
THE WOMAN IN SONG OF SONGS

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ABSTRACT

The woman in Song of Songs seems to be the main character in dialogue with a lover and friends. Over many centuries several hypotheses have appeared about the epistemological questions concerning the identity and character of this woman as well as the interpretation of her dialogue with other characters in the Song. The unencumbered, rich and vibrant metaphoric text of Song of Songs describes the woman as a most beautiful and dynamic character. This research intends not to become involved in these debates but only to attempt to investigate in a coherent way the following topics, “A literary interpretation and some general remarks”, “The identity of the woman”, “The character of the woman”, “The woman in different relationships” and finally “The function of the woman in the rhetoric of the author”.

INTRODUCTION

Song of Songs opens in 1:2 with the voice of the woman (“Let him kiss me”) as an indication of the important role this woman will play in the Song. The voice of the woman and her presence dominate the speeches (e.g., Carr 2000b:240; Polaski 1997:64; Exum 2005:92).¹

A woman begins (1:1–4, 5–7) and ends (8:10–12, 14) the Song. The lover in the Song praises her (1:9–11; also 1:15; 2:2; 4:1–7; 6:4–9; 7:2–10). He comes to “his

¹ Gynocentrism also occurs in other ancient Near Eastern love (poetry) songs. Michael Fox (1983:219–228) demonstrates this in his work on Egyptian love lyrics, which he dates back to the thirteenth to eleventh century B.C.E. According to Rabin (1973:27–37, referred to by Brenner 1993b:274) the same basic features are also found in Tamil love poetry. The male lover is more absent. Rabin further detects similarities between the Egyptian and Tamil love songs and the Song of Songs. The possibility exists (which is evident in the Song) that in love poetry, perhaps also in premarital love relations in general, women in the ancient Near East were allowed a freedom in certain life situations which were denied to women in other cultures. The Egyptian and Tamil love poems therefore suggests the social and textual validity of gynocentrism in the Song (Brenner 1993b:274; also Meyers 1986:218).

garden” on invitation from the woman (4:16–5:1a). She reciprocates his praises with her own (1:16–17; 2:3). She calls on him to do certain things: to take her with him (1:4), to be like a gazelle (2:17), to go with her to the vineyards (7:12–14), to set her as a seal on his heart and arm (8:6) and “to be like a gazelle or a young stag” (8:14). His invitations to her are mediated through her words (2:10–14; 5:2–4). Her craving is communicated to the readers (Polaski 1997:64–81). She vigorously seeks her lover (1:7), and she “held him” and “would not let him go” until “bringing him” into the house of her mother (3:4; 8:1–2). The lover twice says in 4:9 that this woman has “overpowered” his heart “with a glance of your eyes”. Later in the Song he adores her beauty, comparing it to two beautiful cities (Tirzah, Jerusalem) and cosmic elements (dawn, moon, sun) (6:4, 10). In 7:2–7 the lover describes her beauty with specific reference to her feet, navel, belly, breasts, neck, eyes, nose, head and hair (cf. Carr 2000b:240–241 for a thorough description). It is “the tale of a woman, telling her story, her plight, her yearnings, her strengths and frailty, her oppression and flight to freedom” (McMonagle 1995:3, quoted in Ndogo & Viviers 2000:1295).

The woman’s body is often depicted through imagery. Of the four *wasfs*² in the Song, three describe the female and one describes the male (Meyers 1986:212). Polaski (1997:64) points out that the woman is the “vocalizer” in the Song; the dominance of her voice carries emphasis (van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:71–82). Hence, the voice of the woman and her presence dominate the entire Song.³

² In the Song the hymns to beauty are cast in a form called a *wasf*. This is an Arabic term (*ausâf*) which means “description”. It is a “genre of poetry known from ancient and more modern times alike that describes the physical charms of a loved one” (Dobbs–Allsopp 2005:262). There are four *wasfs* in the Song (4:1–7; 5:9–16; 6:4–10; 7:2–6).

³ Females are the dominant actors in the Song: they appear to be strong, articulate, outspoken and active – and more so than their male counterparts. Meyers (1986:212–215) notes that military metaphors in the Song are gendered; they image a textual female. The language of warfare is applied to female figurations. This is incomprehensible unless it connotes supremacy of the imaged entity. The assessment of the socio-historical significance of this literary picture should be supplementary to the recognition of this phenomenon (Brenner 1993b:273). Sparks (2008:294) is convinced that the Song was the work of a woman. He has been influenced by Brenner (1993a:89), who asks the discerning question: “Can it be that some or certain poems [in the Song] are not only presented as spoken by a woman or women but also reflect a woman’s emotions and world in such an authentic manner that no man is likely to have written them?”

In Vienna in 2014, at the third international *Shir ha-Shirim* conference, Cheryl Exum's keynote presentation was titled "The man in Song of Songs". Owing to the overwhelming presence of the female voice, as pointed out in the introduction, the purpose of this article, "The woman in Song of Songs", is to investigate the woman in this Song. Over many centuries several hypotheses have appeared about the epistemological questions concerning the identity and character of this woman as well as the interpretation of her dialogue with other characters in the Song. This research intends not to become involved in these debates but only to attempt to investigate in a coherent way the following topics: "The literary interpretation of the Song", "The identity of the woman", "The character of the woman", "The woman in different relationships" and finally "The function of the woman in the rhetoric of the poet".

A LITERARY INTERPRETATION AND SOME GENERAL REMARKS⁴

The choice of the genre and interpretation of the Song relate closely to how the woman in the Song is regarded and interpreted. See Tanner (1997a:23–46; see also Fields 1980:221–231) for an excellent analysis of the history of interpretation of the Song.⁵ This article focuses on a "literary interpretation".

I believe that historical criticism and text-immanent exegesis over the past few decades have made an important contribution to the reading and understanding of the Song (cf. Fields 1980:221–231). Consequently attention has recently been paid to a more literary reading of the text (cf. Tanner 1997:39; Gollwitzer 1979; Fields 1980:221–231) as well as to the discourse embedded in the structure of the Song (Linnemeyer n.d.:1–23; Exum 1973:47–79). The Song is Hebrew poetry (DeClaissé-

⁴ See Polaski (1997:66; also Sparks 2008:295) for his discussion on how most feminist scholars interpret the Song as symbolic, seeing the Shulammitte woman as a stable and powerful figure which authentically represents the experience of women.

⁵ See also Garrett (1993:352–366) for a thorough analysis of the various interpretations of the Song in his commentary as well as Ndoga and Viviers (1290–1294). Exponents who opt for a historical interpretation: on the two-character and three-character drama views, see Ewald (1826:4–5); Pope (1977:35); Delitzsch (1968:10); Davidson (1989:7); and Tanner (1997a:34).

Walford 2008:392; cf. also Exum 2005); it is a compilation of love poems.⁶ Consequently the songs incorporated bear “diverse impressions and implications of which one is, that we have to deal in the Song with different lovers” (cf. Sparks 2008:284; Brenner 1993b:269).

Brenner (1993b:269) is correct⁷ that there is not a “single loving pair” in the Song, but a number of them.⁸ Different models of human love are drawn upon to accommodate a wider group of addressees. Brenner (1993b:269) writes: “A system of concealed meanings cannot entirely and perhaps should not be ruled out; however, such a system belongs to the readerly act rather than to the (text) level of (written) speech acts.” With this she refers to the monologues and dialogues predominant in the Song.

Some songs give prominence to the power of erotic love and its enjoyment. Sparks (2008:284) identifies some couples (2:2–13; 3:6–5:1; 7:1–13; 8:5b–7), but also others (3:1–4; 5:2–7; 8:1–4) who “express disappointments and frustrations that often attend the adolescent search for love and physical intimacy”. Then there are those texts where the woman announces herself to be a wall (8:9) or the protector of her own vineyard⁹ (8:12).

According to Tanner (1997a:44) the Song has two layers: the first layer expresses romantic and sexual pleasure¹⁰ (and frustrations). The second layer communicates a lesson on love that goes even deeper. This implies that the Song has to be understood and interpreted as both literary¹¹ and didactic. On the literary level, the lovers are used

⁶ This is supported by Longman (2001:48–49). Murphy (1990:97–99) acknowledges that the Song originally consists of a collection of poems that form a unit (see also Sparks 2008:278, 284).

⁷ According to Brenner (1993b:269), “More than one kind of love is implied, serious as well as light-hearted and humorous; different models of human love are drawn upon”. See Brenner for more arguments.

⁸ In this research the singular form (woman) will be used to simplify the discussion about the female(s).

⁹ In this context the reference to vineyard can mean her body in “she had to tend the family vineyard, she could not take care of her own ‘vineyard’” (Garrett 1993:387). According to Ogden and Zogbo (1998:31) “vineyard” here can “refer to the young woman, with perhaps a deeper sexual meaning present also”.

¹⁰ Tanner added “... in marriage”.

¹¹ Here Tanner uses the word “literal”. I disagree with him. It is impossible to interpret the

as created characters to address the topic of romantic and sexual experience (see also Vinatieri 2014:2; Robinson 2004:12). The poet could have projected her views/feelings/desires about love and sex onto the character of the woman. On the didactic level the following elements are emphasised: sex is pleasurable; sex is beautiful; sex is more than physical intimacy; etc. The Song also contemplates “how young women can avoid being hurt and disappointed in the world of young love” (cf. Sparks 2008:284). They should “not stir up or awaken love until it is ready”! (8:4).

THE IDENTITY OF THE WOMAN

The woman is young

In the Song there are two references (1:6; 8:8) to the woman’s brothers which help the reader to determine the woman’s life stage. In 1:6 the woman is subjected to her brothers’ (בְּנֵי אִמִּי, “sons of my mother”) anger (נִחְרַוּ-בִּי) at her desire for love (1:2–4). It is evident that her brothers have authority over her (1:6 “My mother’s sons were angry with me”). They declare that she has not yet reached marriageable age (Exum 2005:105).

In 8:8 the woman’s brothers say: “We have a little sister, and her breasts are not yet grown.”¹² There are two references to the woman’s youth in this verse: “little sister” and “breasts not yet grown”. In the first phrase the adjective “little” (קְטַנָּה)¹³ denotes that the sister is younger than her brothers. This implies that she is probably an adolescent. The second phrase, “her breasts are not yet grown”, in this context means that she has not yet reached puberty.¹⁴ The phrase is probably metaphoric¹⁵ and

Song literally – a literary interpretation is required owing to its poetic nature.

¹² In contrast, the woman herself says in 8:10: “I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers.” Is this late change of the size of her breasts at the end of the poem an indication that some time has elapsed and that the Song was written over a period of time?

¹³ According to Brown, Driver and Briggs (1977:881) the adjective (קְטַנָּה) means “small, young”.

¹⁴ In the Song there are six references to the woman’s breasts (4:5; 7:3, 7, 8; 8:8, 10). Twice her breasts are compared to fawns (4:5; 7:3), once to clusters of fruit on a palm tree (7:7) and once to clusters of grapes on a vine (7:8). Our interest lies with 8:8 and 8:10. The *Today’s English Version* (TEV) reads “her breasts are still small”, the *New International*

should not be regarded as a literal comment on her physique. It means that the younger sister is still not of marriageable age (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:235). Ogden and Zogbo (1998:235) point out that many cultures define the maturity of a girl this way. Consequently, they propose that it can be translated as “We have a young sister who is still too young for marriage”.

The woman is dark (שְׁחֹרָה, 1:5)

In 1:5–6a the woman describes her appearance: “I am black (שְׁחֹרָה) and beautiful (וְנֹאֲמָה), O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark (וְנֹאֲמָה), because the sun has gazed on me.” She explains that her blackness has been caused by exposure to the sun while she worked in the vineyards (Exum 2005:103). When the women of Jerusalem gaze at her, she asks them not to look at her; she does not want them to take her skin colour into account.

Why does she also inform these women that she is beautiful? Can they not recognise her beauty? According to Exum (2005:104) the woman’s statement reveals something about her own assessment. She explains her black skin as the consequence of labouring outdoors – in the sun. This is what lower-class women would have done. Upper-class women were more pampered and would not work in the sun. Thus, by claiming to be “black” and “beautiful”, the woman probably challenges the view of the women in the city that a black skin (caused by labour in the sun and regarded as a sign of lower social status) and beauty are incompatible (Exum 2005:104).

The woman is beautiful

The Song is saturated with explicit as well as implicit references to the beauty of the woman.

Version (NIV) and New Century Version (NCV) read “her breasts are not yet grown”. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) reads “She has no breasts”.

¹⁵ This statement “probably metaphoric” relates to the overwhelming occurrence of metaphors in the Song to describe the appearance of the woman.

Multiple explicit references

References to the beauty (הַיָּפִי) of the woman occur throughout the Song (1:5, 8, 15bis; 2:10, 13; 4:1bis, 7; 5:9; 6:1, 4, 10; 7:6; cf. also 1:10; 2:1; 4:7; 6:8–10).¹⁶ There is no doubt, according to these assertions about her beauty, that she equals the ancient and beautiful heroes of Israel (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:265, 270).

The first explicit reference to her beauty is found in 1:5, “I am black and beautiful (הַיָּפִי), O daughters of Jerusalem, ... Do not gaze at me because I am dark.”¹⁷ In this passage two clauses can be distinguished: i) “I am black and beautiful”; and ii) “Do not gaze at me”. These are the first words the woman uses to refer to herself and to address the reader and the daughters of Jerusalem. In fact, her words are redundant; her beauty speaks for her. Her shyness (“Do not gaze at me”) is the contrary of sociability. The Hebrew conjunction וְ in “I am black ‘and’ beautiful” may also mean “but”. This woman “may be a dark beauty or a beauty in spite of her darkness” (Landy 1980:63). Her lover responds to this by praising her in 1:9–11. Her lover praises her beauty and she reciprocates by praising his beauty.

The second reference to beauty occurs in a number of texts which are normally translated as “most beautiful” (הַיָּפִי) ¹⁸ among women. This expression is one of several other terms of affection for her in the Song. It is also found in 1:8; 5:9 and 6:1 (cf. Ogden & Zogbo 1998:36; also Exum 2005:104). Finally, four more explicit references are found in 1:15, 16; 4:1 (2x) (הַיָּפִי, without the article הַ), which are only translated as beautiful.

Implicit references

An implicit reference to the beauty of the woman is found in 2:1, where the woman describes herself in the following words: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” (cf. 1:5). She makes this statement, which shows how she sees herself, in response to her lover’s praises (1:9–11). According to Exum (2005:113) exegetes find it difficult

¹⁶ Indirect references to the beauty of the woman: 2:1; 6:8–10.

¹⁷ Here the poet uses a different adjective (הַיָּפִי) with a particle (וְ) which can be translated as “most beautiful”.

¹⁸ This is a different adjective from the one used in 1:5 (הַיָּפִי).

to identify the flowers to which she compares herself, namely the “rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys”. Exum is of the opinion that they were probably “chosen for their beauty and fragrance, possibly also for their delicacy and sensuality” (2005:113).

Another implicit reference to the beauty of the woman is found in 6:8–10. Here the dark woman is said to be perfect (תְּמִילִי) in beauty (6:9)¹⁹ and also pure (בְּרָה) (6:10).²¹ She is adored by society (the women of Jerusalem) instead of being an outcast. Because beauty is always desirable, this might be why the most beautiful woman was regarded as adorable by the women of Jerusalem. One critical factor links 1:5–6 and 6:8–10: the beauty of the woman is natural, as opposed “to the cultural beauty of the queens and concubines” (Landy 1980:70). The beauty of the women of Jerusalem seems to be a cultivated beauty, while the beauty of the woman in the Song is a natural beauty (Landy 1980:64, 70). This leads to the following explanations of her beauty in the *wasfs*.

Appearance of the woman in the *wasfs*

The lover’s perception of the beauty of his beloved is moulded in the form of a *wasf* (4:1–7), which used to be a genre of poetry in antiquity. Even in more modern times it was used to describe “the physical charms of a beloved one” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262). In the Song there are three more of these *wasfs* (5:9–16; 6:4–10; 7:2–6). Although all four *wasfs* resemble one another, they are all different. In the first *wasf* (4:1–7) the male lover sings about the beauty of his beloved. The starting and closing verses of the appraisal express this beauty. In 4:1 the beauty of the woman is expressed with fascination: “How! (הֲנֵנָה) beautiful (יָפִיָּה) you are, my love, how (הֲנֵנָה) beautiful (יָפִיָּה).” The interjection particle הֲנֵנָה (How/Behold/Wow! twice) indicates that what follows is surprising and stunning. It is unexpected. Judging from the content, the rest of the *wasf* describes the beauty of the woman.²² The vibrant

¹⁹ According to Brown-Driver-Briggs (1977:1071) it can also mean “complete, morally innocent, having integrity”.

²⁰ Here it refers to the clearness of the sun and not morality.

²¹ Brown-Driver-Briggs (1977:141) translates this adjective as “pure, clean”.

²² In 2:8a and 9b the woman’s experience of her lover is similarly referred to “... הִנֵּה-הֵלֵךְ (Look), here he comes! / ... הִנֵּה-הֵלֵךְ (Look), here he stands” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262).

description of this *wasf* culminates in 4:5 with the lover's admiration of the woman's breasts: "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:262).²³ The *wasf* then closes with a repetition of the opening exclamation about the beauty of the woman (4:7). A slight change now takes place. Instead of the exclamation "How/Behold!" in 4:1, the adverb "altogether" is used in the phrase "You are altogether beautiful" (הַיְּפֹתָיִם כִּלְיָם). Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:263) states that this phrase is "a collective metonym" for the exceptional beauty "of the entire self of the woman", which has no shortcomings.²⁴

The use of metaphors

The poet uses a variety of metaphors²⁵ to describe the woman's beauty. She is likened to doves, goats, sheep, pomegranates, towers and gazelles, amongst others. Interestingly the plural forms are used throughout to evoke images of some body parts: her eyes, hair, teeth, brow, neck and breasts, and so on. These metaphors are often used in the Song to describe the woman (1:15; 4:1b, c, 2, 3b, 4; 6:5, 6, 7; 7:4, 5). References to turtledoves (2:12) and foxes (2:15) are included to describe the setting but not a person. Other metaphors are used in a conventional sense (Meyers 1986:216).

²³ After the two lovers have spent the evening together (the typical time of love), the woman urges her lover to leave before sunrise. In 4:6 the opposite occurs. The beauty of the woman ignites the desire of the man to spend the night with her ("I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense").

²⁴ Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:266) points out that the "partial catalogue of physical anatomy" is the "collective metonym" for the total beauty of this woman, her body as well as her mind. In the rest of the Old Testament there are various references to the physical beauty (הַיְּפֹתָיִם) of some heroes of Israel: "Sarah (Gen 12:11), Rachel (Gen 29:17) Joseph (Gen 39:6), David (1 Sam 17:43), Absalom (2 Sam 14:35), and Esther (Est 2:7) (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:266). The outward beauty of these people points to the invisible beauty of the mind and emotions of the person. The *wasf* of the beauty of Sarah in the Genesis Apocryphon makes the above statement more explicit. "It includes the admiration of her surpassing wisdom (1QapGen 21.7)". "Neither virgins nor brides entering the bridal chamber exceed her charms. Over all women is her beauty supreme, her loveliness far above them all. Yet with all this comeliness, she possesses great wisdom, and all that she has is beautiful." Available: <http://everything2.com/title/1QapGen>. [Accessed 2014/03/02.]

²⁵ Allusions, similes, symbols and hyperboles are also used.

The two animals most often mentioned to describe the beauty of both the male and the female are the “dove” (יוֹנָה) and the “gazelle” (צִבְיָה).²⁶ The eyes of both lovers are compared to doves (1:15; 4:1; 5:12). Some of these metaphors, such as her “dove-like eyes”, occur even more often (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:265).²⁷ Only the woman as a person (2:12; 6:9) is metaphorically associated with the dove. The most dominant

²⁶ Three more animals remain in the catalogue of the Song: a mare (1:9), a lion and a leopard (4:8). Exegetes find it troublesome to determine the connotation of the lion and the leopard. These animal images are somewhat confusing. In 1:9 the woman is compared to a mare, which is portrayed in a battle scene amidst the chariots of Pharaoh. When the mare is set loose among the stallions of the charioteers she creates havoc, which invokes forcefulness. Thus the woman has a power that can offset mighty forces. Architectural and military imagery also occur (Meyers 1986:212–215).

²⁷ Body parts: in the Song imagery is frequently used to describe the woman’s body. The following body parts are described: cheeks (1:10; 4:3); neck (1:10; 4:4; 7:4); eyes (1:15; 4:4; 7:4); face (2:14); hair (4:1); breasts (4:5; 7:3, 7, 8; 8:8; 10); lips (4:11); limbs (4:13); thighs (7:1); navel (7:2); stomach (7:2); nose (7:4); and head (7:5). In 2:14 there is a reference to her sweet voice and in 7:7 to her height – she is tall like a palm tree. These body parts are described in terms of comparisons using the Hebrew preposition *כְּ* or only the prefix, *כִּ*. In his description of the human body, the lover uses imagery familiar to him and the woman. Only the neck and eyes are discussed. The woman’s neck is likened to a “tower” (מִגְדָּל, 4:4; 7:4; 8:10; compare also [טִירָת] in 8:9) of David (4:4) “built with rows of stones”. In 7:4 the lover describes her neck: “Your neck is like an ivory tower”. In 8:10 the woman compares her own breasts to towers. According to Ogden and Zogbo (1998:11) a tower is a tall, solid structure. It was normally located either on the city wall or in a corner. Sometimes it was an independent structure within the city. In antiquity a long neck was considered a thing of great beauty. In the latter part of 4:4 the word “buckler” (הַמָּגֵן) is used. A “buckler” (שֶׁלֶטֶי; see also הַמָּגֵן in 4:4) is a shield used to protect the soldier against sword and arrow attacks. Ezekiel 27:11 uses the same word to describe shields (שֶׁלֶטֶי־הַיָּם) that decorate walls. “Whereon” (עָלָיו, on it) can refer to the tower or to the neck of the young woman. “A picture of a tall and elegant woman with a beautiful necklace” emerges (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:116). The bucklers indicate ornaments worn around the neck of the young woman. The description in 7:4 of the woman’s eyes refers most likely to artificial pools (בְּרִיכוֹת) – reservoirs (Meyers 1986:215; Brown-Driver-Briggs [1977:140] translates it as “pool, pond”). A typical Hebrew wordplay is found in this verse (7:4), as “eyes” and “fountains” are the same word in Hebrew. The eyes are perhaps compared to pools of water because of the reflective quality of the pool, or of light sparkling on the surface of the water. Note that, while the first figure is a simile (with the comparison word, “like”), here we have a strict metaphor (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:198). “The comparison of the eyes to a pool means either their glistening like a water-mirror or their being lovely in appearance, for the Arabian knows no greater pleasure than to look upon clear, gently rippling water” (quoted by Spence 1909:163 from Ovid, ‘De Arte Am.’ ii. 722).

associations of doves are with love and peace (Meyers 1986:216). The man refers to his lover as “my dove” on three occasions (2:14; 5:2; 6:9).²⁸

The other animal used to describe the beauty of the lovers is the gazelle. In a few places in the Song the gazelle is paired with the deer (עֲפָרָה, 2:9, 17; 8:14). According to Meyers (1986:216) it is the loveliness and free movement of these wild animals that seem to underlie the poet’s choice. The poet probably uses these animals metaphorically to rejoice in the attractiveness of the woman’s breasts because of the “tenderness and softness ... of these young animals (4:5; 7:5)” (Meyers 1986:216). The poet does not hesitate to get lost “in the heaping tangle of the dark black hair, or admiring the playfulness of her gazelle-like breasts” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:266).

In 6:10 the poet uses a question to draw attention to the woman’s beauty: “Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, [...]?” The woman’s beauty reaches an apex with this question. The question unifies the inexpressible self and the known universe. This comparison supplements²⁹ the reality of the woman by cloaking her in imagery. In this way, the poet distinguishes and distances the woman aesthetically (cf. Landy 1980:91). Hence, both the gazes of the sun and the “daughters of Jerusalem” cannot detract from the beauty of the woman (1:5–6; Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:271).

Conclusion

Beauty features as a secondary theme parallel to the main theme, “love”, which it complements. The object of beauty is the woman; she is depicted as extremely beautiful. Her beauty is linked to the theme of sexuality which is embedded in the text. Her beauty only exists through the speech that describes her. The poet convinces the reader of the woman’s beauty by comparing her to beautiful things (Landy 1980:57).³⁰

²⁸ His main pet name for her is “my love” (רַעְיָהּ), which is used nine times in the Song (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4).

²⁹ Landy (1980:91) uses “obscures”.

³⁰ When the woman is compared to Jerusalem and Tirzah, reciprocal learning occurs about Jerusalem and Tirzah as well as the woman (cf. Landy 1980:57).

THE WOMAN'S CHARACTER

Dyadic personality

The woman in the Song has a dyadic personality (Robbins 1996:77–78) – “one who needs another person in order to know who she really is” (Ndogo & Viviers 2000:1299).³¹ She seems to be both vulnerable and self-assured, a woman who takes the initiative.

The vulnerability and struggle of the woman

The Song does not always depict the woman in a positive light (cf. Ndogo & Viviers 2000:1286–1307). Sometimes she appears to be vulnerable or even struggling. She is defensive about her dark complexion (1:6a). The lovers depicted in the Song are part of a social system and a struggle in a world governed by traditional rules and ethics. In this social system the woman's brothers are responsible for guarding her sexuality, and men enjoy more freedom than women. The woman in the Song is compelled by her brothers to go into the vineyards in the heat of the sun (1:6; 8:8–9) to be a keeper (נֹטְרָה) of the vineyards. She finds herself indoors when her lover is outdoors (e.g., 2:9–13; 5:2–5) (cf. Carr 2000b:241).

The woman may often appear to be strong and powerful, but she is also shown to be vulnerable. The two lovers must overcome obstacles in a Jewish society that is hostile to their kind of relationship (Carr 2000b:242). Moreover, it must also be borne in mind that the relationship is fictional — the Song is not a true story about a “real” relationship, but a poetic visualisation of what could be real. Against the enforcing patriarchal system in some circles in ancient Israel an alternative is envisioned (Carr 2000a:13).

In 3:1–4 and 5:2–8 the woman's vulnerability receives its fullest expression. The indefinable³² behaviour of the lover can be interpreted not only as a poetic expression of desire and an interruption of the unity of two lovers, but also as a moment of crisis in the woman's perception of the relationship. She gets up at night to look for her

³¹ This point of view questions feminist ideological readings that insist on the total independence of the woman in the Song (cf. Ndogo & Viviers 2000:1299).

³² One moment (5:2) the lover is present, the next moment he is absent (5:6).

lover, which indicates her apparent vulnerabilities in love and her attempt to come to terms with these vulnerabilities and deal with them (cf. Harding 2008:49). She is also beaten and wounded in her second undertaking in search of her lover (5:7).

The poet's emphasis of the theme of absence in both texts (3:1–4 and 5:2–8) reveals not only the woman's vulnerabilities but also her anxieties about love, which is the unavoidable fate of lovers (Harding 2008:58). With this the poet shows the reader that these anxieties are not unbearable for the woman. Her anxieties correspond with her intense desire to connect with her lover again, to find delight in him, to fulfil and renew her longing for her lover. These are aspects of her relationship that are evident throughout the poem (Harding 2008:59).

Only the woman speaks about her lover's absence. Therefore, her contemplation of her lover's absence gives readers the opportunity to look into her psyche and examine her character.

The woman laments her lover's absence on two occasions, namely in 3:1–5 and again in 5:2–8. She reveals that she is troubled and concerned. On both occasions, the lover's absence is puzzling in the context of the Song. The woman seems to struggle to overcome his absence, but she has no other choice.³³ She goes out to search for her lover, which reveals just how anxious she is about his absence (Harding 2008:51).

When the lover's absence becomes real, the woman recreates him. In the moment when she acknowledges her anxieties, she expresses her wish to reunite with him. The most troubling part of her search for her lover (3:1–5 and 5:2–8) occurs in 5:2–8. The woman is stripped and beaten by the watchmen. This text describes a missed encounter between the two lovers and, "on a figurative level, it also describes a sexual encounter"³⁴ (Harding 2008:58). These two encounters show that the lover is

³³ The woman's bold and restless pursuits of her lover, even her eager and risky quests to unite with him, convey an urgency that is missing from the speeches of the lover. His speeches, though intense in their own way, are more unhurried and reflexive. They consist predominantly of extended descriptions of the woman's body. The variations of these scenes and their similarity to each other encourage the reader to connect the scenes. The stories of the lovers' searches should be linked to each other. The second story (5:2–8) should be read as a continuation, or a reiteration, of the first story (3:1–5), so that the effect of these scenes becomes cumulative (Harding 2008:52).

³⁴ See vocabulary: "my head is wet", "with dew", "into the opening". "open", "dripped with

simultaneously disturbingly absent and absolutely present for the beloved. In both these episodes the woman's vulnerabilities and her anxieties are revealed to the reader. She cannot escape her vulnerabilities and anxieties (cf. Harding 2008:58).

The woman's self-assurance and initiative

Throughout the Song the woman is aware of her emotions and she acts in accordance with her self-knowledge. She is the main speaker in the Song. Her voice is quite exciting. The Song opens with the woman's words, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (1:2), and closes with the exhortation, "Hurry, my lover, be like a gazelle or a young deer on the mountains where spices grow" (8:14). In 8:1 she says when she finds her lover outside, she will kiss him. The woman's voice is filled with "intention, initiative, self-assurance and energy" throughout the Song (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:270). She seems to take charge from the beginning (although she is not always in command).³⁵ She seeks to quench her thirst for love. Therefore she clearly says what is necessary to fulfil her desire. She will do whatever is necessary to find her lover, "whether it means pursuing her beloved into the noontime pasture lands (1:7–8), searching the city streets at night for him (3:15; 5:1–8), or seeking him in his garden (6:1–2)" (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:270). According to Dobbs-Allsopp (2005:270) she seems quite comfortable in her dark skin (1:5), and she has the power to decide when and where she will offer her love (7:13).

The woman yearns for love (1:2; 3:1–5; 5:2–7; 8:1–2)

The Torah³⁶ condemns any form of female desire, but in the Song female desire is celebrated. In the Torah men are the primary initiators of sexual activity, whereas the woman is also an active party to love in the Song. The first indication of the woman's active role is given in 1:2, where she invites her lover to kiss her. In 4:16 she calls on her lover to join her in the garden. The man should dominate the woman according to the Torah, but in the Song the woman dominates speech (cf. Carr 2000a:12).

myrrh", "opened".

³⁵ Seeking her lover.

³⁶ See Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21; 22:28; Leviticus 20:10; Numbers 5:11–31.

The Song is saturated with references to the woman's yearning for love. Derivations from the Hebrew verb "to love" (אָהַב) occur frequently throughout the Song. The way in which the body parts of both lovers are described expresses the quality and intensity of their love for each other. The woman yearns for the closeness of her lover. In 1:3 she says: "Draw me after you; let us make haste (run together)." In 3:2 and 5:6 (see also 1:7) she goes out into the night to look for her lover. The phrase "whom my soul loves" appears four times in 3:1–4. In 1:7 she expresses her love: "Tell me, you whom my soul loves." The woman's love is further expressed when she seeks to bring her lover "into my mother's house" (3:4; 8:2). Her love is also expressed in the fantasies about sexual intercourse that are found throughout the Song (Sparks 2008:279).

The Song as a whole expresses the enjoyment of love. It also advises immature women to stay away from the dangers of erotic love. In conclusion it celebrates human sexuality (Sparks 2008:291).

THE WOMAN IN DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS

The woman and her lover

Equality between the two lovers

The portrayal of the woman in the Song reveals a balance between male and female (cf. Ndogo & Viviers 2000:1286–1305). Some images are limited to only one gender, but there are many images or phrases that are used for both lovers (Exum 1973:47), implying that their love is shared. There is no subordination of either male or female in sexual relations, human emotion and love (cf. Meyers 1986:220).

Both call on the other to do things

Throughout the Song the woman calls on her lover to do things. She expresses sexual interest in the opening lines of the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking is better than wine" (1:2, Carr 2000b:240). The woman wants to be kissed by her lover. She desires him to take the initiative and kiss her

(Exum 2005:93). In 1:4 she calls on her lover to take her with him. In 1:7 she asks her lover to tell her where he feeds his sheep and where he lets them rest at noon.

The lover starts praising the woman in 1:9–11 (also 1:15; 2:2; 4:1–7; 6:4–9; 7:2–10), and he comes to “his garden” after she has invited him (4:16–5:1a). She asks him to “draw me after you” (1:4), to “be like a gazelle” (2:17), to “go out early to the vineyards” with her (7:12), to set her as a seal upon his heart and on his arm (8:6), and “to make haste” (8:14). She “seizes” him and “brings him” to her mother’s house (3:4; 8:1–2) (Carr 2000b:240–41). In 7:11 she calls her lover to go out with her into the country (fields) and spend the night with her in the villages. She also asks him to “go out early to the vineyards [with her] and see whether the vines have budded ... [and] ... the grape blossoms have opened” (7:12). Lastly she asks her lover to hurry and to “be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (8:14).

There are also cases where the lover calls the woman. In 2:10 and 13 the lover says: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”³⁷ In (4:8) he repeats the words: “Come with me from Lebanon”. In 6:5 he urges her to “turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me”. In 8:6 the lover asks the woman to put him “as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm”. Finally, in 8:13 he requests the woman to let her voice be heard by his friends.

Interaction, sharing and the mutuality of the woman and her lover

From the outset the poet uses the woman’s activities to indicate a relationship with her lover (“Let him kiss me”). Her activities denote “interaction ..., sharing and mutuality” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:270). The beauty expressed in the Song is beauty par excellence, and the beauty of both the woman and her lover is described. The lovers observe each other and praise each other’s beauty. The echoing of their mutual beauty is explicitly expressed in 1:15–16. The lover speaks first in 1:15: “Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful.” The woman then echoes these words in 1:16: “Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely! Our couch is green” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:270). More semantic expressions of mutuality occur: “My beloved is

³⁷ A literal translation from the Hebrew text.

mine and I am his” (2:16; 6:3; 7:11). The eyes of both the woman (1:15) and the man (5:12) are likened to doves. The lover is compared to a gazelle in 2:8, and in 4:5³⁸ the image of a gazelle is intentionally used to describe the woman’s breasts (one of the main images used in the Song). Finally, the man’s admiration is expressed in the form of a *wasf* in 4:1–7, and the woman repeats his words to him in 5:9–16. Now the woman gazes *wasf*-like at the man (Dobbs-Alsopp 2005:271), while the man gazes three times *wasf*-like at the woman. The gazes of the woman occasionally overwhelm her lover (6:5). Even her “sight” proves to be distressing according to 6:5: “Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me” (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005:271).

The woman and her brothers (1:5–6; 8:8–9)

References are made to the woman’s brothers in 1:5–6 and 8:8–9. The vineyard motif (בְּרִמָּה, 1:6; 8:11) and the role of the brothers interconnect these texts.

Prescribed

In her discourse with the “daughters of Jerusalem” (1:5–6), the woman attempts to explain why she has a dark skin: “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!” She refers in particular to her appearance (body, see Garrett 1993:387), not her virginity or character. She has been compelled by her brothers to work in the vineyards in the heat of the sun. This is an indication of her brothers’ influence over her because of their age and the patriarchal system of the time. As a result she has not been able to preserve the delicateness of her skin; she does not care about her personal beauty (cf. Garrett 1993:387).

Protected

The brothers reappear in 8:8–9. In this passage the poet shows that it is their duty to protect their younger sister’s honour: “We have a little sister, and she has no breasts; what shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we

³⁸ “Your breasts are like two fawns, like twins of a gazelle.”

shall build on her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we shall barricade her with planks of cedar” (cf. Tanner 1997b:143).

The longest section of the poem focuses on a woman (perhaps another woman) who has experienced the joys of love. According to Tanner, 8:8–9 refers to a time when the woman was a young girl and sexually immature (see the metaphoric reference to having “no breasts”). In these verses the caring brothers of this young woman are contemplating her future. It is obvious to them that sexual temptations will come their young sister’s way as she goes through adolescence. The question they wrestle with (Tanner 1997b:143) is whether their young sister will keep herself sexually pure. They wonder whether their sister will become a “wall” or a “door” when she is tempted. The “wall” and the “door” metaphors refer to different paths she may pursue on her way to maturity. The “wall” metaphor suggests a frontier and fence that forbid access into her sexual life. The “door” metaphor, on the other hand, suggests access to the interior (Tanner 1997b:144).

Here the brothers act as the guardians of their family honour. They want their young sister to be a “wall”. This implies that she will resist any sexual advances by men who court her; she will remain virtuous. If she becomes a “door” (yields to men), her brothers must protect and fence her. They have to make sure that no situation develops that would tempt her to allow her desires to take command of her.

The description of the young woman in 8:8–9 stands in contrast to her depiction in 8:10. Here the woman is viewed as a more mature woman. She says the following about herself: “I was a wall, and my breasts were like towers; then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace”. Having reached sexual maturity (she had “no breasts”, but now she has “breasts like towers”), she can say unequivocally: “I was a wall”. This means that the woman has remained morally pure and kept her virginity (Tanner 1997b:144).

The women and the daughters of Jerusalem

The Song contains seven references to the “daughters of Jerusalem” (בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4). Landy (1980:66) states that the relationship of the

woman with these “daughters of Jerusalem”³⁹ is mentioned so often because it is “an important structural element” of the Song. The woman who speaks to the “daughters of Jerusalem” (young women) is probably not the woman who is mentioned in 3:1–5 and 5:2–7. She advises the younger women to avoid premature love. After the sentinels have beaten her (5:6), she is helped by these women, who say she is the “most beautiful among women” (5:9; 6:1) (Landy 1980:66).

Her message to the young women is that they should not arouse love themselves (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The young women should not allow themselves to be aroused sexually until the proper time and person arrive.⁴⁰ The poet implies that the natural joy of sexual awakening is ruined by any form of premature experimentation. Thus, she says to the “daughters of Jerusalem” a woman who awakens love before the right time robs herself of the full experience of romance and sexuality as symbolised by the deer and gazelle. In 2:3–17 the woman warns the “daughters of Jerusalem” not to awaken erotic love too quickly⁴¹ (Sparks 2008:284).

The Song has probably been written to educate its readers and it is connected to the wisdom genre. This is confirmed by the repetition of an oath request: four times the woman asks the “daughters of Jerusalem”⁴² to take an oath. Three of these requests

³⁹ They are secondary characters (created by the narrator) to whom the woman can speak about her deepest feelings (cf. Ogden & Zogbo 1998:62).

⁴⁰ Ogden and Zogbo differ from Garret. They point out that this expression consists of two negative verb phrases. Both include forms of the same verb root. “Both refer to arousing or awakening someone” (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:63). They then come to “the conclusion that the young woman is saying she does not want to be disturbed while she enjoys her lover”. Thus “until it please” means “until our love is satisfied”. The *Today’s English Version* suggests that they should “not interrupt our love” (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:64). The translation in the text above is preferred owing to the noun אֶהְבֶּהָ, which is singular, feminine and absolute, and thus refers to “love” and not the “lover”.

⁴¹ The Song consists of love poems (Sparks 2008:278–291). The various “songs therefore bear diverse impressions and implications. Some of them accentuate the power of love and sex, whether of married couples or singles (2:3–13; 3:6–5:1; 7:1–13; 8:5b–7), while others—especially the songs in 3:1–4; 5:2–7; and 8:1–4—express the disappointments and frustrations that often attend the adolescent search for love and physical intimacy” (Sparks 2008:283–284). The concept (בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם) “daughters of Jerusalem ... without the definite article could speak of ... simply unmarried young women” (1:5; 2:2, 7; 3:5; 10; 5:8, 16; 6:9; 8:4) (Ndoga & Viviers 2000:1298).

⁴² The reference “daughters/women of Jerusalem” (בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם) occurs seven times in the book of Songs (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10, 11; 5:8; 8:4).

(2:7; 3:5; 8:4) read as follows: “I adjure (הַשְׁבַּעְתִּי)⁴³ you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and the deer of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it pleases” (Sparks 2008:285). Longman (2001:115) interprets the request as follows: “More naturally, the verse is a warning of the woman to other women who may look on the relationship and want to experience something similar; she is, in essence, telling them not to force it.”

Sparks (2008:283) states that the woman’s wisdom stems from her successes and failures. The literary context suggests that it is the same woman who asks her friends three times to take an oath. She warns them of the dangers of erotic love. They must not engage in sex until they are ready for it. She seems to have made the mistake of falling in love too quickly and too deeply, and she is suffering the consequences. She wants to protect her friends against a similar fate. This is why she wants the young women to swear “by the gazelles or the wild does” (3:5) “not to stir up or awaken love until it is ready” (8:4).

THE FUNCTION OF THE WOMAN IN THE RHETORIC OF THE AUTHOR

The woman in the Song has no name. Her location is also uncertain.⁴⁴ The lover is not identified either. This enables all lovers to identify with the woman and her lover in the Song (Exum 2005:8). The woman’s anonymity and the lack of references to a place and time mean that every reader can identify with her. The reader can listen to her words and identify with her thoughts, dreams, words and fantasies. The poet wants to educate every reader about love.

The author of this article deals with “love between two lovers” as the main theme of the Song. There are also two parallel subthemes in the Song, namely instruction about the enjoyment of erotic love, and a warning not to awaken erotic love until the time is right. The first of these subthemes includes fantasies about love and is aimed at

⁴³ Briggs et al. (2001:989) translate it as “those sworn with (= who have sworn) oaths”.

⁴⁴ The woman has been linked with the city of Shulam (6:13) and Jerusalem (“daughters of Jerusalem”). Even this connotation is vague.

readers “who are ready for sex” and can fantasise with the woman. Readers can cherish their love with fantasies not only of beauty or closeness but also of sexual pleasure. The other subtheme, the warning, is aimed at persons “who are not yet ready” for sex: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, promise me by the gazelles and the deer not to awaken or excite my feelings of love until it is ready” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

At the end of the Song the poet writes that the woman has found “peace” (שָׁלוֹם, 8:10). In the light of the above discussion “shalom” may well be a euphemism for sexual fulfilment. However, the root also has the meaning of “completeness” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:1022). This suggests that the poet uses “shalom” to indicate that the woman has become fully or completely mature. She is ready to have sex. Thus the translation of the phrase “one who brings peace” (8:10) is “one who has reached maturity” or “one who is complete [fully mature]” (Ogden & Zogbo 1998:240).

CONCLUSION

“Who is this most beautiful woman” or “who are these most beautiful women” in Song of Songs? In a certain sense this question has been replied to, but in a certain sense also still remains an enigma. Fortunately the Song is just a poem. This research endeavoured to create a single picture⁴⁵ of the woman or women in Song of Songs: “their” identity, character, relationships and function in the poet’s rhetoric. The Song is rich in metaphors, symbols, similes and hyperboles, and these and the vast body of research publications on the Song enable contemplative readers to define the women and to enjoy and interpret the Song and its celebration of (sensual) love. In the poet’s creation lies the reader’s dynamic recreation.

⁴⁵ There are many publications about aspects of the woman in Song of Songs. This research constructs a holistic picture of the woman portrayed in the Song. In this effort this author is aware that this woman has different

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