

READING THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE LIGHT OF BOTSWANA'S 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The Book of Esther presents readers with an intriguing story of two women: Vashti and Esther. It is a story of hope for women who find themselves suffering at the hands of cruel and dangerous patriarchal homes, systems, institutions and cultures. Using the case of Botswana, this essay explores how the struggles of the two women in the book of Esther compare with the lived experiences of many African women, and Botswana's in particular. The point I make is that the life of both Esther and Vashti resonates with the struggles of Botswana women who continue to toil and suffer from a complexity of challenges amongst them HIV and AIDS, drought and poverty. The main question I explore is what similarities and lessons, if any, can the story of Esther and Vashti offer concerning the challenges of HIV and AIDS and the declining socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: *Vashti, Esther, Botswana, Socio-economic, conditions, HIV and AIDS*

Introduction

The Book of Esther presents two female figures, namely Vashti and Esther who are epitomes of strength, courage, resilience and ability to stand for what is right thing in the face adversity. For example, Vashti can be admired for her bravery in refusing to bow to injustice in the face of a risky and potentially lethal system (Kebaneilwe, 2011). Her powerful refusal to accept what was clearly wrong, demeaning and oppressive teaches us that defending one's dignity is not a matter of choice but of obligation. Esther on the other hand, exposes the fragility and vulnerability of especially women in dire situations. Her desperate desire to save her people blinded her ability to make sound judgement about self-dignity and led her to succumb to the demands of an unjust and dehumanising system that had no regard for women's dignity. It is the nature of the narrative and the actions of its characters that when viewed through the lens of a Motswana woman, provoked the writing of this paper.

Reading a narrative such as the Book of Esther within and for the context of an ailing socio-economic system, coupled with the haunting reality of HIV and AIDS and the lasting effects of the disease on society, proves to be a worthwhile endeavour. The conditions of life expounded on or even implied in the narrative of Esther, echo in some ways, those of an ailing society. It is a tale about power versus powerlessness in which case, power is concentrated in the hands of cruel leaders who do not care about those they lead.

The paper uses the experiences of the people of Botswana as an entry point. As a woman citizen, I can plausibly identify with the sad narrative of the Book of Esther. The essay proceeds as follows: firstly, it defines the theoretical framework and then, provides a summary of the narrative of Esther in order to set the stage for the analysis and to orientate the audience on the

narrative. This will be followed by a summarised literature review of the contemporary HIV and AIDS and socio-economic conditions of Botswana. The idea is to help the audience to see the connecting seams between Esther's narrative and the Botswana context.

Defining the Theoretical Framework: A Contextual Analysis Explained

As indicated above, the paper uses contextualisation or contextual analysis, as the theoretical lens through which the Book of Esther is read within Botswana's context of HIV and AIDS and, the declining socio-economic situation. The main tenet of this paper is that contextual reading and analysis provide an insight into the interactive relationship between the Book and contemporary issues. The theoretical tool suggested here is particularly useful as it allows the text to speak to and to speak with the context for and within which it is read.

Sigurd Bergmann in *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology* (2017) observes that at the heart of contextualisation lies the intention to attach significance to the sociocultural and sometimes the ecological situation for the interpretation of God's revelation. That is, contextual readings of the Bible give priority to the context for which and within which the Bible is read. In other words, the Bible has found and established a home in the African continent and "among communities who identify with the social and economic realities it portrays, no less than the political environments in which Christians find themselves" (Jenkins, 2006: 67). Thus, African interpreters, both lay and trained, have invented a distinguishable kind of theology when compared especially to their Western, Euro American counterparts.

Andrew Mbuvi in "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline" (2017), discusses what he calls the innovative and reactionary character of African Biblical Studies (which he abbreviates as ABS). His phenomenal work outlines the idea that doing theology and or biblical interpretation in the global south is informed and shaped by the realities as well as the lived experiences of African peoples. There are scholars such as John Mbiti; James Amanze, Musa Dube; Mercy Amba Oduyoye; Madipoane Masenya; Gerald West; Isabel Phiri; and many more whose works have contributed and given shape and character to contextual theology specific to Africa. Thus, there are countless contextual ways of reading and that is outside the scope of this paper.

Simply put, contextual analysis of the biblical text involves "the Christian faith as understood, communicated and lived by Africans and applied to issues which concern them profoundly" (Kasenene, *et.al.* 1994, cited by Bergmann, 2003). While in this instance Kasenene specifically singles out Africans, I suggest that any Christian and any reader and or interpreter of the Bible may apply the biblical message to their specific context(s). In this respect, I read and contextualise the Book of Esther in what follows.

The Narrative of Esther through the Eyes of a Motswana woman: What a Story?

The Book of Esther begins with the banishment of Queen Vashti from the palace and as I noted elsewhere, her banishment and total forsakenness by the text itself (Kebaneilwe 2012). Vashti was married to a powerful King named Xerxes who ruled the entire land of Persia (Esther 1: 1-15). King Xerxes gave a big banquet to all the nobles and officials who were all men; they feasted on food and wine. The big dinner lasted 180 days during which the King showed off the wealth of his kingdom and how magnificent it was. At the end of the lavish 180 days, Xerxes threw another celebration for 7 days. This time he invited all those who lived in the safest part of his kingdom. Food was served bountifully and Royal wine served in golden cups. At this time, Vashti too received a permission to throw a party on the other floor of the palace where she invited all her women friends.

After a week of drinking wine, it is reported that the drunken king summoned his wife Queen Vashti to parade naked before a room full of drunken dignitaries as a fitting last course suitable for male eyes for she was beautiful to behold (James 2005: 145). Unfortunately, Vashti refused to obey the command. Her refusal led her to be dragged out of the palace, forfeiting all the luxuries and to be banished forever (Kebaneilwe 2011). Immediately following the scandal, the king and his men advisers declared a national order. The verdict was cautioning and demanding that every woman remain subject to her male others and never to try to imitate Vashti.

Eventually, Vashti had to be replaced (Esther 2:16-17). The most beautiful virgin girls throughout the land were gathered to parade naked before the king so that he chose the most beautiful as a wife. Esther also known as Hadassah, an orphaned Israelite girl who lived with her uncle in Persia was also brought to participate in the parade. During the boot camp, Esther pleased the attendant in charge of the gathered virgins and he started giving her favours. The selection criteria was such that each of the girls spent a night with the king. Esther was not only beautiful but she pleased the king the night she slept with him and hence she substituted Vashti (Esther 2:12-17).

I will now move onto provide a brief review of the literature on HIV and AIDS as well as the socio-economic status of the present day Botswana after celebrating its 50 years of independence in 2016.

Contemporary Botswana's HIV and AIDS and Socio-economic Status: A Threatened near Success Story?

Research shows that Botswana has made remarkable progress in dealing with HIV and AIDS since its first instance in 1985 (Farahani, *et.al.*, 2014; Allen, *et.al.*, 2004: 1144). The world applauds the country for having one of the most comprehensive strategies for the prevention of HIV from mother to child transmission. Botswana also provides free Antiretroviral treatment to all those infected with the virus. For instance, Creek, *et.al* (2009: 356) note that the

Prevention of Mother to child Transmission (PMTCT) has been available in the country since 1999 and antiretroviral (ARV) therapy since 2001. However, it is now becoming clear that, with the rapidly declining socio-economic conditions, the country is going to face a fresh challenge in dealing with HIV and AIDS. I will recount the socio-economic history of Botswana since independence.

Previous studies show that Botswana was amongst the poorest and least developed countries in the world in 1966 (Owusu, *et.al.*, 1997; Maundeni, 2016). In fact, she was the second poorest country in the world after Bangladesh in 1966 (Dunning, 2005). Unlike other former British colonies, Botswana inherited close to nothing in terms of physical and social infrastructure to foster economic development (Owusu, *et.al.*, 1997). Magang (2015) argues that in 1966, the country was impoverished and benighted with agriculture being the leading economic sector. After gaining independence, Botswana embarked on a long and tedious journey to grow her economy. One of the priorities at the time was to ensure self-sufficiency, hence the establishment of a number of programmes to support especially the agricultural sector, which however suffered because of the mining industry which attracted all attention (Magang, 2015). The situation led to a significant decline in the agriculture and it reached its lowest in the years 2000/2001 with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 2.4% (Magang, 2015). Since then, a number of programmes were designed to support socio-economic development. As Magang (2015) asserts, most notable of the deployed policy instruments included the Arable Lands Development Programme (ALDEP), Financial Assistance Policy (FAP), and Accelerated Rainfed Arable Programme (ARAP). Without detailing the successes and failures of the above mentioned policies whose aim was to provide the support of local farmers to enable self-sufficiency, it is noteworthy that the agricultural sector continued to dwindle (Magang, 2015). There was now a need to ensure food security, which saw the introduction of the National Master Plan for Arable Agriculture and Dairy Development (NAMPAAD) and the Integrated Support Programme for Arable Agricultural Development (ISPAAD) (Magang, 2015).

All of the above were efforts by the government of Botswana to improve the economic situation of the country. In 2001, the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA) was established with the mandate to provide financial and technical support for business development and sustainable citizen owned business enterprises.¹ The list of programmes is long and cannot be exhausted here given the limited scope of the paper. The underlying factor however, is that those programmes have not stemmed the onslaught of poverty in the country, resulting in a large number of citizens living below the poverty datum line (cf. Good, 1999: 185).

¹ <http://www.ceda.co.bw/>

Now where are we at as the nation of Botswana?

Botswana at fifty years of independence has been tellingly described by some scholars as follows:

“... looking back, it is hard to see a Botswana that would shower its colonial British parents with praise for good parenting. It feels more like an infancy at an orphanage, or being the child of an absentee parent. The ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has won every election since independence....the rate of unemployment is reported by Bank of Botswana (2015) to be at 20%, a high rate of unemployment by any standards” (Mogalakwe, *et.al.*, 2017:1).

Notably, contemporary Botswana relies mainly on two volatile sources, namely diamonds and Sothern African Customs' Union (SACU) revenues (Seleteng, *et.al.*, 2016: 5 and Mogalakwe, *et.al.*, 2017). Research shows that “in more recent years, there has been a shift in both growth and governance performance. With sustained declines in capital, labour and total factor productivity growth over the two and a half decades to 2010, there is now general recognition that the public-sector driven capital-deepening growth model that Botswana depended on for so long has run its course (IMF, 2013 cited by Mannathoko, 2013). The combination of expenditure growth and the decline in revenue growth is expected to keep the country's economic growth in the red. This means that socio-economic conditions of the country will continue to decline for some time. Unemployment rate as noted above is also continuing to rise with the youth being the most affected (Mogalakwe, *et.al.*, 2017: 6). Reports further show that Botswana continues to face high levels of poverty and inequality with children of less than 15 years representing 46% of the poor (Good, 1993: 204; Hope *et.al.*, 1996; and Mogalakwe, *et.al.*, 2017: 6). Income inequality in Botswana is amongst the highest in the world with women and girls being the hardest hit (Lekobane, *et.al.*, 2015). Ulriksen (2017), as cited by Mogalawe *et.al.*, opines that “Botswana's much talked about economic ‘miracle status’ has not translated into the reduction of poverty and social inequality for her citizens and hence it is rather a story about poverty in the midst of plenty. Redistributive policies such as drought relief, feeding schemes, destitute policies and old age pensions have failed to achieve their desired goals” (2017: 6). Maundeni (2003) has observed that Botswana faces high inequalities with many of its citizens earning less than enough to meet basic needs.

Today Botswana still boasts of such shameful schemes as the Presidential Housing Appeal, which has recently been re-branded ‘the National Housing Appeal’ (henceforth NHA). The NHA “calls on all who are able i.e., individuals, groups of individuals and companies to help build houses for the needy. The intention is to have housed all needy Batswana by 2016. Government will for its part continue to play its role but would like to encourage others to partner with it for this cause.”² The question to ask is why the lives of the economically disadvantaged have not improved significantly fifty years after independence.

² <http://www.gov.bw/en/news/presidents-housing-appeal/>

Esther in Dialogue with Botswana: A Contextual Endeavour

The events of Botswana's fiftieth independence anniversary (abbreviated as Bot50) celebrations need to be scrutinized in the light of the present socio-economic issues above. What really happened? Without glamorizing the situation, it is understood that the story of the book of Esther summarized above resembles the Botswana situation. However, careful scrutiny of both stories is in order.

Xerxes' kingdom was undoubtedly economically wealthy and the story reminds one of the extravagant Bot50 celebrations, a point described poignantly by Mogalakwe thus:

Botswana, who is a much-vaunted African success story, turned 50 on 30 September 2016, amidst much pomp and ceremony. The tagline for the occasion was Botswana50: United and Proud. So, are Batswana united and proud? (2017:1).

The Botswana government splashed the nation's funds at the Bot50 celebrations leading government expenditure to reach record high as noted below:

P100 million was allocated to be spent on the Bot50 celebrations. The event coordinator Charity Kgotlafela said additional funding could still be sought towards the event though there are competing needs such as tertiary education funding and drought relief interventions because challenges will forever be and people must live amidst them" (Sunday Standard Commentary, 19 Aug 2016).

The events were unbelievable; from painting of stones and old tyres put along roads, to preparing banquets for some invited dignitaries from around the world, who never turned up according to some reports. We can see a resemblance of the 180 days of celebration and King Xerxes' extravagance in Esther 1: 4-8, which were all at the expense of the national budget. Botswana's ruling Democratic Party of the then President Lieutenant Ian Khama Seretse Khama, like King Xerxes spent extravagantly on the Bot50 celebrations despite the continuing struggles of the nation.

At the end of the celebrations, government sent out memoranda declaring that the same government is now struggling financially. The situation affected many important government sectors. For instance, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development reported that government would not fund many educational programmes including more than 60% of the courses in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education.

As the Monitor News Paper recalls:

This trend is not only starting to show recently, one could count back to a period spurning five years or more when primary school and secondary school textbooks and exercise books got a sustained knock that continues up to today. There are no text books, pupils are forced to share the books in class nowadays, whether it is at primary

or secondary school level...At higher education the problem has been precipitating in recent years resulting in the logjam we found ourselves in today; colleges and universities are being owed tens of millions of Pula by government, some debts going back to a period of 4-5 years. (The Monitor, 7 Nov 2016).

The situation is further decried by opposition party member of Parliament Dithapelo Keorapetse of Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) who maintains that:

Government has less revenue than expenditure, these budget deficits are financed through borrowing. It has been going on for some time but not as frequent and for such large amounts until in the recent past...The country has for instance borrowed a total of P10 billion from the African Development Bank (AFDB) to stimulate the economy. Several capital projects were also financed by loans from AFDB including Morupule B, North-South Water Carrier Projects and the Kazungula Bridge. (Mmegi News Paper, 7 April 2017).

Much like in the Esther narrative, the people of Botswana continue to suffer lack, injustice and inequality. Thus if the active youth, at the prime of their lives cannot get jobs and if people continue to live on hand outs and humanitarian aids like the National Housing Appeal referred to earlier, what does it mean for the world to speak of Botswana as a success story? It is convincing as Mogalakwe (2003) concludes; “the story of Botswana as an ‘African miracle’ is one of a mistaken identity”. In the Esther narrative, we do not hear of unemployment rates, or outright elite corruption, as in the case of contemporary Botswana (Good, 1994; Mogalakwe, 2003, 2008, 2017). However, a cursory glance at the events of the narrative suggests that there is a lot that was happening to the ordinary people. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the book only gives the reader what could be termed a tip of an iceberg. Reading between the lines of what happens to Vashti and Esther is merely an indicator that King Xerxes had no regard for the ordinary people, let alone women.

Considering the actions of Vashti and Esther, one might learn a few lessons. Vashti resists oppression and defends her dignity although her bold actions land her in trouble with those in power. However, her story is a legacy through which she continues to encourage the powerless others that it is better to be banished from the palace than to accept injustice and humiliation (Kebaneilwe, 2011; Gill, 2003 and Darr, 1991). Her tale reminds one of Nelson Mandela’s assertion that “to deny people their human right is to challenge their very humanity”. Vashti felt that her very essence of humanity was challenged when she was told to strip naked for a drunken male bunch (Esther 1:11) and as such she took a stance to say no to the injustice (Gill, 2003).

Contrary to Vashti’s boldness, Batswana³ are complacent and content with the international accolades that they are a peaceful and peace-loving nation. They watch injustices thrive and

³ The term “Batswana” refers to Botswana citizens.

their humanity challenged as they go hungry in the midst of plenty and just look the other way and chant *go tlaa siama*, it will be well, a statement they make all the time while the country goes to the dogs so to speak.

A painful thing happened as Botswana was preparing for the lavish Bot50 celebrations and as usual, Botswana looked the other way. *The Sunday Standard News Paper* carried the following report:

On Monday afternoon a group of young unemployed citizens, mainly with tertiary education set out to demonstrate to Members of Parliament about their enduring plight. Many of these young people said while the country is gearing up for festivities that are part of the golden jubilee to celebrate 50 years of independence, for many of them they feel they do not have anything to show for the success of the past 50 years the world likes to talk so much when referring to Botswana. These young people said while the country continues to be showered with praises and accolades of being a star pupil in the African continent when it comes to economic management and low levels of corruption, for them the benefits have simply not come their way. In response, the police descended on them with shocking brutality that even embarrassed some of the better-known adherents of the establishment. It is difficult not to sympathize with the demonstrators (*Sunday Standard News Paper*, 14 Aug 2016).

The entire country ignored the incident making one to wonder if indifference qualifies as being peaceful or peace loving. Such a stance demonstrates undesirable passivity. Botswana need to wake up and resolve to defend their dignity and that of their youth. There are other instances where the nation could have come together and voiced out displeasure to the leadership of the country but never did anything. Vashti still speaks to Botswana to rise up and tackle the injustices, inequalities and corruption from the leaders without fear of the consequences. Although Vashti got banished not only from the palace but from the text itself (Kebaneilwe, 2011: 378), for standing up for her own dignity, her legacy continues beyond the banishment.

The character of Esther brings in the issue of HIV and AIDS. Esther must have lived in an HIV and AIDS free era. Unlike her predecessor (Vashti), the text portrays Esther as a stereotypical woman in a man's world (Darr, 2003: 165). She says yes to the authorities. She wins favour by parading her beauty (Esther 2: 2-8) and by her ability to satisfy sexually (Esther. 2:12-17) see also (Darr, 2003 and De Troyer, 1995). Her credentials that won her a place in the palace were thus purely physical and sexual (Fontaine, 2002). Esther's story alludes to what the king desired earlier with Vashti (Esther 1:11). Women were to parade their beauty for men's sexual satisfaction. The expectation was for women to comply and never to question men's selfish demands.

Unfortunately, in the 21st century HIV and AIDS era, Esther is not a good example. However, many of our youth have no choice but to follow Esther's example in their efforts to make a living. Many who are unemployed or under paid and exploited by the labour system, turn to

what scholars refer to as transactional sexual relationships in their quest for survival (Leclerc–Madlala, 2008; Weiser, *et.al.*, 2007; Nkosana, *et.al.*, 2007). It is now commonplace to find older men sexually exploiting younger women in what is commonly referred to as “*ma14*,” literally, ‘the fourteen year olds.’ The term must derive from the fact that in most cases the girls are a lot younger than the men are. It is also notable that the men, in many cases, are well off in comparison to the girls and hence are able to lure them into transactional sex. A study conducted in three Southern African countries entitled “Community views of inter-generational sex: Findings from focus groups in Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland,” by Cockcroft, *et.al.*, (2010) sheds light on what is going-on in the sex industry:

The young women were unanimous that they had sex with older men for material gain: Money or other material goods: “What would a guy your age do for you? He has to go ask for two Rands from his mother”.

Some men alluded to the transactional nature of the arrangement: “You don’t need to struggle to get the young girls because they need the money” (Cockcroft, *et.al.* 2010).

The above findings, by analogy, show why Esther gave in to the demands of her system; to parade her beauty and to satisfy sexually. She was a foreigner, an orphan and had no means of survival (Esther 2). She used what was readily available to her; her body. That is, her body and sexuality became asserts and vehicles through which she could get access to what was otherwise inaccessible to her, namely, the luxuries of the palace. It is understood that the youth, especially females, in Botswana today, find themselves in the footsteps of Esther. For them it includes being given money as we have already seen, or even being given employment. It is inevitable that in a corrupt system of governance as in Botswana, even getting a job that one has trained for might require more than the certificate and experience and go as far as one’s underpants.

Of great concern is that in the background of all these challenges perpetrated by bad governance, Botswana envisions a Zero HIV transmission by 2020. The greatest worry is that, if the socio-economic situation continues to deteriorate as figures of unemployment and HIV indicate; the dreams of the Batswana will be shattered under their watch. In the absence of decent means of survival, sex work can no longer be relegated to a few but can only become normalized in the form of transactional and intergenerational sexual relationships. Such power versus powerlessness-type of relations thrive in the inequalities, injustices and dehumanising state of affairs prevalent in contemporary Botswana

Conclusion

The biblical Book of Esther recounts a tale of resilience, shame, victimization, tragedy, power versus powerlessness, gender and economic-inequality, deprivation of freedom and disregard for human rights. However, it is also a tale of hope for the downtrodden, the oppressed and suppressed and victory for the feint-hearted. Read within and for the context of Botswana with

her HIV and AIDS and prevailing socio-economic status, the book speaks to the people. First, it cautions those in power that they can be challenged at any point in time by the weakest in society, for that matter.

The disposal of queen Vashti was occasioned through the advice of the eunuchs (Esther 1: 10-22) who by virtue of their castration were weak and yet more powerful over all women including the queen. However, the lesson is that, in the face of an unjust system which has suppressed the voices of the ordinary, it is possible that even the least of its victims are well capable of rising up for what they believe to be their rights. To the surprise of her lording husband, the king, Vashti took a stand and demonstrated that enough can be enough. Her actions to defend herself may have been in waiting for too long but finally the day came and she threatened the entire patriarchal system.

The example of Esther and her actions in desperation to save her people may not be an appealing one given the HIV and AIDS context of Botswana. We have noted that despite the situation many of our youth find themselves forced into unhealthy sexual relations of transactional sex for material gain. Studies have indicated that the situation contributes to the prevalence of HIV among especially the youth. They need to be proactive in order to change the situation. It is imperative to voice out grievances and challenge corrupt systems than to expose oneself to HIV infection and other ills that come with using one's body to gain access to a living of some sort.

Contrary to international accolades (Allen, *et.al.*, 2004:1143), Botswana is characterized by the realities of lack, injustice, inequality and unemployment, especially of the youth. All these coupled with HIV and AIDS, have led Botswana to lose the gains that she had made soon after independence. Botswana need to be proactive and address the situation. There is urgent need to address the rampant elite corruption by those in high offices. It is time that all Botswana are engaged in framing and mapping the future of a potentially prosperous nation.

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