accordingly.” This way, one would understandably see why in the

however, the resilient female voice defies the odds to pronounce herself beautiful by deciding to scold her husband for ‘now’ ignoring her.<sup>78</sup>

The words, “my friend, what are you talking,” are suggestive of a woman who is looking directly into the eyes of a man and mocking him. She does this by reminding him of how he went looking for her when her skin was smooth and shiny. According to the female voice in the Song of Lawino IV, there was a time in the history of her life when the then-boyfriend and now-husband of hers incessantly pursued her and was even beaten by the sons of the (Lawino’s) mother. However, not even this made him stop looking for her in her mother’s house. For the female voice in the Song of Lawino IV, this is reason enough for her to smile and feel good about herself. In this way, one would say the Song of Lawino IV presents the voice of a Kenyan woman who shines through the prevailing circumstances of her husband’s attitude towards her sexuality to dignify herself.

The value of the female voice in the Song of Lawino IV is the fact that she encourages Kenyan women that the sexuality of women needs not to be dictated by male perceptions. This is because while men love by sight, from the Song of Lawino IV, one may say, women love by heart. Thus, it is from the heart that Lawino sees and perceives that her skin still shines, even when her husband does not see this smoothness anymore. The words of the female voice in the song of Lawino IV “my skin is smooth ... It still shines smoothly in the moonlight ...” suggests that she is not only recalling youthful moments when she still had an attractive sexual life. She can still see that she is beautiful and therefore sexually attractive through the rays of the moonlight. Thus, while her beauty is past tense to her husband, she

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“outside of the United states and in many post-colonial nations of the global south, skin bleaching is reaching new heights” (Hall 2008:74). Does this mean that skin color is associated with power and social status? We may never tell. What we do know from the song of Lawino though, is the fact that the poet is portrayed as scolding her husband for ignoring her because her skin no longer shines as it did before she was married.

<sup>78</sup> It should be noted however, that even though the poet seems to assert her beauty to her husband, this should not be a reason for Kenyan women to ignore their appearance. “The emphasis on attractiveness is not wholly unwarranted” (Hall 2008:94). Thus, even when times change (i.e. before and after marriage) one should strive to have time for oneself and for taking care of oneself. If a woman cherishes her spouse, it is worth noting that “among many things, attractiveness substantially influences mate choices. Men are more likely to consider attractive women as suitable sexual and marital partners” (Hall 2008:94). Maybe that is why in the poem, the husband is portrayed as having spent sleepless nights trying to woe the wife when she was still in her parents’ home.

refuses to accept the social status conferred to her by her husband. Instead, she recreates her identity by choosing to see the smoothness of her shiny skin through a metaphoric reference to the moon's light.

Lawino does not need chemicals to whiten her skin in order to look attractive so that she can be socially accepted. She also does not need to conform to the societal constructs of beauty. All she needs is to criticize the misconceptions of society regarding the relationship between beauty, gender and the sexuality of women. She has the ability to reconstruct the misrepresented ideologies of beauty. This can be seen from the way the female voice in the poem is defiant. The song of Lawino IV can therefore be understood from the perspective of a post-youthful and lovely lady who moves firmly towards an affirmed commitment to self-appreciation. This way, one creates a new concept of beauty that does not marginalize.

#### ***4.3.3 Verbal, Psychological and Emotional Violence***

Patriarchy in Kenya manifests itself in various ways. Sadly though, the different manifestations of patriarchal ideologies have had a direct impact on the sexuality of many Kenyan women. Besides male dominance over the sexuality of women exhibiting itself in the art of seduction and socially constructed ideologies regarding gender, beauty and the sexuality of women, patriarchy also exhibits itself through verbal, psychological and emotional violence. In the Song of Lawino I (P'Bitek 1972:34-36), "My Husband's tongue is bitter", one encounters the voice of a woman who narrates her bitter experiences of how her husband verbally abuses her. The Song of Lawino I is a call and response between two people. The poem is popularly understood as one that makes a commentary on the implications of the African society adopting Western culture.

Even though the poems of P'Bitek (1972:34-36) have been understood as ammunition against the Western culture, one can also understand the poems from a different perspective. A good example is the song of Lawino I. In this poem, it is possible to hear the voice of a Kenyan woman who is struggling with male dominance exhibited through verbal violence. In the Song of Lawino I, one possibly sees the relationship between verbal violence, psychological torment and emotional suffering. The female subject in this poem is complaining about how her husband constantly abuses her verbally. Verbal violence

negatively impacts many Kenyan women, both psychological and emotionally. To see the impact of verbal abuses and its implications on the psychological and emotional feelings of a woman, Lawino's words are valuable:

Husband, now you despise me  
Now you treat me with spite  
And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt,  
Now you compare me  
With the rubbish in the rubbish pit  
You say you no longer want me  
You laugh at me....  
Take care of your tongue  
Be careful what your lips say  
First take a deep look, brother,  
You are now a man  
You are not a dead fruit!  
To behave like a child does not befit you!  
It is not right that you should be laughed at in a song  
Songs about you should be songs of praise...

Here Lawino warns her husband. She tells him that he should take care of his tongue and be careful of what his lips say to her. If the husband does not take note of his tongue, he can be assured of one thing. The songs that will be sung about him will be songs of laughter.<sup>79</sup> In other words, what the husband is doing to her will not be left unnoticed just because women are socialized to be silent in the public and the private sphere. This shows that even though women can be silenced in normal conversations, they have the opportunity to correct the behavior of their husbands through poetry.

In the Song of Lawino I, the embattled voice of a woman tries to resist the harsh tongue and treatment of her husband. One can see the embattled female voice in her words:

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<sup>79</sup> In most cases, these are songs of mockery that are sung during circumcision ceremonies. The songs are sung especially among communities that practice circumcision as an initiation ceremony.

“now you compare me with rubbish in the rubbish pit, you say you no longer want me, you laugh at me. Be careful what your lips say ... my brother.” To many Kenyan women, the voice of a woman in the Song of Lawino I sounds familiar. The voice embodies the reality of verbal violence against them and its impact on their dignity. When one is constantly verbally abused, it takes its toll on a person’s psychological and emotional stability. One may therefore say that the female voice in the Song of Lawino I is articulating the indignity that Kenyan women suffer because of a power imbalance in society exacerbated through verbal violence. Elisabet le Roux (2012:54) points out that [verbal] violence is one among many other “culturally ordained practices that are conducive to sexual violence against Kenyan women.”

The Song of Lawino I paints a picture of a husband who is nagging; who despises his wife; subjects her to spite and says that he no longer wants her. In this way, the husband uses verbal violence to make his wife feel bad about herself so that she will plead with him to just stay with her. In the end, it feels like the husband is doing her a favor in being and therefore bearing with her. When this happens, the woman will have no say over her body. Her body is then under the total control of her husband.

Despite the verbal violence many Kenyan women suffer, the Song of Lawino I offers hope to them as Lawino has not been silenced, indeed she confronts her husband with regard to his verbal abuse: “Take care of your tongue be careful what your lips say.” Poetry thus gives Lawino the opportunity to caution her husband who verbally abuse her in private. It is hoped that when verbally violent men would be in a gathering where by chance a poem such as the Song of Lawino I is being recited, they would listen to such a poem and learn that what they have done in private has been revealed to the public.

Furthermore, the words of the female voice in the Song of Lawino I: “it is not right that you should be laughed at in a song; songs about you should be songs of praise,” can be interpreted in the following way. Tanure Ojaide (1996:96) argues “[Kenyan] Women hold the initiative over men in poetry which is sung or chanted.” Kenyan women therefore, have the opportunity to complain about what they go through in the hands of their husbands as a result of verbal abuse through poetry. Poetry can therefore be visualized as a tool for understanding and explaining experiences in contexts where the voices of Kenyan women cannot be heard.

That is why some women in Kenyan take time to teach their daughters the art of (oral) poetry. This way, some women are able to pass on the women's voices in written poetry as a tool for societal change from one generation to another.

One also sees from the Song of Lawino I that the poem offers suggestions on how men *should* behave if they expect to hear songs of praise about them. In other words, the art of poetry is not just about complains and grievances. Kenyan women also take advantage of poetry to show that praising a good behavior is a motivation of cultivating a healthy society. In the words: "Songs about you should be songs of praises," one finds that husbands who treat their wives with dignity will hear songs of praise as well. Thus, through the art of poetry, Kenyan women do not only critique oppression in African patriarchy, but they also sing to praise those men in the society who uphold the dignity of Kenyan women. In this way, through the voices of Kenyan women in poetry, it is possible to fight for the dignity of Kenyan women in two ways; by criticizing dehumanizing behaviors and by praising acts of dignity, on the other hand and, on the other hand, in this fusion, it becomes possible for both men and women in society to journey together in the battle against for instance, verbal abuse.

#### ***4.3.4 Sexual Violence in Kenyan Women's Poetry***

When it comes to matters of sexual and gender-based violence many Kenyan men have wished away these incidences as women's issues. Unfortunately, while sexual and gender-based violence have intensified in the recent past, some Kenyan women just continue to wonder aloud with muted voices. Moving twenty years on toward the end of the previous century, the poem "The Journey," by J. Serunjogi (again a Kenyan male poet) (in Luvai 1988:186-192) recounts the story of a girl who is a victim of rape. In this poem, one encounters themes of a woman's body, womanhood, sex, sexuality and motherhood, coupled with images of violation, confusion and pain. One encounters the voice of a woman who represents the many Kenyan women who are confronted by excessive power of men that often is exhibited through sexual violence. We read in this poem:

Shi...Shi... The man joked; the girl resisted the joke,  
Shi...Shi... The man insisted and joked, resisted the girl the joke,  
But she committed one crime; she stopped to have a glance,



A curious rat...  
The man moved, moved, moved nearer,  
The girl gazed, gazed to have a clear view  
The man behaving in no difference a fashion from that of a kite  
That had spotted a prey, moved he forward and forward  
The girl became hypnotized; the man grabbed a hand,  
The girl resisted but it was too late the haul had begun  
The struggle so useless it was! The green lodge entered,  
The under-envelop removed  
(Plea-----please...) a resisting trail a heavier impact,  
(Don't-----do it!  
So the staccato rhythm started, the staccato rhythm started,  
On the green mattress, on the ground!  
Exhaustion followed, with a big sorry!  
But the temptation had been irresistible  
It would not be repeated....  
The second month, no moon was seen, yes I have had it,  
Thought the girl, ladies and gentlemen,  
That is how I started my journey.  
The girl made sure that, at least my movements had to be curtailed  
How could I be seen kicking in the girl's tummy?  
The day came, stubbornly; I wanted to hurry to come to the open world.  
To the latrine she rushed, into the pit I was dropped [and] the girl left  
[But fortunately] I was taken out of the latrine  
Ladies and gentlemen, so wonderful a journey,  
Death wiped out.

In the above poem one encounters three characters: the man who “joked” (the perpetrator), the girl who resisted the joke, but committed one crime (infanticide); and we have the child who was not supposed to be seen “kicking in the girl’s tummy”, because the pregnancy was the result of rape. From the poet’s words: “that is how I started my journey, ladies and gentlemen, so wonderful a journey,” one sees that the poem might have been

written to show how the child who was born out of rape survived death, after having been thrown into a pit latrine by the mother so that it can die (see Serunjogi in Luvai 1988:186-192). However, one can also see that the poem highlights the worldview of the Kenyan society and particularly the attitude of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women. One sees in the poem that the poet portrays the perpetrator as using excessive force towards the girl, even when she tries to resist being raped.

As a way of highlighting the attitude of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women, “The Journey” portrays the girl as one who is to blame.<sup>80</sup> If she was raped, the poet seems to say, it is because she stopped to have a glance like a curious rat. In fact, in most cases whenever a sexual assault in which a girl or a woman is a victim is reported, it is reported in such a way that the man exerted force and a girl had no option but to give in. Commenting on the relationship between rape and the power of men over women, Gecaga (1996:53) points out that “in all the predominant feelings experienced in most case by victims of rape, are those of powerlessness in the face of life and death situation, vulnerability, devaluation and of fear of loss of the ability to control the events in their lives.”

In this regard, Gecaga (1996:51) contends “sexual violence should not be seen in isolation as an act of perverted sex monsters.” Rather, Gecaga (1996:51) notes “it should be seen in its connection with more widespread behavior of men towards women.” For Gecaga, “one of the common assumptions about rape is that it is a crime induced by women who are sexually seductive.” In this way, the men are seen as having the right to take the girls by force

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<sup>80</sup> In her detailed discussion on sexual violence against women, Elisabet le Roux (2012:49) gives a reference to an example of a situation in which the perpetrators of sexual violence usually go unpunished. She uses the example of Siku, a Rwandese woman, to say that: “Siku had been raped by a 28-year-old male member of the family that she was fostered by after the genocide. The rapist was arrested and spent a few months in prison, but he is now back living in her community.” Le Roux (2012:49) further notes that everyone in the community knows that Siku was raped, yet *she* is stigmatized, “wherever she goes people gossip about her as if it was her fault.” Thus, one clearly sees from the words of Le Roux within the context of the poem “*The Journey*” that while the perpetrators of sexual violence continue to walk free, in most cases it is the victims of rape who are blamed for the act and therefore end up bearing the consequences of rape.

and rape them.<sup>81</sup> In most cases, girls therefore grow up knowing that men are stronger than women. Thus, even if a girl screams or tries to save herself from being raped, her efforts will be in vain. Such social construction therefore highly contributes to the vulnerability of most Kenyan women.

When one listens to some discussions on issues of rape over some radio stations in Kenya, one finds that there, too, are expressions of the tendency to blame women and girls for causing men to rape them. This is particularly the case when the comments are coming from men. For example, some men would say that some girls usually do not dress well. They blame girls/women, for putting on miniskirts.<sup>82</sup> In this way, the men will argue that the girls/women expose their bodies, leading to the men being tempted and therefore rape them. Still others will say girls should not walk alone on lonely paths or in the middle of the night. According to Kinoti (1996:79), Kenyan “women are therefore having to take extra caution where they walk, what they ‘dress,’ and when they walk because rape is everywhere.”

In the poem “The Journey,” one sees a portrayal of a man who has the audacity to grab a girl by force and rape her, even when she tries to resist. One can only guess from the words “the green lodge,” that sexual violence against women happens anywhere and anytime, simply because of male power. In associating the power of men and the issue of sexual violence against women, Gecaga (1996:51) points out that “Kenyan men have used their superior physical strength and their ability to rape as a constant threat that keeps women dependent upon them and in need of their protection”. This is clear from the fact that “in political conflicts, rape is committed by the victorious troops against women of the defeated side or as a considered act of aggression during the progress of the fight.” Thus, it is so unfortunate to see that “the power of men has continued to be translated into sexual abuse of women, with the community condoning this behavior” (Le Roux 2012:54).

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<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, as noted in Gecaga (1996:51), “rape has nothing to do with the sexual seductiveness of a woman. It has everything to do with the power relations between men and women.”

<sup>82</sup> When the society blames women for tempting men by putting on miniskirts, it leads one to think about small children who are also constantly victims of rape. The question in one’s mind is whether small children also put on miniskirts? Or where are the miniskirts when small children are raped? ....

Therefore, the words in the poem “the man grabbed a hand, the girl resisted, but it was too late, the haul had begun. The struggle so useless it was...,” can serve to show that sexual violence against women and girls is firmly embedded within a cultural and societal frame work, which gives men power over women. Surprisingly, the poem is presented in a way that shows that the perpetrator apparently seems to feel remorse after already raping the girl. One can see this from the words “with a big sorry! But the temptation had been irresistible; it would not be repeated again.” In a manner of mocking the perpetrators of sexual violence against women, the poet portrays this act of violence as an act of temptation that the perpetrator regrets and wishes to never repeat again.

Sexual violence against women and the aftermath of it is a reality that needs to be addressed beyond the voices of Kenyan women through poetry. Blaming the victims and leaving cases of rape unreported or the victims of rape unsupported does not serve to address or solve this menace. That is why this chapter has shown how Kenyan women may voice such issues through poetry.<sup>83</sup> From the way Kenyan women address challenges that they face through poetry it is possible to realize that “the female perspective on the social life, and the women’s part in it may be different from the male perspective on the same issues” (O’Barr 1987:58). So we see that sectors of Kenyan society is socialized to blame women for actions of rape; in the poem “The Journey,” we do not hear anything again about the perpetrator after the rape.

The listeners of the poem “The Journey” are only confronted by the reality of a girl who realizes that she is pregnant during the second month of the pregnancy: “The second month, no moon was seen, yes I have heard it, thought the girl.” The perpetrator is nowhere to be seen or heard. In most communities in Kenyan, virginity is highly valued. According to Lawrence H. Fuchs (2000:26) for example, “among the Kikuyu community in Kenya, guarding the virginity of women and discouraging sexual intercourse outside marriage is commonly given as a reason for practicing FGM.” When a girl becomes pregnant before

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<sup>83</sup> Understood this way, it is possible to see that even though Serunjogi’s aim of writing this poem could have been to narrate the story of the journey of the child who was born out of this ordeal of rape, one can possibly see beyond that. The poem also reveals the appeal of the voices of Kenyan women to the Kenyan society to do something about victims of rape, instead of just blaming the victims.

marriage, it is considered a big shame. In fact, in some communities, a girl who has lost her virginity before marriage would be punished. Those who are able to carry the pregnancy to term and give birth, would most likely not have the option of getting married. Not many men would want to marry a girl who already has a child. This is seen as an added cost in terms of feeding the child and as an extra liability in terms of the later provision of land if it is a baby boy.

Furthermore, if a girl who has a child or children before marriage succeeded in getting a husband, she would be married off as a second wife at the choice of her parents. This way, even the dowry payment would not be as costly as that of a virgin girl. Sadly enough, no one considers the possibility of the fact that some of the girls who have children before marriage are actually victims of sexual violence. “Results from the 2003 Kenyan demography and Health survey (KDHS 2003) indicate that physical and sexual abuse of women is a major problem in Kenya” (Njue, Askew & Chege 2005:139). According to Njue, Askew and Chege (2005:139), “nationwide, 44% of married, separated or divorced women aged fifteen to forty-nine years reported such incidents in twelve months preceding the survey.”

Thus, given the circumstances that confront many girls who fall pregnant before marriage, it becomes possible to understand why the girl in the poem “The Journey” is so confused and traumatized, even trying as much as possible to hide the movements of the child in her stomach: “The girl made sure that I could not be seen kicking in the girl’s tummy.” In this way, one can only imagine what the victim of rape goes through afterwards. Commenting on the consequences of rape that most victims of rape have to live with, Gecaga (1996:53) points out that “rape always carries with it the threat of death, it can expose one to pregnancy, physical illness and especially sexually transmitted diseases like Aids, gonorrhoea and syphilis.”

“The Journey,” can therefore be understood as a call to the Kenyan society to address issues of sexual violence against women. In this regard, it may be particularly helpful to encourage male Kenyan writers to challenge cultural issues that dehumanize Kenyan women instead of reviving them in the name of enculturation. “The Journey” hence may be understood from the perspective of cautioning the Kenyan society to “engage in the process of liberating efforts which can transform the sexually violent and gendered practices. This

way one will be able to see beyond the culturally scripted roles and practices of the communities” (Le Roux 2012:53). Seen in this way, it will be possible to transform the negative aspect of the power of men into a positive supportive power that can even generate development towards the society of Kenya and therefore for a life of dignity for all.

#### ***4.3.5 The Impact of Domestic Violence upon the Children***

In another poem by Serunjogi, “She came to Cook” (in Luvai 1988:183-185), a poet presents the voice of a mother who is struggling to live with the reality of an abusive husband. In the poem, a dialogue between the woman her and young son, one can see the image of a woman who is culturally, socially and economically disadvantaged because of her gender. On the other hand, the opening words of the poem “Mummy, why are we shivering outside here and yet daddy is on the chair snoring inside,” one is immediately confronted with the reality of the voice of a child who is suffering. To the female voice in the poem, male abuse is personal. This is a perception that can be created by the title of the poem: “She Came to Cook.” However, the emphasis to the voice of the child in the poem and the words “bring in your children,” creates a scene of the lasting effects of an abusive relationship upon the children:

Mummy, why are we shivering?  
 Outside here, and yet daddy is on the chair snoring?  
 Daddy is bad  
 We also want to sleep  
 No Aida. Daddy is not a bad man,  
 He has left us out here to enjoy some fresh air  
 But Daddy got a panga and you, Mummy, ran out,  
 Pulling us like dogs on chains  
 Robert almost broke his leg  
 Was that really kind of daddy?  
 Your dad did not want to cut us into pieces  
 Using that panga,  
 But he wanted to shave our fore faces  
 In this cold darkness?

The mother blinks  
She blows her nose  
At two in the morning,  
Inside the house  
The snoring stops  
The shoe-steps are heard  
The door-bolt clicks  
And the door opens.  
Hey, bring in your children quickly  
Thank you my husband

In the poem, the mother and her children have spent part of the night in the cold. The children have shivered through the night. When the husband got a panga, she had no choice but to pull the children out “like dogs on chains”. This she did in such a way that Robert, one of the children in the poem, nearly broke his leg. The mother in the poem stayed outside the door waiting for her husband to have pity on her and to let her in. Finally, the husband lets her and the children in and she dutifully thanks her husband for letting them in.

In most communities in Kenya, such cases are common.<sup>84</sup> The abuse is not just done one night; it is a cycle of continuous violence that has a direct impact upon the children. However, when one asks some Kenyan women why they continue to live in and endure abusive relationships, they will say: “If I quit this marriage, I will bring shame to my parents.” After the dowry payment has been made and a marriage has received the blessings of the father of the girl, the girl will be encouraged by the parents to persevere. Is this the reason why the mother in the poem “She Came to Cook” goes back to her husband after staying outside in the cold all night with the children?

Meredeth Turshen (2000:107) has argued that “domestic violence must be understood as a cultural and historical phenomenon.” Domestic violence is a cultural phenomenon because “even when a woman is injured, her family prevails upon her to go back to her

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<sup>84</sup>See Njue, Askew and Chege (2005:139).

husband and be ‘a good’ wife”<sup>85</sup> (Turshen 2000:108). In fact, it is from this perspective that Turshen (2000:108) says that “the Kenyan society tends to penalize the victims of domestic violence more than the culprits.” Therefore, we often see in most communities in Kenya that female victims of domestic violence would rather endure domestic violence than bring shame to the family.

The married woman will try as much as possible to endure the abuse from her husband. On the other hand, the parents of the girl will also try all they can to make sure that their daughter stays in the marriage. Besides the pressure from the parents, some Kenyan women fear the stigma associated with being single. The status of a single woman is even worsened if it is due to divorce. Turshen (2000:109) points out that in Kenya, “seeking justice in cases of domestic violence is a cumbersome and complex process, and it takes a strong woman to face up to the stigma involved”. Because domestic violence is a cultural phenomenon, it is always the woman who will be blamed for not being a good wife. When a woman decides to divorce her husband, society will not seek to find reasons as to why this has happened. Instead, the divorced woman will be labelled as the ‘bad girl,’ the ‘spoilt girl’ or ‘the iron lady.’ She will carry all the blame for not trying to make sure that the marriage relationship worked.

While there are Kenyan women who are afraid of the stigma associated with being a single woman, others will also say that it is because of economic reasons. In most cases, women will choose to stay in an abusive relationship if the husband is the sole bread winner

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<sup>85</sup> Many Kenyan women try to be good wives because “victims of domestic violence believe that no one can help them. Thus “many women who have been constantly abused and isolated by their violent husbands initially try everything they can think of to change the situation” (Turshen 2000:109). According to Turshen (2000:109), some of the victims of domestic violence do “try to minimize domestic violence by handing over their pay check, coming home early from work, giving up work and becoming housewives, by not having their relatives visit.” When it comes to household tasks, others will work extra hard to make sure that the house is extra clean, the food is ‘cooked well,’ and at any time the husband wants to eat, including in the middle of the night, the women will make sure they there is food. Some even dress up and aim to look good, just to impress the husband. Unfortunately, repeated battering diminishes the woman’s motivation to continue trying to minimize the abuse, in this way; she eventually stops trying and accepts carrying the cross of domestic violence. I call it the cross of domestic violence because sadly enough, most male pastors in Kenya usually tell female victims of domestic violence to continue persevering, just the way Jesus Christ endured suffering to the point of death on the cross and God raised Jesus from the dead.



of the family. In this way, the economic status of a woman makes her vulnerable and therefore a victim of domestic violence.

In the aforementioned discussion, one sees that most women in Kenya endure domestic violence because of economical, cultural and social reasons. However, in the poem “She Came to Cook,” it is possible to also argue that a large percentage of Kenyan women in fact endure domestic violence for the sake of the children. Many women in Kenya hesitate to walk out of an abusive relationship because of the children. Most of them think that when they decide to raise the children as single mothers, the children may lack a male authority figure offering parental guidance. It is within such circumstances that Lorraine Radford and Marianne Hester (2006:29) have observed that: “women with children are up to three times more likely to experience domestic violence. Unfortunately, while in an abusive relationship, women may have little autonomy over their fertility or sexuality.”

Unfortunately, most of the women who choose to endure abusive relationships for the sake of the children<sup>86</sup> do not realize the impact of an abusive relationship *upon* the children. In a way of trying to identify possible reason as to why most women opt to endure abusive relationships, Radford and Hester (2006:28) see the possibility of “women underestimating the impact of the violence upon themselves and the children as a way of coping with the abuse and gaining strength in the face of adversity.” However, according to UNICEF (2007:23) for example, “the consequences of [domestic] violence upon the women can be as dire for the children as they are for women themselves.”<sup>87</sup> One can see this from the voice of the child in the poem “She Came to Cook,” who raises various questions to the mother, questions that show that the children are suffering because of the abuse of the father. In the poem “She Came to Cook,” one sees that the mother is powerless. But according to the poet,

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<sup>86</sup> According to Radford and Marianne (2006:29) “victims of domestic violence may be pushed into pregnancies because their partners want a child, or a child of the ‘right gender,’ or because the partners believe that burdening the woman with several small children will keep her busy and prevent her from leaving.”

<sup>87</sup> Thus, even when faced with life-threatening violence, some Kenyan women will say they are able to cope adequately with mothering. They do this by even “describing their husbands as ‘good fathers’ who are adored by the children” (Radford & Hester 2006:28). In the above poem, one clearly hears the voice of a wife who thanks her husband for letting her into the house even after keeping her in the cold throughout the night with the children. Additionally one hears the voice of a mother who tells her child that “your father loves us that is why he sent us out to get some fresh air.”

the mother in the poem presents herself as one who has no choice but to be submissive to her husband. She has to pretend that all is well, even when the voice of the child in the poem is portrayed as showing that all is not well. In fact according to Kofi A. Annan in: UNICEF (2007: vi) "Study after study has shown that domestic violence against women of all ages deprives the children—all of them, not just the half who are girls—of the chance to reach their full potential." "Violence and homelessness harm women, their children and Kenya's overall development" (Walsh 2002:9). This means that when a child is psychologically disoriented from the rest of the world, then it becomes difficult even for the child to do well in school. This way, the dreams of the children of becoming future leaders or adding value to our society are shattered. Pickup, Williams and Sweetman (2001:106) have pointed out that as a result of domestic violence, "the child may perform badly in school. This way it is very important for women who choose to endure domestic violence to always ask themselves one question: 'is it worth enduring domestic violence?'" According to Francine Pickup, Suzanne Williams and Caroline Sweetman (2001:106), "children who witness violence at home display emotional and behavioral disturbances as diverse as withdrawal, low self-esteem and aggression against peers and family members." Additionally, John Hamel (2005:3) also "knows that children from abusive families are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors later in life"— "The mechanism by which this behavior is thought to be transmitted fall into two categories. In the first category, children learn to become violent or to endure violence through the process of observational learning while the second mechanism involves the effects of child abuse and neglect" (Hamel 2005:3). Thus, when one continues to live in an abusive relationship, there is the need to realize that children learn a lot by seeing and imitating. This is one way in which harmful views and practices are transmitted. Children can be left with no choice but to live in an abusive relationship, and to see how their father treats their mother. However, this serves as a breeding ground for passing on domestic violence from one generation to another.

In other words, it is possible for the children to also easily become abusive if they are boys and for the girls to see domestic violence as a normal thing that every woman should learn to live with. Some psycho-analysts have argued that "there is some possible connection between experiencing or witnessing violence as a child, and growing up to be either a perpetrator or a victim of violence" (Pickup, Williams & Sweetman 2001:106). In this way

breaking the circle of domestic violence becomes increasingly difficult. In “She Came to Cook,” one encounters the voice of a mother who is trying to make excuses and to soften for the violent actions of the father and husband to her children.

In speaking about marital expectations, Radford and Hester (2006:31) have pointed out that “the transition to motherhood can be a delight and an excitement. However, it is also a physical and emotional shock for many women.” According to Radford and Hester (2006:31), “there are different expectations about parenting for men and women”. “Women” Radford and Hester (2006:31) say, “may be overwhelmed or shocked at how mothering changes their lives; yet abusive partners often expect things to stay the same as before.” “The man’s expectations,” they (Radford & Hester 2006:31) further argue, “can be very unreasonable and contradictory, setting the feeling of his wife about herself as a mother against his demands of her as a lover.” This therefore is projected to the wife through domestic violence, which ends up hurting the children in the process. It is therefore important for parents to realize that once they have children, life is not just about the two of them anymore. It is also about the added members of the family –their children.

In the poem “She Came to Cook,” the son asks her mother: “Mummy, why are we shivering outside here, and yet, Daddy is on the chair snoring inside the house?” In response to these words, the mother does not even answer the question asked. Instead, she tries to explain to her son that the father is not a bad person. “He has left us outside to shiver because he loves us; he wants us to enjoy some fresh air,” the mother says- words that according to this study ignore the fact that the children have not been given consideration as having the right to family issues between husband and wife. In fact even though the answer of the question tries in a way to shield the children from questioning the acts of domestic violence, probably as a means of survival, it clearly does not work. From the dialogue of the son and mother in the poem the son can see that this is not a normal gesture of love. The father used a weapon to force the mother and the children out of the house. From the conversation between the mother and son in the poem, it is possible to see that “children are not passive victims of domestic violence. They are social actors with their own ways of coping.” Thus, instead of covering up for acts of domestic violence, Kenyan women should “help develop open and honest communication between mothers and children” (Humphreys and Stanley 2006:58). In

this way, it will be possible for the mother to let the children know that any form of violence and aggression against anyone is wrong.

Thus, no matter what is done to cover up the acts of domestic violence, they have devastating effects upon the children. The children have their own independent minds. They have the capacity to judge for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. According to Cathy Humphreys and Nicky Stanley (2006:58), “children always know when domestic violence is happening in their households. They can see or overhear their mothers while they are upset or crying.” Apart from hearing, “She Came to Cook,” one sees that the child can *see* that a weapon, a panga, is being used to chase the mother and the children out of the house. Children thus, can in their own right choose to believe what the mother says or not. Hearing the response of the child to her mother in “She Came to Cook,” one can argue that the poem serves to send some message.

Kenyan women may try to endure domestic violence. However, in a marriage relationship where children are involved, the mother has to think about the wellbeing of the children too and it is worth realizing, that the “future of these children remains uncertain as their mothers may be emotionally or materially un able to care for the children” (Pickup, Williams & Sweetman 2001:106). According to Turshen (2000:110), “a batterer uses physical abuse, financial control, verbal and emotional abuse, intimidation, threats, isolation, blame, children and male power to control their victims.” Thus, when it comes to the children, most victims will say, “I better endure the violence for the sake of my children.” This explains why many Kenyan women continue to endure domestic violence.

Therefore, one of the biggest challenges to activists who champion the dignity of Kenyan women is that their campaign can only succeed if the female victims of domestic violence are, among other ways, economically empowered to raise their children alone if needed before they are helped to quit violent relationships.

Additionally, from the poem’s topic “She Came to Cook,” and the actions of the father to his wife and children, it is possible to say that the only value that the abusive husband in this poem sees in his wife is a “cook, and a mother in terms of having given him

children.”<sup>88</sup> Seen this way, one may argue that after the wife has cooked for the husband, the husband can now treat her any way he pleases. In the Kenyan culture, cooking is a metaphorical expression that illustrates the act of a woman providing a home to a man through marriage and procreation. When a man gets married he is respected by the community. Based upon this poem, one can possibly say that the poet wants to say that after the husband has received a home by marrying the woman, he can now treat the wife any way he wants.

In the poem the husband is treating his wife in any way he wishes. However, the words of the son to her mother: “But Daddy got a panga and you ran out pulling us like dogs on chains and Robert almost broke his leg. Was that really kind of daddy?” indicates that the son sees his father’s behavior as a cruel act of violence. In fact, Hamel (2005:3) has argued that “domestic violence is a significant social problem because of the physical and emotional harm done to adult victims.” Hamel (2005: 3) cautions however, that “domestic violence has a lasting impact on the children who are witnesses to such violence.” He, therefore, advises that public “policy should also target children because they equally suffer the same kinds of emotional, behavioral and social symptoms by witnessing the father hitting the mother or throwing her out of the house” (Hamel 2005:3). Thus, one would possibly argue that the dialogue between the son and mother in “She Came to Cook” may serve to show the impact of domestic violence upon the children. Such acts of violence have both immediate and long term consequences.

#### ***4.4 CONCLUSION***

In this chapter, we have seen a possible connection between a patriarchal society and the voices of Kenyan women in and through poetry. One may therefore say that the voices of Kenyan women in poetry may even constitute the one of the few styles and substance of their own reflections on life in a society that is male dominated. Most poems in Kenya that are written from the perspective of men continue to revive and preserve cultural practices that

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<sup>88</sup> This comment is not meant to belittle someone whose profession is cooking. It is also not meant to belittle the role of a mother. But the statement is made within the context of the poem to try and explain the actions and attitude of this abusive husband in the poem towards his wife.

deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. However, after listening to the voices of Kenyan women through poetry as presented in the discussion above, one thing becomes clear: through poetry, the voices of Kenyan women may sustain their dreams.<sup>89</sup>

The voices of Kenyan women in poetry have shared their experiences, disclosed their struggles, whispered their intimacies and narrated their stories. This they have done even in the midst of prevailing views, which seem to show that Kenyan women are totally silent victims in a male-dominated society. Thus, even though Kenyan men, for the most part, continue to control the sexuality of Kenyan women, these voices speak about issues of sexuality through poetry. The voices of Kenyan women in poetry are representative of the personal and collective movement of Kenyan women towards a brighter destiny. This is a destiny in which every Kenyan woman can live with dignity. The bold ways in which they speak about matters of sexuality through poetry serve as the inspiration for focusing also in the Song of Songs on the strong female voice speaking about matters of sexuality. In this way, the Kenyan women's voices in poetry may serve as a hermeneutical lens for reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women.

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<sup>89</sup> This analysis is based on the discussion of Phyllis Trible (1984:1) in '*On Telling Sad Stories.*'

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ENCOUNTERING THE FEMALE VOICE IN THE SONG OF SONGS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

We have seen in Chapter Four how Kenyan poetry reflects the experiences of Kenyan women, how it at times discloses their struggles, whisper their intimacies and narrate their stories. All of this happens within a largely patriarchal context that constantly silences the voices of women in all spheres of life, but especially on matters of sex and sexuality. In this chapter, we are going to turn to yet another female voice, one, too, who uses poetry to speak of sex and sexuality. In this chapter the female voice in the Song of Songs will be brought into dialogue with several Old Testament passages in order to argue for the possibility of reading the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women. It will be shown that the female voice in the Song of Songs offered a strong counter voice in the context of the Old Testament, which, as in contemporary Kenya, for the most part has been marked by patriarchy.

The female voice that emerges from the Song of Songs offers a voice that challenges the spirit of patriarchy through poetry. Similar to the Kenyan context – as was shown in Chapter Three – the Old Testament also portrays women as silent victims of male dominance. Selected passages from the Song of Songs that contain the voice of a woman will be used for discussion here. This voice, I will argue, responded in a new way to the patriarchal context of the Old Testament. The main purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct the female voice in the Song in a way that her vibrant voice may inform the Old Testament context on matters of sex and sexuality. Speaking about the “power of God’s missing voice” in the Book of Lamentations, Kathleen O’Connor (2002:83) shows the significance of *constructing* voices by saying that “voices signify the emergence of human capacity to act in the world by bringing pain to speech.” O’Connor (2002:83) continues by saying that to “gain a voice means to come to terms with the truth of one’s history. [And that] this then helps to recover one’s life and the urgency to act.”

This is exactly what reconstructing the female voice in this chapter is about; to show contemporary women readers of the Song of Songs the value of de-muting their muted voices, especially in a patriarchal settings where they are muted in the name of ‘our culture.’ As was made abundantly clear in the examples from Kenyan poetry in Chapter Four, one way of bringing pain to speech is through poetry and song. That is why Esther Mombo and Heleen Joziassse (2012) in a book’s title that documents the voices of women through story-telling say: if one does not have a voice to *tell* one’s story, one may as well just sing.<sup>90</sup>

In fact, according to Gerald Caron (2000:79), the voice, words and actions of the female voice in the Song of Songs “disrupt[s] the imaginative functioning of the patriarchal world order of the Old Testament.” In this regard, Anna Kasafi (2011:38) observes that in the Old Testament, “[p]urity was associated with sexual renunciations, and all expressions of bodily pleasures – including sexual expressions – were considered evil.” As will be seen in this chapter the Song of Songs offers a different view of bodily pleasures, including sexual expressions, as not at all evil, but as God’s gifts meant for human enjoyment through a positive portrayal of women’s sexuality. This is why Nancy DeClaisse-Walford (2008:389-93) may acknowledge that despite the fact that “the Song of Songs is a puzzle-some book in the Old Testament”, it “promote[s] an understanding of sexual love as blessed, holy, a place of divine presence ... a basis for a theology in which sexual relationship is whole and redeemed.”

In her essay “Ten things that every feminist should know about the Song of Songs,” Exum (2000:24) argues that in the Song of Songs, “a woman initiates sexual encounters; a woman roams the streets looking for her lover and a woman speaks openly about her desire to a man.” Moreover, Joan Burton (2005:180) proposes that the female voice in the Song of Songs “claims control over her own body and the right to bestow her favors where she chooses; she asserts her own erotic perspective and gaze.”<sup>91</sup> Both Exum (2000:24) and

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<sup>90</sup> See Esther Mombo & Heleen Joziassse (eds.). 2011. *If You Have No Voice Just Sing! Narratives of Women’s Lives and Theological Education at St. Paul’s University*. Limuru: Zapf Chancery.

<sup>91</sup> Recent scholarship on the Song of Songs continue to show that the female voice in the Song of Songs presents sexuality as something that can be expressed, celebrated and enjoyed without fear (see Exum 2000:35).



Burton (2005:180) present the female voice in the Song as speaking and acting in a way foreign to the customs of Old Testament society.

In the Song, the female voice, therefore, presents readers of the Bible with a new image of women with regards to issues of sex and sexuality. One will also further see that while the Song of Songs in certain regards remains a patriarchal book, the female voice in itself may offer the readers of today an incentive to advocate for a society where gender parity is the norm.

The reconstruction of the female voice in the Song will be done thematically in this chapter. Through such a thematic reconstruction of the female voice one may see how the latter gains the courage to break the long silenced voices of women in the Old Testament on issues of sex and sexuality; how it adopts a new image of women on matters of sex and sexuality which stands in strong contrast to the typical ways in which sexuality of women is presented in many parts of the Old Testament. A great deal of what we know about women in the Old Testament comes to us through the moral laws and stories about women in the Old Testament. Large portions of the Old Testament seem to show that men control the sexuality of women (see, for example, Deut 22:13-22; Lev 15:19-30 and 18:6-18 and LaCocque 1990:12; Fee & Hubbard Jr. 2011:197-198). Furthermore, not only are women *portrayed* in negative ways in the Old Testament text, but, as Phylis Tribble (1978:72-3) shows this has lead to traditional *interpretations* of some Old Testament passages also painting a negative picture of women's sexuality. Tribble herself engages traditionalist interpreters of Genesis 2:7-3:24 in detail to show how this particular narrative has been traditionally interpreted "to proclaim male superiority and female inferiority in such a way that a woman is portrayed as a 'temptress' and troublemaker; and one who is to be dependent upon and dominated by her husband."

Apart from the text of the Old Testament itself, one may also learn about Old Testament women in archaeological findings and other literature on the Ancient Near Eastern world. In a new search for the biblical Eve, and what she symbolizes for all women, Carol Meyers' (2013:1-2), for example, shows that archaeological findings offers a broader perspective on the portrayal of Israelite women, a portrayal that also served to furnish early interpreters of The Old Testament with negative images of Old Testament women. Meyers

(2013:1-2) points out, for example, that Eve is not simply a literary figure as mainly understood by early male-oriented interpretations of the story of the Fall. According to Meyers (2013:2), “Eve is a link to the experiences of Israelite women in Ancient Near Eastern World.”<sup>92</sup>

In this regard, Alice Bellis (1994:21), too, points out that in Israel, “the women’s primary responsibility was procreation” and that “adultery and sex before marriage if done by a woman, was punished by death.” According to Bellis (1994:21), “brides were expected to be virgins and if it was found out that they had committed fornication, they were executed.” It therefore seems probable that Old Testament girls and women may have grown up and lived in fear of expressing their sexual feelings. This also shows how difficult it was for girls and women to be open and explicit about their feelings, or even to voice their grievances if they have been sexually violated. From this perspective, sexual violence in the Old Testament may be said to continue to go uncriticized. The texts selected in this chapter to show that women in the Old Testament are portrayed negatively on matters of sex and sexuality, implies that women indeed either remained silent on these matters or their voices are silenced by Old Testament narrators, a fact that Michele Osherow (2009:78) emphasizes in her appeal to hear female speech in patriarchal settings.

As was said and will be shown, the female voice in the Song of Songs presents women from a positive perspective. Through her words and actions, she conveys a new message to her audience, i.e., that woman should not carry a burden of guilt if they are in love. The Song of Song’s treatment of sexual matters gives women a new positive image on issues of sex and sexuality. Speaking about images of women in the Old Testament, Phyllis Bird (1997:13) argues that “it is the unnamed mothers, who, silently and unacknowledged, bear all the endless genealogies of males. But it is the named women, by and large, the exceptional women, who supply the primary images for the usual portrait of the Old Testament women.”<sup>93</sup> In this chapter, I argue that it is the unnamed female voice in the Song

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<sup>92</sup> See also Jennie R. Ebeling (2010:4), who uses a wide range of sources of evidence to reconstruct women’s activities and life circle events in the Iron Age.

<sup>93</sup> Note: even when exceptional most of them are also victims of negative images.

of Songs, a woman who does not even bear any genealogies of males who can be understood as acting in a (new) way to supply the Old Testament with a positive image of the sexuality of Old Testament women. Depicting the female voice in the Song of Songs as an embodiment of resilience, Monica Melanchthon applauds those who portray the female voice in the Song as the protagonist. Linda Meccouri (1995:9) generally defines resilience as “the capacity to overcome, or the experience of having overcome adversity in defiance of the odds.” Understood in this way, the female voice, I argue, defies the Old Testament odds in which the lives of Old Testament women were marked by subordination towards the male members of the society. In fact, Melanchthon (2004:182) argues that whoever does so “consciously and unconsciously intervenes in a longstanding debate concerning Israelite identity and its intimate yet uneasy relationship with Israelite womanhood” as “the Israelite woman is a figure whose very life is marked by subordination and subservience to the male members in the society.” According to Melanchthon (2004:182), the Old Testament portrays women in such a way that “without an identity of her own, a woman needs public protection and control through regulation.” This sounds very similar to the situation in contemporary Kenyan society with regard to sexual taboos and cultural practices that are aimed at controlling the sexuality of Kenyan women as was shown in Chapter Three.

Thus, the above may be understood as one of the reasons why men in the Old Testament continued to enjoy a position of dominance, which also included controlling the sexuality of women. When one reads Old Testament narratives that speak about the sexuality of women they also often portray a male-dominated social order that tries to justify the controlling of the sexuality of women as ‘sanctioned’ by God and as a moral prerequisite for social order. This is what Esther Fuchs (2000, 2003:15) has called “the Old Testament’s patriarchal sexual politics that validates the [control of the sexuality of women].” Speaking about patriarchal ideology as a theory of biblical sexual politics, Fuchs (2000, 2003:15) has one thing in mind, namely that “by attributing certain words, gestures or actions to female characters and by evaluating the characters as positive or negative, the narrator[s] constructs what womanhood is and what it should be.”

Sadly, many women who read the Old Testament have also identified with and internalized the negative portrayal of women in it, something that only strengthens the already (culturally) oppressive situation they find themselves in. In fact, as has been shown earlier in this study, Kenyan women have often been prone to assumed that enduring patriarchy and patriarchal ideologies is a requirement from God, who will eventually vindicate the sufferer and punish the perpetrator. By so doing, injustices against women continue to go un-criticized and to flourish and this – in fact emphasizes the need to break the bondage in which Kenyan women have lived, among others because of oppressive readings of the Old Testament.

While I am reading the Song of Songs as an African woman, who is challenging the African context on how the African culture has portrayed the sexuality of women in a negative way, this of course does not mean that it is *only* African women who are struggling with negative portrayals of their sexuality. Writing from an Indian context, Melanchthon (2004:184), for example, tells us that (even today) “in the Indian culture, women can pursue the gratification of desire only within the context of conjugal love. Marriage is an institution that gives the utmost power to men to own, name, mark, and control the bodies of women and rewrite abuse and aggressions as love and pleasure.” From this context, Melanchthon (2004:183) also points out the need for and the encouraging fact that “contemporary women are aware of the wrongs which the absolute power of patriarchal control does not allow them to correct.” According to Melanchthon (2004:183) what is needed is that the society recognises that as children of God, created in the image of God, women have the right to live as persons with identity, dignity, and worth. I will argue that when one or two women choose to speak without fear about issues of sex and sexuality, the misconceptions on these issues may start to be addressed. The hope is that it will encourage other women not to merely watch from a distance, but to speak out as well, thus inviting the entire society into taking collective responsibility for the mistreatment of women.

If Melanchthon (2004:183) is right in saying that contemporary women are aware of the wrongs which the absolute power of patriarchal control does not allow them to correct - then I argue that being aware of the wrongs of the absolute power of patriarchy is not enough. There is need to create a platform that enables women to work in and through each other to deconstruct systemic male dominance and men’s control of the bodies of Kenyan women.

And, again, this implies giving voice to the voiceless, naming, exposing, criticizing, and destabilizing patriarchal ideologies that silence women. In this way, it will be possible to reconstruct a social order that respects the image of God in every individual.

What is essential in this regard, especially regarding the issue of sex and sexuality, is to communicate the message that “the passionate physical attraction between man and woman, who find in this the fulfilment of their deepest longings, is seen as a healthy natural thing” (Pope 1977:194). Viewed in this way, I propose that the sexuality of women will not be seen primarily and exclusively as the property of a man. The sexuality of women will be regarded as a gift of mutual fulfilment between the sexes as it is in the Song and as Bird (1997:61-2) points out: “in the love poetry of the Song of Songs sex is free and freely given.” And this was written in a society where woman’s sexuality was guarded before marriage by her father and her brothers (Deut 22:13-21, 28-29; cf. Gen 34:5-7) and after marriage by her husband and brothers-in-law (Num 5:11-31). In the Old Testament, a prostitute who supplied sexual services for her livelihood, was a social outcast, but who was generally forced into the profession by destitution or loss of parents or spouse and not because she is pursuing the pleasures of bodily desires.<sup>94</sup> To appreciate the striking exception to such traditional beliefs in the Song of Songs we will first look at the historical context of the Song of Songs.

## ***5.2 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION HISTORY OF THE SONG OF SONGS***

### ***5.2.1 Authorship, Date of Composition and the Setting of the Song of Songs***

Traditional reception of the Song of Songs unanimously accepted the unity of the Song and also ascribed the authorship of the Song to King Solomon (see Weems 1998:165). However, recent scholarship on the Song has shown that the superscription “The Song of Songs Which is Solomon,” in Hebrew- שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה (Song 1:1), has continued to render diverse opinions regarding a number of issues in the Song of Songs.

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<sup>94</sup> See for example, the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. This shows that the female voice in the Song of Songs can be understood as presenting sexuality as something that can be perused, even when one has not lost a parent or a husband, just for the pleasures of bodily desires.

According to Longman (2001:87), the superscription of a biblical book can be compared to the title page of a modern book. In modern books, the title of a book provides information about the genre, author and occasionally the subject matter and the date of the book. However, it seems that this is not the case with the Song of Songs. The concern of Longman (2001:87) and many modern readers who study the Song of Songs is that two things appear in the superscription of the Song: first, “the Song of Songs” (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים), a construct phrase built from the singular and then the plural of the same noun “Song.” The second point that has been rendered problematic by a number of modern feminist scholars is the phrase “which is Solomon” (לְשׁוֹלֹמֹה). Many commentators see this as a phrase behind the assumption that the Song of Songs is just one song which was single-handedly composed by King Solomon.

For Exum (2005:34), however, the question of the unity of the Song of Songs should not be confused with the authorship of the Song. In this regard, there is no consensus regarding the authorship, date, place of writing and the literary design of the Song.<sup>95</sup> The school of thought that one aligns to regarding the issues mentioned here has had a direct impact on the interpretation of the Song of Songs. For example, the ‘biased’ attachment of the name Solomon to the title of the Song of Songs serves as basis for some commentators to argue that the Song of Songs was written by King Solomon.<sup>96</sup> This school of thought takes two directions: that is, that Solomon wrote the Song himself, or inspired the Song’s composition.

In contrast, Weems (1998:165) argues that “the attribution to Solomon in 1:1 is in all likelihood an editorial gloss and was probably inserted either to suggest that king Solomon wrote the song himself or indirectly.”<sup>97</sup> While scholars continue to hold different opinions on

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<sup>95</sup> According to Bergant (2001:xi), even among those who regard the Song of Songs as a collection of love poems views differ regarding its literary design and the number of poems which it comprises.

<sup>96</sup> In I Kings 5:12 and I Kings 4:32 we see Solomon being associated with a long tradition of wisdom literature, and composition of Songs while in and I Kings 11:3 we see Solomon’s notorious fondness for foreign wives.

<sup>97</sup> See also Longman (2001:87), Robert Kugler and Patrick Hartin (2009:220). It should, however, be noted that there are some commentators who argue that the superscription in Song 1:1 was not

the above-mentioned issues, recent studies on the Song of Songs show that the explicit language of sexuality in the song,

...the book's unusual perspective, the presence of different speakers, the identification of varying themes – to name just a few literary features – have prompted diverse and dynamic proposals for understanding the social, religious and literary content of the Song of Songs (Weems 1998:165).

According to Weems (1998:165)

the Song of Songs finds its closest parallel in ancient Near Eastern love poems where the poetry is noted for its frankness, openness, tenderness, desperate longing, and bold erotic outbursts between the lover and the beloved.

Of significance to this study is that a good number of modern scholars unanimously agree that the Song of Songs is a poem of love distancing themselves from allegorical interpretations which saw in the song a love relationship between God and humanity.

Furthermore, because of the Hebrew prefix לִי and the relative pronoun אשר, the Hebrew title, שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשֹׁלֹמֹה, can be interpreted in different ways. The superscription can be understood to mean the most excellent of songs, *composed* by Solomon, or the Song of Songs which is *dedicated* to Solomon (Longman 2001:88). It is possible as some scholars have argued, that the title appeared later than the poem, when the relative pronoun was always שׁ and never אֲשֶׁר (see Exum 2005:89). However, if one interprets the superscription as a song which is dedicated to Solomon, then it is possible to argue that the Song was possibly composed *by* 'the female voice' in the Song of Songs (whose voice constantly dominates in the Song as compared to the voices of other characters in it), who was dedicating the song to Solomon. In fact, in I Kings 11:3 we read about Solomon's notorious fondness for foreign wives. According to Weems (1998:165),

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appended to the book later and that it should be accepted as an original part of the book (Goitein 1993:65-66).

...the quality of speech credited to women in the Song of Songs, the emotions and experiences of the female protagonist and the Jerusalem daughters are at the center, not the periphery of the poetry.

While there is no evidence to prove that the female voice (or as some say a woman) composed the Song of Songs, “there is no compelling evidence to the contrary either” (Weems 1998:165). In fact, according to Weems (1998:165), the emotions and experiences of women in the Song ring authentic and the words of a woman represent the only unmediated female voice in the Bible leading more than one scholar to speculate that the poet and, therefore, the author is a woman.

Scholars are also divided on the date of origin of the Song of Songs. According to Duane A. Garret (1993:350), “one rarely explored issue in discussing the date of the Song of Songs is the similarity between the biblical book and the Egyptian love poetry of ca. 1300-1100 B.C.” Garret (1993:165), argues that there are some common formal elements and literary motifs between the Song of Songs and Egyptian love songs. For Garret (1993:350), this is a pointer to the fact that the person who composed the Song was familiar with Egyptian poetry and must have lived at a time when the motifs common to both the Song of Songs and Egyptian love songs were current and appreciated.

Other scholars like Ellen Davis (2000:236) and Michael Fox (1985:187-90) holds that the Song of Songs was written during the Persian or Hellenistic periods (5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century) during which time many of the Israelites found themselves displaced in foreign countries. The Song’s love language that speaks of paradise restored in the lovers’ embrace speaks a healing word to a suffering people.

However, as Cheryl Exum (2005: 67) rightly asks: How does it help us to know when the book was written?

If it were written in time of crisis, one could say the Song is escapist literature, offering a respite from depressing circumstances. If it were written during a time of peace and prosperity, one could argue that it reflects a society that had time for the pleasures of life and love and the leisure to compose and enjoy the literature that celebrates such pleasures.



As she poignantly concludes: “Love poetry, like love, knows no season.”

### ***5.2.2 Literary Interpretations and the Social Context of the Song of Songs***

The different interpretations of the Hebrew superscription שיר השירים אשר לשלמה as discussed above already shows that the Song of Songs has had a long history of considerable scholarly interest. However, according to Efraim Shmueli (1990:69), “from the very outset, the Song of Songs was regarded as a purely symbolic text.” Shmueli (1990:69) even firmly believes, that “the Song of Songs would undoubtedly have been excluded from the canon had its meaning not been divorced from a literal reading as a secular love-poem.” The long history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs also shows that the Song has been the subject of allegorical interpretations (see sections 5.2.2.1 and 5.2.2.2 below). Jewish and Christian interpreters of the Song of Songs saw the Song as a mysterious text that needed to be handled with a lot of care and caution.

According to Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c.254) (in Norris 2003:2), for example, every person who reads the Song of Songs was supposed to be aware that people whose inner self is still small and infantile were not allowed to read the Song of Songs. For Origen (in Norris 2003:2), only those people who had rid themselves of “the vexations of flesh and blood” and had withdrawn from soliciting the material nature of bodily desires were to be allowed to read the Song. It seems, therefore, that the allegorical approach to the Song was one way of linking ancient texts of the Bible with key issues of theology, philosophy and mysticism. Abraham Mariaselvam (1988:41) has noted that Origen is possibly the earliest mystical interpreter of the Song of Songs. From a mystical point of view, Origen saw in the Song of Songs a marriage symbol that is so common in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

In contrast to the above, many contemporary interpreters strongly distance themselves from allegorical interpretations that saw in the song a love relationship between God and humanity (see section 5.2.2.4 below). Many, in fact, most commentators today agree that the Song is a poem of love. Weems (1998:165) for example points out that “the syntax of the title of the Song of Songs (Song 1:1), allows for one other way of translating the title as a superlative: ‘Most Excellent of Songs’. Understood this way,” Weems (1998:165) argues,

“the book is a collection of beautifully composed love songs, or a chorus of love poems.” Aligning with the school of thought that argues that the Song of Songs is a poem of love is of important significance to this study. Love Poems, like all other artistic creations originate in particular social settings. They may in many cases preserve and promote certain views about social reality, yet, besides seeking to defend, patristic creations may also challenge the way/s in which people are socially constituted (Weems 1998:165; see also the methodological reflections on this study in Chapter One in this regard). By analogy, the themes, motifs and symbols in the experiences of the female voice in the Song of Songs can be understood as a poet’s art of exposing and challenging the patriarchal context of the Song and the entire Old Testament.

### **5.2.2.1 Jewish Allegorical Interpretations of the Song of Songs**

Jewish Allegorical interpretations saw the Song of Songs as a song of love between God and Israel. In this relationship, God was understood as the lover while the bride was the nation of Israel. Mariaselvam (1988:40) points out that “according to this view, the Song in its literal sense speaks about the dealings of Yahweh towards Israel in history-the lover being Yahweh and the beloved being Israel.” In the Jewish allegorical interpretations, the economy of divine salvific acts between God and Israel are captured as from the time of the exodus to post-exilic events especially the rebuilding of the temple. This timeframe is divided into two. The period between the exodus and the installation of the ark in the city of David is seen as representative of the first covenant while the second covenant captures the exile events to the time of the reconstruction of the first temple (Mariaselvam 1988:40). In this relationship, the love of God for Israel is understood to be so strong that it surpasses the continued betrayal of Israel to God through ‘idol’ worship. “This was then a love-song about God and Israel; the torah and the Temple, Exile and redemption, a spiritual and holy love Song- so that once this allegorical interpretation was firmly established by the Talmudic sages,” the Song continued to be read literally as a song of love between God and Israel (Shmueli 1990:70).

Some interpreters of the Song are convinced that the Song of Songs was first interpreted allegorically by Rabi Akiba (Othman Keel 1994:7).<sup>98</sup> However, according to Keel (1994:7) early Jewish groups, for instance, the Pharisaic scribes and conceivably the Essenes, were the earliest allegorical interpreters of the Song – probably in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. Keel (1994:7) therefore thinks that the Song had already attained canonical status as early as the first century. For Keel (1994:7), allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs are a clear indicator that the canonical status of the Song was not disputed right from the first century. In any case, at issue for this study is the fact that the Song of Songs continued to be interpreted allegorical for a very long time in a way that served to prevent God's people from perceiving matters of sex and sexuality as gifts from God for human beings to enjoy and not to restrict themselves from.

Rabbi Akiba was convinced that the Song of Songs was the holiest book that God ever gave to Israel. He therefore saw those who sung the Song in taverns as defiling the word of God. Shmueli (1990:69) records Akiba as having exclaimed: "God forbid... for all the world is not worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies." Akiba is also said to have argued that the Song of Songs does not defile the hands. Akiba's point of view on the Song of Songs has been understood to offer fertile ground for early Jewish allegorical interpretations which prevented Jewish readers of the Song from reading the Song as a poem of love between two human beings. In fact, Jewish authorities included the Song of Songs in a small class of scriptures that are extremely difficult to interpret. Some Jewish interpreters even advised that the Song could only be read by those who are over forty years of age. It was strongly believed that the erotic content of the book could unshackle unquenchable passion in young people and make them to sin against God by following the desires of flesh.

#### **5.2.2.2 Christian Allegorical Interpretations**

Early Christian interpreters of the Song of Songs also did not deviate much from Jewish allegorical interpretations. Longman (2001:24) notes that because the Christian

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<sup>98</sup> According to Longman (2001:24) for example "Akiba was an earliest voice for an allegorical approach to the Song of Songs."

community grew out of the Jewish community it would have only been natural for Christians to adopt the same Jewish allegorical approach to the Song and to have done so for centuries. In fact Exum (2005:73) has observed that “allegory was the dominant mode of interpretation for centuries.” Thus, it seems that allegorical interpretations of biblical texts dominated the world of scholarship until the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century (see Exum 2005:73). “This is because” Longman (2001:24) says “Christian exegetes did depend on previous traditions to understand the verses of the Song of Songs.”

As Christian theologians technically adopted Jewish allegorical interpretations of the Song, they replaced God with Jesus while the church took over the place of the nation of Israel. The love of Christ was understood from a universal point of view as an expression of the love of Christ for the universal church and or the individual soul of a devoted Christian. “The first known Christian allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs is that of Hippolytus of Rome that was written in the third century of the Christian Church”, according to Gordis (1975:3). The same view was also followed by the likes of Jerome, Athanasius and Origen. Origen, one of the early church fathers has given an extensive discussion on the Song of Songs. Longman (2001:29) points out that Origen devoted almost ten volumes of his work to the Song of Songs and a number of homilies. Origen saw the mysteries of communion between God and the soul of a devoted believer, as a union that is beyond the corruption of worldly pleasure. As a young man, Origen even sought to withdraw from his corporeal nature, by castrating himself.<sup>99</sup> In fact, Longman (2001:29) notes that while Origen understood the Song as a song of human marriage, the bridegroom and the bride are immediately spiritualized before they even reach the marriage bed - in Origen’s conception of the book.

In his (Origen’s) works on the Song, he developed the symbol of the bride as a portrait of the church, but also as the portrait of the soul of the individual believer. According to Norris (2003:2), Origen has written: “This little book, I take to be an epithalamium, that is, a marriage Song written by Solomon” – and, according to Origen (in Norris 2003:2), this was “ done in the manner of a drama – to be sung as if he were a bride at her wedding,

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<sup>99</sup> Longman (2001:29) gives a detailed discussion of Origen’s view on matters of sex and sexuality. In fact Longman (2001:29) strongly believes that it is Origen’s view on sexuality and how he understood the Song that caused Origen to castrate himself.

burning with heavenly desire for her bridegroom, who is the word of God.” Interpretations such as those of Origen continued to be followed in later patriarchal interpretations of the Old Testament, interpretations that continued to serve the agendas of the negative portrayal of the sexuality of women. These are agendas continued to portray women as responsible for causing ‘men of God’ to be lead astray, hence giving in to the pleasures of bodily desires. Many proponents of Origen’s interpretation of the Song were also heavily influenced by Neo-Platonist and Gnostic dualism that saw the soul and the body as two separate, even opposing, entities (Longman 2001:29). Duane Garrett (1993:355) even curiously notes that the Song of Songs became a favorite of most militant ascetics such as Bernard of Clairvaux who sought to detach themselves from the body in order to save the soul from eternal damnation.

According to another church fathers, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), too, the Song of Songs demonstrates the unity of God with the soul of a devoted Christian, but that it can only take place if a devoted Christian denounces the bodily passions that may result into a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. According to John Davidson (2004:66), Gregory said that the Song of Songs only uses expressions that *seem* to suggest carnal passion, as it in fact instructs believers in the divine life.

Allegorical and mystical interpretations continued to be favoured even during the Reformation. However, with the coming of the Enlightenment, the approach started to loose popularity. It was the time of the advent of critical biblical scholarship that brought a ‘new’ dimension to the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Even so, a number of (mostly Roman Catholic) scholars even in the twentieth century continued to advocate an allegorical approach to the Song, despite the fact that the literary features of the Song continued to provoke scholarly approaches that saw the song as referring to a love relationship between two human beings.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Also see Exum (2005:75ff.) for a detailed discussion on the allegorical and mystical approaches to the Song of Songs that followed Origen and Nyssa’s trends of allegorical interpretations.

### 5.2.3 Towards a Literary Interpretation of the Song of Songs

When one reads contemporary scholarly literature on the Song of Songs, it is possible to see that scholars are still to some extent not in agreement about a number of issues regarding the Song of Songs. As was seen above, there is no consensus regarding the authorship, date, place of writing and the literary unity of the Song. While scholars continue to hold different opinions on the above mentioned issues, a good number of modern scholars however agree that the Song is a poem of love. But what exactly are at issue in the poem and what are its major themes and the symbols in it?

In the discussion on literary interpretations of the Song of Songs, it was shown that contemporary scholars generally agree that the Song is a song of human love (see Exum 2005:73). However, it is worth noting that not many modern scholars pay attention to the *patriarchal nature* of the Song. Many scholars have been so under the impression of the seeming equality between the sexes in the Song as to argue that the song celebrates a love relationship between two lovers who are portrayed as equals. However, owing to the rich poetic nature of the Song, new provocative and exiting approaches to the Song of Songs continue to emerge (see for example Chapter Two of this study). Even so, not many exegetical and traditional works on the Song of Songs have been able to reckon exhaustively with the patriarchal context of the Song of Songs. I wish to argue here that it is still possible to encounter Old Testament layers of patriarchy in it that can be understood as responsible for the negative presentation of the sexuality of women in some places of the Song. This I call themes, motifs and symbols in the Song of Songs.

In the Song, one finds themes of the *human body, sexuality and gender construction*. In the Song of Songs there is a repeated theme of a man abandoning the female voice. This shows that the female character in the Song suffers a double burden. This is a burden of the power of love and the pain of having to seek for her beloved in the streets at night. Not only does the female voice in the song pay the price of the power of love through the *seeking-finding motif*, she also pays by being physically assaulted by the watchmen in the name of love. Thus, in as much as the man in the Song has been largely understood as offering reciprocal love to the female, the patriarchal layers of the Song should not go unnoticed. Owing to the patriarchal nature of the book, the abandonment of the woman can be

understood to imply that the man bears responsibility only for himself, while the woman carries the responsibility for herself, her family and her community (see Song 1:5-6 and 5).

In the Song of Songs we also find themes of gender roles that shows, as the product of a patriarchal society, the book still judges men and women differently. The reference to Solomon in the title of the Song seems to emphasize the significance the society of the Song attached to names, and the name of a man at that. In the Song, however, the voice of King Solomon is passive. The voice of the nameless woman is active and dominates the entire song. Yet, the text gets recognition and was possibly included in the canon because of the name associated with the title of the book. In this way, the name of King Solomon in the title of the Song can be understood to show the effects of both oppression and liberation. The motive of oppression can be deduced from the complain of the female voice in Song 1:4 who seems to complain that the King has brought her into his chambers against her will.

Even without being named, the female voice bridges the gap between patriarchy and the urgency for the liberation of women from the patriarchal ideologies of the Old Testament (and early allegorical interpretations of the Song) according to which the pleasures of bodily desires should be shunned or are understood as evil. Thus, while the Song of Songs remains a patriarchal text, it also remains true to the fact that, when one reads the Bible, the text may inform the context of the reader, and sometimes the context of the reader may also inform the text. It is from this context that this song encounters the female voice in the Song of Songs so as to read the Song for the dignity of Kenyan women. The first step towards breaking the long silenced voices of women on matters of sex and sexuality therefore is to try and reconstruct the female voice in Song of Songs as the voice of a woman whose words and actions can be understood in a new way to perceive of the image and identity of Old Testament women.

### ***5.3 RECONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE VOICE IN THE SONG OF SONGS***

The female voice in the Song of Songs emerges from within the Old Testament's patriarchal setting with a vibrant and empowered voice to speak about issues of sex and sexuality. According to Robert Jenson (2005:90), "the female voice in the Song of Songs speaks to her

beloved with a radical and wonderful demand.” Her confident words determine the response of her male counterpart, who reciprocates her feelings towards her.

According to Elie Assis (2009:72), the sense of intoxication from the female voice receives a new expression in Song 2:5, which is the feeling of being lovesick. “The sense of being sick,” Assis (2009:72) says, is meant to indicate that the feeling of love is so strong that it actually has an influence on the person’s physical condition as the sense of being sick results love and longing. The strength of love seems so strong that it takes control of the person and prevents him or her from doing anything apart from being immersed in the power of love. On the other hand, Susan McCaslin (2011:108) argues that “love is a gentle call and a loving reciprocity that wishes to infuse us with delight and an enhancement of being.” Both of these effects of love can be found in the lovers’ dialogue in the Song. Additionally, in Song 2:13b-14, the beloved responds to the female voice saying to her:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

This reciprocal response enables the two to enjoy their relationship, especially when they are in each other’s company. Robert Davidson (1986:14) observes that “as her lover stands outside he cannot see her properly, so he describes her as ‘my dove’; the dove as a symbol of love but also a bird that timidly hides in the crevices of the edges of cliffs.” Understood in this way, it is possible to understand why the male counterpart speaks as if he is not seeing her beloved clearly.

The female voice and her beloved engage in dialogue. After the female voice speaks, her male counterpart “confesses to the female voice how she once seemed to him inaccessible like a palm tree” (Bloch & Bloch 1995:16). Many times men in patriarchal settings assume that the silence of women on sexual harassment is equal to sexual submission. The female voice that emerges from the pages of the Song of Songs however, clears such misconceptions. In fact, “in 1:15-17 and 2:1-3, where the lovers admire one another” Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch (1995:16) say, “part of the pleasure of dialogue are in their quickness and verve as they outdo each other in praise.”



It is thus possible to say that it is through speech that the beloved in the Song of Songs is able to know what the female voice wants. She does not only *act* in a manner that suggests that she is in love; she *says* that she is in love. Her actions only serve to reinforce her voice. It is with this purpose in mind that we reconstruct the female voice in the Song of Songs thematically but, in dialogue with Old Testament passages that portray the sexuality of women from a negative perspective.<sup>101</sup> Through her words and actions, the female voice in the Song of Songs conveys a new message to her audience and the entire Old Testament readership, i.e., that, women should not carry a burden of guilt if they are in love.<sup>102</sup> One of the ways in which this happens is in the way that the female voice speaks openly and explicitly on matters of sex and sexuality.

### ***5.3.1 The Female Voice is Open and Explicit on Issues of Sex and Sexuality***

The Song of Songs presents the voice of a woman who is in love and who initiates and celebrates the triumph of love using explicit language on sexuality.<sup>103</sup> She uses language that is vivid, imaginative, unguarded and even ecstatic, to depict one of the most personal and intimate of human relationships. This is also the view of Longman in Longman (2008:118), in his review on the work of Exum (2005:263), namely that “the Song of Songs expresses the various emotions associated with love in subtle poetry with vivid and often provocative metaphors.” It is exactly these provocative metaphors that invite the audience to view the love relationship in a new way.

Ellen Davis (2000:232) describes the language of love in the Song of Songs by saying that “the Song of Songs speaks about human love in a language as exuberant, and at the same time as delicate, as has ever been written.” Thus, one would say that the book is

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<sup>101</sup> Renita Weems (1995:2) closely examines how “popular norms and attitudes about women, their bodies and sexuality in the Old Testament were used to portray women negatively as objects of sexual desire.” This is not the case in the Song of Songs. In the Song, as we shall see throughout this chapter, the sexuality of a woman is presented from a positive perspective.

<sup>102</sup> Tribble (1978:144) “hears the Song as speaking from lover to lover and reaching out to include the world in their world of romance.” This can be understood as sending a message to the readership of the Song of Songs that the world of romance is not something that people should be ashamed of.

<sup>103</sup> Commenting on the bold step taken by the female voice to initiate a love relationship, Habtu (2006:824) argues that “in the beautiful poem of Song 1:2-4, it is the girl who speaks first.”

best read poetically as a real expression of human experience which in itself reflects the generous gift of human love from God. And, from the discussion of Duane Garret (1993:365) of the history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs as “love poetry”, it is clear the the language used clearly expresses erotic love between a man and woman.

Commenting on the open and explicit sexual language of the Song of Songs, Dianne Bergand (1998:7) argues that “[a]mong all of the books of the Old Testament, the Song of Songs is one of the most intriguing.” “On the one hand,” Bergand (1998:7) notes “its unabashed sensuality has captured the imagination of and has endeared it to those who appreciate passionate human love. “On the other hand,” she further notes, “more demure readers have chosen a metaphorical reading.” As such this, therefore, also issues a challenge to contemporary readers of the Old Testament who still shun away from reading the Song of Songs because of its erotic language.

The female voice initiates love by openly inviting without fear her beloved male counterpart to kiss her because the love of her beloved is “sweeter than wine” (Song 1:2-4). The opening words of the female voice “let him kiss me”, too, are celebrative and vibrant. Interestingly, according to Habtu (2006), a similar vibrant celebrative voice occurs in the creation account in Gen 2:23.<sup>104</sup> But in the latter case, the voice speaking was that of a man who celebrates the coming of a woman with the words, “this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” It is a joyous celebration, but is not accompanied by language that is suggestive of romance.<sup>105</sup> In Song 1:2, though, the words “with the kisses of his mouth” are open, explicit, romantic, and suggestive words from the voice of a woman-which is an important aspect for this study-a study that seeks to advocate for the power of the voices of women in a Kenyan patriarchal society.

Of course, kissing is also referred to elsewhere in the Bible. However, it is unique in the way it is used in the Song of Songs. According to Exum (2005:93), of “the thirty-one

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<sup>104</sup> See Habtu (2006:824) for a detailed analysis on how the celebration of the female voice in the Song of Songs is related to the celebrative voice found in Gen 2:23.

<sup>105</sup> Tina Beattie (2002:179) points out that Genesis 2 has been read by male centred interpreters as signifying the subordination of women. See also Kristine E. Kvan, Linda S. Scheering and Valarie H. Ziegler (1999:164ff.) for a detailed discussion on some male-centered interpretations that portray the sexuality of women from a negative perspective.

occurrences of the Hebrew word קִשָּׁה meaning “to kiss” in the Bible, in most cases it refers to men kissing other men, usually relatives (see for example Gen 27:26-27, 29:13; 33:4; 45:15; 48:10 & 50:1). Women are depicted as kissing other women, for example, in Ruth 1:9, 14. The only instance of a woman kissing a man is in Proverbs 7:13, but there it is used in a warning about a “loose woman” who seizes and kisses the unsuspecting youth.” However, in Song 1:2, it is a woman longing for the kisses of her lover and ... she is not scolded. Furthermore, in Song 1:2, the kissing is specifically directed to the mouth and not the hand. In fact, to be kissed by ‘him’ defines the boundaries of the kiss. For Robert Jenson (2005:16), “this is not just a demand for love of a sublimate sort; it is apparently with haste for something more than the kisses of the mouth of the beloved.” Unfortunately Jenson does not tell us what exactly this “something else” may be, however urgent the desire may be.

Typically in the Old Testament, it is a man who is first said to fall in love with a woman. Even after falling in love, a man will mostly not share his emotions publicly and directly with the woman whom he has fallen in love with.<sup>106</sup> Instead, he tells it to the closest relative of the woman and with her help will then make arrangements for marriage – even without the consent of the woman.<sup>107</sup> For instance, in Gen 29:18-20 Jacob first falls in love with Rachel but he tells Laban and not Rachel about his feelings.

The marriages between Jacob and Rachel and Leah are arranged on the terms of Jacob negotiations with Laban, the father of Rachel, and on Laban’s conditions. The men thus make a decision regarding Rachel and Leah without seeking their consent.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, Song 1:2-4 presents the voice of a woman who calls upon her beloved male counterpart to pull her out

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<sup>106</sup>Even if the story of Tamar is a sad one, it is interesting to note that when Amnon falls in love with his sister, he does not tell her. Instead, “he was so distressed that he made himself ill in the process of finding ways of satisfying his sexual urge” (Van Dijk-Hemmes 1989:139). This echoes my comment regarding men in the Old Testament; even after falling in love, they would not say it directly.

<sup>107</sup> In Gen 21:21, 24:1-4, 38:6 and also in Judges 14:1-2, it seems probable that marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and the groom. It also seems that girls were betrothed shortly after puberty.

<sup>108</sup>Pardes (1992:62) sees through the eyes of the narrator of the story of Jacob in Gen 29:15-20 to show us how Leah is used by the narrator to show that the marriage of Leah to Jacob instead of Rachel, “served as a symmetrical punishment for Jacob’s cunning usurpation of his elder brother’s birthright.” The words of Pardes (1992:62) are suggestive of the fact that Leah’s feelings and reaction to this deal are silenced by the narrator.

of the chambers of the King so that they can run because the love of her beloved is better than wine. According to Longman (2001:66), “one of the most remarked-upon features of the Song is the confident voice of the woman as she pursues relationship with the man.” It thus seems probable that the confidence of this female enables her to use sexually-open and explicit language in the Song. The female voice clearly breaks away from the Old Testament norms where women are constantly silenced when it comes to matters of sex and sexuality.

The emphatic call in Song 1:4a: “...draw me after you, let us make haste. The King has brought me into his chambers,” is symbolic of a strong, resilient and resistant person who has resisted remaining in the chambers of the King, who seems to have brought the female voice into his chambers against her will. In fact, William MacDonald (1989:922) points out that “the [female voice] is longing for the Kisses of her shepherd lover; imagining that he is present ... King ‘Solomon’ has brought the [female voice] into his chambers against her own will.”

One finds an interesting hypothesis here with regard to the interpretation of the Song, namely the so-called “shepherd hypothesis”. Alec Motyer and Donald Wiseman (1970:580) argue that

Solomon had captured the [female voice] for his harem attempting to win her affection through artificial allures of the palace. But the [female voice] now yearns for her shepherd lover. She is longing for him and pleads that he takes her away since it is the King who has brought her into his chambers against her will.

Identifying “the King” in Song 1:4b as King Solomon and the female voice as the Shulammitte (see Song 6:13), Motyer and Wiseman (1970:580) further argue that “Solomon is hardly the best example of true, loyal, single minded love in the light of his 700 wives and 300 concubines and all the dire consequences for the nation that followed in the train of his many love affairs.” Ascribing the Song of Songs to King Solomon, Gareth Crossley (2002:500), on the other hand, argues that “the Song of Solomon was obviously composed during a period of Solomon’s life when he was in a healthy spiritual state-in other words, before his tragic decline.” Crossley (2002:500) bases his argument on the documentations of Solomon’s life in 1 Kings 11:3-4 that reads:

... and he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned his heart for it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.

Be that as it may, in one sense, the female voice here stands opposed to the Old Testament practice of arranging a partner for a woman with no opportunity for the voice of the one who has been dragged into the relationship to have a say.

The arrangement may not necessarily be because of love; in fact it may have been mostly because of considerations of wealth, payment of debts, to secure alliances across families or to keep the family property within the family tribe.<sup>109</sup> Hubbard (1998:54) for example, tells us that

to keep each tribe's inheritance intact, the [Old Testament] law forbade a daughter who had inherited land to marry outside her father's tribe lest her property become part of another tribes holding.

Thus, in the context of the inheritance of land, a daughter had no right in the Old Testament to choose a partner that she loves. Even if she would have wanted to choose a man after her own heart, her voice would not have been heard. The Song of Songs 1:2-4 however shows that the female voice falls in love, explicitly declares her feelings and invites her partner under *her own* terms and conditions. Nobody has arranged a partner for her.

By openly choosing her partner, the female voice in the Song of Songs creates an environment conducive to the blossoming of a mutual reciprocal love that crowns the relationship by declaring that her lover is hers and she is his (Song 2:16). The female voice is not ashamed of declaring explicitly and openly who the object of her affections is and it is here where we will find her (See Song 2:17). Thus, as Roland A. Champagne (1998:14) puts it, "the [female voice in the] Song of Songs is an anomaly in the [Old Testament] where

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<sup>109</sup> Katharine Sakenfeld (1999:56) for example, describes how "the story of Ruth and Naomi is set within an overreaching and undergirding societal structures in which long-term security for women depends upon their being in relationship with some male who has access to economic assets."

typically, male speakers abound and their subject is power.” Robin McCall (2008:419) emphasises that

[t]he book [the Song] does not suggest that the woman’s passionate self-expression is a negative quality (unlike, for instance, Vashti’s refusal to dance for the King in Esther 1:12-22). There is not even concern here to restrain the woman’s frank sexuality, which in other parts of the Bible is a dangerous thing to be carefully restricted by civil and cultic laws (cf. Lev 12; 15:19-31; Deut. 22:13-29).

According to Champagne (1998:14), “in the Song of Songs, the reverse is true; the woman more than a man is connected with images of power.” “Such power,” Champagne (1998:14) says “is that of a woman’s voice asserting its life and place within [a patriarchal] society.”

### ***5.3.2 Sex Beyond Utility Value***

After initiating and celebrating the triumph of love in an open and explicit language of sexuality, we also encounter the voice of a woman who presents sexuality from the perspective of sex beyond utility value. In fact, Jim Dant (2008:496) points out that

The Song of Songs gives us permission to pursue our passions and enjoy them – even seeing them as holy. Rather than denounce or deny the beauty in your lover or the beauty of God’s world, see him or her as a gift. Bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, world of your world, intended to bring joy.”

And, Melanchthon (2004:184) argues as follows:

The relationship between the female voice and the beloved transcends borders of convention and propriety. It emphasizes neither marriage nor procreation, which is normally considered to be the aim of union between the sexes. Neither of this is the concern. The focus instead is on mutual love, respect, and appreciation. Love and wanting to be with the lover is the central theme; something that is often neglected in social and even religious definitions of marriage and love relationship.

Thus, one could say that the female voice in the Song transcends the Old Testament portrayal of sex as either for procreation or for the pleasure to the man only. When one reads the Song of Songs, one will find no words for “children,”<sup>110</sup> “offspring,” “family” or “bride price.”<sup>111</sup> We only hear phrases such as “your love is better than wine” (Song 1:2b), “my lover” (Song 2:2), “his fruit was sweet to my taste” (Song 2:3b) and “I have eaten from my honey comb” (Song 5:1).

These words are specifically used in the Song to express the sexual enjoyment of the two lovers in the Song. It is not even clear from the Song whether the two are married or have children. What we experience through their joyful encounters is that they are enjoying themselves. From the understanding of Pope (1975:208), it is clear that “unlike the first woman of Genesis (Eve) the female voice is not a wife and her love does not entail procreation. She actively seeks the man. When she finds her [beloved], she grabs and holds him.” The female voice in the Song of Songs thus presents a broader perspective on sex that stands over against the traditional understanding of female sexuality in the Old Testament.

In this particular case, Murphy (1999:221) sees the Song of Songs as “deviating from the Old Testament’s central regulation on issues of sex and sexuality and her central concern for procreation.” Moreover, one may argue that the female voice is inviting her audience to conceive of sex as something that should bring pleasure to both the man and the woman in a relationship. According to David Dockery (2011:255), “although we are sinners, God tells us that the [sexual] relationship is a thing to be cherished and enjoyed.” “If the Bible said nothing in this area beyond prohibitions and warnings,” Dockery (2011:255) says, “we might

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<sup>110</sup>Even though Bronner (1994:88-9) does not link the barrenness of biblical women with sexuality in her reconstruction of biblical women, she arguably points out that “the barren woman was the person with the most tenuous status in biblical society, for life without children seemed empty; unless (until) she had a son, she had not fulfilled her destiny. Barrenness was regarded as a reproach, because it was believed to be a curse from God (Gen 16:2). It was only thought to be relieved by the mercy of God in response to prayer by the Barren woman herself or by someone else on her behalf i.e. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah and Samson’s Mother whose name is not given” (1994:88-9). Thus, one can argue that there is an indirect link of barrenness to sexuality, so that barren women could not find pleasure in their sexual encounters with their male counterparts unless the relationship was crowned by a child or children.

<sup>111</sup>See Deuteronomy 22:28-29 for the use of the word “fifty shekels”, which probably has been used in reference to modern day understanding of the word bride price.

suppose that all sexuality is innately evil and is to be suppressed entirely except for procreation.” For Dockery (2011:255), “it is not sexuality but the abuse of sex that is wrong.” Sexual abuses occur, one would say, through for example sexual violence.

The Old Testament presents issues of sex in a way that even when it is for procreation, it is a man who takes a woman and lies with her. In Genesis 4:1, for example, the words “Adam lay with his wife Eve and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain” confirms that in this particular case, Adam had a sexual relationship with Eve primarily for procreation. Additionally, in Genesis 16, we read the story of Abraham and Sarah, to whom God had promised a son. But Sarah was barren and therefore, in Genesis 16:1-2, she persuades Abraham to take Hagar and sleep with her so that Abraham and Sarah could build a family through her. Sex in this case, too, was specifically for procreation. The result of the sexual encounter between Abraham and Hagar is that Ishmael was born from this union (See Gen. 16:1-16).

In contrast, Song 2:3-7, I propose, offers us a broader perspective of sex.<sup>112</sup> From the female voice in Song 2:3-7, one sees that the issue of sex is not restricted only to bringing pleasure to men. Thus, the female voice rises above the Old Testament male-dominated prejudices on matters of sex by presenting a woman as also enjoying sexual encounters with her male counterpart. In the Song of Songs, it is possible for one to see that the female voice is celebrating the joys of consummation with her beloved, when she says that “as an apple

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<sup>112</sup>Distinguishing Song 2:4-7 from Song 1:15-2:3, Assis (2009:68-69) says that “the previous poem is a dialogue between the man and woman, while in this poem the woman is speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, without the man being present. In vv. 4 and 6 she is speaking about her beloved in the third person singular while in v. 5 she is speaking to a group of people, whose identity is probably the Daughters of Jerusalem as revealed in v. 7 While the uniting motifs of the previous poem are jewelry and perfumes, the theme of the poem in 4-7 is ‘love,’ a word that appears in this poem three times.” While Assis focuses on the theme of love as a uniting theme of this section of the Song, he does not give the details of the love. Is it the love that culminates in the sexual consummation? We do not know. However, Longman on the other hand points out that “the woman describes her embrace with the man.” “The best understanding of the verse” Longman argues, “is that they are lying down and the man has slipped his left arm under her hand, and, as he cradles her head on his arm, he has reached over and pulled her toward him.” For Longman (2001:115), “this is not a response to her fatigue. It is rather an expression of a desire for more lovemaking.” “This verse” he says, “recurs in 8:3 and serves as one of the refrains of the Song that bind the whole together and thus the context certainly indicates that this is an intimate embrace.” Seen in this way, it certainly shows that the two lovers are enjoying sexual intimacy together.



tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” In this regard, Longman (2001:112) argues: “She continues to use the imagery of an apple tree to comment on their intimacy. Their physical union is represented by the fact that she tastes his fruit.” Thus, the female voice shares the experience of her encounter with her beloved as an encounter of enjoyment between the two lovers.

In the Old Testament, sex is often presented in a way that it only brings warmth, pleasure or satisfaction to the men involved. Women are often only pressured into it. In 1 Kings 1:1-4 for example, we are told that when King David was old and advanced in years, his servants tried as much as possible to cover him with clothes, but he could not get warm. Because he was getting even colder, David’s servants suggested to him that a young maiden should be sought for the King and should lie down with him to keep him warm. Abishag the Shunammite was brought to the King. In this story, therefore, one possibly sees that Abishag only lay with King David to make the king warm. This might imply that Abishag did not enjoy her sexual encounter with King David. The words “but the King had no intimate relationship with her” (1 Kings 1:4) serve to reinforce this.

Additionally, there are several examples of a man just taking a woman by force and having sex with her against her will. The story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is probably the most horrific example in the Old Testament where men have used force to solicit sexual pleasures from women. According to Mark Jones (2006:109), “the shame of being sexually abused, which still lies beneath the surface today, was overt in Tamar’s day.” In fact, in instances where women are sexually violated, there is no room for one to conceive of sex beyond utility value. It becomes even worse when the voices of the victims are silenced.

Moreover, the sexual experiences of women are ignored or not expressed by the Old Testament narrators. In Genesis 34:1-5, for example, we read about Dinah the daughter of Leah whom she had born to Jacob. She went out to visit the women of the region.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>It is not immediately clear from the text that Dinah is going to visit the women of the region at night. I am here presuming that visiting hours are automatically during the day. If Dinah was out there during the day and she is raped; the rape of women in the Old Testament has nothing to do with women being out alone at night. This observation is in reference to the words of Hagedorn

However, when Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her. From this text, I argue that there was no romantic encounter at all that would allow for Dinah to express her feelings or even to consent to the prince of the region. The story only proceeds to the climax with the prince, whose sexual urge has been satisfied. One then would possibly ask: What then happened to Dinah? We do not hear the voice of Dinah after her rape at all. The main contention here is that Dinah has been portrayed as a silent victim of sexual violence. Frymer-Kensky (2002:182) argues that “we do not hear about how Dinah feels and that even the consent of Dinah is not the issue.” It thus seems from the story of Dinah that sex in many parts of the Old Testament is not presented as something done for the enjoyment of women. It was rather done to quench the sexual urge of men. One may even say that men used patriarchal ideologies to silence the voices of women in the Old Testament, so that they (men) could continue to benefit from the sexual submission of women.

Furthermore, with reference to Deuteronomy 22:28, one may argue that Old Testament laws legalize the sexual abuse of women as a matter that is condoned, as long as it has brought sexual satisfaction to a man. This is because all that a man needed to do if he had feelings for a woman was to seize her as long as she was not engaged: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife” (Deut 22:28-29). From this levirate law, one can easily fill in the missing gaps and say that if the man is *not* 1) his act of rape will not be punished- 2) if the man *is* caught in the act, the woman will be forced to marry a man who raped her and that in their sexual encounter, the woman will not get any pleasure given the circumstances that lead to her marriage. It becomes even more dangerous if a man is not caught in the act but the woman decides to speak about the ordeal. No one will believe her because they were not caught in the act. In fact, she might be accused of having lost her virginity due to her own fault and be executed (Deut 22:20-21).

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(2005:210), who seems to insinuate that, the watchmen of Song 5:7 abused the female voice because she was “outside alone after hours.”

Moreover, in Genesis 29:14-30 we also encounter the story of Jacob, who is tricked into sleeping with Leah. Jacob had sex with Leah, thinking that it was Rachel. It is not until the following morning that he realizes that it was Leah and not Rachel whom he had sex and therefore married. In this story, one sees that Jacob could not even realize that he was having sex with Leah and not Rachel!

Did Leah really enjoy her sexual encounter with Jacob? We are not told. What one can see though, is that it is Laban, the father of Leah, who took her secretly to Jacob. In fact, Hamilton (1995:262) tells us that “the story raises many issues. How does Leah feel about being led to Jacob’s bed by her father? Does she voluntarily accept the role of surrogate wife? Is she content to be reduced to a means to an end?” The issues that Hamilton (1995:262) raises about Leah serve to show that, for women in the Old Testament, sex was not a matter of enjoyment or celebration. Sex was a means through which marital covenants would be sealed.

From the aforementioned analysis, it is evident that the silenced voices of women in the Old Testament make it difficult to conceive of sex beyond utility value. Seeing that the Old Testament presents the concept of sex as limited to procreation and for the pleasure of men, could one possibly argue that women in the Old Testament did not find pleasure at all in sex? We do not know. Jenson (1989:30), however, points out that “the view that women do not or should not find pleasure in sex, found in cultures both primitive and sophisticated is plainly not shared by the female voice in the Song of Songs.” One therefore sees that the female voice offers a new perspective of sex and sexuality to her contemporary readership as compared to that what has been presented to us from some other Old Testament passages discussed above.

In contrast to the Old Testament portrayal of sex as something that is reserved for procreation and something that may only bring pleasure to men, Song 5:1 offers a fresh perspective. The words of the beloved to his lover and his friends are an indicator of this:

I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey and I drunk my wine with my milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.<sup>114</sup>

The male lover's words offer a distinctive change from the concept of a sexual relationship that is characterized by being seized by force and not pursued out of love. The female voice therefore leads us through the Song of Songs to see that if a love relationship is conducted out of love, the sexual encounter is respected and cherished. For both partners, it is significant that sex is handled with respect. Thus, through the initiative of the female voice, we see how the two lovers are enjoying their sexual encounter.

The experience of the lovers' enjoyment of their love moves the man to invite his friends to "eat from the honey comb" as well and to become be drunk with love, because sex is something to be enjoyed. Habtu (2006:827) points out that "some commentators have been baffled as to who is speaking and who is spoken to in the invitation 'Eat, O friends and drink: drink your fill, O lovers' (5:1b)." Habtu argues that: "If the drinking and eating refers to the consummation of love between the bride and the bridegroom, then this cannot be shared with anybody else-it is theirs alone" (2006:827). Habtu, however, agrees with the NIV's translation which identifies the friends as guests who have come to witness and participate in the wedding ceremony of the female voice in the Song of Songs and her beloved. If this is the case, then it is proper to argue that the beloved (male counterpart) is encouraging the friends who have come to witness the wedding between the female voice and her beloved to also eat from "their honey comb" and be intoxicated with love.

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<sup>114</sup> Bloch and Bloch (1995:179-80) see Song 5:1 as: "A self-contained epigram, this boisterous call to enjoy life's earthly pleasures may have been taken from a popular wine song (see Segal 1976). The words serve as an exuberant finale to this entire unit. They are thematically integral to the rest of the verse, and there is no compelling reason to assume that they are spoken by a different voice. Nor are the friends necessarily to be taken as referring to identifiable persons (say, the young man's companions of 1:7 & 8:13). They may well be the proverbial friends or "comrades" rhetorically addressed in a wine song (see Eccles. 11:9)." On the other hand, Garrett sees "this brief call as a chorus that brakes the tension of the previous verses opening the way for a second solo that is similar to Song 3:1-5." For Garret (1993:408), these are the daughters of Jerusalem whom he calls "girls intruding on the couple's lovemaking calling on both the man and woman to let them-selves be intoxicated with love."

With regard to this verse, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch (1995:178) also reject the translation of the Revised Standard Version, which looks at the action of the beloved of coming to his garden and eating from his honeycomb as a reference of a present tense action. They argue that if one adopts a present tense translation, then the translation will read: “I come, I gather, I eat, I drink.” For them (Bloch and Bloch), this phrase is, therefore, an indicator of sexual pleasure between the two lovers; a sexual pleasure that has already happened (1995:178).

So, too, we hear the words of the female voice in Song 3:4-5 celebrating the joys of sex:

When I found him whom my soul loves- I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready.

Objecting to the literal interpretation of Song 3:1-5, Garrett (1993:396) argues that,

it would be very strange for a girl in ancient Israel to wander the streets at night because she misses her boyfriend; and that it is also difficult to see the female voice taking her boyfriend to her mother's house for a sexual liaison.<sup>115</sup>

The female voice tells us that she brought her beloved to the house of her mother. In addition, she emphasizes that she took him to the chambers of the one who conceived her. While this particular verse has generated different interpretations, for the purpose of this study however, we can only imagine the strength of love that lead the woman to take her beloved to the chambers of her mother's house. If the chambers are understood as the inner

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<sup>115</sup> Speaking about the interpretation of Song 3:1-5, some commentators argue that “the interpretation of Song 3:1-5 is difficult. Four approaches are possible: the literal, the cultic, the dream, and the symbolic. If it is understood literary, it means that she longed for her lover and wandered the streets until she found him. She then brought him to her mother's chambers for a sexual liaison ... taking a man to her parent's home for that purpose would be unthinkable in Israelite Society. Thus the literal meaning is too bizarre to be the intended meaning here” (Garret 1993:396)

rooms, then the inner rooms as used in this verse could be understood by a contemporary reader in terms of a bedroom.

I thus argue that the joys of sexual encounters can only be celebrated if the boundaries of the joys of sex are understood beyond utility value. One could say that when the female voice in the Song of Songs pursues love for enjoyment and not for procreation or for fulfilling the sexual urges of men, then she would be accused of seducing innocent young men. However, in Song 5:3-4 we encounter the voice of a woman who has taken off her garment and does not want to put it on again, because she is ready to enjoy her sexual encounter with her beloved, whom she is eagerly expecting tonight (see Song 5:5-6). She further says that she has bathed her feet and she does not want to soil her feet while looking for her lover outside. All she wants is for her lover to come in, because she is fainting with love and her inmost being is yearning for her beloved (see Song 5: 6 & v. 8).

In fact, in Song 5:8, we hear the advice of the female voice to the daughters of Jerusalem: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved; please tell him that I am faint with love." It is therefore possible for one to see that from these two texts, the female voice in Song of Songs is finding pleasure in her sexual encounter with her beloved.<sup>116</sup> It is the pleasure that she has experienced that has made her to pursue her beloved out of love (See Song 3:4 & 5:1), because love is as strong as death (Song 8:6). In this way, sex beyond utility value in the Song of Songs challenges the idea of sex as a utility concept that is the norm elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Thus far we have encountered the voice of a woman in the Song of Songs who uses open and explicit language of sexuality to speak about the gift of human sexuality as something that God's people should not be ashamed of. We have also seen from the explicit language of sexuality that sex should not necessarily be perceived within the boundaries of procreation and or as something that only brings pleasure to men. At this point of the study,

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<sup>116</sup> It is important to point out here that I am not encouraging lovers to celebrate the joys of their sexual encounters in the inner chambers of their mothers if they have been *overpowered* by love. I am just highlighting this to show how love can be *overpowering*. Additionally, this can also be understood to mean that it is important for mothers (parents) to allow their children to be open with them about their sexual feelings. In this way, they can have the opportunity to offer advice and guidance regarding how far they can go with matters of love.

we are going to encounter the voice of a woman who offers contemporary readers an opportunity of looking at *their* lovers as both lovers and friends.

### 5.3.3 “*My Lover is My Lover, My Friend and My Companion*”

Confronted by the female voice in the Song of Songs speaking about issues of sex and sexuality with such a bold and explicit language, one may fall short of seeing *beyond* the celebration of the sexual encounters of the lover and her beloved (see Song 2 & 5:1). In fact, returning to Song 5:1 for the moment, Keel (1994:184) says that “the man (beloved) turns to his companions to invite them to also experience how it feels when one has been intoxicated with love.” This could be understood to insinuate that Keel (1994:184) sees the call of the beloved in Song 5:1 as a call for an intimate relationship, which may not necessarily involve a company of two lovers just staying together and enjoying the friendship of one another without having sex.

Song 5:16, on the other hand, presents the female voice as looking at her beloved as her lover but also as her friend and companion. In fact, the declaration of the female voice that “this is my beloved and this is my friend” (Song 5:16), not only shows her love and commitment; it is a declaration of “the depth of their relationship. Her beloved is not any man whom she finds desirable – he is her friend” (Vardy 1997:99). We have already seen how the female voice celebrates being in the company of her beloved in Song 2:4-6. Here, in Song 5:16, I argue that she takes her audience beyond the sexual aspect of a love relationship to say that true love is more than just sex. Vardy (1997:99) for example proposes, that this relationship “speaks of an intimacy and a sharing, an engagement that goes beyond and yet is expressed by physical closeness.”<sup>117</sup>

Song 5:16, I argue, may therefore be understood as showing two people who are deeply in love, that the depth of a true love relationship is characterized by companionship and friendship. Seen in this way, lovers will be able to draw strength from one another. They

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<sup>117</sup>It is important to note here that in Song 3:1-2 and 5:5-6, the female voice seems to express concern over her missing male counterpart. However, in Song 5:16, she is presented as one who portrays her beloved as always keeping her company a lover and a friend who is always there for her.

will count on one another's friendship and support at all times. So many people today, including Christians, act as though passionate words of love between lovers are inappropriate (Munger 2004:317). The reason for this is arguably because many people mistake the flow of passionate expressions in romantic relationships with sex only. Some young men, who are usually sexually active, even practice coming up with the best romantic words so that they can woo unsuspecting young girls for sexual relationships.

If love is seen beyond sexual acts and lovers enjoy the physical presence and company of each other's bodies as good friends, it is possible to tame aggressive sexual behavior that may stem from misconceptions on matters of sex and sexuality. One thus finds the possibility of seeing love beyond sexual acts in the voice of a woman in the Song of Songs. After passionately describing the body parts of her male counterpart (Song 5:10-15), the female voice crowns her romancing speech and description by referring to her beloved as her beloved and friend. According to Munger (2004:317), "the [female voice] in the Song of Songs draws strength from the love of her beloved and that is why with her fullest feelings, she responds to the love of her beloved by exclaiming my 'lover, my friend'."

When lovers view their love as a relationship that goes beyond sexual encounters, they will be able to treat each other with mutual respect and dignity. In the Old Testament, men are mostly depicted as lusting for sex (2 Samuel 13) and women are portrayed as the givers of sexual services to men (Genesis 38:15). Arguably, men in the Old Testament continued to treat women with indignity since men saw women as only objects of sexual fulfillment. However, by raising her voice to call her beloved her lover and her friend, the female voice speaks from within the Old Testament context to show that women are human beings just like men and in the same manner, they are also capable of loving; they are "subjects for love and not objects of sex sexual desire" (Brenner, 1997:29). In a society that silences the voices of women, sexual injustices go uncriticized. The female voice in Song 5:16 may thus also show that the voice of a woman has the power to even prevent aggressive sexual behavior if a lover is reminded that he should also be a companion and her friend; hence, true love is more than just sexual encounters.



In Genesis 2:18 one reads that God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion suitable for him...”<sup>118</sup> In the whole creation account in Genesis 1, one encounters the repeated phrase: “It was good.” But when God carefully observed the perfect creation, God saw one thing that was “not good”: man was alone. God saw that Adam deeply needed companionship (Kredrick & Kredrick 2009:12). While the divine command in Genesis 1:28 is immediately followed by another divine command of being fruitful and filling the earth as a command for procreation, the original idea of creating a woman was clearly for more than procreation; it was perhaps first and foremost for mutual companionship.

Unfortunately many commentators have emphasized the aspect of procreation. In fact, speaking about the aspect of humanity’s loneliness in relation to the creation of humanity, Paul Griffin (1978:86) argues that “for the first time in our story the story teller suggests that there is something that is ‘not good.’ In search for companionship man could not find a corresponding companion.” What was missing was friendship. This shows that besides many passages that portray the sexuality of women negatively in the Old Testament, some passages have also been interpreted negatively by some Old Testament commentators to present a negative image of the sexuality of women.<sup>119</sup>

With regard to this text in Genesis another (unfortunate) aspect of it is the fact that it is found in the context of God’s command to Adam to name the animals.<sup>120</sup> It is in the

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<sup>118</sup>There is a lot of “vigorous discussion surrounding the creation of a woman in Gen 1 and 2” (Ortlund 2000:650). “God” Ortlund (2000:650) says, “defines the newly created woman with the phrase ‘helper fit for him’ suggesting a twofold understanding of woman vis-a vis man. On the one hand, ‘helper’ positions her in the garden as his supporter (cf. Ps 20:2). On the other hand, ‘fit for him’ affirms her unique compatibility with the man. She alone answers his needs, for she alone is his true counterpart in the creation” (2000:651). It is therefore important for readers of the text to give consideration to the fact that when we reading the Bible, sometimes the Bible informs our context and our context also in a way informs our reading of the Bible. Pardes (1992:12-38) for example, provides a contrastive analysis of six feminist readings of the story/s of the creation of woman in Genesis to show that there is no single monolithic approach to Scripture.

<sup>119</sup> See for example the comments of Tribble (1993:98) about male centered interpretations regarding Genesis 2.

<sup>120</sup> Most parts of the Old Testament portray the images of women from a negative perspective. We however have an example of this passage however, which has the potential to be interpreted positively to offer a positive image of the sexuality of women. The challenge is that some male centered

process of naming the animals that the loneliness of Adam is conceived by God as something that is not good, but sadly though, many people have read this part of Genesis without recognition of the aspect of companionship.

Taking one step further regarding the interpretation of the aspect of loneliness in Genesis 2:18, Zvi Kolitz (1993:44) writes that the words “to be” in Gen 2:18 “suggests a unique in-depth experience of which only Adam is aware, and is unrelated to any function or performance.” “To be,” Kolitz (1993:44) says, “means to be the only one, singular, different; and, consequently lonely.” According to Kolitz (1993:45), “the result of the loneliness of Adam leads God to create a woman. This way, God forms a rhythmic beat of hearts starved for companionship.” It is therefore the aspect of companionship as a component of friendship that makes love a complete relationship. Speaking about the process by which God provided for companionship in Gen 2, Tribble (1978:98) argues that “God operates on Adam to produce a companion and the identity of humanity becomes sexual.” In this text it is evident that the aspect of friendship in the company of a lover is greatly valued. Tribble (1978:98) helps us to see, that the identity of humanity becomes sexual after God has “operated” on Adam to produce a companion.

In light of the above, one may argue that in a love relationship, the man needs to offer love and friendship to make the companionship complete. Therefore, we see in Song 5:16 that the element of mutual companionship and friendship is celebrated by the female voice through her words: “This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.” In her words to the daughters of Jerusalem, “the woman uses exotic royal language to represent her lover and then to declare this lover hers. In fact this is the only time the woman refers to the man as my friend” (Bland 2002:449). Bland (2002:449) further points out that “the term ‘friend,’ which is used primarily by the man for the woman, is an expression of equality and the mutuality of respect.”

Just as God crowned the created world with the creation of a woman who was to give companionship to a man in Genesis 2, one may therefore argue that the words of the female

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interpretations have interpreted this passage from a male centered perspective to portray a negative image of the sexuality of women (see Tribble 1997:98ff for a detailed discussion on this aspect).

voice in Song 5:16 crowns the love relationship of the two lovers by showing that love is more than sexual acts. In fact, Smalley and Trent (1989:134) have argued that

... romance is a relationship, not an event. It's not something we occasionally do to stoke the fires of passion. Rather, it should be an ongoing, foundational part of our relationship that doesn't come and go like the tide.

Smalley and Trent (1989:134) further say that a true, friendly, love relationship should “flow as steadily as a river” and that an inescapable aspect of romance is being “‘best friends’ with your spouse (Song 5:16).” According to these authors, “during the ideal courtship, couples should have time to build their friendship to its peak since friendship is closely linked to romance” (1989:134). A love relationship that is viewed from the perspective of friendship is thus nurtured with respect and dignity by both the lovers.

Given the aforementioned analysis, it is worth mentioning that in Song 2:10, 17 the beloved had already invited his lover to be with him and to stay with him until the day breaks. Read together with Song 5:16, one may say that in the Song of Songs, the beloved offers mutual companionship and friendship that is responsible for the fact that the female voice views their love relationship as more than just sexual encounters. This mutuality depicted in Song of Songs stands in stark contrast to the way the Old Testament often depicts the relationships between men and women.

In Genesis 38:1-26, for example, we encounter the story of Judah who instructs his daughter-in-law Tamar to remain a widow in her father's house until his son Shelah grows up. Tamar obeys the order of her father-in-law; and goes to live in her father's house (vv 11-12). In this regard, Bird (1997:202-3) points out that “Judah was afraid of losing his only remaining son. So he sent Tamar home to her father's house instructing her to remain a widow until the third son, Shelah grows up.” “As a dutiful daughter-in-law,” Bird (1997:202-3) continues, Tamar remains a widow “yet ‘betrothed’ and therefore not free to remarry. Judah in his anxiety has therefore sealed the fate of Tamar for he intends her widowhood to be permanent.” If a love relationship is perceived beyond sex and procreation and perceived from the perspective of providing friendship and company, then society will also look for ways of offering widows friendship and company, without necessarily soliciting for sexual

returns from women. This is especially helpful in societal settings in which widows are usually forced into marriages in the name of ‘our culture.’

In the case of Judah, his daughter-in-law was instructed to remain a widow so that she can continue his (Judah’s) lineage. This seems probable, given that the story ends by speaking about Tamar who poses as a prostitute in order to get a son from Judah: “When Tamar was told, ‘your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep’, she put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage ...” (Gen 36:13-16b). In this story, one may argue that the possibility of Tamar enjoying the friendship and company of the promised love of Shelah does not realize. Instead she ends up conceiving a child with her father in-law and this may also be an instance that shows that often Old Testament men sought rather to control women instead of offering them the companionship of love and friendship that the female voice in Song 5:16 speaks of.

Judges 19, too, tells a harrowing story in which men are portrayed as not caring for women, but rather controlling the bodies of women. Consequently, we see in Judges 19: 25 how when the men of the city asked to have sex with the Levite, but the latter then “offers them instead his own young daughter and his guest concubine” (Hackett 2004:360). “The man [then] seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning.” While the concubine was being abused outside, the Levite was inside. We do not hear a word of concern from the Levite until the following morning.<sup>121</sup> In fact, according to Susan Niditch (2008:193), “the author implicitly contrasts her condition, dying, abandoned outside, with the husband’s security in ‘the house of the man’ until morning.” From the story in Judges, it is evident that the men in the story are not responsible and do not care about the women in their household. Even before the Levite threw his concubine out to the men of the city, the ‘the old man’ had already offered her daughter, who was a virgin, together with the concubine to them.

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<sup>121</sup>According to Jo-Ann Hackett (2004:360), “we learn that the Levite throws his concubine to the mob, and she is raped and abused the whole night. The concubine is finally let go, and she makes her way back to the host’s threshold, where the Levite finds her in the morning. He orders her to get up, but she doesn’t reply.” His words and actions clearly indicate that the Levite was not concerned at all about the condition of his concubine.

In this regard, Andrew Hock-Soon (2007:203) points out that “Judges 19 reveals the deep-seated subjection of women to a social order that privileges only men.”<sup>122</sup> It shows women were totally under the mercies of men. Having total control over their bodies, men could do to them whatever pleased them. This is clearly not the case in the Song of Songs. In the latter book, the female voice is portrayed as enjoying the company and friendship of her husband, a friendship that offers her security and comfort. In a relationship of true friendship, abuse is absent. A love relationship that offers companionship and true friendship is characterized by a sense of care and responsibility.

This is exactly what one finds in Song of Songs 2, where the female voice portrays her lover as responsible and caring. In this particular Song, we encounter a woman who is not lonely; she is enjoying the company of her male counterpart. In Song 2:3, we hear the female voice saying:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love.

In response, the beloved invites the female voice to show her face unto him and to speak to him because he wants to see her and hear her voice. Longman (2002:66) contends that “the man responds in kind and it is fair to characterize their relationship as egalitarian. There is no power play between them, no domination of one against the other.” The female voice in Songs of Songs shows us that it is possible to transform socially contracted norms.<sup>123</sup> She does this by taking upon herself the initiative of creating the environment of reciprocal mutual care in Song 2:1-6. The reciprocal love from the male lover in Song of Songs thus

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<sup>122</sup> “The book of Judges is a violent book” says Jo-Ann Hackett (2004:360). “There is hardly a single narrative that is not concerned with violence of some sort; battles as well as individual killings, kidnapping, threats, even human sacrifice, and a list goes on. I have been struck before that much of the book is also focused on women, both as actors and as victims of actions. It will not be surprising, then, when we see that women and violence cross paths repeatedly in stories in judges, sometimes in rather unusual ways. This is probably because; there was no King in Israel and therefore everybody did as they pleased” (2004:360). Hackett (1998:191-2) gives a detailed discussion on the state of Israel’s Society during the time when they had no King and so everybody did as they pleased.

<sup>123</sup>See Hock-Soon (2007:203).

offers an important counterpoint to the view presented in a ‘text of terror’ such as Judges 19.<sup>124</sup>

By celebrating the company of her beloved and declaring that her lover is her friend, the female voice gives new meaning to the social aspect of the love relationship between the lovers. Earley (2011:7) “..like[s] the fact that the two terms lover and friend are linked together. [As] [i]n marriage, they complement and build each other. As the friendship deepens, the intimacy grows. As the intimacy grows, the friendship deepens. Thus your mate needs to become your best friend.” Davis (2000:247) also comments on the way the female voice calls her beloved “her friend” saying that “the echo expresses full reciprocity of their love relationship. Each calls the other by a distinctive term of endearment.” This indeed shows that being lovers does not necessarily mean that a love relationship is determined by sex.<sup>125</sup> In this regard, Pope (1977:194) also comments that the Song “speaks of other elements in the love relationship that make it fully meaningful.”<sup>126</sup> By telling her audience that the beloved is her friend (Song 5:16b), the female voice in the Song of Songs invites the reader to share a new perspective of love.<sup>127</sup> It is a remarkable love relationship that is

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<sup>124</sup> I am, of course, here referring to the well-known *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of the Biblical Narratives*, in which Phyllis Trible (1984:1) takes upon herself the “task of telling sad stories as she hears them.” Apart from Hagar, Tamar and the daughter of Jephthah, Trible also looks in detail on the story of the unnamed concubine in Judges categorizing this story as part of the texts of terror in the Bible. While “many scholars who study Judges 19-21 start their consideration with a reference to the influential work of Trible, *Texts of Terror*,” (Erik 2005:102-4) Erik (2005:102) argues that “Feminist Theology has developed and progressed making it risky to take her approach as the starting point for his considerations.”

<sup>125</sup>“Before we get married, we chose our husbands because we hoped to have both elements of lover and friend in them. They chose us for the same reason. And a truly satisfying marriage makes room for both. Real moms debunk the myth that moms love sex and have it all the time” (Morgan & Kyukendall 2002:88). Gregoire (2003:193) further points out that in a love relationship “it may seem strange to talk about friendship after talking about sex. After all, shouldn’t we feel like close friends before make love? In marriages sexual intimacy often comes first. In many cases our husbands need sex to feel close to us. Then once they feel close to us they’re more relaxed and more willing to explore other ways to boost the relationship. In the Song of Songs, the female voice declares, after a deepening of their relationship, “my lover, this is my friend” (5:16).”

<sup>126</sup>Speaking about other elements that make a love relationship meaningful, Kreeft (1989) says that “in the Song of Songs we find Eros, or desire, we find affection, we find friendship and self-giving.”

<sup>127</sup>Heng and Poon (2003:39) allude to a renewed perspective of a love relationship by arguing that “although Song 5:16 refers to the groom as her friend, marriage love is different from friendly love and yet lovers ought to be friends. They should respect each other like distinguished guests and also treat each other like the best friends.” “The lovers in the Song of Solomon were madly and

marked by mutual love, sexual fulfilment, enjoying the company of each other and the friendship to one another.<sup>128</sup>

In this section of the song, one thus again sees how, as Melancthon (2004:180-85) formulates it, “women crossed boundaries and exercised power and agency within the limitations of cultural and social world in which they lived. What is important in the Song of Songs is that the woman is strong, assertive, and confident.” In short, this view presented in the Song of Songs offers an important counter voice in contrast to the passive ways in which women are often portrayed in the Old Testament. Having encountered the voice of a woman who says that her lover is her companion and also her friend, we will now encounter the voice of a woman in the Song of Songs who risks her life in the name of love.

#### ***5.3.4 Risk Taking in the Name of Love: The Female Voice in the Streets at Night***

The themes chosen in this chapter to reconstruct the female voice have the aim of inspiring one to see how the female voice in the Song of Songs can be understood as deliberately not yielding to the Old Testament’s negative portrayal of the sexuality of women. In the themes, it is possible to see that the female voice entertains, inspires and informs the readership of the Old Testament, especially on matters of sex and sexuality. It is important to see however, that the female voice also *cautions* her readership on matters of sex and sexuality. It is unfortunate to note that in patriarchal settings, matters of sex and sexuality are sometimes portrayed in such a way that women are shown to be indebted to men so that women have to go beyond the call of duty and to great lengths so to make a love relationship work or to hold on to the love of their lives.<sup>129</sup> In short: women in

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passionately in love yet it was of the beloved male counterpart the person she walked with, visited, played, and had fun with that the female voice calls him her lover and her friend” (George 2004:173).

<sup>128</sup>For Fernandez, when the female voice calls her beloved as her friend, “she depicts him as a friend of friends who will never leave or forsake her.” It should be noted that she had just been seeking for her beloved in Song 5:6 and in Song 6 the female voice speaks about her beloved as though she knew where he was. She portrays him in Song 6 as though she had not left her as indicated in Song 5:5-6.

<sup>129</sup> Some men do pretend that they are madly in love with a woman just with an intention of having a sexual experience with a woman. Thus, a man will use terms like: “If you truly love me, then prove to me that you love.” Many men will say this to make a woman feel like if she does not give into the demands of a man she is the one who is the loser here. The unsuspecting women will then give into the demands of a man and accept to have a sexual encounter with a man. If unfortunately, the sexual

patriarchal settings have been socialized to believe that when a love relationship goes bad, it is a woman who loses.<sup>130</sup>

This is one of the reasons that in the beginning of this chapter, it was necessary to be reminded that even though the female voice is portrayed in the Song of Songs as equal to the man, the Song of Songs is nevertheless a patriarchal book. Thus, even though Exum (2005:80) rightly points out that “feminist scholars were drawn to the Song of Songs because it seemed to offer a breath of fresh air in the patriarchal climate of the Old Testament,” one can still encounter in the book elements of patriarchal ideologies that also continue to deny women the right to live with dignity.<sup>131</sup> In fact, according to Kenneth Stone (2005:99), when one reads the Song of Songs, “the question should not be whether the book’s approach to sexual pleasures avoids entirely any evidence of its patriarchal context.” “The question is rather,” as Stone (2005:99) points out, that “within the constraints of a patriarchal context the Song of Songs is able to assert the importance for women’s sexual pleasure.” Stone (2005:99), however, adds “with the urgency and desire to do so in a way that surpasses or causes the Song to stand out among the [Old Testament] texts.”

In Song 5:2-6 we encounter the voice of a woman who risks her life to go out in the streets at night in the name of the love she feels for her beloved. This shows just what risks

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encounter results into pregnancy, the man may not be ready to marry the girl. He will then ask the girl to choose between having an abortion and losing him. The more the woman proves vulnerable to a man, the more the man makes more and more demands. In the end, the woman will end up losing even more in case; the man leaves her for another woman. This makes it even more difficult for a woman, given that she will even feel more of a loser. Besides losing the man, she will have lost her virginity and so on. Samuel Kisseadoo (2010: X) has pointed out that “generally domestic and relational challenges appear to hit women harder than men in several respects and produce more devastating effects to women than men.” According to Kisseadoo (2010: X), therefore, “women do experience deeper feelings of pain and disappointment than men when things go sour in their relationships and love affairs.” This explains why many women will try all that they can to make sure that a love relationship or a marital relationship works.

<sup>130</sup> In the name of love, therefore, some women are ready to even risk losing their life without realising that many societies are patriarchal in nature where structures of gender-based violence are expressions of profound inequalities, exploitation, poverty and gender-based ideologies, which have put women in vulnerable positions. Adrienne Leigh McEvoy (2011:13) has argued that “in such societies (patriarchal societies), women are sex objects. ... Women are to be controlled through sex ... and [are] not free to pursue love untainted by degradation or shame.”

<sup>131</sup> See for example, Song 1:5-6, and 5:7.



women may take in the name of love. Love is as strong as death, says Song 8:6, and when love is strong, you may understand why, in my Kenyan context, how phrases as “electric currents,” “magnetic force,” “you are my sugar,” “you make my heart go yori yori”<sup>132</sup> are used to describe feelings of love. In Song 5:8, the female voice says: “I am dying/ fainting with love.” Today, many women risk losing careers, material possessions, social standing, honour and even children due to love. Unfortunately, some even risk dying by engaging in sexual promiscuity, and being the recipient of sexual violence, verbal, psychological, emotional abuse and domestic violence in the name of love. And, due to the enduring patriarchal nature of society, many women continue to live a life of indignity in the name of love.<sup>133</sup>

Cotter (2001:59) proposes that “Song 5:2-6 bears striking similarities to the elements in Song 2:8-3:5.” According to Cotter (2001:59), the similarities

...include the man approaching the house, the woman making a move towards the man, and she goes out in the streets alone. The passages close with an adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem; an adjuration that seems to portray the strength of the love of the female voice for her beloved.

One of the most striking similarities between Song 3:5 and 5:6 is the risk that the female takes in going out in the streets at night searching for her beloved; love comes at the cost of sacrifices from the side of a woman.

In Song 3:2-3, the woman’s search proceeds from the bed and ends up in the city streets at night. In this regard, Cotter (2001:59) says that

...the searching finding motive unfolds with the woman aggressively seeking her beloved; she finds him, embraces him and eagerly takes him into the

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<sup>132</sup> Yori Yori, literally means: “You make my heart beat very fast”.

<sup>133</sup> When a woman expresses that she is madly in love/love sick, some men have taken advantage of this to treat women the way they want. Some men have walked in and out of a love relationship whenever they want. It is possible for one to see such an incident in Song 5:2-6, when the female voice complains that she opened the door for her beloved but her beloved was already gone. She searches throughout the streets but she does not find him. This would probably explain why some women endure abusive relationships.

chambers of love. She then adjures the daughters of Jerusalem not to interfere with their lovemaking.

To return to the image of the mother's chambers, in many Kenyan contexts it would be unthinkable to take one's lover to a mother's bedroom. This reference may help one to imagine the boundaries that a woman may have to cross and the risk that a woman may take in the name of love. In fact, what catches the attention of Stone (2005:103) is how the female voice "actively searches for her male lover when they are apart, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully (5:6-7)." For Stone (2005:103), "the woman's determinations to be with her beloved are asserted throughout the Song." This shows that, while the female voice in the Song of Songs reveals the pleasures of a love relationship, the female voice can also be understood as cautioning women against the pressures of the pleasures of a love relationship.

One also finds in Song 5:2-6 that the female voice takes the risk of seeking for her beloved in the streets, but she does not find him. The seeking motif is concluded with the words of adjuration to the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her beloved, if they find him, that she is dying with love. Does she send the daughters of Jerusalem with a message to her beloved because she is blaming herself for hesitating to open for her beloved? (See Song 5:2-6). For Cotter (2001:61), it is "because she hesitated in responding to the man that she must take the risk of going out to the streets alone to search for the one she loves."

Viewing Song 5:2-6 in this way allows one to recognize the fact that the female voice might have narrated this experience in order to challenge the Old Testament portrayal of women as not being risk takers in the name of love. Cotter (2001: 61) argues as follows: "Consequently, one can say that Song 5:2-6 is not just a picture of a sleeping woman, awakened by the man's knocking on the door or window. She is in response and alert at the same time". For Cotter, the words of the female voice suggest the drive and energy of passion and loving desire for her beloved. Seen in this way, then the implication is that the strength of her love, makes her risk her life by going to the city streets at night alone searching for her beloved. This is clear from the words of the beloved in Song 5:7, when she tells her audience that the watchmen found her and abused her. Speaking about the dangers of city streets and the love relationship between the female voice and her beloved,

Griffiths (2011:75) points out that “the female voice and her beloved have been exchanging endearments, she has eagerly expected his arrival, but he has gone away and now he seems beyond her reach.” Griffiths (2011:75) further says that “she does not find him in her bed and so she decides to look for him in the city streets declaring her resolution in the future tense (“I will get up and I will seek”).”

For Griffiths (2011:76), “when the city appears it does so as a place even more desolate than the wilderness. It is a place of separation, search and grief certainly; but it is also a place of danger.” This may, therefore, be understood as a lesson to contemporary readers who encounter the female voice to pause and ask themselves how far one should go in the name of love. The event is thus not necessarily narrated in order to complain for having been found by the watchmen, as such, but one may rather see in it a situation in which the female voice shares her experience as a way of cautioning two people who are madly in love against going beyond their limits in the name of love.

For Longman (2011:161) the actions of the characters in the poem seem odd if judged by the standards of everyday life: “The man comes to the door, but she demurs at first. By the time she changes her mind and opens the door, he is gone. She then sets out in hot pursuit, searching for him in public places. She does not find him and instead gets beaten by the city patrol.” Longman further points out that “in life such abuse is traumatizing but the next verse finds her unfazed and enlisting the aid of the chorus in her search for the love of her life.” In fact, for Longman and Mariaselvam (1987:33), speaking on Song 5:2-7, “this poem like all the other poems in the Song is not focused on real-life occurrence” (Longman 2011:161). While there are scholars who see some parts of the Song as a dream, “to make the whole of the Song of Songs into a collection of mere dreams and fantasies seems to go too far” (Mariaselvam 1987:33). Mariaselvam further points out that “the Song of Songs corresponds to the seven-day celebration of a wedding in Palestine.” If this is the case, then one would argue that Song 5:2-7 is a documentation of a real life experience as narrated by the female voice.

Song 5:5-8 thus presents the voice of a woman who has endured a very painful experience in the name of the love. This can be seen from the way the female voice continues the search for her beloved, even after having been abused by the watchmen (5:7).

Is this a portrayal of how much women in the Old Testament could endure in the name of a man-woman relationship?<sup>134</sup> It is not immediately clear from the Old Testament itself given that, apart from the female voice in the Song of Songs, we do not encounter any other female voice in the Old Testament who tells of an experience similar to the one found in the Song of Songs.<sup>135</sup>

When the female voice tells of her experience in the Song of Songs, Keel (1994:35) argues that “like Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs presents experiences and insights that endanger the everyday life ruled by justice and law, faithfulness and rewards.” For Keel (1994:35), “love appears in the Song as a natural force; a mountain stream whose waters sometimes nourishes, and sometimes destroy. Courageous love and unrelenting death determine the rhythm of life.” In light of Keel’s (1994:35) notion of “courageous love”, I want to argue that the female voice endures<sup>136</sup> a very painful experience.<sup>137</sup> However, one also notices that even though the woman has risked her life in the name of love, and suffered the abuse of the watchmen for it, she does not remain silent regarding abuse (Song 1:5-6 and 5:7). In Song 5:7 particularly, one hears the voice of a woman who decides to speak out against the watchmen. It is not immediately evident why the female voice decides

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<sup>134</sup> From Deuteronomy 22:28-9, for example, we learn that a virgin who has been raped is forced to marry the person who has raped her. She had no choice but to endure the psychological trauma of having been raped and the pain of marrying the person who has raped her.

<sup>135</sup>Gordis (1975: 39) however, points out that “an Egyptian Love Song of the New Kingdom expresses the same theme of the lover’s devotion in the face of physical attack.”

<sup>136</sup>Apart from sexual violation, it seems that there are other painful experiences that Old Testament women endured in the name of man woman relationship. From Numbers 5:11-31, for example, we hear about a ritual in which a woman was forced to partake should her husband suspect that she was having an affair with another man. It was the duty of a priest to prepare a portion of holy water and mix the water with dirt from the floor of the tabernacle. The curse was uttered over the mixture and the woman was forced to drink the water. The result of this was dreadful: if the woman’s abdomen swelled up and her thighs waste away, it would be presumed that she was guilty of adultery.

<sup>137</sup>The story of the female voice in Song 5:7, which presents herself as enduring pain in the name of love, is a documentation in a “delightful poem, also called canticles which stands firm in the list of the five Hebrew rolls, or megilloth. The poem is read on important anniversaries. It was read at the initial and greatest feast of the year, the Passover” (Merrill *et al.* 2006:42). Can the reading of the Song be seen as an exit from the portrayal of women as enduring even in situations in which there is need to address injustice done to women, such as sexual violence? (Song 5:7). We do not know. However, when one encounters the female voice in Song 5:7 one hears her saying that “when the watchmen found her wondering about the city, they beat her and took away her mantle. This account is followed by the bride searching for her beloved the description of his comeliness in which she compares her beloveds physical beauty and nurture” (Cohn-Sherbok 1996:190).

to share this experience with her audience. But it is significant that in Song 5:7, the female voice tells the story of her painful encounter to the sentinels of the walls. One sees that she chooses to not suffer in silence. She may have done this exactly to show that, while the female voice and the beloved are portrayed as equal, the Song of Songs is still a patriarchal book.

The woman tells how watchmen found her and struck her, taking away her veil. The reference to veil (סָרָו) is significant.<sup>138</sup> This term has been used in Isaiah 3:23 to describe the daughters of Zion, saying that because of their immoral behavior, God will strip them of their veil (see Bergant 2011:66). Bergant (2011:66) further says that in the Song “the nature of the garment she was wearing may account for the watchmen to mistake the female voice for a prostitute.”<sup>139</sup> The fact that the watchmen took away the veil of the female voice is indicative of a state of almost being left naked and in shame. If this understanding can be applied to our context, then it is probable that the watchmen sexually abused the female.

Commenting on the attack of the female voice by the watchmen of the city, Bergant (2011:66) says that “in Song 3:2-3, the female voice had questioned the sentinels, but they did not respond. Here she does not speak to them, but they attack her. The reason for their fury is not given. However some commentators believe that they judged her to be a prostitute and respond accordingly. After all, she is in the city, the realm where only men or loose women are found; she alone, conduct unbecoming decorous women in a patriarchal society, and it is night, the time when prostitutes frequently ply their trade. It would be easy to mistake her in this way.”

Even so, the courage of the female voice in Song 5:7 to speak about her experience offer a clear alternative to some Old Testament passages that portray women as silent victims of sexual violation and physical assault. In fact, this silence may lead one to think that some Old Testament passages almost condone and even approve of violence against

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<sup>138</sup> The NRSV however, translates the word as “mantel”, while some versions even give the option of “a headcloth”. The word for “veil” also appears differently in other parts of the Song of Songs: see for example Song 4:1, 3 and Song 6:7.

<sup>139</sup>Speaking about a veiled woman, Genesis 38:15 says that because Tamar had veiled/covered her face, Judah mistook her for a prostitute.

women! In Numbers 31:7-8, for example, one reads the story of the women of Midian, who were captured by the sons of Israel when they waged war against the Midianites. The victors brought the captives, the prey and the spoils of war, to Moses, Elieazar the priest, and the congregation of the sons of Israel at the camp on the plains of Moab opposite Jericho.

Moses then ordered the sons of Israel to kill every male and every woman who has known a man intimately. The sons of Israel were however asked to take the virgins among the girls. The girls in this text were captives of war. The story in Numbers 31:7-18 ends without a single voice of complaint from the women of Midian!<sup>140</sup>

Also in Zechariah 14: 2, one encounters the prophecy of Zechariah according to which God will gather all the nations in a battle against Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem shall then be taken and the houses looted, the prophecy foretold. Furthermore, the women will be raped and half the city shall go into exile. Given the fact that prophets were seen as people who delivered a message from God, the words were understood as a divine command. It is significant once again that the women who are portrayed as victims of sexual violence in this text remained silent after having been abused.<sup>141</sup>

In the story in Judges 19 referred to earlier, expressing how women are treated solely lies within what the prerogative of the narrator, of what he chooses the audience to hear. In the instance of the virgin girl in the story, for example, we know nothing about what happened to her. According Winbush (2011:106), “we do not hear even a whimper or cry from the concubine and the virgin daughter.” Was she also pushed out into the night? Did she remain in the house? If she was pushed out and therefore raped, too, what happened to her after that? We do not know. What we know about her comes to us in the words of her father to the men of the city when he tells them: “Here are my virgin daughter and the concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but

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<sup>140</sup>For a detailed history of sexual assault and women by Donna McNamara see <http://www.ineractivetheatre.org/reic/history.html> [accessed January 25, 2013].

<sup>141</sup> Seeing the rape of women in the Old Testament as divine command leads Wilkerson to ask: “How do you explain to a non-believer how God sanctions rape in Old Testament times?” (See <http://www.tsculpitseries.org> [accessed January 25, 2013].

against this man do not do such a vile thing” (Jdg. 19: 24). While it is good also to remember the virgin girl, one should also not forget that the lot that befell the concubine, whose voice also remains silenced after having been physically assaulted and sexually abused the whole night, might have been shared by the daughter.

Thus, contrary to the way the Old Testament portrays women as silent victims of physical and sexual violence, the female voice in Song of Songs chooses not to suffer in silence, but speaks out (Song 5:7), perhaps to break the long and multiple silences of women, beginning with her own experience .

Finally, besides narrating the story of violence against her, (the female voice) also takes the initiative to create an identity for herself by calling herself “black and beautiful” as we shall see in the discussion that follows. By telling the daughters of Jerusalem that she is black and beautiful, I will argue in the next section, that the female voice recreates her identity her own way in the midst of social and identity disparities.

#### ***5.4 RECREATING IDENTITY IN THE MIDST OF SOCIAL DISPARITY***

When one looks at the attention that many women give to their physical appearance, one does not immediately realize the impact one’s perception of one’s physical appearance may have on one’s identity. Notably, the identity of many women is hidden in the concept of beauty without them realizing that in patriarchal settings it is *men* who benefit from the socially-constructed ideas of the so-called beauty myth. According to Judith Worell (2002:199), “women have therefore emulated beauty ideas hoping to win the approval of [men] and as a result the opinion of [men] becomes a major basis for defining women’s sense of identity and worth.” Because women’s sense of worth continues to be determined by the sexual likes and dislikes of men, many women continue to suffer from low self-esteem. On the other hand, “[t]he more a woman views herself as attractive, the greater her sexual self-esteem” (Worell 2002:199).

Men have thus benefited from the confused state of women concerning issues of beauty by particularly controlling the sexuality of women. Many men have controlled the sexuality of women sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. As such, the concept of beauty and identity has become a core factor that men in patriarchal settings have used to

maintain gender disparities between men and women and social disparities amongst women themselves. Unfortunately, as Worell (2002:199) says, “when standards of beauty are internalized as aspects of identity, a number of psychological consequences are likely to follow.” Some women have withdrawn from others because they cannot fit into their social class as they feel they do not conform to social ideals of what constitutes being beautiful, while others have sought social acceptance by trying in any way possible to conform to societal concepts of beauty. Many women have, for example, used medically dangerous means such as creams to lighten their skin in their efforts to try and make themselves more attractive. Unsuspectingly, many women have been socialized to confine themselves alongside the socially constructed strands of beauty as dictated by men. The idea of controlling the sexuality of women has been “packaged” within concepts of beauty. Unfortunately, mainstream beauty consumers, who are mostly men, have made visible multiple bodily representations that have reduced women to unhelpful construction of what men in patriarchal setting consider ideal and real. These men do, even inadvertently, for example, by commenting on the appearance of women and comparing them with other women. Men are the “consumers of the packaging” (of sex and the sexuality of women) in the name of beauty and women often do not realize how the male conceptions of beauty and identity have been used as a tool to control their sexuality as women.

From the Old Testament we learn of a number of women who are identified as harlots or adulterous women. From such examples one could say that the Old Testament’s portrayal of women’s sexuality is very negative. In Genesis 39:7-20, for example, one encounters Potiphar’s wife portrayed as a seductress who unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Joseph. According to Day (1989:29), “a young, virile male is approached by an older female who attempts to seduce him.” I argue that the identity of Potiphar’s wife is constructed by the narrator and in most cases accepted as such by the readership of this story. The fate of Potiphar’s wife has been sealed by many commentators who read the story without any deeper consideration of the text, for instance by asking why Potiphar’s wife disregarded her status as a royal woman and she opted to have sex with a slave. Of course, the narrator tries to portray Joseph as the most handsome man, whom Potiphar’s wife could not resist. However, some ancient sources speculate that Potiphar was a eunuch (Mattox 2003:235), which does change the context of the event quite significantly.



According to Mattox (2003:135), “the question whether Potiphar may have been a eunuch is relevant to the story of Joseph’s encounter with the man’s wife because it provides at least two possible grounds on which Mrs. Potiphar’s actions might have been justified.” For Mattox (2003:135), the grounds on which the portrayal of Potiphar’s wife should be reconsidered include that she (Potiphar’s wife) is a normal human being who has normal sexual feelings like any other person. If Potiphar was a eunuch then it is possible to argue that his wife was denied sexual fulfilment. Furthermore, in Israel, a patriarchal society, a man had the right to marry another wife if his first wife was not able to give him children or could not satisfy his conjugal needs. This explains why polygamy was accepted and not a surprise in patriarchal settings (see for example the story of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar in Genesis 16). The second reason that Mattox (2003:235) uses to justify the action of Potiphar’s wife is that, it might have been that she, like any Israelite woman, might have wished to have children (even more so if Potiphar was a eunuch) as we are not told whether Mrs. Potiphar had children.<sup>142</sup> My aim here is not to justify the sexual desire of Potiphar’s wife. My aim is to show how Old Testament narrators portray the identity of Old Testament women from a negative perspective, while they justify and see as legitimate the sexual desires of men.<sup>143</sup> Under ‘normal circumstances,’ the narrator of this story would have been expected to show some sympathy for the predicament of Potiphar’s wife (Mattox 2003:235).

However, since the intention of the narrator is to present Joseph as a hero, the identity of Potiphar’s wife is painted very negatively. In this story, one sees that while the identity of women in the Old Testament is portrayed negatively, men are portrayed as sexually innocent men of God. In Proverbs 5, 6, and particularly 7:15-29, we hear the story of a temptress who uses her wealth to entrap unsuspecting young men (Bland 2002:20). In these proverbs men are portrayed as innocent victims of the perverted sexual desires of women. In fact, in another well-known Old Testament narrative, in Judges 16, Delilah is also identified as a

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<sup>142</sup> Seeing as we are not given the name of Potiphar’s wife, I will call her Mrs. Potiphar, as referred to by Mattox (2003:235).

<sup>143</sup> See Mattox (2003:240).

seductress.<sup>144</sup> She used her sexuality to seduce Samson, a man of God, in order to find out the secret of his great strength. According to the narrator, this ultimately led to the death of Samson. Exum (1996:176) rightly comments that the Samson and Delilah narrative depicts the identity of Old Testament women in a very negative light. Exum (1996:176) argues: “Delilah’s name is painted with treachery and deceit as frightening and ultimately deadly.” This incident thus seems to suggest that Samson’s identity informed by a positive perspective as a hero is meant to portray Samson as a man of God, while Delilah’s identity constructed in terms of seduction ‘is an agent of the devil’.

Accordingly, one famous Gospel musician has sung a song that seems to speak about the prototype of Potiphar’s wife and Delilah in the Kenyan society. In the Song “*Tuwachunge tushuga mami*” (literary, ‘men be careful of sugar mummies’), Jimmy Gaito (2009) warns Kenyan men against women who may trap them using beauty, wealth and social positions (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DXRDxL5-g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DXRDxL5-g) [accessed October 31, 2013]). One therefore sees how Old Testament ideologies are used to even further portray the identity of women from a negative perspective when such texts are also read and interpreted from patriarchal contexts.

From the aforementioned examples, one may argue for the probability that it was impossible for Old Testament women to assertively create a positive identity for themselves. However, in contrast to these Old Testament examples, the way the female voice in Song of Songs assertively declares that “I am black and beautiful” (1:5), the Song helps one to see that any concept of identity is culturally and historically constructed, and as such, it is not fated or predetermined ahead of time or that it should remain unchallenged and unchanged (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:261). By appreciating how the female voice recreates her identity in Song 1:5, by saying that she is dark and beautiful, contemporary women readers may be encouraged to reconstruct their own identity.

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<sup>144</sup> In most cases you will hear some men nicknaming some women in the society as “Delilah” to portray them in a negative light, identifying them as seduceses who “cannot control their own sexual urge.”

To better understand the relationship between gender, identity, beauty and sexuality, what follows is a close reading of Song 1:2-6 with the aim of reconstructing the identity of women in the midst of social disparity.

#### ***5.4.1. Gender, Beauty, Sexuality and the Identity of Women***

In Song 1:5, one hears the voice of a woman who tells the daughters of Jerusalem not to look down upon her because of her dark skin. In these words, one finds a socially-constructed idea of beauty on the part of the female voice which in all probability differs from the perspective of the daughters of Jerusalem.

According to Worell (2002:199), “there is an increased internal motivation to attract the attention and affirmation of others and the preferences and needs of others become defining features of the self.” Arguably, the concept of beauty and identity in patriarchal settings has affected the identity of many women. Worell (2002:190) argues that “beauty myths give meaning to women’s identity as they serve to uphold the importance of attractiveness in women’s lives. The myths reveal the complexity of messages, many of which are contradictory, that women receive about beauty and identity” the result of this is that many women have given into the affirmations of men and their sexual preferences as defining features of their identity.

Worell (2002:198) also argues that “women’s bodies have become an arena where cultural meanings and values are projected and played out” and, therefore, cautions that “in many cases, the cultural frameworks are ultimately internalized by women, hence enabling the social construction to regulate and control individual women in particular and women as a group in general.” Song 1:5 can therefore be understood as portraying the daughters of Jerusalem as being under the control of certain socially-constructed concepts of beauty in Israelite society.

Thus, even though it is not possible to always clearly see how beauty was perceived in the Old Testament, the female voice in Song 1:5 can be understood as at least shedding some light on the matter. The tone of the female voice: “I am black and beautiful, do not look down upon me ...” portrays the voice of a woman who possibly resists societal perceptions and misconceptions of beauty and the identity of women. From the tone of the female voice, it is

possible to see that in patriarchal societies, women had limited choices in order to construct their own identity in terms of beauty.

Worell (2002:197) argues that “it is in patriarchal contexts that beauty and beauty myths become even more significant in women’s lives” and that “being considered unattractive appears to impact women more than men.” One can see this from the way the female voice in Song 1:5-6 has to try and explain the reason behind her “ugly” looks – in which clearly she does not look like the daughters of Jerusalem.

Based on Song 1:5-6, it is possible to argue that socially-constructed norms of beauty and identity, have the power to impact negatively on gender parity. One finds that some women will also group themselves in social categories determined by similar levels of attractiveness (Worell 2002:197). It is also critical to realize that concepts of beauty, especially in patriarchal contexts, do not always adhere to one given standard. For example, in Song 1:5, the female voice compares her beauty to the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon. Her male counterpart, on the other hand, has a different concept of beauty all together. He compares the female voice to a mare among Pharaohs chariots, saying that the neck of the beloved will look beautiful if she has strings of jewels on her. The man also compares the eyes of his beloved with a dove – in which case, the essence of the difference can be found in the image used.

In the Song of Songs, one thus encounters three different constructions of beauty and therefore identity:

1. We have the concept of beauty as perceived by the daughters of Jerusalem (Song 1:5), which results in them looking down upon the female voice
2. We have the concept of beauty as perceived by the female voice (Song 1:5; 2:1), who according to her own self-designation is dark and beautiful. We furthermore see her describing her male counterpart from her own understanding of beauty in Song 2:3 and 5:11-16.
3. We also have the concept of beauty from the perspective of the male counterpart of the female voice (1:9-11), according to which the beloved compares the female voice to a mare among Pharaohs chariots and her eyes to doves.

Notably, the concept of beauty as portrayed by the male counterpart of the female voice raise more questions than answers. For example, is it genuine for the male counterpart to describe the female voice in such a way that her nakedness is so exposed? How beautiful is one who is compared with a mare among pharaohs' chariots? In patriarchal settings, men coin very sophisticated words as long as it is possible for them to get what they want, i.e., to have a sexual relationship with a woman. After all, that is what we see in Song 5:1, the male counterpart praises his sexual encounter with the female voice. This is an indication of the relationship between patriarchal concepts of beauty and the sexuality of women.

One therefore sees how one patriarchal society can have different perspectives on the socially-constructed concept of beauty at the same time. One may therefore say that just as beauty and identity is a social construction, it should also be possible to *deconstruct* negative concepts of beauty that have been used in patriarchal settings to control the sexuality of women. This, in turn, can be done in order to *reconstruct* new concepts of beauty that can allow women themselves to reconstruct positive images and identities that portray their sexuality in a positive light.

#### ***5.4.2 I am Black and Beautiful***

Even in the midst of socially-constructed concepts of beauty which may affect the identity of the individual, it is possible for one to reconstruct one's own identity. It is also possible for contemporary women to reconstruct their identity in ways that do not have to conform to the socially-constructed concepts of beauty. These are some of the concepts that have continued to regulate the sexuality of women in such a way that it is the men who benefit from controlling women's sexuality. In Song 1:5-6, we encounter the voice of a woman who says:

“I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother's sons the female voice says were angry with me; they made me keeper of their vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept.”

Some detailed comments on the grammatical and linguistic elements of this passage may assist one in further understanding its significance. In the Hebrew text, the “I” is an independent pronoun first person common singular and is used elsewhere as a formula of introduction. It is used in Exodus 3:14 “I am who I am” to stress the name of Yahweh, denoting uniqueness. The use of it here may perhaps be an indication of uniqueness. In early Hebrew, it was appended to a verb to express a real emphasis, but in later Hebrew, it is sometimes pleonastic, that is, used in response to a question. “Black”, appears elsewhere as שְׁחֹרֹת, שְׁחֹרִים, and is used with reference to black hair (Lev 13:31), black horses (Zech 6:2), and here to a dark complexion. As several cultures view a white or lighter complexion as more beautiful, this may indeed be an affirmation that being black/dark and thus beautiful goes against social opinion? Commenting on the social aspect of Song 1:5, Garret (1993:386) says

... in contrast to modern standards of beauty, the ancients in Israel regarded light skin as most attractive. Dark skin identified her as of the laboring class and left her vulnerable to scorn that, Fox notes, would originate in social, and not racial prejudices.

The particle conjunction “and”/וְ is used in classical Hebrew where synonyms are coupled. It introduces an idea, which exceeds and/or proceeds. It also means “nearly” and/or “equivalent to”. It can also be used to indicate “peculiarly”, “seemingly” and “at the same time”. It connects alternative cases, contrasting ideas in order to attach a fresh subject or object to a clause that is already grammatically complete. It is also used in a repetition of the same word to express the weight rareness or diversity (see Bloch & Bloch 1995:140). Here it places emphasis on the fact that ‘besides being black, I am (also) beautiful’. Beauty is an additional emphasis to the normal appearance (see Longman 2001:95).

Unfortunately the reference in the text to the tents of Kedar is not easy to understand as it is not clear what the latter looked like. However it is used in a positive sense. The word, אֹהֶל appears elsewhere in the Old Testament, and is used for example, in Genesis 4:20 for a place of worshiping God, in Exodus 28:43 and 1 Kings 2:28 the word is used for the tent of Yahweh, and in Judges 6:5, the word has been associated with dwelling places for families (see Bloch & Bloch 1995:141).

The word תִּרְאוּנִי (gaze) is a qal imperfect verb, second person masculine plural. It has been suffixed with first person common singular. The word is jussive in meaning, even though it has no unique form for jussive. The word refers to a lingering intent look. It is often a word indicative of fascination, awe or a hard look. It can also mean a stare of curiosity, boldness, insolence or stupidity. The word is used twice, interchangeably here. In both cases, the term sounds negative and in the first instance it is a sign of discontent with and caution to the daughters of Jerusalem. In the second usage it refers to the sun that gazed at the woman. It is used in reference to the sun's scorching or parching rays, and/or to dark spots caused by the sun (see Garret 1993:387 & Keel 1994:49).

The particular word used for dark as in “because I am dark” is an adjective and means “devoid of”, “deficient in light or brightness”, “shadowed” or “black” and is often used with reference to hair, skin or eyes. As used here, it is indicative of having a complexion that is not fair (see Keel 1994:47). The use of the phrase “my mother's sons” is an indication of belonging to a category. In this case, the word belongs to a category of brother-sister relationships. It is not very clear why the beloved uses the words ‘sons of my mother’. But having children with different fathers and mothers was not uncommon in Israel, nor is it in most African communities. In the case of African communities, it fits well with the context of polygamous marriages. Sons of my mother could therefore be in reference to brothers from an extended family, as in a polygamous marriage (see Bloch & Bloch 1995:141).

The word from the root word רָטַן is used here as a qal participle and it means to “keep”, or “to take care of” (see Longman 2001:97) and refers to the “vineyard” (or fields), a common noun masculine plural (from the root word כָּרְם). Here it seems to be used in a metaphoric way. Does this mean that the beloved took care of others and she ignored herself? What is clear though is that the first usage is masculine plural, and the second usage of the word metaphor is feminine singular (see Longman 2001:97-8). Finally, the word translated with ‘own’ here, is indicative of an independent pronoun, and it means belonging to or exclusively. Most frequently, it is followed by a possessive pronoun as my, and our, denoting ownership (see Bloch & Bloch 1995:141).

To return to the meaning of the passage, from the words of the female voice to the daughters of Jerusalem, one can argue that the daughters of Jerusalem are looking down upon

the female voice because of her dark skin. In this way, the daughters of Jerusalem have probably created a social boundary between themselves and the female voice. But when the female voice takes the initiative to claim that she is “black and beautiful,” one would say that she has broken the barriers of socially constructed boundaries of beauty and identity. Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:261) argues that “like any other cultural value, beauty can and has been abused. But my emphasis on the positive and the constructive is meant, among other things, to signal our own abilities to combat that abuse.”

Thus, the negative and socially-constructed cultural values should not prevent women from reconstructing a positive self-identity. In fact, Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:261) points out that “one of the things that the Song of Songs helps to show us is that any concept of beauty is culturally and historically constructed.” For Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:261) therefore, “it is not fated or predetermined ahead of time. By appreciating how the Song looks at beauty at one point in history, we gain some purchase on how we look on beauty.” It is thus important to take note of the fact that the conceptions and constructions of identity are not static or forever fixed. Rather, they are dynamic and may change depending on time and space. It is important for every woman who reads Song 1:5-6 to be critical therefore on any relationship between the concept of beauty, especially in her own, possibly patriarchal setting, and her sexuality.

Additionally, the female voice can here be also understood as having reconstructed her own identity in the midst of social disparity by calling herself beautiful. From the courage of the female voice in Song 1:5 that comes up with her own perspective of beauty, one would say that each one of us has the potential to reconstruct our identity. One should not wait that others define one’s identity for one.

The words “I am” and especially “*and*” as in “I am black *and* beautiful” are important. As explained above, the deliberate use of the first person singular “I am” can be understood as the female voice feeling unique. Her experience of being special invites one to see that she possibly is telling the daughters of Jerusalem that she is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image and likeness of God (Psalms 139:14). The female voice therefore invites the daughters of Jerusalem to see for themselves that the female voice is beautiful. It is therefore encouraging to see a possible reconstruction of the female voice; but in such a way that the perception of the daughters of Jerusalem on the identity of the female voice may be



transformed. It is significant that the daughters of Jerusalem then, in Song 1:8, call the female voice the fairest among women.

It is after breaking the barrier of social boundaries in the Song between herself and the daughters of Jerusalem that we time and again hear the female voice in dialogue with the daughters of Jerusalem (see, for example, besides Song 1:8, also 2:7 & 5:8).<sup>145</sup> While the daughters of Jerusalem possibly wanted to create an identity for the female voice by the way they were looking down upon her, she takes the initiative to redefine her identity herself. The only challenge to her beauty she has shown us was the sun that gazed on her skin. In other words, the existence of her beauty that is in the complexion of her dark skin cannot be eroded, not even by the hot rays of the sun. The only thing that creates negative identities of people is the society and all the female voice needed to do was to help those who see her to see the beauty in her by recreating her own identity in order to reclaim her social space that probably had been threatened by her parched skin.

In Song 2:1, the female voice again uses the words “I am” to create her own identity her own way. She says: “I am a rose of Sharon and a lily of the valleys.” With these words, “the female voice asserts her own beauty by associating with flowers. This verse is a self-description which initiates an admiration song. The self-description fits in well with the pattern of nature imagery used throughout the Song” (Longman 2001:110). In the Old Testament, a woman who would give such a self-description using such sweet words would be labelled a prostitute. Speaking about the strange woman in Proverbs for example, Camp (2000:41) says that: “The most obvious images given to women with sweet speeches are those of sexual discretion, including a peculiar combination of accusations of adultery and prostitution.”

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<sup>145</sup> It is worth mentioning here that there several scholars who argue that Song 1:8 contains the words spoken by the beloved and not the Daughters of Jerusalem. Assis (2009:46) for example, argues that “the male counterpart calls the female voice ‘most beautiful among women’ a very great compliment.” Additionally, Longman (2001:102) states that “the male counterpart expresses his feelings towards the female voice by calling her the most beautiful woman of all.” Whether the words are spoken by the daughters of Jerusalem or the male counterpart, I have no problem with it. The point is that it is after the female voice has come up emphatically to recreate her identity by calling herself beautiful when we encounter other voices in the song calling identifying her as beautiful.

Using Proverbs 2:17, 7:19 and 7:10, Camp (2000:41) shows how the woman in Proverbs is portrayed as forsaking the lover of her youth and lures another man into having sex with her by using sweet words. Thus, these images, serve to label women and hence make it difficult to recreate a positive identity for them. The words of the female voice “I am a rose of Sharon” therefore show that the potential to recreate a positive identity is situated within the individual. All one needs to do is to take the initiative in order to break away from the historically and socially-constructed norms of what constitutes being a woman.

In the Song of Songs, one further encounters the voice of a woman who stands out as one who portrays herself as the one who desires. I argue that when the usually desired ones, i.e., women, also desire men, the portrayal of women as objects of sexual desire and not subjects may fall away. In Song 2:5, the female voice says: “Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love.” As we have previously seen in the Old Testament women were seen as *objects* of sexual desire, often resulting in harsh treatment. Identifying the female voice in the Song as the Shulamite, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch (1995:150) say that the female voice “dramatically proclaims her erotic hunger to her male counterpart.” Seen in this way, I argue that the female voice takes the initiative to portray herself no longer as the object, but as the *subject* of sexual desire thus recreating a new identity for herself.

Interestingly, in Song 1:5-6 one further encounters the voice of a woman who tries to *explain* to the daughters of Jerusalem the reason behind her dark skin. From the words of the female voice, it seems that the reason behind the darkness of her skin was as a result of taking care of the vineyards of the sons of her mother. Hinting at the socio-economic struggles of the female voice within her family unit, Blank (1970:4-5) is of the opinion that

... there was a family living at Shulem, consisting of a widowed mother, several sons, and one daughter, who maintained themselves by farming and pasturing. The brothers were particularly partial to their sister, and took her under their special care, promising that her prudence and virtue should be greatly rewarded by them. In the course of time, while tending the flock, and according to the custom of the shepherds, resorted at noon beneath a tree for shelter against the meridian sun, she met with a graceful shepherd youth, to whom she afterwards became espoused.

While Blank gives helpful background to the socio-economic struggles of the female voice, his claim that the brothers of the female voice took her under their special care (insinuating that they gave her protection or that they made her tend the vineyards in good will) does not sit well with the complaint of the female voice in Song 1:6, where she says that the sons of her mother were angry with her and *therefore* made her keeper of their vineyards.. It is also not possible to know from the Old Testament whether women who were tending vineyards were doing it under a very hot sun, and whether women who tended the vineyards did so under duress. It is also not immediately clear if by tending the vineyards, the women's physical appearance was affected so very much that others would look down upon them. However, from Ruth 2 it is possible to see those women were involved with harvesting and in Genesis 29:9 and Exodus 2:16 women were tending flock. Speaking about roles and activities of Israelite women outside the family, Bird (1997:62) points out that "women's roles and activities outside their household-centered work were of two types, assistance in the basic tasks of production (agriculture and animal husbandry), and specialized professions and services."

Thus, such roles could have been the basis from which the female voice emerges from within the Old Testament in her efforts to explain the reason behind the darkness of her skin. In fact, Bland (2002:4) points out that that Song 1:5-6 "contains a self-description of the woman, and her relationship to her brothers."<sup>146</sup> The female voice describes herself as "dark am I yet lovely." Thus "dark," one may argue, is not necessarily a reference to her being black in the sense of race, as some have argued. This is because Song 1:5-6 seems to disclose

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<sup>146</sup>It is not very clear from the text as to why the female voice says that the sons of her mother were angry with her. However, Song 5:6 "gives the reason for the punishing glare of the sun on the speaker. Her brothers, who were angry with her, sent her off to watch over the vineyards. This job was normally for men (8:11-12; Isa 27:2-3), who were thought more fit than young women to drive away thieves, wild boars (Ps 80:13, 14), and foxes (Song 2:15) ... In this poem, the task of keeping the vineyards serves only as a background for her revealing comment: 'my own vineyard I have not kept!' Here 'vineyard' can refer only to her feminine charms. In the love song that lies behind Isa 5:1ff (cf. Isa 27:2), the vineyard is a metaphor for the beloved woman ... even in its literal form it can be seen only as an expression of pride and self-worth" (Keel 1994:49-50).

that the darkness of the skin of the female voice is as a result of over exposure to the sun as she worked in the vineyards.”<sup>147</sup> In fact, Longman (2001:98-9) argues as follows:

Verse 6 makes it clear that the woman finds her scorched complexion unattractive. Again, her reaction has nothing to do with race or some trans-cultural statement on the aesthetics of skin pigmentation. The sun has burned her. She has been out in the fields working hard, with the result that her skin deeply tanned or sun-burned. We might speculate that her skin did not show signs of the physical labors of the lower classes. Indeed her burn came as a result of labor that was forced on her by her brothers. She had to work vineyards at the insistence of her mother’s sons.

From the aforementioned discussion on Song 1:5-6, it is thus possible to see that the female voice’s assertion that she is black and beautiful may be understood in part as an explanation of the results of the scorching of the sun. However, Song 1:5-6 is also open to different interpretations. Some commentators, who read this text from a Womanist perspective, have for example interpreted this reference from an ethnic point of view.<sup>148</sup> Johnson (2007:33-4) has argued that “the woman in this story also recognizes her beauty as a black woman.” In her opinion (Johnson 2007:33-4), the female voice is not saying, “I am beautiful *in spite of* my blackness,” instead, she is saying that she is beautiful *because of* her blackness. Thus, according to Johnson (2007:33-4), the female voice is conscious of her beauty, and that the beauty of the female voice lies in her blackness. For Johnson (2007:33-4), this is difficult to grasp for some African Americans because they grew up in a racist nation, which tried to convince them that anything black or dark has something wrong with it.

On the other hand, writing about color terms in the Old Testament, Brenner (1982:98) says that “skin complexion tone stands in sharp contrast to the conventional idea of beauty

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<sup>147</sup>This is “the first of the numerous reference to vineyards, or orchards, and gardens within the Song of Songs, which is also characteristic of *hija*’ poetry in the Arabic tradition” (Noegel & Rensburgh 2009:190).

<sup>148</sup> See for example the interpretation of Weems (1998:167) and other Womanist commentators who have applied the racial approach to Song 1:5-6 appropriating the Song as a black woman’s Song in chapter two of this study.

elaborated upon in the song.” For Brenner (1982:98), “this should be understood as a juxtaposition of urban beauty ideas vs. country ideals and realities.” Brenner (1982:98) can thus be understood as distancing herself from associating the use of the word black in this text with ethnicity/race. If indeed the use of the word “black” in Song 1:5-6 can be understood from the perspective of social disparity, then it is possible for one to see a creation of identity in terms of the tone of skin complexion.

That is why Keel (1986:47) points out that the “Arab love songs of Palestine do record a controversy between brown and white women, where the brown are the Bedouin girls and the white are the spoiled city dwellers.” Hence, it is possible to argue that the spoiled city dwellers might have gained the whiteness from having enough time to take care of their skin. They might also have stayed indoors and were therefore not exposed to the hot sun. This way, it was possible for the daughters of Jerusalem to socially believe that they are beautiful in terms of their own standards of social life. Keel (1986:47), however, notes that, “the Old Testament has no such antithesis and that blackness can be a sign of sickness, as indicated in Job 30:30 or health especially if the word is used in reference to human hair.”

It is thus possible to argue that the female voice was being looked down upon because she had no time to take care of her skin. She was working hard in the vines to probably make sure that the sons of her mother had enough food. Because of her skin she was being looked down upon by the daughters of Jerusalem, who were from the city and thus knew nothing about toiling in the fields.<sup>149</sup>

Because Song 1:5-6 is open to different interpretations, a contextual interpretation of Song 1:5-6 can allow one to understand the Song from an ethnic perspective, as Johnson (2007:33-4) has previously argued. In both instances (interpretations with regard to race and class), it is worth noting that race and class may be intrinsically linked. After all, they are

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<sup>149</sup>“The women of Jerusalem are probably used in the Song as the stereotypical public because these spoiled, idle, and curious women of the capital city were said to be especially versed in matters of beauty and love. The prophetic tradition judges the daughters of Zion (3:11b) by a very different standard from that of the Song, condemning those who throw their seductive glances and jingle their ankle bracelets as they walk (Isa 3:16-26). Thus, the combination of the poor, exotic, and terrifying world of Kedar with the equally exotic and fascination luxury of Solomon makes the blackness of the speaker at once frightening and fascinating; she is mysteriously different” (Keel 1994:47-9).

both aspects of social disparity. When the female voice says; “do not look down upon me because I am dark” (1:6a), it is possible to argue that she is not socially mingling with the daughters of Jerusalem. This is because they see her from her skin complexion as being different from them, an identity that has been created for the female voice by the ‘other.’ In fact, the words of the female voice to the daughters of Jerusalem seem to further indicate boundaries of social acceptance that would have created identities of social a social class.

However, from the previous discussion, one sees that from Song 1:5-6 the identity created from a social boundary does not prevent the female voice from celebrating her beauty. She celebrates the black complexion of her dark skin with boldness and assertiveness (Song 1:5). She does this by focusing on her inner resources, rather than by finding her worth from the outside.

In short, it is evident that within the context of Song 1:5-6, the word “black” is to be celebrated. It thus seems probable that the female voice is presenting herself as the subject of beauty and not the object of beauty. She has accepted herself – a matter that in the end serves to direct the daughters of Jerusalem in Song 1:8 to see her as the fairest among women. The attitude of the female voice towards herself and her vibrant and self-assertive voice about her physical appearance therefore serves to give a new transformed perspective on social boundaries. I argue that the newly transformed social boundaries are suggestive of the fact that an individual has the power to determine if one will or will not be socially accepted. The power to be socially accepted can only be realized when one takes the initiative to recreate one’s identity. It is possible to do this by being self-assertive and vibrant about one’s physical appearance, as the female voice does in Song 1:5-6.

Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous discussion that the female voice’s reference to herself as black and beautiful may also mean that we can also not ignore the fact that she presents a relationship between her beauty and her socio-economic struggles and that the latter have heavily impacted upon her physical appearance. I argue therefore that the female voice in the Song of Songs creates a new space for social acceptance and challenges women that they also need to create time to take care of themselves. Thus, one could argue that from the concept of recreating one’s identity, a vibrant affirmation that one is beautiful is not just enough. One also needs to have time to take care of oneself.

This seems to be the case when the female voice explains her situation in Song 1:6. In fact the words “do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept,” show that she spent much of her time living for “others.” In many Western countries, during summer most women/young girls like to bask in the sun for their skin to become darker (beautified<sup>150</sup>). Here a darker skin is a sign of pleasure, leisure, luxury and relaxation – a totally opposite situation from that in Song 1:6.

Assis (2009:48) points out that “the confrontation with the daughters of Jerusalem mirrors a second confrontation, this time between the female voice and her brothers.” According to Assis (2009:48), the brothers “have appointed her to be keeper of the vineyards, and this has obliged her to neglect caring for her body.” One could say that the first usage of the word “vineyards” as in: “the sons of my mother were angry at me and they made me keeper of their vineyards” (Song 1:6) has been used to imply the fields. On the other hand, the second usage in the same verse “my vineyard” can be taken metaphorically to mean the body of the female voice. In fact, Bergant (1998:24) points out that:

The theme of vineyard is rich in meaning. On the literal level, it represents one of the most common and profitable occupations of the Near East. The grapes and the raisins that a vineyard yields and the wine produced from its fruit are staples of the diet. For this reason, the vine became a symbol of basic sustenance as attested to in 1 Kings 4:25, 2 Kings 18:31 and Micah 4:4. On the other level, the fruitiness of the vine became a simile of the sexual fecundity of the woman as indicated in Psalms 128:3 and Ezekiel 19:10.

It seems therefore that “the first vineyard probably should be understood literally. But here and elsewhere in the Song (8:12), the woman’s vineyard appears to be a symbol of her sexuality” (Bergant 1998:24). While it is possible to perceive the woman’s vineyard as a symbol of her sexuality, my concern lies in the relationship between the usage of the vineyard

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<sup>150</sup> The word beautified is put in brackets, because the word beauty is relative. Beauty, as famously said, is in the eyes of the beholder. It is not used with the implication that I agree with the fact that they actually become beautiful by basking in the sun.

of the female voice as a symbol of sexuality and her complaint about her dark skin that has been scorched by the sun (Song 1:6). Thus, while it is important to note the immediate connection of the dark skin of the female voice and her socio-economic struggles, it is worth noting that the core issue here is that patriarchal settings had different ideologies that they used to control the sexuality of women. As mentioned earlier on, one of the elements that patriarchal societies use to control the sexuality of women, apart from concepts of beauty and identity, is in the socio-economic aspect.<sup>151</sup>

Thus, the possibility to interpret Song 1:5-6 in different ways enriches the value of contextual interpretation in biblical studies. A good example is how Song 1:5-6 previously mentioned has opened up possibilities for women to interpret the song for the liberation of women regardless of race, class or continental boundaries. The point of departure here is that discrimination is discrimination. That is why Weems (1998:167) notes that it is difficult to ignore in Song 1:5-6 that the black complexion of the female voice has made her the object of ridicule by the daughters of Jerusalem “which she claims was the result of having been put to labor by her brothers.” It is such discrimination and control by the brothers of the female voice that I say need to be named and exposed in order to celebrate the reconstruction of the image and identity of women through the female voice in the Song of Songs.

#### ***5.4.3 Celebrating the Beauty of her Male Counterpart***

We have already seen in the Song of Songs a love relationship from the point of view of a man and a woman. One finds in the Song of Songs evidence of a love relationship that allows for both a man and a woman to freely express their sexual desire, which creates the possibility for both a man and a woman to enjoy each other without one being subordinate to the other.

So it is significant that in texts like Song 1:1-2 and 5:10-16, one also sees how the female voice desires the beauty of a man. From the way the female voice celebrates the beauty of her male counterpart, we will see how beauty from a female point of view helps to minimize the negative portrayal of the sexuality of women. I argue that when beauty and

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<sup>151</sup> See chapter three of this study for more details on how patriarchal contexts use a socio-economic aspect of life to control the sexuality of women.



identity is viewed from the perspectives of *both* man and woman, it is possible to reduce the monopoly that men have continued to enjoy when it comes to issues of beauty and identity and the relationship to the sexuality of women.<sup>152</sup>

In Song 5:11-16a, we encounter the voice of a woman describing the physical appearance of a man in great detail and in a sensuous way. In no single story in the Old Testament does a woman describe the physical appearance of a man in such detail as here. She begins by describing the head, then the hair, eyes, cheeks, lips, arms, legs, the mouth and the rest of the body of her beloved. After describing his physical appearance, she also praises his speech as being sweet in nature. Her concluding remarks regarding the physical appearance of her beloved is that he is altogether desirable. Instead of comparing him to human beings, she therefore compares him with the Cedars of Lebanon (Song 5:15b). In fact, Carr (1984:144) comments on how the female voice describes her beloved, concluding with the words: “he is desirable.”

In Song 5:9, the daughters of Jerusalem have just asked the female voice what it is that makes her beloved different from other men. This question, according to Longman (2001:170), “provokes the woman to present a song in form of a poem praising the physical beauty of the man.” Longman (2001:170) further says that the female voice begins to describe the physical appearance of her beloved “with a general statement of his body by saying that her beloved is radiant.” According to Longman (2001:170), the term “radiant” “denotes a healthy hue of his skin.”

It is not clear from the entire Song why the female voice compares the physical beauty of her beloved with the Cedars of Lebanon. According to Segal (2009:63),

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<sup>152</sup> Glenda MacNaughton and Gillian Williams (2009:281) give a detailed reflection on the techniques that can be used to deconstruct negative concepts of beauty and identity. Using children as the target group, MacNaughton and Williams (2009:281) have argued that “there is a host of body images that children can be encouraged to deconstruct.” One way, according to MacNaughton and Williams (2009:281), “is by helping children to imagine different ways of judging people than with reference to body size, shape, weight and body style. This shows that it is possible to deconstruct negative concepts of beauty and identity. In my opinion, the female voice in the Song of Songs offers contemporary readers an incentive on which to deconstruct negative concepts of beauty and identity. One way that comes out vigorously is from the way the female voice says that she is beautiful. She does not wait to be told she is beautiful, especially through the judgements of the others in her society.

Lebanon in the Song implies the finest wood (3:9), with pleasing odor (of word or wine – 4:11) and a majestic mountain to the North (4:8). Cedars in the other hand are also known for beauty, strength and majesty.

Exum (2005:209) points out that the female voice “has been using metaphorical language to describe the appearance of her beloved including his fragrance (v. 13) and now she compares his form to Lebanon.” For Exum (2005:209), “as the lofty scented cedars of Lebanon are unrivalled by other trees, so he is distinguished among men, a metaphor that takes her audience back to the theme with which she began, (v. 10).”<sup>153</sup> The assertive female voice concludes in Song of Songs 5 as she began in Song 1:2-4, by describing how beautiful and admirable her beloved is.

This celebration of male beauty serves to emphasize my point that just as the man can perceive beauty in a woman in order for him to be sexually attracted to her, women also have the capacity to appreciate a beautiful and attractive man. Othman Keel (1994:198) argues that it is the passion of the female voice that has caused the daughters of Jerusalem to question her regarding the qualities of her beloved. Keel (1994:198) therefore says that “this probably alludes to the increased feeling of self-worth induced by passion and the free expression of one’s own needs.” Passion, according to Keel (1994:198), makes one beautiful. Thus, it is the increased feeling of self-worth that I argue should also motivate contemporary women to not be influenced by socially-constructed senses of worth in which only men are portrayed as desiring the beauty of women. Women can and do desire as well.

However, in the Old Testament it is typically men who would look at a woman lustfully, take her and lie with her to satisfy his sexual urge.<sup>154</sup> In the Old Testament, issues of love are presented in such a way that it is a man who is lustfully attracted to a woman, who is dutifully submissive to the sexual needs of a man. This, therefore, necessitates a concept of

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<sup>153</sup>In Song 2:3, the female voice had already “described her beloved as standing out from other men like an apple tree among the trees of the forest” (Exum 2005:209).

<sup>154</sup>In Genesis 38:1-3 for example, we hear a story of Judah, who departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. When he saw a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua there, he took her and went into her. Shua then conceived and bore Judah a son who was named Er. It is possible to see from this text that Judah just took Shua and lay with her. The issue of her physical appearance is not mentioned here.

beauty that is presented from the perspective of a woman to demonstrate that women too share sexual feelings and urges that are typically human. From the way the female voice describes the physical appearance of her beloved, I argue that she gives a new identity and therefore meaning to the male-female relationship, as opposed to the one-sided way in which it is predominantly presented in the Old Testament. One may find that in the Old Testament it is typically a woman's physical body and beauty that provokes sexual sensation from a man. Thus, regardless of whether a woman likes the physical appearance of a man or not, she will have to dutifully agree to marry or live with a man that has been forcefully given to her (see for example Genesis 29). This way, one could argue that the identity of a woman is thus attached to how a man responds to the physical appearance of a woman and not necessarily from the physical appearance of a man to a woman.

In Song 5:10-16, though, it is the physical appearance of the beloved that makes the female voice love him even more. It is his outstanding physical appearance that causes her to be faint with love for her beloved (Song 5:8). The emphasis on both her physical appearance and that of her lover's, contributes to a vibrant assertive voice that secures her beauty, as well as determining the boundaries of her feelings for her lover. Through her self-assertion and the vibrant and assertive voice towards the physical appearance of her beloved, the female voice breaks away from the social boundaries created by the patriarchal world of the Old Testament.

### ***5.5 CONCLUSION***

In this chapter, the female voice has been reconstructed in order to show how, in contrast to much of the Old Testament, the female voice in Song of Songs presents her sexuality and her concept of beauty from a positive perspective. By bringing the female voice in dialogue with a number of Old Testament passages, we encountered in this chapter the voice of a woman who uses open and explicit language of sexuality to help us perceive of sexuality as the gift of God's creation that one should not be ashamed of. We have further encountered the voice of a woman whose sexual encounters are not necessarily for procreation, as seems to be the case as presented by most passages in the Old Testament and as seen in our discussion in this study. From the love relationship of the female voice with her

beloved, we have also heard the voice of a woman who declares that her lover is her friend and companion.

From this love relationship we also encounter the voice of a woman who even risks her life to search for her beloved in the streets at night in the name of love. It is through this search that we encounter the voice of a woman who decides not to suffer in silence after having been abused by the watchmen who were guarding the city gates at night, while she was searching for her beloved. We have also encountered the voice of a woman who boldly states that she is black and beautiful and that this statement offers her readership the possibility of recreating their identity in the midst of social disparity. Finally, we have heard the voice of a woman who boldly describes the physical appearance of her beloved, giving her readership the opportunity of seeing that the traditional objects of sexual desire have now become the subjects of sexual desire.

Having presented the female voice in the previous discussion as being in dialogue with the representation of women in the rest of the Old Testament, it is therefore safe to say that the female voice in the Song of Songs offers a new mode of articulating the meaning of sex and sexuality. The female voice in Song of Songs offers the opportunity for one to perceive women who are in love positively. The female voice can therefore be understood as a model for redefining one's identity in the midst of social disparities. This is particularly important because the female voice in Song of Songs has offered a counter voice to the way in which many texts in the Old Testament promote "popular norms and attitudes about women, their bodies and sexuality lending women to manipulation and exploitation" (Weems 1995:2).

In the concluding chapter, I will return more closely again to the Kenyan context and the issue of reading the Song of Songs – as informed by the references to the female voice in this chapter – for the dignity of Kenyan women. I will show that Kenyan women have the right to live with dignity as God's children as already provided for in Genesis 1:27 and I will emphasize that both man and woman have been created in God's own image and thus that no one, also no one from the opposite sex, has the right to dominate the other.

## CHAPTER SIX

### READING THE SONG OF SONGS FOR THE DIGNITY OF KENYAN WOMEN

#### *6.1 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH*

This study investigated one of the central aspects of a Kenyan woman's identity, namely their notion of sexuality, which unfortunately also underlies numerous socio-economic and developmental challenges currently confronting them. Yet, in Kenyan society, being patriarchal, verbalizing issues of sex and sexuality still remains taboo.<sup>155</sup> This research has shown that in Kenya patriarchal ideologies are used to control the sexuality of women in the name of 'our culture.' Patriarchal ideologies are embedded in the systemic and human constructs of the society to such an extent that gender-based violence, and especially sexual violence, continues to go uncriticized.

This study has also shown that through cultural practices and rites of passages, women have been used as custodians of culture. Women have been used as custodians of culture, passing on cultural values from one generation to another. In this way women may even be understood to be accomplices to sustaining the situation in which it remains very difficult to criticize patriarchal ideologies that are used to dehumanize them. All in all, it has been and is therefore difficult for many Kenyan women to live with dignity as equally created in the image and likeness of God.

This study therefore sought to name, expose, criticize, destabilize and to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. Patriarchal ideologies were challenged that have been muting the voices of Kenyan women on matters

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<sup>155</sup> On the face of it, issues of sex and sexuality would seem to be a very simple matter that hardly needs to be questioned or even discussed. These are obvious things, one would say. However, the very 'innateness' of the negative worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women provokes the need to see why the sexuality of Kenyan women is conventionally organised around male patriarchal ideologies, which constantly seek to control the sexuality of women. Unfortunately, it has been difficult for Kenyan women to verbalize issues of sex and sexuality. This is because Kenyan women have been brought up in a society that compels them to follow socially constructed norms imposed upon them by men in the name of 'our culture.'

of sex and sexuality by introducing the voices of Kenyan women as found in poetry as a means of expressing themselves. It was shown how, by means of poetry, the full power and energy of these women were mobilized.

The voices of Kenyan women moreover offered the opportunity for a contextual re-reading of the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women. I have presented the female voice in the Song of Songs as responding in a new way to Old Testament society on matters of sex and sexuality. In the process, this study came up with a twofold strategy for addressing the negative worldview of Kenyan men towards the sexuality of women:

Firstly, this study proposed that it is important to steer conversations regarding issues of sex and sexuality and that this will create a platform for addressing other manifestations of gender-based injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. Secondly, by focusing on the voices of women in Kenyan poetry, as well as on the female voice in Song of Songs, this study proposed that it is possible to reconstruct positive aspects of the sexuality of Kenyan women, which may allow them to live with dignity.

To achieve its aims, this study used an African women's approach to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women within the broader context of Feminist and Womanist approaches to the Song. A Feminist and Womanist approach to the Song of Songs enabled an African women's approach to identify with the female voice in the Song, appropriating the Song of Songs as a *woman's* song. Through an African Women's approach to the Song of Songs, this study also showed how the female voice that boldly speaks out in the Old Testament patriarchal setting can indeed be liberating to Kenyan women.

Moreover, in the study the female voice in Song of Songs was brought into dialogue with other Old Testament passages that portray the sexuality of women from a negative perspective. It was evident that the female voice in the Song of Songs openly speaks about matters of sex and sexuality and moreover, presents the sexuality of women in a positive fashion. By being able to initiate sexual encounters, the female voice in the Song of Songs was portrayed as enjoying her sexual encounters with her male counterpart. For this reason the importance of creating situations in which Kenyan women may be empowered to be subjects and not merely objects of sexual desire was also emphasized. Only when Kenyan

women are empowered to negotiate safe sex and express their sexuality on their own terms and conditions will their dignity be fully realized. This study has furthermore shown how socially-constructed negative concepts of beauty can be used in patriarchal settings to control the sexuality of women and how such negative concepts of beauty have served to further intensify gender and social disparity. Despite this, it was proposed in the study that even in the midst of gender and social disparity, it is possible to reconstruct one's identity – specifically with reference to the way it was done by the female voice as she boldly challenged the daughters of Jerusalem to acknowledge that she is black and beautiful.

In short, this study has thus shown how the female voice in Song of Songs presents issues of sex and sexuality in a *new way*. And as such I proposed that the female voice in the Song of Songs, read through the hermeneutical lens of Kenyan women's poetry, has the potential to inform and therefore to *transform* the patriarchal setting of the Kenyan society. For this reason Kenyan women are encouraged to become vocal on matters of sex and sexuality despite the fact that patriarchal societies are always rigid and resistant to change. Speaking out however requires courage. It takes courage like that of the female voice in the Song of Songs, as well as the Kenyan women who spoke about their sexuality in poetry, for Kenyan women to realize the possibility of raising their voice regarding sexual matters.

This does, of course not mean that there are not a variety of ways and channels through which the plight of Kenyan women may be addressed. It also means that Kenyan women should not have to wait for the right situation and audience before speaking – this was clear with reference to the voices of women in poetry as well as the voice of the female lover in the Song. Kenyan women are challenged to take the initiative *to create* space, context, situations and audiences to speak at or to on their sexuality.

One of the most important aspects of this study is the fact that through her words and actions the female voice in the Song suggests that the sexuality of women is part of what it means to be human. As such women have nothing to be ashamed of regarding their sexuality. This, too, must be part of the consequences of the encounter with the female voice in Song of Songs, as women are encouraged to claim a new image and identity in terms of their sexuality, claiming the right to live with dignity as children equally created in the image and likeness of God.

## 6.2 THE DIGNITY OF KENYAN WOMEN AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

The issues of human dignity and the image of God were discussed in detail in chapter one of the study, but it should be returned to briefly here, in the conclusion to the study. It was also acknowledged that the experiences of women across the world differ depending on time, context and space.<sup>156</sup> However, when one listens to Kenyan women's voices in poetry and the female voice in the Song of Songs, one thing stands out: There are also many similarities between the struggles of Kenyan women who raised their voices through poetry or whose voices are found in poetry and the female voice in the Song of Songs. Indeed, at closer inspection, it is possible to see that Kenya's patriarchal context is similar to that of the Song of Songs. Similarly, several issues that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity are to be found in and are raised by the female voice in the Song of Songs.

In fact, at a very fundamental level, we have seen that Kenyan women may quite often struggle with the question of what it really means to be a woman because of patriarchal ideologies that continue to portray their sexuality from a negative perspective. The latter may lead to them suffering from an inferiority complex, refraining from speaking up, being excluded from the public domain, and being submissive, even to sexual abuse. It is a reality such as this that has challenged me to ask what it really means when Genesis 1:27 claims that we are all created in God's image. This question provides a framework for the affirmation of Kenyan women's value and worth in terms of human dignity, a framework provided in the words of of Genesis 1:27 according to which:

... God created humankind in God's image,  
in the image of God,  
God created them  
Male and female,  
God created them (Gen. 1:27 NRSV).

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<sup>156</sup>See Chapter Two of this study.



At the center of this passage, one finds the strong notion of human dignity as intrinsically related to the image and the likeness of God, as something inherent to being created. Human dignity is not given by any human being to another and therefore it cannot be taken away from any person by anybody. Human dignity is a right; it is not a privilege or a favor. Human dignity thus also contains an element of freedom. This means that Kenyan women have the right to be free to express their sexuality without being intimidated or exploited. Kenyan women also have the right to be free and freed from all forms of injustice that deny them the right to live with dignity as children of God, equally created in God's image.<sup>157</sup>

Many scholars have argued that human dignity is something inherent to every created human being. Stella Vettori (2010:230) for example, points out that "the idea of an inherent human dignity emanates from the Judea-Christian idea of individual ethical responsibility and worth under God." This means that every Kenyan woman at both an individual and at communal level has the right to live with dignity. Central to the liberation of Kenyan women from the negative portrayal of their sexuality is the fact that they are precious in the sight of God. Thus, when it comes to the dignity of Kenyan women, the relationship between the concept of human dignity and the image of God should be understood in terms of three dimensions:

Firstly, it is important that every person should be given the right to and be allowed the opportunity and freedom to live life and life in fullness. In terms of being uniquely created by God, one may say that God knew every Kenyan woman even before God formed her in her mother's womb (cf. e.g. Jer 1:5; Ps 139). God therefore has a plan and a specific purpose for the life of every Kenyan woman in this present world. Thus, Kenyan women can only find fulfilment in life when they realize their potential to live life in its abundance

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<sup>157</sup> Thomas Heilke (2006:89-90) notes that for Italian Renaissance philosopher Pico Della Mirandola, the freedom of choice given by God to human beings enables everyone to have the right to live with dignity. Heilke (2006:89-90) say that Della Mirandola argued that "it is in the act of choosing well with respect to their ends that human beings find their highest dignity which is God given. This means freedom properly exercised." This study is therefore proposing that Kenyan women should be allowed the right of choice when it comes to sexual matters, but also cautions them to use their freedom of choice wisely, for example, to negotiate for safe sex even with their husbands.

today. In this case Kenyan women, for example, should live in a society where they are free to walk alone in the streets at night and everywhere and they should feel free to express themselves without the fear of their sexual innocence being taken away.<sup>158</sup>

Secondly, according to Vettori (2010:230), in history the idea of the relationship between the image of God and human beings was elaborated on by German philosopher Immanuel Kant “who held that human dignity is inherent and derives from the status of finite rational beings that are capable of autonomous action.”<sup>159</sup> This means that when Kenyan women are not allowed to exercise total autonomy over their sexuality, *God’s* dignity is also violated. When customary laws such as those pertaining to arranged marriages and bride wealth are used to negotiate the prize of a woman, the body of a woman is commoditized and therefore her dignity is also compromised. In Kantian terms, Godself has then also been commoditized. Human dignity simply cannot be measured or discussed in terms of value as value is connected to individual (human) judgment. In this study, it was shown how the value of many Kenyan women is often determined and is dependent upon the judgment of Kenyan men. And this judgment is mostly based on the bridal wealth, the number of children to whom a woman gives birth, and the hard work a woman has to do in order to “repay” the bride wealth that was paid by her husband’s family to her parents. This, too, has made it difficult for many Kenyan women to live with dignity.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Hanne Loland (2007:7ff.) also gives a detailed discussion on the relationship between human dignity and the image of God in Genesis 1:27. However, it is worth noting that Loland (2007:7) elaborates further on the concept of human dignity as provided for in Genesis 1:27. Loland (2007:7) argues for example that “the extreme prohibition of homosexuality by death penalty... is best explained as a desire to keep the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ intact.” For Loland (2007:70), “anything that threatens the differentiation between them [is] strictly prohibited.”

<sup>159</sup> Heilke (2006:90) however, cautions that “Kant was skeptical concerning human possibilities for moral rectitude, yet Heilke (2006:90) still applauds Kant “for moving towards dignity as an intrinsic value.”

<sup>160</sup> In David B. Resnik (2004:90-100) we see a detailed explanation on the connection between human dignity and ‘market’ rhetoric. Even though Resnik (2004:90-100) speaks more on the ethics of selling body parts, it is possible to argue that the market rhetoric can also be applied to the way Kenyan men measure the value of Kenyan women in terms of bride wealth, the number of children a woman can give birth to and the hard work-as in to economically restore the ‘price’ give by her husband to her paternal family. According to Resnik (2004:100) therefore, “treating a person as intrinsically valuable requires us to treat that person as having a value that cannot be measured in market terms” (Redin 1996).

Thirdly, Yair Lorberbaum (2011:146) proposes that the relationship of humanity to the image of God dictates that human beings are the extension of God upon the earth. This means that human beings have the power to ‘rule’ over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and over every creeping creature on the earth (Gen 1:26). This however may be understood to mean that there is no human being on earth who has the right to rule or have dominion over another human being as therefore says “the entire human race is made in the image of God” (Lorberbaum 2011:146).<sup>161</sup> In fact, this principle is typically displayed in the Song of Songs. We see this when the two lovers celebrate their love as equals, but in a way that they both have ‘dominion’ over nature (see for example Song 2 and 5:9-16).

In short, human dignity is embedded in the image and likeness of God. Every individual has the right to live with dignity – Kenyan women included. This is why Maulana Karega (2004:317) argues that “the fundamental point of departure for both the discourse on moral worthiness and the practice to achieve it is in the recognition of and respect for the inherent worthiness of the human person.” In Chapter Five, however, when we read several parts of the Old Testament, we saw that male dominance is embedded in patriarchal structures that constantly silence the voices of women, a situation that reflects that of Kenyan society.<sup>162</sup>

Janet Walsh, LaShawn R. Jefferson and Joseph Sounders (2003:46) have, for example, pointed out that in Kenya, “women are constantly subjected to sexual coercion thus violating the right of Kenyan women to freely make decisions regarding their sexual relations.” Walsh, Jefferson and Sounders (2003:46) have therefore also endeavoured to expose injustice done to Kenyan women by pointing out that in Kenya “women’s rights to sexual autonomy, physical integrity and security of persons are violated when women are forced to undergo traditional rites of passage.” As we have seen in Chapter Three of this study, some of these negative cultural traditions include female circumcision, traditional rituals like cleansing, and wife inheritance, all of which involve physical abuse in connection with property rights violations.

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<sup>161</sup>See also Richard Middleton (2005:129), who discusses the liberating image of God in Genesis 1.

<sup>162</sup>See Eric A Saibert (2012:3. 139).

Walsh, Jefferson and Sounders (2003:46) also remind one that “international human rights law increasingly recognizes women’s right to sexual autonomy which includes the right to be free from nonconsensual sexual relations.” The right to sexual autonomy is reflected in a number of international declarations and conference documents (Walsh, Jefferson & Sounders 2003:46). Inspired by these international declarations and conference documents on human dignity, this study proposes that conversations regarding issues of sex and sexuality are an important element towards the realization of the dignity of Kenyan women.

The choice in this study to focus on the Song of Songs is moreover informed by the continued silencing of the voices of Kenyan women on issues of sex and sexuality and the daily sexual and physical abuse of Kenyan women. In cases such as the Kenyan context, where the abuse and harassment of women has become part of everyday life, this study asks: For how much longer shall the voices of (Kenyan) women be silenced? This question is also asked by Kanyoro (2001:159), who points out that there is a major task confronting African women theologians besides reading the Bible for themselves and by themselves. For Kanyoro (2001:159), the task is how to incorporate discussions that challenge the sanctioned and normative dehumanization of women in our communities. These discussions should be based on the fact that every individual is created in the image and likeness of God. In fact, as was shown in this study, a possible conversational text for the dignity of Kenyan women could be The Song of Songs in dialogue with Genesis 1:26-27.

According to Kanyoro (2001:159), this will also allow “women to safely speak about issues that harm their wellbeing.” The biblical conviction that men and women are created in God’s image underlines the fact that Kenyan women, too, must live with dignity. This study, therefore, joins the call and challenge to every Kenyan woman to act courageously and to think aloud about what it means to be created in God’s own image. If this means to rise up and criticize every attempt that intimidates or silences them, depriving them of their sexuality and identity, Kenyan women have to stand up and speak about matters of sex and sexuality in a prophetic manner as becomes an issue that has its origins in a divine command. Thus, all patterns of discrimination, domination, abuse and/or oppression that deny Kenyan women their right to live with dignity must be named, exposed, challenged and deconstructed.

In the final instance, thus, the female voice in the Song of Songs invites women to take collective responsibility for women in their own societies and across the world. Women everywhere should condemn any language and behavior that seems to condone the use of power over women or sexual violence. When one woman suffers, all women suffer. This study proposes that it is possible to take the experiences of the female voice in the Song of Songs seriously, but in a way that connects her experiences to the realities of Kenyan women today. In this way, too, the female voice in the Song of Songs joins the voices of ordinary Kenyan women in poetry in a liberative song that sings on behalf of Kenyan women. If Kenyan women heed this call, it will be possible to reconstruct a society in which everybody, Kenyan women included, may live lives of dignity.

### ***6.3 CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY***

It is believed that this study contributes at different levels to the Kenyan church and society, as well as to the study of the Old Testament. With regard to the Kenyan church and society, it is worth noting that concerns about how Kenyan patriarchal society uses culture to control the sexuality of women should extend beyond just the verbalization of sexual matters. There is an urgent need to cultivate practical ways of applying the concepts verbalized into action. I propose that the leading question should be: “How do we incorporate discussions that challenge the sanctioned and normative dehumanization” of Kenyan women in our church and society? (cf. Kanyoro 2001:159). Towards this the following four recommendations may be made:

Firstly, the church has existing platforms that can be used to cultivate a positive image of the sexuality of women. Such an image may protect the sexuality of women from being controlled and exploited by men. As was seen in the story in Chapter One of my own experience in delivering a sermon on the Song, the pulpit may, for example, be used to address the negative portrayal of the sexuality of Kenyan women. Preaching on the Song of Songs in the pulpit helps congregants to imagine the possibility of verbalizing issues of sex and sexuality. Besides preaching on the Song of Songs, clergy should receive training on how to incorporate healing messages in their sermons. Debra Patterson (2012:379), for example, proposes that “similar to other professionals, it is important that the clergy receive

training on the appropriate response to sexual violence to ensure that their messages are healing and supportive.”<sup>163</sup> One way in which this may happen is with reference to portrayal of sex and sexuality the Song of Songs.

Secondly, the church can also organize fellowship meetings to sensitize a congregation and society on gender-based violence. Patterson (2012:379) argues that “faith based communities can increase awareness of local resources e.g. rape crisis center, child advocacy center and other recreational facilities.” Small groups may be facilitated so that church members and members of the society may feel free and safe to share stories and to discuss ways of reducing gender-based violence. This is one way of breaking the silence in sexual violence and serves as a way of exposing sexual and gender-based injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. For Patterson (2012:379), “these activities can help to diminish the silence that surrounds sexual violence – thus encouraging victims who may be members of the congregation to seek help from the clergy or local services.”

Thirdly, the church should create forums that involve the community to sensitize the people on matters of sex and sexuality. Workshops and seminars that even involve legal practitioners may be one way to sensitize communities and congregations on how to seek legal help on sexual violence and sexual harassment. Such forums will also offer opportunities to address other forms of gender injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. To address and even eliminate sexual and other gender-based injustice, there is a need not only for personal and religious, but also communal, public and political commitment.

Fourthly, in light of the link between the church and broader community, it is implied that it is the duty of the church to be a living example. The church should lead by example by totally changing the way women are treated *in the church*. One way of leading by example is by confronting cultural issues in society that deny women the right to live with dignity. Some congregations, for example, are based in areas that practice female circumcision and members of these churches often stay away from church when it is time

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<sup>163</sup> According to Patterson (2012:379), cross-training can, for example, “provide clergy members with information on sexual violence, while local providers can receive information on the cultural and social needs of the population to advance the cultural competence of local service.”

for circumcision only to attend once more after their daughters have been circumcised asking the pastor to pray for them and claiming that they had been tempted by the devil. In fact, the continued participation of Christians in circumcision practices even serves to encourage non-Christians in their societies to continue the practice. This makes it very difficult for the church to act as moral authority and to rebuke practitioners of circumcision in their community.

Finally, it is important for the community to use legal action when necessary. For instance, the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) employs the services of a lawyer when the property of the church is threatened. Why does it not do the same with regard to issues pertaining to sexual abuse against women? The new Kenyan Constitution, for example, provides ways in which women are legally protected against any forms of gender-based injustices. In fact, Peter Wangula Wekesa (2013:17ff.) points out that “the achievement of the new Kenyan constitution is a huge milestone to Kenyans and the African region.” According to Wekesa (2012:10), the new constitution for example, accords Kenyan women “privileges concerning their families, marriage, divorce and succession.” Wekesa (2013:10) notes that “the new constitution even extends to allow Kenyan women the fundamental freedom to sexual autonomy because of the inclusion of the clause on ‘sex’ as a basis for discrimination.” Unfortunately, instead of being advised to seek legal action, many women have been encouraged to pray, persevere and wait upon God to intervene on their behalf.

On a different level, this study also contributes to the study of the Old Testament. It has used contemporary Kenyan women’s voices in poetry as a hermeneutical lens to read the Song of Songs. As was shown, patriarchal contexts have continued to silence the voices of women in the name of our culture, so denying them the right to live with dignity. The voices of Kenyan women in poetry have shown, however, that those women are not silent victims of patriarchal ideologies after all. They can speak. Just as the voices of the Kenyan women use poetry to speak, it shows that it is possible for women to speak in patriarchal settings. Using Kenyan women’s voices in poetry therefore is a new contribution that challenges Old Testament readership to see the urgency of empowering the voices of women; thus empowering women to voice out the negative portrayal of their sexuality that deny them the right to live with dignity.

#### **6.4 POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEACRH**

This study hopes to break the silence that patriarchal ideologies continue to impose upon the voices of women. But there is still a lot of work to be done before Kenyan women may truly live with dignity as children of God equally created in God's image and likeness. I mention five areas for further research:

Firstly, further research may be done on the use of dialogue in the Song of Songs. The use of dialogue in the Song of Songs may be adopted to advocate for gender parity, in both the church and society. Consequently, we have seen in this study that the Song of Songs contains the voice of a woman who raises her voice on matters of sex and sexuality. But she speaks in such a way that the other characters in the text are not excluded from the conversation. According to Exum (2005:4), "through a dialogue model the Song of Songs gives us the impression that we are overhearing [characters in the Song] and observing [issues] as they unfold in the Song of Songs."<sup>164</sup> An initiation of dialogue by the female voice can here be seen as beginning from a single initiative. The single initiative from the female voice then provokes the response of her male counterpart, a response that causes the two to speak as equals, but together. Roland Boer (2007:15) has observed that "the Song of Songs contains dialogue that comes close to full mutuality between partners." Inspired by such a model of dialogue, men and women may be able to engage in dialogue on matters of sex and sexuality and acknowledge each other as equally created in the image and likeness of God.

Secondly, in Kenya, women are for the most part poor and a large majority of Kenyan women are HIV positive. According to A. Guldaneniz Yucelen (2007:5), "women are disproportionately affected by HIV in Kenyan (UNAIDS, 2006b) so that for every two adult Kenyan men living with HIV, there are about three adult women who are infected with the virus." In Chapter Three it was shown how several cultural practices can contribute to the high rate of HIV infections among Kenyan women. We saw that some of these cultural

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<sup>164</sup>For Exum (2005:4) "most love poetry is written from a single point of view with the poet or narrator implicitly or explicitly speaking to or about the object of her or of his desire." In such cases, it is possible for one gender to be understood as dominating the sexuality of the other. This is because a love relationship will only be understood from a single point of view of the poet or the narrator. That is why Exum (2005:68) says that "love poetry does not need to correspond to social reality, and in fact, it may offer an escape from social constraints for women and men."



practices include wife inheritance, polygamy, dry sex, and female circumcision (where one knife can be used to circumcise more than one girl).<sup>165</sup> Patriarchal structures use cultural practices such as these to ensure the total submission of Kenyan women and this has as one of its unfortunate consequences the spreading of HIV among Kenyan women. This therefore underscores the importance of empowering Kenyan women to speak about sex and sexuality.<sup>166</sup> This, however, also points to the need for Kenyan women to be able to negotiate safe sex when initiating sexual encounters. It was evident in the Song of Songs, how the female voice is portrayed as enjoying sexual encounters on her own terms and conditions.

Additionally, patriarchy allows men in Kenya to have multiple sexual partners - in many cases without even using protection. Shisanya (2009:17), for example, points out that “traditional cultures of many Kenyan communities allow males to have multiple sexual partners and to control the nature of these relationships.” According to Shisanya (2009:17), Kenyan men control the nature of sexual relationships “by for example marrying very young girls and encouraging dry sex for greater male pleasure, thereby exposing females to bruise through which HIV could enter their bodies.” This has therefore served to further escalate the spreading of HIV among Kenyan women. In Kenya, if a woman demands that her husband uses protection in their sexual encounter, the husband will be quick to accuse the wife of unfaithfulness! In fear of being accused of being unfaithful to the husband, many women opt to silently give in to demands for unprotected sex with their husbands or partners.

Thirdly, in Chapter Four of this study, I have introduced the voices of Kenyan women in poetry that continue to be orally transmitted, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of what we have in written form has, however, been documented by male compilers. Thus, many of the poems still reflect male-dominated perspectives that do not help to liberate women. Kenyan

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<sup>165</sup> See Shisanya (2009:17).

<sup>166</sup> Dialogue is a positive aspect for the liberation of women. In patriarchal settings, men try to socialize women in such a way that men expect no reaction from women, even when their dignity is at stake. Many women have therefore opted to play the victim instead of raising their voices. This way, many women have continued to live a life of indignity without knowing what to do. Dialogue, especially as initiated by the female voice, expresses a strong sense of a liberated self. In song 5:7 for example, we hear the voice of a woman who has been violated. We do not here this voice playing the victim here however; instead, we hear the voice of a woman who sees beyond her plight and opts to initiate a dialogue between herself and the daughters of Jerusalem.

women continue to articulate their theologies, struggles, pain and hope orally through poetry. This study therefore suggests that further work be done on documenting Kenyan women's poetry. The documentation will be particularly helpful if it could be done by a woman. This way, the perspective of a woman will be in a position to give special emphasis on the role of poetry in sustaining the hope of women, even in unjust institutions.

Related to this, this study also has the potential to steer discussions on oral theology especially from women's experiences. This is because the study is primarily based on the real experiences of Kenyan women. In Chapter Four of this study, we have seen how the hopes of Kenyan women are sustained through their voices in poetry. Further work may be done in motivating Kenyan women to continue reciting poems and especially poems that allows them to be open on matters of sex and sexuality. One such an avenue is the interschool competitions held yearly in Kenya. In these competitions, poetry plays a very important role in instilling values in the members of Kenyan society. This study therefore proposes that further work be done in documenting and analyzing the role poetry plays in Kenyan society in forums such as the interschool poetry competitions.

Fourth, further work also needs to be done to explore prophetic theologies of hope. In Kenyan women's poetry, it is possible for one to experience the spirit of hope. This is because the voices of Kenyan women in poetry express joy, pain, struggle, resistance, resilience, rebuke *and* future hope. This study has been undertaken in the hope that the oppressed themselves (Kenyan women in this case) may join in the struggle for liberating Kenyan women from the negative portrayal of their sexuality.<sup>167</sup> Further work may be done in outlining a prophetic theology of hope rooted in the Old Testament witness. According to

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<sup>167</sup> Ann Vandenhoeck (2011:10) argues that "taking a prophetic stance means to advocate for those who have 'imperfect' bodies, bringing a perspective of hope by breaking the destructive gaze of society and proclaiming the biblical holistic perspective on human beings." According to this study, a holistic perspective on a human being cannot be realized when the sexuality of Kenyan women continues to be portrayed from a negative perspective. That is why Vandenhoeck (2011:7) says that "a prophetic role does not lie in just one act. It lies in continuing a tradition of relationship, values and practices that includes a transcendent horizon of meaning against which we measure the meaning of our lives." Therefore, in my opinion, the meaning of the lives of Kenyan women and all women globally should be measured using Genesis 1:27, which says that all human beings have been created in God's image.

Albert Nolan (2009:60), it seems that “there is a growing denunciation of injustices, but there is no clear annunciation of hope for the future society”.

The spirit of hope is nurtured, amongst others, through the artistic creation of passing on information from one generation to another through poetry. The protest and confessing models in Kenyan women’s poetry and the female voice in the Song of Songs ignite the fire of liberation theology. This then creates a link between the sustained hope in women’s voices through poetry and prophetic theologies. The spirit of prophetic theologies triggered by this study display the spirit of believing in a near future world/society in which all shall live with dignity. A young woman in love shall roam the streets at night, searching for her lover without fear that the watchmen will assault her. Men and women will speak about sexual matters without one perceiving the other as subordinate or the object of sexual desire.

Finally, the themes of sex and sexuality in the Song of Songs can also be used as a conversational text regarding *non-heterosexual* relationships. In Kenya a number of gay and lesbian people are not allowed to freely express their sexuality as, according to Nancy Baraka and Ruth Morgan (2004:25), “homosexuality is [seen as] against African norms and traditions and even in religion it is considered a great sin.” Baraka and Morgan (2004:25) further remind one that under the old Kenyan Constitution, “section 162 to 165 of the penal code outlaw homosexual behavior and attempted homosexual behavior between men, referring to it as ‘carnal knowledge against the order of nature.’” Baraka and Morgan (2004:25) note that “the penalty of gay relationship was punishable by 5-14 years in prison.” An underlying assumption of this study has been the reconstruction of a just Kenyan society that allows every human being to live with dignity. Unfortunately, in Kenya, matters of sex and sexuality continue to be clouded in mystery, so much more with regard to people whose sexual orientation and/or identity are not heterosexual.

Using the Song of Songs as a conversational text on matters of sex and sexuality in Kenya may thus help to promote boldness in speaking about sex and sexuality for *all* people. This then opens up the opportunity to criticize societal ideologies that have been defined as the ‘norm’ and therefore used to discriminate or deny God’s people the right to live with dignity. The term heterosexual can be understood as a social construction that has been used by many societies to define the concept of what is the norm, but as Sean Burke (2011:176)

insists using so-called queer theory, “identity categories remain arbitrary, totalizing, exclusionary, normative, and regulatory social constructions that function by denying difference and suppressing ambiguity.” This way, some societies have shown how a particular group of people is perverse and therefore different from ‘normal people’. In such situations, it has been very difficult for gay people to even talk about matters of sex and sexuality, even in contexts where they have been sexually assaulted.

As was seen above, according to Hanne Loland (2008:68), gender is a social construction that has been used to deny God’s people the right to live with dignity. Therefore, in light of Gen 1:27, Loland (2008:68) argues that “the Hebrew Bible recognized only two genders: and God created humankind in the image of God, in God’s image, God created male and female.”<sup>168</sup> Loland thus wishes to challenge and extend the use of human dignity in terms of the *Imago Dei*, saying that *every* human being deserves to live with and in dignity. In fact, in Song 5:1 we hear the voice of a man calling upon his friends to enjoy their romantic encounters, saying: “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.” This can be understood as a song that calls on everybody to enjoy issues of sex and sexuality without being intimidated, stigmatized, restricted or silenced.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

This study started by describing the difficulty of speaking about issues of sex and sexuality in the Kenyan patriarchal context and referred to a personal experience in preaching on the Song of Songs in Sunday worship service attended by men and women of all ages. The main motivation behind this study was that the dignity of Kenyan women depends on the positive portrayal of their sexuality. Even with such a motivation, one challenge stands out in this study: with Kenya being a patriarchal society, it is almost inconceivable for a woman to even think about preaching from the Song of Songs in a patriarchal church that does not

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<sup>168</sup> See for example Heidi Epstein (2011:93), who say that “political conflicts and ethnic differences in some parts of the Old Testament are represented negatively in terms of sexual violence and gender ambiguity.” Sean Burke (2011:176) also sees identity as the result of social construction. According to Burke (2011:177), “in ancient masculinities, social recognition as a man depended on one’s being perceived as embodying the positive terms in a series of binary oppositions - so that the possession of a penis and testicles was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for social recognition.”

ordain women – let alone proposing to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women!

However, this study went ahead and employed the voices of Kenyan women as a hermeneutical lens to read the Song of Songs for the dignity of Kenyan women. This study has therefore shown that it actually is possible to voice sexual matters in Kenya. This also shows that it is possible to address other forms of gender-based injustice in Kenya, injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity as children equally created in the image and likeness of God. At the end of this study, one must also contemplate other gender-based injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity, for instance, we may pause for a minute of silence in remembrance of the victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya, and yet, there is hope as:

- Who would have thought that slavery and the slave trade would have been abolished?
- Who would have imagined that it was even possible to put an ‘end’ to apartheid in South Africa?
- Who would have imagined that Female Genital Mutilation would have ‘ended’ among the Kikuyu community in Kenya?
- Who could have even imagined the fact that a woman could preach in the RCEA from the Song of Songs, albeit near but not in a pulpit?

In this study, a voice from the ‘wilderness’ emerged that spoke for the dignity of every human being, with the conviction that all of us are created in the image and likeness of God for the aforementioned issues to be addressed. A Kenyan woman’s voice in this study has read the Song of Songs from an African women’s perspective, for the dignity of Kenyan women. I have said in Chapter Four of this study that Kenyan women have articulated the theologies of their struggles through poetry. Kenyan women have done this with conviction and an undeterred hope that issues that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity will one day be addressed. This way, it will be possible for all Kenyan women to live in a society where human dignity is the norm. The female voice in the Song of Songs has shown that ‘nothing is impossible.’ I am concluding this study by stating that it is possible to voice

sexual matters in Kenya, despite it still being considered taboo by many Kenyans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If verbalizing sexual matters is a possibility in Kenya, then it is also possible to address other forms of gender-based injustice that deny Kenyan women the right to live with dignity. We may not change the fact that the dignity of Kenyan women continues to be denied and deprived every time a woman, for example, is sexually assaulted, but it is possible to change the future of Kenyan women in the spirit of the female voice in the Song of Songs, by beginning to speak about matters of sex and sexuality.

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