

Revisiting Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa: Through 'new voices' of women black theologians

**Author:**Sandisele L. Xhinti¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, Faculty of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Sandisele Xhinti,
xhintsl@unisa.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 13 Sept. 2019

Accepted: 23 June 2020

Published: 10 Nov. 2021

How to cite this article:

Xhinti, S.L., 2021, 'Revisiting Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa: Through "new voices" of women black theologians', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(3), a5816. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.5816>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) has done significant work for many decades in the struggle for the liberation of black people. Black Theology of Liberation is a theology which restores human dignity and identity for black humanity, and it needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. One of the most important contributions BTL made was the creation of new forms of ecclesiological knowledge, resulting from a critical look at the use of the Bible with Eurocentric perspectives, and the organisational structures of the church divided between black and white, leading to, amongst others, the dismantlement of black African knowledge, systems and their culture. From a black theological perspective, ecclesiology focused on restoration of the dignity of black persons by dismantling Eurocentric views about faith and ecclesiology that have continued to demonise black lives. Black theology, with its positive contribution, focused on racism and other constructs of oppression such as class, with very little and limited focus on sexism and patriarchy. This article will demonstrate how significant the contribution of BTL has been and also decry or denounce the fact that patriarchal violence and the liberation of women were not given equal attention.

Contribution: The article contributes to theological discourse in South Africa (SA) today. It is written from the perspective of BTL and premised by the experience of oppressed black persons. In this article, it has been stated that black persons and their lived experiences are epistemologies in the quest for liberation of black humanity as a whole. The article will therefore bring forth BTL epistemologies that have been put in the periphery by western theology.

Keywords: patriarchy; sexism; Black Theology of Liberation; black ecclesiology; patriarchal violence; decentring women's voices.

Introduction

As a starting point, this article analyses the influence made by Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) in creating black ecclesiological awareness. It is on the edifice of black consciousness (BC) philosophy that black theology came to existence, as the gospel that struggled against white racism and for the liberation of black people. At the centre of the struggle against white racism was the Bible and its interpretation. James Cone (1969) argued that:

I want to speak on behalf of the voiceless black masses in the name of Jesus whose gospel I believed had been greatly distorted by the preaching and theology of the white churches. (vii)

Cone's argument starts by acknowledging the work performed by the Civil Rights Movement. Just like in the South African context, BC became a philosophy that inspired BTL. The point is that for BTL, faith and ideology are central. Steve Biko (1979:94) argues that black theology is a theology which wants to communicate God and Jesus to the very situation facing black people every day of their lives. He continues to say that the role of BTL is to have a God who participates in the reality a black human faces daily. The role played by BTL in black communities was good news for BC because the majority of black people were Christians who were disorganised by the missionary enterprise that demonised black people's culture. Its counterpart, white orthodox theology, heavily criticised BTL, but BTL persisted with its project nonetheless (Ntintili 1996). Whilst the project has many milestones, the oppression of women and the rigidity of patriarchy within the discourse that speaks about liberation raise pertinent questions that this article poses.

Note: Special Collection: VukaniBantuTsohangBatho: Spirituality of Black Liberation, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo (University of South Africa) and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

Early phase: The introduction of Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa

Black Theology of Liberation was instituted in the United States of America, and it was then later introduced to South Africa (SA) early in 1972, as a response to the oppressive situation black people were faced with. South African communities were experiencing brutal white supremacy and oppression, which located and shaped a sense of agency amongst black theologians. Boesak is amongst black theologians who have published extensively and help us in understanding black theology as a situational theology that seeks to find the meaning of the gospel in a black person's situation or condition (1977:17). For Buthelezi (1973:33), blackness in black theology is a life group that looks and holds the whole of his daily lived experiences. Blackness defines the situations he faced as a child growing up until his time as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. According to Moore (1973:6), 'It tries to understand as clearly as possible who the people are, what their life experiences are, and the nature and cause of their suffering'. Moore continues to say BTL is a theology which comes out of a condition, 'Black theology is a situational theology. And the situation is that of the black man in South Africa' (1973:5). For Boesak, Buthelezi and Moore, blackness is core in their articulation of BTL. But my question is blackness that excludes blackness of women if black women are oppressed. Therefore, if black theology is a situational theology that comes out of black people's conditions as Boesak argues. What about the situation faced by a 'black woman' in the South African society and in black churches? In her work that critiques BTL as a construct of oppression, Kobo (2019:91) observes in Moore's definition, the use of human as opposed to humanity as a problem, that is, a situational theology of black humanity. She further observes in this work how BTL privilege race and class struggle to the detriment of patriarchal violence amongst black people themselves.

Manas Buthelezi, Sigqibo Dwane, Khoza Mgojo, Allan Boesak and Simon Gqubule are amongst black theologians who played a remarkable role in the critique of the policies of the then government and also critiqued the policies of Christians' institutions. Accordingly, black theology played a role in the public space and also the church (Mashabela 2016:4). Mashabela further argues that they composed a song, 'Missionary go home and leave the black human, he is matured to do his own things' because they believed that black people can do things on their own.

They also made a contribution by criticising the role of the Bible as the Word of God as hermeneutical starting point for their argument. These black theologians interpreted the Bible differently than white theologians. Boesak (1977:15) suggests that the hermeneutical interpretation of the Bible was to search for the original declaration of the gospels to the poor as its original purpose. Boesak further asserts that the God of the Bible is a God of liberation, not oppression; justice, not

injustice; humanity, not enslavement; and comradeship, not animosity.

On the contrary, Basil Moore (1973:2) argues, 'Perhaps the most significant factor which has made the emergence of Black theology possible in South Africa is the growing mood among black people against multi-racialism'. Moore asserts that white supremacy in South African societies created the mood amongst black people to respond to racism. Cone (1989:97) says in black societies where black people lived that there were no rights to protect them from white supremacy. Cone's experience in SA changed how he viewed white supremacy and he goes on to say that it is an experience 'I will never forget and which I have written something about'. However, Cone says that BTL was formed for societies like the one he found in SA even if the origin of BTL is in the United States of America. Black Theology of Liberation is a theology given birth by black people in search of their identity in the church and society.

Racism was a challenge insofar that it was also a challenge for the church. On the one hand, English-speaking churches had a close relationship with English political parties, which made the English-speaking churches not speak out against white supremacy because of their association with the English political parties, and the same churches kept their authority with white people. Moore argues that 'It remains true that the Church has never seriously come to grips with its own racism' (Moore 1973:2).

Even in multi-racial churches, the message preached was that of reconciliation, yet the leadership remained white dominated. Moreover, there was class differences between black and white persons. For example, the white people were more educated and economically wealthier than black people. In the main BTL in SA there was a response to class and race challenges and in the process the oppression of women within the black community was brushed off.

Dominant masculine, black consciousness and patriarchal character of Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa

As stated earlier, BC inspired BTL. Perhaps the inadequacies one sees in BTL can be traced back to BC, if the androcentric language used by Steve Biko for BC is brought to light. 'Black man, you are on your own, wishes to eradicate from black man's mind before society, Black theology's approach and thereby once more uniting the black man with his God' (Biko 1979:91, 92 & 94).

Black Theology of Liberation uses BC as one of its interlocutors in defining black people's experiences, not only black men but also all black people. Vellem (2015) argues that BTL works with BC as its weapon to fight for the liberation of black people:

In a nutshell, the school of Black Theology of Liberation employs as its tools Black Consciousness, African Philosophy and Liberation Philosophy to reflect on black faith in the struggle of liberation of the blackness of humanity. (p. 660)

Kobo (2016:2) argues that the very first publication of BTL by Moore and Ntwasa uncovers oppression of black women as black women experience intersectional oppression. Kobo continues to say that black women in SA are firstly oppressed as black persons and again as black women. Kobo agrees with Mosala that liberation of women has been sidelined for far too long because women have been at the forefront of the struggle. She asserts that liberation of women and autonomous discourse are necessary for black women in their struggle for liberation. This clearly indicates that women's struggle for liberation cannot be treated as an afterthought, but needs to be taken seriously and as a matter of agency. Gender discrimination needs to be addressed with the same power and force that was displayed during the issue of racial discrimination. The gender discrimination was taken notice of a long time ago, as far back as a 1973 BTL publication and again in 1985.

In 1985, Cone raised a powerful concern when he met with South African black theologians such as Allan Boesak, Takatso Mofokeng, Itumeleng Mosala and others. His main concern was gender and sexuality in BTL and the black church, as he felt that it was avoided. Cone, in Maimela and Hopkins (1989:101) stated clearly that if black theology and the black church want to talk about inclusive liberation, they could not take gender and sexuality lightly in their struggle for liberation in SA and even in the United States of America. Cone acknowledges the works by Roxanne Jordan and Kelly Brown who wrote about gender and sexuality, as well as many other black women who made a clear point coming from SA and the United States of America. After acknowledging other works, Cone admits his and other black theologians' failure to address gender and sexuality as they have addressed white supremacy and class discrepancies:

It is not easy for us men to face it honestly, seriously and with the integrity that it needs. Nevertheless, wholeness in sexuality involves more than just the relation between men and women. In addition, it involves the relation between women and women, and men and men, as gays and lesbians are teaching us. (Maimela & Hopkins 1989:101–102)

Looking on the focus placed on gender and sexuality by BTL from both the United States of America and SA, one can tell that it is not the same as the emphasis placed on white supremacy and class discrepancies by the same theologians. Maluleke (2018:5) argues that in the early 1990s in America, there were different intersected disciplines of media, religion and culture, but all these disciplines ignored gender and masculinity. In relation with the lack of scholarship in masculinity studies, Maluleke reflects on works by Ratele as he articulated that a society that does not have the strength to recognise men and boys, women and girls as gender natural constructs adds to the minimal scholarship. Masculinity requires the same special attention as race and class from black scholars who have the struggle for liberation in their hearts.

Class and race in SA today are still divisive factors in black communities, and currently we are faced with a new challenge – violence against women and children – which adversely affect our society. The new challenge is rooted in sexism and patriarchy, which is deleterious to black communities and the black church. Maluleke (2018) says:

In his recent book, Ian Macquene writes about the 'new black masculinity' of the 1970s, which while intended to oppose both white male supremacy and white racism. This move is for the restoration of the dignity of the 'black man', it was nevertheless complicit not only by displaying the same conservative outlook towards women, but it also perpetrated similar patterns of violence against women perpetrated by white supremacists. (p. 8)

The argument echoes what Steve Biko was advocating in BC in pursuit of reviving black manhood and his identity as they were oppressed. Black men, through oppression, lost their manhood and their identity, as they had to submit to the master who is white. The only way in which a black man could revive his manhood and identity was to stand up to the white master. Biko (1979:31) argues that the very first thing which a black man had to do, was to speak to himself to regain life into his voided vessel, and to regain his self-respect as a person. Maluleke (2018; 10) argues that, for the liberation of black women, credit must go to very few feminist and womanist scholars who have published works that deal with patriarchy and masculinity in Africa since 2008, such as Nyambura Njoroge (2009), Ezra Chitando (2012) and Isabel Phiri (2009). These scholars published many works but those related to this paper were '... efforts to theorise and prevent violence against women' (Maluleke 2018:10). There are more gender publications than masculinity publications and for this reason, Maluleke suggests that masculinity studies ought to be compulsory at schools if we want to exit a patriarchal society and enter into a new society where both genders walk freely together.

Development and establishment phase: A chronological overview from 1972 to 2019

Theologians of white theology strongly disapproved the use of the Bible by theologians of BTL. It came as no surprise to theologians of BTL as they had exploded the myth of balanced independence in theology and assumes to avoid ethnic and philosophical or ideological taming.

Mosala (1989:15–16) argues that it is surely, what he calls slavery to the hermeneutics of white theology, which is accountable for trying to make BTL a practical hypothetical tool at the discardment of the oppressed and marginalised. Mosala continues to argue that BTL did deliver on its objective and aim of becoming a critique tool towards white theology and society. Black Theology of Liberation delivered on its aim; however, it did not escape criticism on how the Bible is understood and that may be the reason why BTL has not reached its full potential. White theology used the Bible to oppress black people and that caused confusion amongst

black people when BTL presented a new interpretation of the Bible. Mosala (1987:4) argues that one of the biblical truths is that the Bible is the revealed word of God and God always sides with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. The Bible in BTL is understood in many different ways as it looks at the oppressed black persons' lived experience; however, all these interpretations have one thing in common: to encourage black people about their identity, truth and realism of his state in God (Biko 1979:94). If God in BTL sides with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, it means God is with women in the struggle against patriarchy. For BTL, God sides with the oppressed; therefore, against patriarchy, God is with women and this is the truth as far it goes with BTL. The first phase of black theology in SA was based on biblical hermeneutics, which was led by black theologians such as Manas Buthelezi, Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu and so on.

In the first phase, the Bible is viewed as a tool on the side of the struggling black person for liberation and life, and a tool to fight apartheid. Black theology is a theology that struggles for liberation and life of humanity and that uses the Bible as a primary source. Biblical hermeneutics was considered the primary source of black theology in SA, as the hermeneutic ideology was oriented in the Bible, West (2016:326) argues. Black theologians of the first phase created a connection between race struggles in SA and the struggle of God's people in the Bible. These black theologians used certain biblical texts to address racial discrimination in SA that was experienced by black people during the apartheid regime. The first phase has been the most interesting phase as it tells the story of the development of BTL in SA. Mosala and Thlagale argues (1986) that BTL started its debate amongst those who saw race as a point of departure and others who saw class as a starting point for hermeneutics in order to analyse the struggle of many black persons in SA. After the racial discrimination black people experienced, black theologians moved to the second phase where the history of the Bible and throttled black persons are given hope.

The point of departure for the second phase is underpinned by a famous statement:

[W]hen the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us 'Let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible. (Mofokeng 1988:1)

Mofokeng argues that black persons young and old in SA know the above statement, therefore when they read this statement they put the Bible at the centre of their oppression and exploitation. West (2016:336) argues that the forerunners of the second phase of black theology in SA, Takatso Mofokeng and Itumeleng Mosala, equally viewed the Bible as a tool that can be used to fight class, racial, cultural and gender struggles. West continues to articulate Mosala's point by saying that after black impoverished and throttled persons came to know the truth about the use of the Bible in exploiting and oppressing them, they decided to work together for their

liberation as they started by freeing the Bible from the hands of the oppressor, placing it in their own hands so that the Bible could liberate them.

After liberating the Bible, black theology would use the very same Bible on the land issue in SA. The stance of black theology is that it will use the Bible to return the land to black persons without losing the Bible. Black theology will get the land and keep the Bible. West (2016:338) inserts a clear stance taken by Mosala on the land issue in SA when he suggests that the interpretation of the Bible is part of the land struggle. From these points, Maluleke interjects that African culture or African religion is something that has the potential to quell Eurocentric Christianity and the Bible in black theology, West (2016:340) argues.

Maluleke suggests black African culture in black theology during the third phase as one of the forerunners.

Maluleke states that black African culture and African indigenous or independent churches (AICs) are interlocutors of black theology. He (1998:3) argues that in many conferences of black theology, the AICs were, and still are, being discussed. African indigenous or independent churches and black theology have something in common as they both look at African traditional religion as a notion which needs to be looked at, Maluleke contends.

Maluleke continues to argue that it is vital to have a dialogue regarding the African traditional religion in black theology because the masses of the African traditional religion are the impoverished, and black theology in SA is in solidarity with the impoverished. West (2016:346) argues that black theology in SA did take note of gender struggle in phases 1 and 2 but in phase 3, it faded way.

In my view, Vellem proffers a new phase as he builds on the AICs and incorporates spiritual liberation. Vellem's (2007:2) build up started when he argued that BTL found that womanist theologians and black cultural critics support gender discourse for black lives. He continued to suggest that womanist theologians and black cultural critics decry sexism in black society. Vellem saw oppression of black women as destructive in nature, keeping white supremacy alive.

Vellem (2015:11) argues that AICs differentiate between black and white spirituality, and that ultimately gives birth to black faith. In phase 4 of BTL, Vellem proposes new views on democratic SA and empires as systems that are life giving and life killing. Vellem (2015:12) argues that the west's grouping of non-beings (black persons) in SA and the world is synonymous with killing life in black ecclesiology. However, the Mokhukhu spirit rejects the grouping of non-beings and refuses to be killed, Vellem (2015:3) says. The Mokhukhu spirit gives life to a black person as a liberating tool from the Western epistemologies, which kills black people. Vellem (2019:280) argues that exponents of BTL like Steve Biko and Sabelo Ntwasa have been killed by the white

power structure. Vellem continues to argue that these exponents of BTL are killed so that the white power structure can keep its status quo and maintains its white power structures.

This kind of interpretation propelled Boesak to create a platform in his reformed theology which moved from being black to oppressed that shifted his lense to Theology of Justice in SA. Boesak (1984:98) suggests that the character of the reformed faith or theology in government is not displayed by how many times the government proclaims that SA is mainly dominated by Christians. Nevertheless, the character is clearly portrayed on how the government treats and looks after the impoverished. Reformed tradition requests the government to do right by the needy and remain a friend of the people rather than an enemy of the people. Hopkins (1989:104) argues that Boesak viewed the scripture as something used to construct apartheid by the white Christian government and the church, pampering apartheid ideology in adoration by dogmatically modifying the exaltation of apartheid in SA. Theology of Justice as black reformed Christians to be proud of being reformers with all the faults reformed faith has committed. Boesak (1984:102–103) argues that Theology of Justice asks black reformed Christians to lead the project of lifting and empowering impoverished black persons whilst proclaiming that Jesus is Lord of Justice. A black Christian whose faithfulness is in reformed faith should commit himself or herself to remove all evil oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism and patriarchy in the 21st century so as to seek liberation, peace and justice for all humanity.

Black Theology of Liberation always looks at Jesus as the liberator of all humanity. This enables BTL to look at Jesus from the reality of history, thereby intertwining historic Jesus with the Jesus of today. The claim made by Christian faith that Jesus was God and he was human can be viewed as the practicality of historic Jesus whose description is assumed by Apostles. One who claims to know Jesus Christ must start understanding the role of Jesus in our history in SA and also understand what Jesus did whilst he was human, working on earth. Understanding Jesus when he was a human gives BTL the confidence not to accept a white Jesus.

Black theologians assessed the white Jesus who is always with the white powerful people who oppress black powerless people. The white Jesus who is rejected by BTL is the same Jesus who has blessed the weapons of white people who killed numerous black people in Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Orange Free State and other provinces in SA. 'It was He [*Jesus*] who blessed their [*whites*] weapons and assured them victory over Kaffirs and Indians' (Boesak 1977:38). Amongst many black theologians and Christians, Khabela (*The Struggle of the Gods* 1996) and Boesak (*Farewell to Innocence* 1976) agree with Cone's view, naming and confession of Jesus as the Black Messiah; hence, these black theologians continued to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Black Messiah as he appealed to the black struggle.

In SA, one can locate the within BC and BTL; however, it is not the Bible that involves BTL, but BTL that involves the Bible. Black Theology of Liberation holds the Bible as the weapon of the struggle because it is unthinkable to do theology without the Bible. White theology rejected the use of the Bible in BTL as BTL says that people who have used the Bible to oppress, marginalise and impoverish black persons have misinterpreted the Bible because the Bible is on the side of BTL.

The periphery: Women voices in Black Theology of Liberation

Black Theology of Liberation looks at the condition of impoverished and oppressed persons according to Mosala (1987:39), as he argues that black feminist theology raises one of the vital provocations to black theologians. Mosala suggests that the significant work performed by BTL will be measured by the struggle of women for liberation. Women's struggle for liberation is an urgent issue and is vital for the complete liberation of black persons. The liberation of women from patriarchy and sexism in the church and society needs to be one of the vital issues BTL deals with in democratic SA. Therefore, BTL needs to take women's struggle for liberation seriously for its success life and not allows to be cut as an irrelevant theology. For Mofokeng (1987:25), it is a sad and painful moment as he asserts that BTL had time to look closely at women's struggle for liberation. Mofokeng continues to say that black theologians need to hang their heads in shame and approach God for forgiveness for neglecting women's oppression. He even says after asking God's forgiveness, black theologians need to apologise to women themselves for overlooking their oppression. Mofokeng acknowledges that black theologians did focus on the national crisis back then, which was race oppression, and neglected gender oppression. Women's struggle for liberation against patriarchy cannot be overlooked any more. Patriarchal oppression cannot be taken lightly as black women experience intersectional oppression in the church and society.

Black churches were never treated with respect and dignity by white theologians and white people saw nothing wrong with their thinking about God. This led to Malcom X calling Christianity the religion for white people (Dibeela, Lenka-Bula & Vellem 2012:134). According to Cone (1969), the Black Power movement gave black men self-respect and self-worth, making white people see black people as human beings too. Furthermore, the spirit of black power placed challenges on white people in America. Biko (1973:38) argues that in SA, the spirit of BC gave black persons a great attitude as they started to view themselves as complete human beings, as independent people who were free to their humanity. The spirit of BC produced too few members of the clergy who decided to establish black theology. Black theology arose from few radical clergy who saw it fitting to interpret anew the Christian faith using the black struggle for liberation as

the point of departure. These clergymen took it upon themselves to use black experiences to theologise and create a new black ecclesiastical knowledge rather than reproducing a theology that suits white people.

The new black ecclesiastical knowledge was a quest to display God's liberating presence within the society. A society where black people because of their skin colour were dominated economically and overlooked constitutionally by white people. It is clear that God does not take the side of the dominant and powerful group, but he is always on the side of the impoverished. Boesak (1977:19) argues that black theology is a theology of the poor and oppressed, which seeks to bring a new understanding of Jesus Christ as a liberator of the poor and marginalised. Boesak continues to suggest that black theology seeks to bring a relevant message of the Bible to the people who have been deprived of their full humanity and their self-respect. Boesak articulates the relationship between the powerful and impoverished beautifully, as he brings in the message that gives impoverished black people their respect as God's children too.

In BTL, the core was the 'black man'. The 'black woman' was overlooked, be it unconsciously or consciously. Because black women's experience within BTL was not healthy, it resulted in the birth of black womanist and feminist theology. Masenya (1995:150) argues strongly that black theologians of black theology took a very strong stance against white men's interpretation of the Bible. However, black theologians of black theology in SA did not take the interest and struggle of black women seriously. Kobo agrees with Masenya's observation; however, Kobo (2019:91) takes it further when she argues that BTL has the tendency to speak about black society as if black women are not part of it. The critique by Kobo suggests that it is difficult to separate BTL with white theology, a theology that failed to recognise the presence of black humanity. In a nutshell, BTL failed to take black women's struggle seriously, like it did with racial and class segregation.

Rev. Roxanne Jordan (1989:53) argues that adding to the struggle that black women face together with black men, black women face another form of oppression as they are oppressed and misused by black men as black women are defined to be weak, minor and non-thinking. Kobo (2018:51) articulates what Jordan says but in a deeper sense when she says that black women's position is bad as black women face triple oppression of race, class and gender. Morrison (1970) puts it more practically when she says:

[E]verybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, 'Do This'. White children said 'Give me that'. White men said, 'Come here'. Black men said, 'ly down'. They ran the house of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they clean up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. (p. 110)

Discrimination of this kind is bad and evil towards black women in SA as they are oppressed and discriminated against by their counterparts in the name of culture and religious customs. Ntwasa and Moore (1973:25) gave the

same critique in the first publication of BTL as they mentioned the triple oppression faced by black women. Setri Nyomi argues that black women are discriminated against in their homes, churches and society as they are left out of many religious and cultural customs and they have been crying for gender justice (Dibeela et al. 2012:112). Gender injustice in one way or another leads to gender violence or patriarchal violence, especially when black women start raising their voice against discrimination in cultural and religious customs.

Kobo (2016:1) articulates this point well when she identifies two poles from which the problem could be examined. One of the poles is that there is a larger society that is sexist, sexism being one of the consequences that can be seen in African culture. The second pole is the connection between racism and apartheid that was South African based. Black women experience sexism and patriarchal violence in the society where they live. Sexism and patriarchal violence is the product of western systems as it influences and demonises African culture. Masenya (1998:278) argues that the Mosadi reader will read the Bible and point out androcentric elements such as classism, racism and sexism. To add, in the church too, there is another site of struggle whereby black women who are the majority in the church would raise funds, only to be told by black men who are in leadership how they should use the money. Masenya (1995:153) argues that many black women's voices were silenced by certain biblical interpretations. Masenya's argument was to read the Bible in a way that would assist black women to achieve total or complete liberation. Because of this kind of oppression towards black women, many black male theologians like Mosala engaged in the notion of black women's struggle for liberation. These black scholars support the complete liberation of black women and Mosala (1987:39) argues about the establishment of black feminist theology to analyse and engage BTL. Works by Maluleke and Nadar (2004) and Vellem (2015) do raise the same strong voice of black women's struggle and the need for the liberation of black women in SA.

Even in America, James Cone acknowledges that BTL did not really give adequate attention to the struggle of women in black communities and black ecclesiology (Cone & Wilmore 1993:279). He writes that although black women represent more than one-half of the population in the black community and 75% in the black church, their experience has not been visibly present in the development of black theology. For the most part, black male theologians have remained conspicuously silent on feminist theology generally and black women in particular. We have spoken about the black religious experience as if it consisted only of our male experience with no distinctive contribution from black women (1993:279).

Whilst acknowledging the role that these male theologians played, my focus is the voices of women theologians.

Ogunyemi (1985:72) argues that black womanist theology is a philosophy that seeks to acknowledge and rejoice black ancestries and roots as the model of black humanity.

Ogunyemi continues to suggest that the notion of gender justice needs to be addressed in the presence of other matters where both genders are present. South Africa is known to be a non-sexist, non-racial democratic country on paper but actions prove otherwise. Masenya (1995:150) argues that even after the first elections of democratic South Africa, black women's voices were suppressed through sexism, racism and classism. Sexist, racist and classist systems have rooted themselves in fragments of colonialisation, segregation and racist political economical and patriarchal customs.

Various works of BTL speak about the subject of racism and classism, but very little writings speak about the subject of sexism and patriarchy. Black Theology of Liberation is very vocal and radically addresses oppressive formations, but fails to robustly engage patriarchy and its systems. One can draw a conclusion from a situation that the liberation of women in SA is in the hands of black women. Hence, there was a formation of black feminist theology in SA. Masenya (2012:126) argues that black women in SA struggle against gender equality and gender justice and causes black women to experience a raw patriarchy, as it is a system of injustice.

Kobo (2018) in one of her works says:

The date 1494 in the statement brings to mind the unforgettable violence against black women in the dungeons of Elmina Castle. The exploitation of women even in the church today is undeniable! While they are marginalized from leadership positions and remain powerless in decision-making processes, their contribution in the church and society continues to be exploited. (pp. 2–3)

Black men oppress black women as Kobo suggests that black women are being excluded, if not discriminated against, when it comes to decision-making in the black church, whilst they are the majority. The leadership and decision-making bodies of the black church are dominated by men, whilst women are the minority.

In SA, in the black struggle for liberation, one can clearly say that black women suffer a triple oppression, as they have to struggle against race, class and gender compared with black men who have agonised against race and class (Kobo 2018:2; Vellem 2017:6). One again can safely say that the reason why black male theologians did not really focus on patriarchy and sexism is because they never agonised under it.

The rise of women and meaning of black womanism or feminism

Rev. Roxanne Jordan echoes the same sentiment as Cone and Wilmore:

Yet despite this, the rise of black theology did not initially consider the feminist aspect of divine liberation. However, I was very inspired by Professor James Cone's acknowledgement of his own weakness when he was shaken into the reality of accepting how black theologies, essence, had to re-evaluate the legitimacy of its liberations. (Maimela & Hopkins 1989:54)

Jordan continues to be impressed with Cone when she said that there is no holistic or all-inclusive liberation without addressing subjects affecting black women. If any liberation movement does not deal with subjects of patriarchy and sexism that liberation movement needs to be extremely tested, as it appears to be misinterpreting the very notion of liberation. Cone and Wilmore (1993) argue that black women have managed to make black men theologians more delicate when dealing with black women's matters.

Jordan argues that all human beings are created by God and when God created human beings, God created them in his own image. Jordan continues to argue that after human beings were created by God, God gave both of them dominion to rule over earth – the whole earth, not a portion of earth. The interpretation of the Bible that Jordan starts the argument with is profound as it interprets the very creation story of all humanity. The dominion given to humanity to rule over the earth is entrenched in human nature and that God knew why God gave dominion to humanity. 'However, because of what I believe to be some irresponsible act in the Garden of Eden, authority has been usurped' (Maimela & Hopkins 1989:51).

Dominion here has been assumed for greediness and rebellion as it is known that human beings, when they have power, tend to be violent against each other.

Black women face this degrading situation from black men, who see them as weak, lesser and non-thinking. This degrading situation perpetuated by black men and BTL theologians could not address them in depth and this gave birth to black feminist theology. Black women made a strong standing that they would not accept a God who awards dominion only to men, as black women believe that God awards dominion to all persons.

In SA, black feminist theology blossomed just after 1981, and this theology started involving communities. At this time, black women started occupying high paying jobs, which used to be occupied by white people, black men and the black feminist theologians involved their black communities (Jordan 1989:53; Kee 2006:110). Kobo (2019:92) argues that black men need to break the silence and state their stance towards patriarchy and sexism affecting black humanity.

It is not a secret that black women have been part of the liberation struggle in SA even if their involvement is not as recognised. Notwithstanding the participation of black women in the liberation struggle of the country, black women continued to be slaves in their own household. Masenya (2012:127) makes a very powerful point that demolishes the lie that black women are weak when she argues that, when black men work at the mines, black men would leave black women with their children. When these black women are left at home with their children, black women are forced to play the role of a father and a mother to balance the lives of their children. Through many kinds of oppression of black women in their household, black women came together and made

their cries heard by composing black feminist theology. These black women did not compose black feminist theology to compete with BTL, but to form a vital part of BTL.

Black women were dissatisfied with raising their concerns only for black men to respond facetiously. 'Unfortunately in 1985, black men at black church leaders' ecumenical consultation held in South Africa laughed at the cries and distress of black feminist theologians' (Maimela & Hopkins 1989:56). Black men make jokes about what is real for black women, and make sexist remarks. Vellem (2017:7) argues that the competition between black men and black women in SA leads to patriarchal violence. Sexism is more painful than racism because, in sexism, women are discriminated against and oppressed by their own fathers, husbands and brothers in their own households, and are rejected by their own black people in the society and church. I concur with Vellem when he argues that competition between black men and black women results in violence. The competition between black men and women is what I call independence of black women. When black women cry out, black men are either flippant or silent.

During the ministers retreat of the 2018 Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa in Benoni, there was a slot on the programme during which black ordained women ministers expressed their pain within the church. Most black ordained men walked out of the conference room, as they refused to listen to black ordained women cry so that they decided to be silent. The act of walking out by black ordained ministers validates the point argued above by Maimela and Hopkins (1989:56). As black ordained men walked out the conference room, it displayed to me the brokenness of black men and how they refuse to look at black ordained women ministers and see what they have done. I wanted to call black ordained men back and say, 'Sit down and listen to what we have done to our female counterparts, our colleagues.' I stood up and asked why black ordained male ministers are walking out when black ordained female ministers express their suffering within the church. My question was never entertained, and some mumbled amongst themselves saying I disrespected black ordained men. Again, when the rape and killing of women are continued in SA, the leadership of many churches said nothing. Church leadership only appeared during funerals, but they released no statements nor organised any public protests. Instead, they remained silent. I came to the conclusion that black churches were silent only because the leadership is male-dominated and patriarchal. Church leadership did not even record a statement on a video and upload it on social media platforms stating the stance of the church on gender-based violence.

Black women raised their voices on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter where black women went as far as naming and shaming the perpetrator (men). On Facebook and Twitter there was a group called, 'Not another Child' and men were called out by name for what they have

done to women. The deaths of Uyinene Mrwetywana, Jesse Hess, Janika Mallo, Lynette Volschenk and others triggered many women to voice their cry on social media platforms by uploading videos where they were crying and expressing their pain. News24 (2019-09-05) released an article where they narrated the rape and killing of Uyinene Mrhwetyana and the response of women and government. Ethan van Diemen and Jan Gerber argued that Bheki Cele, Minister of Police, met with civil society, communities and student groups who protested outside parliament.

Kobo (2018:7) argues that a life-threatening system can find its life in the Bible or theology to mention but one. Headship theology is justified by the Bible as it gives power to men. She continues to say that many African cultures maintain and support headship theology or patriarchy. In the amaMpondo and amaXhosa cultures, a common saying men use when losing a debate against a woman is '*ndiyindoda*' [*I am a man*]. By saying '*ndiyindoda*', men try to display muscular power, as they are defeated intellectually. '*Ndiyindoda*' simply means, 'I am done talking and I stand by what I am saying'. To women, it proposes submission. '*Ndiyindoda*' is a form of dismissal that disregards the women's argument.

Jordan argues that when she was visibly pregnant and had to serve Holy Communion, black men in the church could not partake as she was regarded by them as unclean. Kobo (2018:7) argues that black women's concerns are what she calls a 'cry for life' as they are searching a way forward in a society that is patriarchal. Her own brothers in Christ discriminated against her based on a natural matter. How can black men see being pregnant as unclean? Black feminist theology in SA is a theology that lives amongst and with the marginalised and downtrodden black women in dusty streets of townships and rural areas.

Another interesting point is well articulated by Landman (2000:184) who argues that the old custom where women use culture against each other is located in the Bible where only middle class women have conversations with God, thereby excluding other women. She continues to argue that *lobola* is the adding factor on violence against black women as it appears and is perceived that black women are black men's property after paying *lobola*. Rev. Purity Malinga in a theological meeting at UNISA argues that using *lobola* adds to the violence used against black women. In the meeting, black men suggested that she was dividing the black community to natural constructs by viewing it through a feminist lense (Kobo 2016; Landman 2000).

Conclusion

I have attempted to raise a few questions about the challenges patriarchy poses to BTL. Black Theology of Liberation scholars agree that they have not paid enough attention to patriarchal violence, and that it has now become urgent. Yes, BTL scholars have done some work and have addressed many social issues that affected human dignity. We must

applaud BTL scholars for the fight they have put forward for the liberation of black humanity and to create systems that are life-giving. We must also applaud black women who responded by developing their own black feminist and womanist schools and the liberation of black people needs notions of liberation that take this matter seriously. The work of feminist and womanist scholars reflects and analyses patriarchy and evil patriarchal systems for the liberation of black humanity.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him writing this article.

Author's contributions

S.L.X. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Biko, S., 1979, *I write what I like*, Bowerdean Press, London.
- Boesak, A., 1977, *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study of black theology and black power*, Raven Press, Johannesburg.
- Boesak, A., 1984, *Black and reformed: Apartheid, liberation and calvinist tradition*, Orbis Books, New York.
- Buthelezi, M., 1973, *An African theology or a black theology*, Hurst & Company, London.
- Cone, J.H., 1969, *Black theology and black power*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Cone, J.H. & Wilmore, G.S., 1993, *Black theology a documentary history volume one: 1966–1979*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Dibeela, P., Lenka-Bula, P. & Vellem, V., 2012, *Prophet from the South: Essay in honour of Allan Boesak*, SUN Media, Stellenbosch.
- Hopkins, D.N., 1989, *Black theology USA and South Africa: Politics, culture, and liberation*, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Kee, A., 2006, *The rise and demise of black theology*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, United Kingdom.
- Khabela, M.G., 1996, *The struggle of the gods: A study in Christianity and the African Culture*, Lovedale, Alice.
- Kobo, F.A., 2016, 'Umfazi akangeni ebuhlanti emzini: A Womanist dialogue with Black theology of Liberation in the 21st century', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3268>
- Kobo, F.A., 2018a, 'A womanist exposition of pseudo-spirituality and the cry of an oppressed African woman', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4896>
- Kobo, F.A., 2018b, 'Black women's bodies as reformers from the dungeons: The reformation and womanism', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5015>
- Kobo, F.A., 2019, 'Womanism and Black anthropology: In memory of James Cone', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 162&163(1), 82–100.
- Landman, C., 2000, 'Women using culture against women', in J. Malherbe et al. (eds.), *Women, society and constraints – A collection of contemporary South African gender studies*, pp. 177–189, Unisa Press, Pretoria.
- Landman, C., 2000, 'Women using culture against women', in J. Malherbe, K. Marc & K. Elize, (eds.), *Women, society and constraints – A collection of contemporary South African gender studies*, pp. 177–189, Unisa Press, Pretoria.
- Maimela, S.S. & Hopkins, D.N., 1989, *We are one voice*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg.
- Maluleke, T.S., 1998, 'Black theology as public discourse', in J.R. Cochrane (ed.), *Constructing a language of religion in public life: Multi-event 1999 academic workshop papers*, pp. 60–62, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Maluleke, T.S., 2018, 'Of wounded killers and 'failed men': Broadening the quest for liberating African masculinities', *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 24(1), 33–78. <https://doi.org/10.14426/jagr.v24i1.40>
- Maluleke, T.S. & Nadar, S., 2004, 'Alien Fraudster in the white academy: Agency in gendered colour', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120(1), 5–17.
- Masenywa, M.J., 1995, 'African womanist hermeneutics: A suppressed voice from South Africa speaks', *Journal of feminist Studies in Religion* 11(1), 149–155.
- Masenywa, M.J., 1998, 'A Basadi (womanhood) reading Genesis 16', *Old Testament Essay* 11(2), 271–287.
- Masenywa, M.J., 2012, 'Without a voice, with a violated body: Re-reading Judges 19 to challenge gender violence in sacred texts', *Missionalia* 40(3), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.7832/40-3-29>
- Mashabela, J.K., 2016, 'Manas Buthelezi: The church leader, Liberation activist and scholar in the South African context', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiae* 42(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265/2016/506>
- Mofokeng, T., 1987, 'Following the trail of suffering: Black theological perspective, past and present', *Journal of Black Theology* 1(2), 21–34.
- Mofokeng, T., 1988, 'Black theology, the Bible and Liberation', *Journal of Black Theology* 2(1), 34–42.
- Moore, B.S., 1973, *Black theology: The South African voice*, Hurst & Company, London.
- Morrison, T., 1970, *The bluest eye*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, NY.
- Mosala, I.J., 1987, 'Black theology in South Africa and North America: Prospects for the future: Building of alliances', *Journal of Black Theology* 1(2), 35–41.
- Mosala, I.J., 1989, *Biblical hermeneutics and Black theology in South Africa*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Mosala, I.J. & Thagale, B., 1986, *The unquestionable right to be free*, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg.
- Ntintili, V.P., 1996, 'Notions of Liberation in Black theology: Which is more liberative?', *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 10(1), 1–17.
- Ogunyemi, C.O., 1985, 'Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary black female novel in English', *Signs* 11(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494200>
- Van Diemen, E. & Gerber, J., 2019, *News24: Uyinene murder accused allegedly tried to rape woman in hospital, says Cele as gruesome details emerge*, News24, viewed n.d., from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/uyinene-murder-accused-allegedly-tried-to-rape-woman-in-hospital-says-cele-as-gruesome-details-emerge-20190905>.
- Vellem, V.S., 2007, 'The symbol of liberation in South African public life: A black theological perspective', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Vellem, V.S., 2015, 'Black ecclesiology. Uprising faith praxis for the blackness of humanity', *World Council of Churches* 67(4), 651–663. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12196>
- Vellem, V.S., 2017, 'Un-thinking the West: The spirit of doing Black theology of Liberation in decolonial times', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological studies* 73(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4737>
- Vellem, V.S., 2019, 'Cracking the Eurocentric code: A battle on the banks of the "New Blood Rivers"', *Missionalia* 42(2), 267–287. <https://doi.org/10.7832/46-2-313>
- West, G.O., 2016, *The stolen Bible: From tool of imperialism to African icon*, Brill, Boston, MA.