

VIOLENCE AND THE LIBERATED WOMAN: BRENDA FASSIE'S SONG "NAKUPENDA" AS A HERMENEUTICAL LENS FOR READING THE SONG OF SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Although it is widely argued that the Hebrew Bible contains texts which caricature violence against women, the present article shows that some biblical texts could also offer liberating possibilities to oppressed women in South Africa. The interest of this article lies in bringing Brenda Fassie's song "Nakupenda" (I love you) into conversation with the Song of Songs in order to produce an interaction between the biblical text and an African popular song. In the reading of both songs, the issue of violence against women as well as women's (sexual) independence in the context of patriarchy is highlighted. In conclusion, the author of this article draws liberating lessons for women in South Africa from the actions of the woman protagonist in the *Shir ha-Shirim* and of the female lover in Brenda Fassie's song "Nakupenda".

INTRODUCTION

The fact that YHWH is not mentioned in any of the eight chapters of the Song of Songs (SoS) makes one sceptical about allegorical readings of the *Shir ha-Shirim*. Thus, this article is not meant to illustrate either the divide or the intersection between theological (allegorical) readings and the literary interpretation of the SoS. However, a decisive argument about the allegorical reading of the SoS is worth noting. According to Brenner (1997:576):

Imagining that an allegorical meaning—of divine-human love, historical or mystical; of any kind of Jewish or Christian or scholarly approach—is the *primary* or even a coexistent 'original' meaning of the SoS leave me with genuine puzzlement, even embarrassment ... I find it improbable

that the original significance of the biblical text is a ‘hidden’ significance, anything else but what it declares itself to be by its content: songs of love and love-making between heterosexual humans.

Of significance is the point that the SoS hints at the liberation of a woman who freely expresses her sexuality and sexual interest in the context of patriarchy. As Weems (1992:156) has noted, “the protagonist in the Song is the only unmediated female voice in scripture ... Nowhere else in scripture do the thoughts, imaginations, yearnings, and words of a woman predominate in a book as in the Song of Songs.” Thus, it is reasonable to probe the display of freedom exercised by this female protagonist in the context of violence against women in the SoS, and more importantly to show that some biblical texts also offered liberating possibilities even in their patriarchal context. This study also attempts to bring the Song into conversation with the South African context in order to show that a liberative ancient text could offer liberating possibilities to women in South Africa today. First, the idea that the woman in the SoS is liberated will be probed. Second, Brenda Fassie’s song “Nakupenda” (“I love you”) will be interpreted in the light of the SoS. Third, in conclusion, the lessons for modern South Africa will be drawn from the two songs.

LIBERATION OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN THE SONG OF SONGS

Black (2013:212) points out that the debate about the issue of a liberative text and the woman protagonist in the SoS is not exhausted. The text of the SoS and the protagonist have been viewed as liberative mainly because the woman is portrayed as “sovereign before her loved one” (cf. Kristeva 1982:99). Until recently, modern readers of the Hebrew Bible (HB) have questioned the positive and liberating reading of the SoS and returned to the debate on the woman’s (sexual) autonomy and body imagery.

Although the protagonist appears to be sovereign, strong, self-assured and confident, as Brenner (1997:576) has correctly observed, she experienced oppression

and gender-based violence. In Song of Songs 1:6, the woman expresses her lack of freedom in the statement אָמִי נִתְרוּבֵי שְׁמִנֵי נִטְרָה אֶת־הַכְּרָמִים כְּרָמֵי שְׁלִי לֹא נִטְרָתִי “My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me to keep the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!” The statement reveals that the woman experienced hostility from men who are identified as her brothers. The noticeable experience of hostility prompts Black (2013:222) to argue that the expressed lack of freedom in the SoS stands in conflict with the argued autonomy of the protagonist. The verb שְׁמִנֵי (“they made me”) suggests that the protagonist is coerced into keeping the productive land owned by her male siblings (SoS 2:15). Put differently, Song of Songs 1:6 indicates that the woman is led to act outside her will, that is, she is coerced to serve the interests of men. Rather than an independent farmer who tends her own productive land, the text reveals a protagonist who is relegated to the position of keeping the productive land of her brothers (v. 6). There is no evidence or hint that the woman is paid for the services rendered on her brothers’ farms. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the protagonist is exploited by her male siblings. As van der Zwan (2015:4) has argued, the protagonist “is possessed by her brothers, not only as a sexual asset with economic value, but also as a labour object”. No doubt, the protagonist has experienced socio-economic injustice because she is relegated from the position of owner and user of productive land to that of a labourer in the vineyard of her male siblings. It becomes clear then that the protagonist is also a victim of patriarchy.

Furthermore, the protagonist appears to have experienced physical abuse at the hands of the watchmen of the city. In Song of Songs 5:7, two clauses, namely הִכּוּנִי (“they beat me”) and פְּצְעוּנִי (“they wounded me”), confirm the violence against this female protagonist. Against Tribble’s (1978:161) argument that in the SoS there is no evidence of male dominance and female subordination, the preceding text reports that the men of the city overpower and physically abuse the woman. Therefore, like Black (2013:211–292), one would be cautious to present the SoS in a completely positive and liberating light because features of oppression and violence against women are evident in the text. Thus, the violence against the protagonist brings the question of liberation or sexual freedom to the fore. In other words, the scene of physical abuse

triggers the question: how liberated is the woman and how liberative is the text of SoS? Worthy of note are the two words translated “veil” in the SoS, that is, *צָמָה* in Song of Songs 4:1, 3; 6:7 (NRSV) and *רְדִיד* “veil” (NKJV) or “mantle” (NRSV) in Song of Songs 5:7. It is clear from Song of Songs 4:1, 3, and 6:7 that *צָמָה* refers to a piece of cloth that is used to cover the face, that is, the eyes and cheeks. However, it is not so obvious which parts of the female body a *רְדִיד* covered. Although the assault against the woman and the confiscation of her wrapper, *רְדִיד*, suggests the possibility of sexual violence, the uncertainty about whether the wrapper taken by the men covers the woman’s sexual organs makes it hard to argue firmly that the protagonist is sexually violated. However, the suggestion that the sexual organs of the protagonist could have been exposed in public without her approval hints at some form of sexual ill-treatment.

On the ill-treatment that the protagonist received from her family, Black (2013:222) remarks, “Though not explicit, 2:15 and 8:10 imply that the woman has been experiencing some undetermined difficulty (2:15), or is negotiating with her family members over her freedom (8:10).” Black’s remark supports the view that the protagonist has been oppressed and exploited by her brothers. Interestingly, in Song of Songs 8:10, the protagonist contrasts the experience of oppression from her brothers with the *שָׁלוֹם* (“peace”) she experiences with her lover. The reference to breasts that links verses 8 and 10 suggests that the perpetrators of oppression are the woman’s male siblings. Although the protagonist experiences oppression and exploitation from her brothers as well as violence from the watchmen, she opts to focus on the freedom, respect, peace and love experienced from her intimate male partner, which counter the negative experience in the hands of the watchmen and her brothers.

Thus, one would agree with van der Zwan (2015:4) that a cry for freedom is also expressed in the SoS. The liberation of the protagonist that is implicit in her intimate relationship and more importantly in the freedom to express and please herself offers hope of freedom in the context of oppression and violence that is presented in the SoS. Put in a different way, the treatment received by the woman from the loving man (her lover) does not only stand in contrast to the violence meted out by the abusive men

(the watchmen and her brothers), it may be viewed also as a call for the liberation of women. The point that the experience of love is elevated above abuse suggests that gender-based violence is not foregrounded in the SoS.

Weems (1992:158) notes that the SoS describes love between two people in a manner which is explicit (2:4–7; 3:6–11), imaginative (5:2–8) and physical in terms of the expression of senses such as touching (7:6–9) and hearing the sound of each other's voice (2:8, 14; 5:16). On the point that there are clues about sexual intercourse between the woman and the man in the SoS, Weems' (1992:158) remark is worthy of note:

Throughout the book, in their praises of each other's body (4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–10; 7:1–5), the lovers rhapsodise about those parts of the body that one explores and luxuriates in during sexual intercourse (e.g., lips, teeth, hair, neck, thighs, breast, navel, vulva).

Besides the mention of sensitive body parts, there are more explicit references to sexual intercourse in the SoS. In an explicit scene about love-making in Song of Songs 2:4–7, the protagonist says *שְׂמֹאלוֹ תַּחַת לְרִאשִׁי וְיָמִינוֹ תִּתְּבַקֵּנִי* “O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!” (2:6, NRSV). The statement “Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields, and lodge in the villages ... There I will give you my love” (SoS 7:11–12 NRSV) shows that a sexual encounter is being initiated. Interestingly, because of the sexual language and imagery as well as the explicit erotic scenes in the text, the modern reader of the *Shir ha-Shirim* is tempted to rescue the erotic language by equating the text with pornographic literature (Boer 1992:53–70; Burrus & Moore 2003:24–52). The reading of the SoS as pornography is inconclusive because pornographic literature places emphasis on physical sensation without emotional feelings, whilst the woman protagonist in the SoS is in touch with her emotions, which also implies that she is empowered (cf. Weems 1992:158). The statements *אֵת שְׂאֵהָבָה נִפְשִׁי* (“the man I love”) (SoS 3:2–3) and *וַיִּמְעַי הָמוֹ עָלָיו* (“and my inmost being yearned for him”) (SoS 5:4 NRSV) show that the woman is in touch with her emotions. Thus, the argument that the SoS is about erotic sensuality and most importantly about love is decisive (Weems 1992:158;

Brenner 1997:575; Tran 2011:234–259). Significantly, the protagonist in the SoS depicts a figure who insists on her right to initiate love and sex — in short, a liberated woman (cf. Weems 1992:158).

On the question of whether the text is liberative and the protagonist is liberated, Clines' (1995:94–121) observation that the SoS presents male fantasy comes to mind (cf. Polaski 1997:64–81). This view suggests that the SoS served the sexual interest of men as it enabled the male to gaze at his lover's body (Exum 1999:71–86). Black (2013:224) however refutes Clines' view which for him continues to privilege the male gaze and perspective that have dominated the reading of the SoS. Thus, the view that the SoS reflects male fantasy is inconclusive because both the male and female figures appreciate each other's body (SoS 4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–10; 7:1–5). In other words, the SoS may also be viewed as a reflection of female fantasy, and the text of the SoS and the protagonist do not privilege a male gaze. However, it is possible to argue that the text offers liberating possibilities to women because the sexual interest (fantasy) of both the male and female are represented.

Brenner (1997:576) argues that the woman's voice in the SoS is “stronger, more self-assured, more confident, more articulate than male voices”. This comparison between male and female in the book suggests female superiority rather than gender mutuality (cf. Brenner 1993:273). Brenner's argument stands in contrast to both Weems (1992:160) and Black (2013:214) who claim that the SoS advocates gender mutuality instead of dominance. I find Brenner's argument unconvincing because both the woman protagonist and her male partner express sexual interest in each other. The scene in which the man knocks at the door in Song of Song 5:2 confirms that both the man and the woman initiate intimacy. In Song of Songs 2:13 and 4:8 the man invites the woman but the converse is also true as the woman also invites the man (SoS 7:11). Moreover, both the man and the woman praise each other's body (SoS 4:1–7 [man praises]; 5:10–16 [woman praises]; 6:4–10 [man praises]). Therefore the reading that identifies gender mutuality in the SoS is appealing. In my view, the liberation of the woman protagonist in the SoS does not oppress the male counterpart or impose superiority over him.

Noteworthy also is Brenner's (1997:571) comment on Song of Songs 6:11 ("I went down to the nut orchard, to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom", NRSV), which is well-known in the dancing arena in Israel. Brenner recalls that the SoS was part of her pop culture before it became Bible to her (Brenner 1997:574). Based on her personal location, Brenner's (1997:577–578) argument that the SoS is about erotic and physical love becomes conclusive. Interestingly, not only does Brenner's experience or personal location influence her reading of the SoS, the SoS also enables her to understand aspects of pop culture. She draws a connection between the SoS and modern pop culture, specifically between the SoS and the pop song of the early and mid-fifties titled "Simona of Dimona" which mentions the phrase "black but comely". According to Brenner, the phrase is related to the phrase "black and beautiful" in Song of Songs 1:6. However, the interest of this study lies not in the pop song "Simona of Dimona" but in reading Brenda Fassie's song "Nakupenda" (I love you) in light of the SoS, and, more importantly, from a South African perspective.

BRENDA FASSIE'S "NAKUPENDA" SONG AND THE *SHIR HA-SHIRIM*

The interaction between the biblical text and African popular (Afropop) song may be illustrated with a conversation between the SoS and Brenda Fassie's song "Nakupenda" (Swahili word meaning, I love you). In 2000, Brenda Fassie released an album titled, *Amadlozi*, which featured the Afropop song "Nakupenda".¹ The song is about the expression of love between a female lover and her male counterpart. The lyrics of the song are outlined in the table below.

¹ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vrrrd_QEYxkc.

Table 1: “Nakupenda” (I love you)

Lyrics (translation mine)	Verse line	stanza
<i>Nikumbambe</i> (Let me touch you),	1	1
<i>Nakubusu</i> (Let me kiss you),	2	
<i>Songea nikumbambe</i> , (Come closer so that I can touch you)	3	
<i>Songea nakubusu</i> , (Come closer so that I can kiss you)	4	
<i>Nikumunu</i> (I care for you)	5	2
<i>Nakupenda</i> (I love you)	6	
<i>Songea nikumbambe</i> (Come closer so that I can touch you)	7	
<i>Songea nakubusu</i> (Come closer so that I can kiss you)	8	
<i>Nakupenda</i> (I love you)	9	3
<i>Nakuwaza</i> (I am thinking of you)	10	
<i>Ngwanenaw ena ko [ndiyakuthanda nami, Yha]</i> (You baby over there [I also love you, yes])	11	
<i>Nakupenda</i> (I love you)	12	4
<i>Nakuwaza</i> (I am thinking of you)	13	
<i>Ngwanena wena ko [ndiyakuthanda nami, hawungibambe tuu]</i> (You baby over there [I also love you, please touch me])	14	
<i>Bathini?</i> (What are they saying?)	15	5
<i>Bathi ngiphuma eAfrica</i> (They say I am from Africa)	16	
<i>Ngithi kuyafana kuba ngigcwele kunjalo</i> (I am saying that it is all the same because I am already into her)	17	
<i>Bathini?</i> (What are they saying?)	18	

<i>Mina ngithi</i> (I am saying)	19	
<i>Ngithi kuyafana kuba ngigcwele kunjalo</i> (I am saying that it is all the same because I am already into her)	20	
<i>Noba singazwani ngenkulumo</i> (Even though we do not understand each other's language)	21	
<i>Kodwa ngiyazi ngothando sizozwana</i> (But I know that with love we will understand each other)	22	
<i>Noba singazwani ngenkulumo</i> (Even though we do not understand each other's language)	23	
<i>Kodwa ngiyazi ngothando sizozwana</i> (But I know that with love we will understand each other)	24	
<i>Nikumbambe [hawungibambambe]</i> (Let me touch you [Touch me, repeatedly])	25	6
<i>Nakubusu [hawungenze njalo]</i> (Let me kiss you [do that to me])	26	
<i>Songea nikumbambe [yha]</i> (Come closer so that I can touch you [Yes])	27	
<i>Songea nakubusu [sondela baby]</i> (Come closer so that I can kiss you [come closer baby])	28	
<i>Nikumumu [ngibambambe]</i> (I care about you [Touch me, repeatedly])	29	7
<i>Nakupenda [hawungithintathinte]</i> (I love you) [Touch me, repeatedly])	30	
<i>Songea nikumbambe [sondela baby]</i> (Come closer so that I can touch you [come closer baby])	31	
<i>Songea nakubusu [yha]</i> (Come closer so that I can kiss you [yes])	32	
<i>Mina nakupenda [ndiyakuthanda nam]</i> (I love you [I also love you])	33	8
<i>Wee mwana ngu [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (My closest boyfriend [I am totally into you])	34	
<i>Songea [yha] nakubusu [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (Come closer [yes] so that I can kiss you [I am totally into you])	35	
<i>Nakupenda [ndiyakuthanda nam]</i> (I love you [I also love you])	36	9
<i>Nakuwaza</i> (I am thinking of you)	37	

<i>Ngwanena wena ko [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (You baby over there [I am totally into you])	38	
<i>Oooo nakubusu [yha]</i> (Oh, Let me kiss you [yes])	39	
<i>Nikumbambe [hawungibambambe]</i> (Let me touch you [Touch me, repeatedly])	40	10
<i>Nakubusu [hawungithintathinte]</i> (Let me kiss you [Touch me, repeatedly])	41	
<i>Songea nikumbambe [yha]</i> (Come closer, so that I can touch you [yes])	42	
<i>Songea nakubusu [sondela baby]</i> (Come closer, so that I can kiss you [come closer baby])	43	
<i>Nikumumu [ngibambambe]</i> (I care for you [Touch me, repeatedly])	44	11
<i>Nakupenda [hawungithintathinte]</i> (I love you [Touch me, repeatedly])	45	
<i>Songea nikumbambe [sondela baby]</i> (Come closer so that I can touch you [come closer baby])	46	
<i>Songea nakubusu [yha]</i> (Come closer so that I can kiss you [yes])	47	
<i>Mina nakupenda [ndiyakuthanda nam]</i> (I love you [I also love you])	48	12
<i>Wee mwana ngu [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (My closest boyfriend [I am totally into you])		
<i>Songea [yha] nakubusu [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (Come closer [yes] so that I can kiss you [I am totally into you])	49	
<i>Yiza kaloku sana</i> (Come baby)	50	13
<i>Yiza ndikuphuze kaloku</i> (Come, let me kiss you)	51	
<i>Mcwaaaaahh, tyhini,² [ndiyakuthanda nam]</i> [I also love you]	52	
<i>Ndiyakuthanda nam okwam [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (I also love you [I am totally into you])	53	
<i>Nam ndiyafa nguwe sana [ngigcwele ngiyafa]</i> (I'm dying for you, baby [I am totally into you])	54	

² A Xhosa term for being overwhelmed.

<i>Ndikulelel'eflat nam sana [ungishaya ngaphakathi]</i> (I am also lying flat in anticipation of you, baby) [You are charming me])	55	
<i>Nam [hawungibambambe]</i> (same with me [Touch me, repeatedly])	56	
<i>Nam ke [hawungithintathinte]</i> (If so, the same must apply to me [Touch me, repeatedly])	57	
<i>Heee, [Sondela, baby]</i> [Come closer, baby]	58	
<i>Yhuu, hayi lona</i> (No, this one).	59	

In both the SoS and Fassie's "Nakupenda", the woman initiates a sexual relationship and intimacy. It seems the women in both songs are free to express their sexual interest as liberated women. In Song of Songs 1:2, the woman initiates a kiss and later in the text invites the man to the lodge for sexual intimacy (cf. SoS 7:11–12). Similarly, the woman in Brenda Fassie's song initiates both a kiss and sexual intimacy. The statements "*Songea nikumbambe*" (Come closer so that I can touch you) and "*Songea nakubusu*" (Come closer so that I can kiss you) show that it is the woman who initiates intimacy (v.3). The statement "*Ndikulelel'eflat nam sana*" (I am also lying flat in anticipation of you, baby) in line 55 also indicates that the woman is talking about sex and she initiates sexual intimacy. The fact that she is "lying flat" confirms her readiness and willingness to engage in sexual intercourse.

As mentioned previously, the woman in the SoS is in touch with her emotions rather than merely exhibiting physical sensation (cf. Weems 1992:158), as the protagonist expresses her love for her lover (SoS 3:1–2; 5:4). The expression of the emotion of love in the SoS bears a striking similarity with the woman's utterance of love in the Afropop song under consideration. Like the woman in the SoS, the African woman also says to her lover in verse line 6 of the pop song, "I love you". She initiates the love relationship by expressing her attraction and love to the man. The utterance *Nam ndiyafa nguwe sana* ("I'm dying for you, baby" v. 54), also bears resemblance to the statement "My inmost being yearned for him" (SoS 5:4). In the two instances, both women articulate the extent of their emotions, specifically, of their love.

The idea of gender mutuality as opposed to dominance that is raised by both Weems (1992:160) and Black (2013:214) in the SoS is equally noticeable in “Nakupenda”. The statement *Ndiyakuthanda nami, Yha* (“I also love you, yes” v. 11) is the man’s response to the woman’s expression of love. In stanza 5 of the song “Nakupenda”, the man participates equally in the act of sexual intimacy. Similarly, the fact that the man is knocking at the door in Song of Songs 5:2 proves that he also actively plays a part in the scene. Verse line 17 in “Nakupenda” says *Ngithi kuyafana kuba ngigcwele kunjalo* (“I am saying that it is all the same because I am already into her”). The statement *Ngigcwele kunjalo* (“I am already into her”) refers to one’s experience of the physical attraction caused by another’s beauty, and it expresses praise for the woman’s body. It should be noted that gender mutuality is also evident in the praise that the partners lavish on each other in both songs (SoS 4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–10; and v.17 in “Nakupenda”). Instead of dominating the woman or physically abusing her, the lover in SoS does not only allow the woman to express her sexual interests and emotions freely, but he also responds to her with love and respect. Similarly, the man in “Nakupenda” does not force himself on the woman in terms of physically abusing her, but responds to her in love.

In “Nakupenda”, the statement *Bathi ngiphuma eAfrica* (“They say I am from Africa”) in verse line 16 is an allusion to different ethnic and national origins of the woman and the man. The woman in “Nakupenda” sees the man as African, that is, black and beautiful and of a different nationality. She is attracted by the fact that the man is African – black and beautiful. Thus, the allusion to the African identity and outlook of the man in Fassie’s song “Nakupenda” reminds one of the phrase “black and beautiful” in Song of Songs 1:5–6. The word “Shulamite” which identifies the woman protagonist in the SoS shows that love is not restricted by ethnic identity (cf. Brenner 1997:578–579). The word “Shulamite” and the phrase “black and beautiful” in the SoS shows an interesting dimension of the Afropop song “Nakupenda” namely the affirmation of love between two people of different ethnic origins or nationalities.

Significantly, the men in both “Nakupenda” and the SoS are not presented as perpetrators of gender-based violence even though they lived in a milieu in which

patriarchy resulted in violence against women. In the South African context, for example, statistics reveal that among the cases of sexual violation of women reported to the police, a higher proportion (55.3%) was said to have been committed by strangers (Hirschowitz, Worku & Orkin 2000:2). In addition, Hirschowitz, Worku & Orkin (2000:17) note:

Among white women interviewed in the survey, 7.3% reported being raped. This was the largest percentage within each population group, followed by coloureds (6%) ... When calculated as a proportion of the total number of women who had reported being raped (N=471), African women represented the largest proportion (66.7%), followed by coloured women (19.5%), then white (11.4%) and Indian women (2.1%).

Based on the data above, violence against women in the form of rape is a perturbing reality in South Africa; so too the coercion of wives to have unprotected sex by their husbands. It is not surprising therefore, that gender-based violence has attracted considerable attention of female Old Testament scholars in Africa. One may wonder whether South African women are concerned by gender-based violence. However, that is beside the point because the reality suggests that violence against women in the form of rape or wife battering is a major issue in South Africa. Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (2012:213–214) affirms that violence against women is perpetrated not only by strangers but also by family members. The idea of physical abuse at the hand of family members rather than strangers as in the SoS and the song “Nakupenda” calls to mind Olojede’s (2015:87–98) article on the absence of wife battering in Old Testament narratives. Wife battering is the form of physical abuse against a woman that is perpetrated by her husband. Although the SoS does not form part of the biblical text that Olojede investigated, it fits into the scope of her inquiry as wife battering is also absent from the SoS. The possibility of physical abuse of women by their husbands as either a literary omission or an aberration in the ancient Israelite world of the HB is worth investigating but the evidence seems to support the latter scenario (Olojede 2015:87–98). Thus, it is puzzling that in the SoS, the strangers (watchmen of the city) would assault the woman protagonist (SoS 5:7) immediately after her lover

turned to leave when the woman does not open her door on time (cf. SoS 5:6). The phrase *הָמָק עָבָר* “turned away and was gone” suggests disappointment on the part of the man which is caused by the woman or by the delay in opening the door. Since the text states that the protagonist is beaten by strangers, perhaps it is only fair to query the occurrence of wife battering on the part of the lover or refrain from reading it into the SoS text even though the content of vv. 6–7 remains puzzling. Nonetheless, both the SoS and “Nakupenda” present male lovers who are not abusive to their female partners even though they exist in a world in which gender-based violence is practiced.

In addition to the gender-based violence that is evident in the experiences of rape and wife battering in the context of the recipients of the SoS, that is, “the oppressed women in South Africa”, is the issue of women’s full sexual freedom or full access to the bodies of their male partners. Both the SoS and “Nakupenda” also imply that women do not have easy access to the bodies of their male partners. In Song of Songs 3:2, we find the woman wandering through the streets and squares in search of her male partner. In a similar manner, the woman in the “Nakupenda” song, particularly in verse lines 58 and 59 struggles to gain access to the man’s body. After saying “Come closer, baby”, the woman is puzzled that the man is still reluctant to come close to her. Could it be that the woman is educated and wealthy? There is no evidence to suggest so. However, Mdyogolo (2015:1) reveals that wealthy and educated women cannot achieve full sexual freedom and/or full access to the bodies of their male partners in South Africa. Although the reason for the woman’s difficulty to find a male partner in SoS 3:2 is different from that of women in South Africa, the point of similarity is that women struggle to gain access to the bodies of their male partners. In the South African case, the issue seems to be that men of average means find it hard to accept and live with wealthy and educated women.

CONCLUSION — LESSONS FROM THE TWO SONGS

No doubt, the HB contains acts of gender-based violence. However, the text of the SoS presents a liberated woman protagonist whose actions could also offer liberating possibilities to the oppressed women of South Africa. Women who are abused or exploited may aspire to be like her, particularly in terms of the way she freely expresses her (sexual) interests. In the same vein, the woman in Brenda Fassie's "Nakupenda" also embodies a woman who has the freedom to express her views, concerns and interests. However, acts of violence against women are evident in both the SoS and the South African (con)texts, and it is critical that we read the portrayal of a loving male partner in contrast to the gender-based abuse perpetrated by the strangers in the SoS. It is important also to read the protagonist's experience of liberation against the oppression that is meted out by her brothers. In other words, the experience of liberation counters the oppression perpetrated by the protagonist's brothers. Furthermore, the love and respect that the protagonist receives from her lover contrasts with the violence perpetrated against her by the watchmen of the city. Both the liberation of the protagonist and the behaviour of the lover serve as an inspiration and sign of hope to South African women.

Allegorical readings of the *Shir ha-Shirim* by Brenner and other scholars deprive one of realistic lessons that could be drawn from the SoS. Thus, in line with Weems and Black in contrast to Brenner, we submit that gender mutuality rather than female superiority is depicted in the SoS. Gender mutuality that is evident in both the SoS and the song "Nakupenda" is presented here in this study as a paradigm for the South African context which often tends to embrace male dominance in sexual relations. In the end, an interaction between the SoS and the song "Nakupenda" reveals that the readings of both the biblical text and the African popular song illuminate each other and offer mutually liberating lessons.

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