

# A male body as communal space? Engaging sexuality and masculinities from selected sacred texts

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Expressions such as 'a piece of a man is better than no man', and *monna ke kobo, re a apolelana* [a man is a blanket, he is shared among us] (read: women) afford hearers a small glimpse about female perceptions on a male body and/or male sexuality. Several African proverbs shed light on the underlying assumption that a male body, despite the man's marital status, can be shared with many women. Also, a glimpse, at certain texts in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Es 2) appears to give readers an impression that a male body, including a married man's body, can be shared with other women. In a nutshell, patriarchal heteronormativity coupled with unhealthy notions of masculinity, seem to take it for granted that a male body is a collective space, not necessarily for female pleasure in marriage, it may be argued, but first and foremost, for the satisfaction of male desire, the entrenchment of the normativity of the male species as well as the endorsement of dangerous notions of masculinities.

**Contribution:** Can the pursuit for equality, human and/or woman dignity and reciprocity succeed amid the preceding dynamics of the intersection among power, male sexuality and unhealthy notions of masculinities as revealed in the affirmation and celebration of the notion of the 'male body as communal space' especially in the context of heterosexual unions? The preceding was the main question that this essay sought to answer.

**Keywords:** male body; communal space; African proverbs; Esther 2; sexuality.

## Introduction

The topic on the intersection between the notion of 'male-body-as-communal space', male sexuality (read: virility) and masculinity, is a scarcely researched upon topic not only in the context of South African Hebrew Bible scholarship, but dare one say also globally. Why so? The field of masculinities in the context of Hebrew Bible studies is relatively new (Haddox 2016:176–206; West 2010:184–200). Also, in the discipline of African Biblical Hermeneutics, there is paucity of literature in the same field. Yet in my view, the struggle towards the achievement of gender justice, cannot be separated from the struggle towards the achievement of the constructions of, as well as, the realisation of affirming and thus, liberating notions of femininities and masculinities.

The notion of the 'male body as communal space' seems to persist uncontested, especially in varying African contexts. As a matter of fact, such a notion finds a comfortable footing in heteropatriarchal contexts, including the contexts that produced biblical texts, as will become clearer during the course of this article. In the present investigation, the author thus seek to problematise and also abnormalise the notion of the 'male body as communal space' arguing that it has been brought about by problematic notions of masculinity and male virility (Rakoma 1971). The preceding notions directly perpetuate the problematisation of female virility as well as the understanding of women as sexual beings with agency (Masenya [Ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2021). If allowed to persist, and especially when translated into praxis, such notions cannot be helpful in our pursuit for the affirmation of the equality of women and/or the female folk as people with human dignity and with agency as sexual beings. Hence, the key question that forms the pivot around which the discussion in the present essay will happen is as follows: Can the pursuit for equality, human and/or woman dignity and reciprocity succeed amid the preceding dynamics of the intersection of power, male sexuality and unhealthy notions of masculinities as revealed in the affirmation and celebration of the notion of the 'male body as communal space' especially in the context of heterosexual marriages?

A brief discussion about the definition of the concept of 'marriage' as it will be used in the present investigation, will thus be in order.

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## What now of the concept of 'marriage'?

As already noted, the present investigation seeks to bring together, notions of masculinities, power, sexuality and male virility as revealed in the proclamation and affirmation of the 'male body as communal space' from two different contexts. These contexts are set apart from each other by history, geography and time among others. These are the context of biblical Israel (cf. the text of Es 2) and present-day African contexts (cf. the African Northern Sotho context and/or selected Northern Sotho proverbs<sup>1</sup>). The concept of marriage (Pressler 2005) will be understood basically as that of a union between one man and one woman. About the multivalent voices regarding the notion of 'marriage' Pressler (2005) says, 'The Older Testament does not offer a single view of marriage, much less a single view of the family. Biblical Hebrew does not have a noun 'marriage' or a verb 'to marry'; it rarely uses terms that explicitly refer to marital status ('husband' or 'wife').

It should be noted though, that the Hebrew Bible concept of *be't ab* [father's house] resembles what used to be the case in our traditional African-(South) African settings. In such settings, it was and/or is common to find families of one patriarch, that is the patriarch (cf. *bet av*) and his sons and their wives, living under one compound (De Vaux 1986; Meyers 1991). In such settings, a man who was a polygynist, would also live with his wives and *pilegeshim* [secondary wives] under one compound. What quickly comes to mind here is the situation portrayed in Ruth 1. The patriarch Abimelech lived with his wife, Naomi and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion together with their Moabite wives (Rt 1:1–5). It should also be noted that biblical Israel and traditional Africa practised polygyny as a legitimate form of union between a man and his wife and/or wives. Although polygynous arrangements will not be the focus of the present investigation, they do provide a small glimpse of the celebration and praxis of the notion of the 'male body as communal space'. Pressler's observation is thus instructive in this regard:

In all of these cases, the woman might be her husband's only wife, or she might be one of the numerous concubines, primary wives, and slave wives. That is, a man might have many wives of various sorts if he could afford them, though a woman might have only one husband. (Pressler 2005:203)

Apart from the union of polygyny, the African and/or Northern Sotho language, for example, as it will also become clearer later in the course of this essay, is replete with numerous proverbs that appear to endorse the notion of the 'male body as communal space'.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, the underlying tenor of

1. The proverbs are deemed to be sacred texts in this specific African context. Why so? The fact that before a proverb can be cited, the following phrase can sometimes be heard: *Mogolologo o boletše a re*, translated, 'the ancestor has said [...] point in the preceding direction.

2. One such proverb says: *monna ke thaka, o a naba* [a man is like a pumpkin plant, he spreads]. In a nutshell, due to his strong virility, a man may not be limited to his field only (wife). Baker and Maluleke (2020), explain the proverb's tenor as follows: 'An African man, according to this proverb is viewed as someone that has the freedom of flirting with other women other than his wife/wives ... There are no limits as to how many women an African man can marry, even if a man has married one or more than one wife, he can still have concubines'. (2020:16700–16701)

these proverbs is that a married man can, over and above his wife, have other sexual partners outside of the marriage union!

The portrait of 'family' as one that consists of one man and one woman (that is, 'monogamy') in the sense portrayed in the present investigation, appears to feature in the Hebrew Bible wisdom book of Proverbs. Proverbs appears to feature monogamy as an ideal (e.g. the parental pair of mother and father Pr 1:8–7; Pr 4:1–6; Pr 10:1, etc.). There are texts about good and bad wives (Masenya [Ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2018) as in the following examples, a wife who causes shame to her husband or one who does him good, all the days of her life (Pr 31:12) (Masenya [Ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2018). The book reaches climax with a poem in praise of the '*eshet hayil*' (Pr 31:10–31), one whose husband is known at the gates.

Interestingly, it is also in this same book, that one of the rare texts in the Hebrew Bible, that is, a text which urges men to monogamous sexuality (read: fidelity), thus problematising the notion of 'male body as communal space' occurs. In Proverbs 5:15 we read:

'Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well...

18. Let your fountain be blessed and rejoice in the wife of your youth

This apparent resistance to the notion of the 'male body as communal space' can be heard loud and clear in the following verse: 'Why should you be intoxicated my son by another woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?' (Pr 15:20).

The notion of the 'male body as communal space' within the preceding monogamous settings (read: monogamous marriage), especially in a gender-justice seeking context, becomes a site of protest and resistance rather than that of affirmation and celebration. A brief unpacking of this notion is now in order.

What does the notion of 'male body as communal space', entail?

## Male body as communal space

As might have already become evident so far in the discussion, especially within heterosexual monogamous marriages, it appears to be common knowledge and also accepted by all and sundry, including female persons, that a married man's body can be shared with the bodies of other women<sup>3</sup> outside of marriage (cf. also Masenya [Ngwan'a Mphahlele] and Olojede 2019). As already noted, numerous African proverbs endorse the preceding view, for example, *monna ke thaka, o a naba*: [a man is a pumpkin plant, he spreads]. Also, the fact that in varying African contexts and the contexts that produced the Hebrew Bible, polygyny rather than polyandry was and/or is the legitimate form of marriage, point in the same direction.

3. From the authors interaction with my Master of Divinity class at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA, USA though, it became clear that there are actually other heterosexually married men, 'men on the down low' who share their bodies with other men outside of the marriage context.

This perception both from the Hebrew Bible in particular, (as well as from some of the Northern Sotho proverbs) about the affirmation that married male bodies can be shared with other women (whether in marriage or outside of marriage), while that may not necessarily be the case with female bodies, should be contested. One is thus at the same time problematising the notion of male sexual virility as one of the critical features of ideal heteronormative notions of masculinities. Does such a notion undermine or underscore female agency? Does it, albeit unwittingly, throw any light on the “illegitimate” power of female virility.

Having stressed the fact that the notion of ‘male-body-as-communal space’ especially within our hetero-patriarchal marriage contexts, appears to be taken for granted, and thus hardly problematised, the present investigation will start from the unfamiliar to the familiar, simply put, from the unknown to the known. In the following paragraphs I thus ask: Which perceptions and/or assumptions do women have about the notion of the ‘male body as communal space’?

## From the unknown to the known

### A piece of a man is better than no man

In the years 2004–2005, I had the privilege to be appointed as one of the two Womanist scholars-in-residence by the Office of the Black Women in Church and Society at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta GA, under the directorship of one of the founder members of womanist theology, Dr. Jacqueline Grant. As part of the authors responsibilities, the author had to teach a Master of Divinity class for one semester. The name of the course which the author taught was as follows: The Bible, HIV/AIDS and Africa and South African Women. As the authors class engaged black notions on masculinity under the theme, “the Bible and human sexuality”, the students introduced the author to the following two proverbs and/or sayings: ‘A piece of a man is better than no man’ and ‘a man will be a man’<sup>4</sup> (cf. also, Baker and Maluleke 2020:16704). The class was more than 90% female. Here the author was, surprisingly enlightened about insights from women about male sexuality. Although at face value, the proverb on the piece of a man, may be viewed as throwing light on the scarcity of male persons, and thus endorsing the importance of men especially in the lives of women, read at face value, the proverb appears to implicitly endorse the notion of ‘the male-body-as-communal space’.

The understanding that a piece of a man is better than no man, not only perpetuates the stereotype of the normativity of the male sex within our patriarchal contexts, it may prepare fertile soil for the idolisation of heterosexual marriage, that is, the ‘marriage at all costs’ mentality. To the aspiring young female adult, the proverbial piece of a man, is likely to

4. A female participant’s response to the perception of the normativity of male sexual behaviour outside of marriage can be gleaned from the response: *Banna ka moka ba a swana ba na le bakaola* literally, [all men are the same, they have concubines], (Baker & Maluleke 2020).

confirm that a woman cannot be deemed complete without heterosexual marriage. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for example, reminds us that in African contexts, a woman cannot be deemed complete without marriage (Mbiti 1969; Oduyoye 1995). The overemphasis on the need for a woman to be validated by a man, may breed fertile soil for the silent acceptance of Intimate Based Violence (IBV)<sup>5</sup> because ‘a piece of a man is better than no man’. The violence may also be supported by women who silently endure the infidelity of their partners even when they are pretty much aware of it.<sup>6</sup> What should be highlighted here is that the trope of a married man’s body as communal space in the traditional African sense, and dare one say, even today, refers to a man who could either be heterosexually married to one woman or a polygynist with several women. The proverbs, which are sacred texts<sup>7</sup> in this context, endorse the underlying mentality that such a man can have extramarital relations. He can, with the legitimization of what the sacred texts declare, share his body with other women outside his marriage. It is not clear to later users of these old proverbs whether women in the latter category were married or not. What is clear though is that a married man’s body can be shared with women who are not his wives!

A related proverbial saying is a rare one among the many Northern Sotho proverbs that clearly mark their patriarchal origins.

### *Monna ke kobo, re a gogelana*

The Northern Sotho proverb, *monna ke kobo, re a gogelana*, which can literally be translated, [a man is a blanket we share] simply means that a man should be shared among (many?) women. In his doctoral thesis titled, *Virtuous Living: Toward an African theology of wisdom in the context of the African renaissance*, Solomon B Nkesiga, acknowledges that women were part of the elders who ‘... were the “wisdom texts” of proverbs in the African oral tradition’ (2005:255). In his view, women had their group of elders, and female counsel could be sought on matters related to the feminine. Within such feminine African settings, proverbs could be cited during female initiation rites as well as during wedding celebrations among others. It is thus plausible that the proverb on a man as a blanket, may have originated from a feminine space. Its tone reveals the probability of its female origins. The proverb is cast like an exhortation in which one

5. The expression, Intimate Based Violence (IBV), is used in this textual context based on my reading of the text of 1 Corinthians 7:4. In the view of the Apostle Paul, a wife’s body belongs to her husband, while her husband’s body belongs to her. Thus his body is not a communal space to be shared with others. Thus, if a body that supposedly belongs to a wife, is shared with other partners (women in the context of these proverbs) extramaritally, a wife’s body is being violated. Also, research on the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) has revealed that more than 90% of the infections in heterosexual marriages in the sub-Saharan African context were/are brought by men into the marriage relationships. Women eventually received the short end of the stick. In the preceding contexts, IBV is not necessarily restricted to physical abuse, but also to the mental and, emotional life of the woman involved.

6. For example, it is commonplace for some pastors’ wives to endure/or to be exhorted to endure the infidelity of their husbands for the sake of ‘peace’, to ‘cover’ up for the men of God.

7. It is noteworthy that the phrase, *mogologolo o boletše a re* [the ancestor spoke and said] would usually precede the utterance of a proverb, thus imbuing it with sacred authority. It is no wonder that the continuing impact of the proverbs continues to be seen and felt in the subconscious selves(?) of those who still find them normative.

woman 'reminds' and/or 'tells' other women that as a blanket, a man *must/is to be shared* among women. It is as though the original utterer of this proverb (probably a woman?), tells other women that as a communal space, a married man's body has to be shared by other women! The author is of the view that it is not likely that this proverb would have been uttered by one of the co-wives in a polygynous marriage setting, as each wife's right of access to their husband's body, would not have been contested. As a matter of fact, women who entered polygyny or for whom such was arranged, would have entered knowing pretty well that the harsh reality of 'the male body as communal space' would stare them in the eye daily.

The last saying in the realm of the 'unknown' does not deal directly with the notion of 'the male body as communal space'. It however appears to go against the androcentric grain of male virility even as it appears to affirm and endorse the agency of women as sexual beings.

### **Kgarebe ya go tseba monna [virginity and carnal knowledge]**

The Northern Sotho word, *kgarebe* has [virgin] as its English counterpart. In the Northern Sotho language, a common expression used to show the intersection between a virgin and carnal knowledge is *kgarebe yeo e sa tsebe go monna*. The preceding interesting phrase, one that may upset many a patriarchally-minded person can be translated as, 'a virgin who does not know a man'. It could be argued that according to the preceding saying, the active partner in the sexual act is not a man with his communal body, a man is *not* the subject of *knowing* a *kgarebe* [virgin]. The agency lies with a female human being because it is *kgarebe* who is understood or deemed the subject of the knowledge of a male body.

The phrase is known exactly as it stands and it cannot be reversed to conform to what may be deemed 'normative' as in the following phrase: *lesogana leo le sa tsebe go kgarebe* [a young male adult who does not know a virgin]. In the Hebrew Bible though, it is almost, always, a man who knows a woman sexually, but also as we have previously noted, whose body is perceived as a communal space for women. As one who has not yet known a man, a virgin thus has the agency to decide when and with whom she can decide to do so. In that way, she appears to have the agency to problematise the notion that a male body is a communal space always up for grabs by women, even those who are not his wives!

## **Now to the familiar ...**

### **A communal body? Power, male virility and masculinity in selected African proverbs**

Proverb 1: *monna ke tšhwene o ja ka matsogo a mabedi*: [a man is a baboon, he eats with two hands]. This proverb's tenor reveals that a man may be married but can still share his body with other women outside of the monogamous union.

As a proverbial baboon, one with insatiable hunger for sex, one who possesses a communal body, a man eats with two hands. Masculinity and sexual prowess thus go hand in glove according to the tenor of this proverb.

Proverb 2: *Monna ke phoka o wa bošego*: [A man is fog, he falls in the night].

A fog typically spreads freely over a vast area. Noteworthy is the *action* of falling by the fog which is not made to fall by anyone. It falls on its own and in the night. May we speculate that a man's extramarital sexual activities will happen under the cover of the night? It is in this space that his masculinity(virility) will be revealed in allowing himself *go wa* [to fall], thus allowing his body to be a communal space. The sexual aggression of such a man, can also be figured from the Igbo proverbial ram metaphor: *Aturu muru ebunu gba aka nwa* [an ewe that begets a ram is without an offspring] (as it will always wonder in search of females). Another proverb says, *Ebuunu laa azu, o bia ogu* [when a ram retreats, it comes back with a more aggressive fight] (said about a man's physical and sexual prowess) (Ezeifeke 2017:110).

What is noteworthy is that in a context where the normativity of a man is taken for granted, these proverbs which link ideal masculinity with virility, would have been uttered by men. Why so? Women, especially those whose husbands engage with other women in such relationships, would naturally not have celebrated the harsh reality entailed in the tenors of these proverbs. So, if the proverbs were/are uttered by men who endorse and celebrate ideal masculinity as linked to high levels of virility, the complicit party would be male rather than female. However, it would not be far-fetched to argue that for single women, such a trope of a male body as communal space, one that hurts fellow women, could be embraced.

Also, the word 'communal' as it pertains to a male body, is used in this essay in a sarcastic sense. We thus need to nuance the celebration of the spirit of communality in our African cultures, especially if such an embrace is found to be death-dealing to the powerless others within marriage unions. Those couples who choose a monogamy ought to be faithful to each other in terms of sexual intimacy until death separates them. The tenors of the proverbs buttress the patriarchal mentality that women's bodies should first and foremost serve the interests of men as husbands, and not necessarily the other way round. The preceding point though, should not give an impression that the author would support proverbs that celebrate a female body as a communal space.

The next proverb links a man with a proverbial axe.

Proverb 3: *Monna ke selepe o lala a louditšwe*: [A man is an axe, he is sharpened in the night].

A man (read: masculinity or virility?) is an axe. What at face value appears to problematise the strength of male virility (read: axe) is that the axe gets sharpened by someone according

to the second stichos. The sharpener, 'the actor' on the communal male body will probably be a woman in African heterosexual marriage contexts. If our speculation holds water, the capacity of the female human being to be an active participant as a sexual being, revealed in the proverb of a man as a proverbial blanket, gets confirmed by this proverb. Thus, female agency (read: sexual prowess) alluded to in *monna ke lepai, re a gogelana* gets acknowledged, albeit covertly. What is disturbing about the preceding proverb though, is that irrespective of its possible origins from a female setting and/or space, it still seems to celebrate the normativity (and perhaps male virility) of a male person; hence its first stichos starts with the phrase, '*monna ke*' [a man is...] and not '*mosadi ke*...' [a woman is...]. A man is however objectified as a blanket in female hands!

The discussion on 'the male body as communal space' so far, has been gleaned from what may be designated as a female space and/or female-identified discourses as in the following:

- a piece of a man being better than none
- a man as a proverbial blanket, as well as
- a virgin and her agency in knowing a man.

From the familiar male space, three Northern Sotho proverbs were engaged with in our efforts to unpack the notions of masculinity as revealed in male power (male virility), one which can freely be exercised outside the confines of his marriage. As a possessor of a communal body, a man's body, can be shared with others outside of the marital union. Noteworthy is the fact that although these proverbs may today not openly be uttered by men, including male youth, actions speak louder than words. Why so? The realisation that even in their youthful age, a young male adult or even a boy can have more than one girlfriend, the phenomenon of cross-generational sex between young women and sugar daddies and the hinted research on the harsh reality that more than 90% of the HIV infections in heterosexual marriage unions were brought by men into the households in sub-Saharan Africa, all point in the same direction.

By way of conclusion, the narrative of King Ahasuerus in Esther 2, will be read through the lens of a male body-as communal space. It is hoped that the interface between the eunuchs, the Persian virgins and King Ahasuerus (cf. Es 2) may throw light on the trope of the male body as communal space.

## Many female bodies *vis-à-vis* one powerful male body

One of the very few books that carries a female name, that is, the *Book of Esther* in the Hebrew Bible, may at face value, send a positive signal about the expected elevated position and the roles played by the female figures in the book. At face value, the narratives of the two queens, that is, Queen Vashti and Queen Esther, may be celebrated as the stories of two powerful women. On the one hand, Queen Vashti was a person [...] power which she had. On the other hand, Queen

Esther, although a bit laid back and unintrusive, managed to navigate the patriarchal system in a covert way and ultimately received what she wanted.

If the reader was to focus on the first chapter of the *Book of Esther*, the trope of 'the male body as communal space' would not come out so clearly. Why so? Esther 1 portrays a context of a monogamy, that is, a family consisting of only one man and one woman. This was no ordinary couple, though, but a royal couple which consisted of a king and his queen. The implicit portrayal of a monogamous union in Esther 1, may persuade a reader to believe that the king's body may have been shared with Queen Vashti only. However, the trope of the male body as communal space may fit in, albeit not fully when the reader interfaces with King Ahasuerus' summons of Queen Vashti to parade before his drunken friends to behold the queen's beauty. In my view, the beholding of a beautiful female (body) by the eyes of drunken men in patriarchal contexts need to be taken with trepidation.

The situation will become clearer once Vashti would have exercised her power by refusing the summons of her drunken husband. She would suffer the consequences of her 'deviant' behaviour by being dethroned from her queenly position and then the search for a new Queen would begin (Es 2:1–4). Thus, once a reader gets to the second chapter, a different picture thus emerges:

- After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.
- Then the king's servants who attended to him said, 'Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king.'
- And let the king appoint the commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegal, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given to them.
- And let the girl who pleases<sup>8</sup> the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This pleased the king and he did so.' (Es 2:1–4)

The trope of 'the male body as communal space' becomes glaring as a reader gets to know that before a new queen could come into the picture, the bodies of young beautiful virgins would have to be prepared for one communal body, that is, the body of one powerful male person. In order for the possessor of the male body to be fully satisfied, with as many of his senses to be nourished by what would come out of each virgin, be these the eyes that would behold her beauty, the nose that would smell the good fragrance from the perfumes, the ears that would embrace her sexy voice and eventually, the sexual satisfaction from each virgin sharing the body of this one man, each girl had to be prepared accordingly. Hence, elaborate and possibly costly preparations had to be put in place for all the young female adults who aspired to the position of a future queen (Es 2:3–4, 9). The fulfilment of each virgin's aspirations should entail her willingness to be 'de-flowered' by individually experiencing the truth

8.The verb "please", that is, *ytb/yatab*, means to suit/fit/please.

embedded in the following statement: the body of a man, especially a powerful man, is a communal space. Or was Ahasuerus's body the case of a proverbial blanket shared among many women or is it a matter of King Ahasuerus being a proverbial pumpkin with no capacity to be contained in the field of its owner but which thrives in spreading into other men's fields?

The individual woman's qualification as the next queen, would not only depend on her beautiful looks, including on how her face and body had reacted to the elaborate treatment she would have underwent. It would regrettably also be determined by how ably, as an individual female person, she would have managed to please the sexual desires of this one man, whose body is and/or would have been a collective space for all the aspiring young female adults! If a girl won the king's favour, especially sexually, she could have been called in again:

'In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go into the king again, unless the king *delighted* in her and she was summoned by name.' (Es 2:14).

The author is not of the view that the virgins in the Esther 2 text were forced to enter into a pageant exercise. If the preceding view holds water, the action of the girls in Esther 2 resonates with that of Zulu girls who voluntarily appear before a traditional leader in the context of a Reed dance. In the same way, women (single or married) who share their bodies with married men, and thus brings to realisation, the truth in the tenor of a male body as a communal space, are not necessarily forced into such relations. The latter argument though, excludes situations of younger girls who become involved in cross-generational sex with sugar daddies, or women and girls who engage in sex trafficking due to poverty and/or for socio-economic gains.

King Xerxes, a man of power, politically and socio-economically, has the luxury to tamper with the virginities (de-flower) of young women, who would then, also in search of being attached to a man of power, share his body, even if for the one night. In such an encounter, we see male privilege and male power intersecting to display the powerlessness of the one who at times uses her body to navigate a context that does not legitimate female power nor recognises female agency. In the case of the Hebrew Bible though, we need to also remember Bailey's caution to read between the lines as the Hebrew narrators tend to subsume women's struggles into national ones and in the process, female characters become sexualised.

Cautions Bailey (2009):

[...W]e must both decry the ways in which biblical narrators only allow women to function as seducers as a means to achieve national liberation and be cautious in our readings as to what is possibly going on in the text. '[...] We need to be aware of the androcentric and misogynistic ideologies embedded in such a paradigm of national struggle' (p. 242)

## Conclusion

Power and privilege go together, for example, patriarchy as a system legitimates male power, and not so with female power. Hence, in patriarchal contexts, men, whose power is legitimated, will be more privileged than women. The notions of manhood as depicted in the proverbs under discussion point to the privilege and power accorded male persons as in the following example: men can indulge in extramarital sex supported by sacred texts (read: proverbs), while women dare not.

Also, from the Esther 2 text, several layers of inequalities can be identified. One powerful man (male gender), king (prestige and socio-economic class), an elderly person, who was previously in a monogamous union *vis-à-vis* virgins (who have not yet known a man), younger, virgins (lower female sex) and certainly not of the same socio-economic class. One male body is shared with many female bodies in a dangerous violent bit (Nadar 2006) for only one of them to become a queen! A persistent justice-seeking question would be: why do female persons subject themselves to such situations that would not only expose their vulnerability as the 'weaker' gender in the patriarchal contexts, but that would perpetuate the inequality between the sexes as well as continue to absolutise the normativity of the male body as communal space? Could our agitation for the egalitarianism and/or equality and reciprocity between the sexes ever be successful under the preceding circumstances? The preceding questions are based on the assumption that those who opted for being pageants, most probably knew what the preceding exercise, that is, parading as pageants, entailed. The preceding statement though, does not support the violent, androcentric female-disaffirming practice of a search for a queen that of necessity entailed the violation of many female bodies, a violation, which would also have frustrated the future possibilities of the Persian virgins to enter monogamous unions still being virgins. And so argues Nadar (2006);

If we read the text carefully we will see that the king is spending a night with each of the virgins. They are not simply paraded before him in beautiful gowns. Yet what happens to these virgins when they go into the king's room at night? I suggest that their bodies are violated and raped, being treated as mere objects of desire. The virgins are as violated as the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. (pp. 189–203)

Although in patriarchal societies, all men, irrespective of their race, ethnicity and geography among others, possess power that is legitimated by patriarchy, a hierarchy still obtains, hence the notion of hegemonic masculinities. Kopano Ratele's (2016) caution in this regard is instructive:

We have to stop treating men who are in reality marginalized by capitalist, white and black heteropatriarchal ideologies as if they have power. We cannot go on approaching and theorizing poor, poorly educated, young black men for example, as if they are the same as rich men. We need to look at our subjects in their proper and full context. Not doing this contributes to the failure to liberate men, perhaps we quite often do not really see them. (p. 87)

Hence, there are men who are more powerful than others on account of their race and socio-economic class among others (cf. Masenya [Ngwan'a Mphahlele] 2019). For example, as already observed, such a hierarchy in masculinities may be applied seamlessly in the context of the socio-economic class of King Xerxes. It can be safely concluded that during that time, not every man could have had the luxury to have beautiful young virgins parade in front of him in a beauty pageant. King Xerxes, royalty and a man of class could easily share his body with other women who were not his wives. Such a trend was and still is the case, even in the context of traditional African leaders [*dikgoši*]. Their royal and higher socio-economic status enabled/enable them to practise polygyny. The preceding analysis speaks to the notion of hegemonic masculinities.

Our engagement with the theme on the intersection among power, male sexuality and masculinity, through the lens of the male body as communal space, has led to the following observations: For as long as such a notion continues to be taken for granted and even endorsed, [...] to be a collective space **for women** [...] our battle for gender justice [...] especially in heterosexual marriage **unions**, [...] may never be won any time soon.

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