

Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe

The Woman of Courage

A Womanist Reading of Proverbs 31



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To my mother, you are a woman of courage!

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Introducing the Woman of Courage¹

The subject of the biblical text of Prov. 31.10-31 (henceforth Prov. 31) is a mother and wife who is presented as the ideal woman. For the English rendering of the Hebrew term for this ideal woman, *eshet-hayil*, I have opted for ‘Woman of Courage’, a choice that I will justify in the section below. In this book, I look at the Woman of Courage from a perspective of ambivalence, demonstrating that the story of her life is paradoxical. Firstly, she works under patriarchal oppression to fulfil the roles of wife and mother, and still emerges heroic. Secondly, men praise her at the same time as they oppress her. The description of the Woman of Courage in Prov. 31.10-31 gives us a multifaceted woman, and for that reason, it is easy to find overlaps with women in general, both past and present and with the Botswana women who form the contextual background for this book.

The Woman who is celebrated in this biblical text lives in a culture with accentuated gender roles which resonate with the lived experiences of many Batswana² women in many ways and at different levels. Like Botswana culture, ancient Israelite culture, as demonstrated throughout the Hebrew Bible, is agrarian, patriarchal, and androcentric. In both worlds, a woman’s worth and dignity are closely associated with her socially prescribed and labour-intensive roles of wife and mother. Yet, I demonstrate in this book that she is impressive to her oppressors, including her husband (v. 28) and

1. This book is based on my PhD thesis titled: “This Courageous Woman: A Socio-rhetorical Womanist reading of Proverbs 31:10-31,” available online at <https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/doctoral/This-courageous-woman-A-Socio-rhetorical-womanist/991005545126907891/>.

2. The term Batswana is the plural form for the native people and citizens of Botswana. In the singular form it is Motswana, and the native language and culture is Setswana.

the patriarchs in higher authority as stated in the concluding verse (v. 31) who are urged by the overarching voice of the narrator to hold her in high esteem and applaud her for her work and position. The implied praise of the men at the gate shows that the Woman of Courage has transcended one of the fundamental limitations of the patriarchal system, which was that she could never be recognised, praised, or rewarded for her work. In fact, earlier in v. 29, the narrator asserts that she has done more courageous deeds than ‘many daughters,’ a comparison which will be explored in Chapter 3 under intertextual analysis. The recognition and appraisal given to the Woman of Courage is significant in that it opens a window for her to explore her potential beyond motherhood and wifely duties. The same stance foregrounds the main argument of this book that the Woman of Courage at the centre of Prov. 31.10-31 here explored, sets an example for all women to be proactive and explore their potential despite suppressive and oppressive circumstances they may find themselves in. The message is particularly aimed at real flesh and blood women like Botswana women who exist in somewhat similar patriarchal contexts as the one in which our character existed. The message being that they too can, if they gather the courage to, excel in what they do despite their circumstances and can redefine the course of their lives as she did. The ideas will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters of this book.

The stereotype of the Woman of Courage echoes the Setswana³ proverb ‘*mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo*’, literally meaning, ‘a woman is a baboon because it is her hands that must be eaten’. The functional meaning of the proverb is that a woman is valued primarily for her industriousness or what she can do with her hands. The belief nullifies a woman’s intrinsic worth as a human being but rather reduces her to some form of commodity whose value lies in what her significant other(s) can benefit from her. A similar belief is alluded to in Prov. 31.11 and this shall be nuanced later. Notably, while the ideology behind this proverb is oppressive, the specific purpose of the proverb itself is tributary, meaning that the woman who fulfils its expectation will be praised or recognised. Likewise, the term ‘*hayil*’ in Prov. 31.10-31 is a celebration of the woman’s industry. The text centres her as the primary actor while her husband is only mentioned in passive terms. I will hasten to say that the humour of this acrostic poem of Prov. 31.10-31 lies in that though portrayed as passive and indifferent, the husband of the Woman of Courage is also glamourized as *balah* ‘her lord.’ The title indicates

3. The noun ‘Setswana’ refers to the native language of a large majority of the people of Botswana. It is also used as an adjective to refer to their culture and lifestyle.