

**AN AFRICAN-CONSCIOUS FEMALE'S READING
OF STEVE BIKO**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Senzeni na (What have we done?) (8x)
Isono sethu ubumnyama (Our sin is our blackness)
(8x)

Senzeni na (What have we done?) (8x)
Isono sethu ubulili bethu besifazane (our sin is our
female sex) (8x)

When the black South African masses sang the two stanzas of this song in the heyday of apartheid, the primary threat was the torture and atrocities which were being perpetrated on them on account of their black skin colour: *isono sethu ubumnyama* (literally, "their sin is their blackness"). Seemingly, reality dictated that the oppressed channel all their energies into challenging and resisting the racial injustices that were being inflicted by a powerful white minority on a powerless black majority.

I think, though, that it is pertinent – not only in view of the position of African South African women in post-apartheid society, but also in view of the title of the present article – to add yet another line to the song. It is hoped that the new addition, *isono sethu ubulili bethu besifazane* (literally, "Our sin is our female sex") will conscientise those among us who are still unconscious of the reality or the 'fact' (to use Biko's terminology) of African South African women, as it exists today and as it existed then.

How and when did I encounter Biko? I turn to this question in the following sections.

2 BLACK AND FEMALE BUT UNCONSCIOUS

I was born in a conservative, rural setting that formed part of one of the northernmost Bantustans of apartheid South Africa. As is common knowledge to those who are acquainted with South African history during that period, blacks were shelved in such settlements on the basis of the claim that each ethnic group should be allowed to develop separately. Looking at that setting in retrospect, one can describe it as one that was basically rural, politically unconscious and/or naive, but culturally - depending on the people's relationship with Christianity - fully conscious. This cultural consciousness was often compromised by people's attempts to 'fit' into hegemonic definitions of Christianity. At times such people acted as though they were culturally unconscious.

The churches (both mainline and Pentecostal) which I attended from early childhood and throughout my teens, the Bantu education offered in black schools at that time, the kind of parental upbringing I received from a thoroughly colonised father, and traditions of white theology and/or biblical scholarship on which I was nurtured did not help to arouse or sharpen my political conscience (Masenya 2005:180-182). I had an inkling that we blacks were oppressed by whites, but given the repressive environment as well as the rural setting in which I grew up, that political reality was not central to my life. My existential reality was that of being a girl child and that was all. Awareness of the fact that patriarchy had condemned me to unequal treatment on account of my female sex never formed part of my early childhood upbringing. Looking back at myself at that time, I can see that although I was black and female, I was politically unconscious of the kind of life that my blackness and female sex had plunged me into. I was politically and psychologically oppressed (cf Biko, quoted by Woods 1978; Arnold 1977: xiv).

Against this background it is no wonder that in the mid-1970s, when at the then University of the North I first heard of Steve Bantu Biko, the political activist who was fighting for the liberation of blacks (including myself), my response was negative. His name was associated with communism, a philosophy that was hated and feared by the ruling party. He was introduced to me as a terrorist¹ who did not care about the progress of black people. If he cared, why was the country experiencing the chaos of sit-ins, strikes and international sanctions? More importantly for me as a student, why were university programmes being disrupted on account of student unrest, more often than not influenced by Biko's philosophies? My naive, politically unconscious self wrestled with such questions. To use Biko's jargon, I was engaged in self-hate and self-negation. As Biko put it:

... the black man [sic] has developed a certain state of alienation, he [sic] rejects himself [sic] precisely because he [sic] attaches the meaning white to all that is good, in other words he [sic] equates good with white. This arises out of his [sic] living and it arises out of his [sic] development from childhood (cf Woods 1978:188).

As part of my socio-political development I was brainwashed to believe that even what was said by the white government against my fellow black people was always good for me. However, to be conscientised otherwise in the repressive state in which blacks found themselves called for courage and boldness in the face of incarceration and even death. Fear, as Biko (1977:272) would say, was "an important determinant in South African politics".

¹ Arnold (1977:xxii; cf also Frank 1977: 272) comments on the Terrorism Act as follows: "None of the laws however, are as draconian as the Terrorism Act." In addition to the usual definition of terrorism, under the provisions of the Act, terrorism is also defined as an act which embarrasses the South African government; which would bring about any social or economic change; or which would "cause, encourage or further feelings of hostility between the white and other inhabitants of the republic."

In my naivety and political slumber I negated philosophies and processes that were geared to enabling me to live a fully human life, in which my worth as a black person would be affirmed. Biko said:

I must emphasize the cultural depth of black consciousness. The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces blacks to ask the question: "Who am I?" and the fundamental answer we give is: "People are people!" So "Black" Consciousness says: "Forget about the color!" (quoted by Woods 1978:145).

An important question I ask at this point is: how many African women today still negate progressive liberationist theologies/philosophies geared to enabling them to affirm their full humanity as equal human beings?

3 RE-ENCOUNTERING STEVE BIKO

Today, having regained my black consciousness, I read and encounter Steve Biko differently and marvel at how gracious and gifted a person he was. He was bold, kind, sober, patient, loving (despite the hatred he received from his opponents), non-racist, intelligent and articulate. I encounter a totally different person from the one I was introduced to in the mid-1970s. Such noble qualities of this great son of Africa should be aspired to and emulated by present-day African women even as we continue to struggle for full affirmation of African female humanity. Biko's conviction that white liberals could not possibly be effective in fighting the black struggle (cf. Arnold 1977:xviii; Woods 1986:180-181) should inspire us to take seriously the truth underlying the Northern Sotho proverb, *Sešo se baba mongwai wa sona* (The itchiness of a sore is felt by the one who scratches it). Similarly, Mosala warns African women that "liberation does not fall into one's lap. It must be claimed and protected. You cannot give me my liberty and I cannot give you yours. Unless we are willing to exercise our right to claim power

and do something about bringing about the changes we believe are necessary we will remain the invisible creatures who are always on the outside looking in" (Woods 1986:132).

Biko left a legacy which needs to be perpetuated by those of us who still sit on the margins of our communities, wherever they may be. He was faced with a formidable task of encouraging oppressed people to affirm their full humanity as equal human beings even when their physical living conditions and the atrocities committed against them dictated otherwise. Not only had the perpetrators succeeded in instilling fear in the hearts of the black majority but, even more importantly, they managed to influence their way of thinking (cf. Frank Talk 1977:271-277). Biko was of the conviction that SASO was "working for the liberation of the Black man [sic], first from psychological oppression by themselves through inferiority complex and secondly from the physical one accruing out of living in a White racist society" (quoted by Arnold 1977:18-19). Despite such a repressive, volatile and depressing context, Biko still dared to say:

We know that *all* interracial groups in South Africa are relationships in which whites are superior, blacks inferior. So, as a prelude, whites must be made to realise that they are *only* human, not superior. Same with blacks. They must be made to realise that they are also human, not inferior. For all of us this means that South Africa is not European, but African (quoted by Woods 1978:148).

Biko was right in holding that the minds of black persons first had to be freed from self-negation, self-worthlessness and an inferiority complex before there could be any political liberation. By the same token the perpetrators' perceptions of inherent superiority also had to be overcome.

No human being should claim superiority over anyone else. The mountain of inequality has to be levelled into the plain of humanity. According to Biko all humans share the same humanity irrespective of their skin colour.

This noble conviction of the equality of all human beings should make us wary of entertaining feelings of superiority or inferiority. There is no room for inferior or superior human beings in Biko's view of reality. His coining of the slogan "Black is beautiful" was motivated by a desire to inspire black people to overcome all feelings of inferiority, affirming their worth as full human beings. The slogan challenged self-negation - what Biko called a "kind of feeling of self-censure within the black man [sic]" (cf. Woods 1978:191). The concept of "Black is beautiful" challenged self-hate and self-alienation to enable blacks to love themselves just as they are. Biko's elaboration on this significant slogan is worth noting:

That slogan serves a very important aspect of our attempt to get at humanity. It challenges the very roots of the black man's [sic] belief about himself [sic]. When you say "black is beautiful," what in fact you are saying to him [sic] is: "Man [sic], you are okay as you are. Begin to look upon yourself as a human being" (cf. Woods 1978:192).

In the next section I look at Biko's application of this slogan to the lives of African women at that time, even as I continue my inquiry into the relevance of his thinking to African women in 21st century post-apartheid South Africa.

4 "BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL": A REALITY IN AFRICAN WOMEN'S LIVES THEN AND NOW?

In situating his slogan within the way he perceived African women, Biko argued:

The way they dress, the way they make up and so on, tends to be a negation of their true state and, in a sense, a running away from their color. They use skin-lightening creams; they use straightening devices for their hair, and so on. They sort of believe, I think, that their natural state is not synonymous with

beauty, and beauty can only be approximated by them if the skin is made as light as possible and the lips are made as red as possible, and the nails are made as pink as possible. So in a sense the term “black is beautiful” challenges exactly that belief through which someone negates himself [sic] (quoted by Woods 1978:193; cf. also Arnold 1977:21-22).

Looking at African women today, one wonders whether the experience of our fore-sisters and foremothers as described by Biko has really changed all that much. If there has been any shift, how significant has it been for black female consciousness?

In my view the situation of African women described in the foregoing quotation is one of human beings who, on account of double and/or multiple forms of oppression, tried very hard to fit in. Where? Into the models of beauty that were/are dictated by ‘normative’ white society, models which continue today as evidenced by the worship of Hollywood beauty standards! Such standards impact on definitions of female beauty for women (and men) globally. One wonders how many African men, even elderly ones, still take seriously the definition of female beauty as defined by traditional Africa. How many young male adults in post-apartheid South Africa still take seriously the tenor underlying the Northern Sotho proverb, *nku go rekwa mosela* (literally, “sheep, we buy a tail”) in their contemplation of future marriage partners?

I am raising these concerns not necessarily to support the inferiority complex which typified African women then and still typifies them now. I am situating their plight in a context that made and still makes the following two basic demands of them:

- Africa and all that goes with it cannot breed anything good or beautiful. So fit into the model of beauty defined by normative society. After all, everything good and beautiful is white and Western! It follows, then, that your model of beauty can only be that of a white woman.

- The patriarchal African and apartheid cultures (endorsed also by religious traditions) dictate that adult African female humanity can be achieved only within the confines of marriage. So, African woman, beautify yourself to avoid the state of *bofetwa*² at all costs.

The latter state is shameful and maligned in African contexts. However, if analysed through a woman-friendly lens, this state can in fact be helpful in supporting the affirmation of African women as fully independent human beings even when not attached to men in marriage.

In my view, if there is any group which needs to be affirmed in terms of the worthiness and true humanity of its being, it is that of African women. During Biko's time they occupied the lowest rung on the socio-economic and political ladder, even as, by and large, they continue to do today. Biko's articulation of the need for all human beings to affirm their intrinsic worth should be embraced by the women of Africa in their quest for self-discovery and self-affirmation.

5 THE FULL HUMANITY OF AFRICAN SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

- (1) Biko's call to South African peoples to embrace the affirmation of all human beings irrespective of their skin colour should inspire African women to challenge the underlying perception that the norm is exclusively white. Maleness, too, is not the norm. The latter category, though, seems not to have been part of Biko's vocabulary. The perception that whiteness and maleness are normative should be resisted by African women, as it challenges their worth as equal human beings. Like Biko, they should resist this notion in spite of many life-denying situations

² The Northern Sotho noun *bofetwa* comes from the verb "*go feta*" ("pass by"). A woman (interestingly, the word is never applied to a man) who is called by the derogatory name, *lefetwa* (literally, "the one who has been passed by [by men]"), is usually shunned by the community, including its female members, some of whom might view her as a potential threat to their marriages.

which may dictate otherwise. Having said that, let me reiterate that Biko was certainly no advocate of the rights of black women per se. In some instances, however, black women fell within the compass of his broader concern for the humanity of black people (cf. Arnolds 1977:21-22).

- (2) The observation about Biko's apparent inclusiveness is problematic because of his constant use of the phrase 'black man', sometimes in the generic, sometimes - dare I say it? - in the particular sense of a male human being. There are many examples where he details the suffering of black men (cf. Biko, quoted by Arnolds 1977:20), including that of an Eastern Cape man who had to endure the harassment of a white man merely to survive (cf. Woods 1978: 190). This man said that he no longer worked to live but lived to work (cf. Arnold 1977:20) and vented his frustrations on his family at home (cf. Arnold 1977:20; Woods 1978:189).
- (3) Embracing the full humanity of African females may enable African women and girl children to fight the inferiority complex that is so deeply ingrained in them. For example, marriage should no longer be idolised (cf. Masenya 2003; 2007). Women should no longer be expected *always* to perceive themselves as complete *only* if married. In this day and age of HIV/aids heterosexual marriage has become a high risk factor for many women in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Baden & Wash 1998; Granish & Mermin 2001). The institution of marriage, whose dignity is gradually being eroded, should also be approached with caution.
- (4) What made the perpetrators easily identifiable in Biko's days was their 'otherness'. The situation facing 21st century African South African women is more complicated. Being of our own kind, the perpetrators are not only difficult to identify but are integral parts of our lives, which makes it hard if not impossible to fight against them. What one finds curious is that although African South African men know fairly well how painful it was and still is to be dehumanised on account of an ontological reality such as

one's blackness, they have difficulty in viewing their sisters as equally human. Could it be, as Mncube (1991:356-358) and Bam (1991:56) argue, that some of these men act in the name of their culture as though it can remain static? Or are African women expected to understand their brothers' reluctance in terms of Biko's observation that "when he gets back from work through the same process of travelling conditions, he can only take out his anger on his family, which is the last defence that he has" (quoted by Woods 1978:189; cf. also Arnold 1977:20)? Despite the frustration that they may be subjected to in the workplace, they have no right to dehumanise powerless others in the private sphere.

(5) I wish to argue that the *bosadi* (womanhood) approach to problematic cultural and sacred texts can be helpful to African women in their struggle to regain their dignity and sense of self-worth. This approach helps to counter the stereotypes and beliefs found there that a woman is less human than a man, that her inferiority is divinely ordained, that she cannot be a leader, and so on, in the following ways:

- It elevates the positive elements of African cultures for both women and men, including the institution of the family and its significance in and for Africa, the spirit of communality, the spirit of *botho* (*ubuntu*), commitment to hard work and a healthy code of sexual morality (cf Masenya 1997; 2004; 2005). Foregrounding the positive elements of African cultures gives us a more balanced view of Africa and its peoples, a view far removed from the negative one challenged by Biko during the time of apartheid South Africa. Such a view deviates from the negative one inherited during the colonial and apartheid eras and perpetuated today by the media.
- It is noteworthy that the positive aspects of their culture are not re-appropriated uncritically by African women. As a result of the approach's commitment to the life-affirming experiences of African women-

folk, these positive aspects are redefined and re-appropriated in order to facilitate the transformation of the lives of African women and men. One example will suffice. The concept of *mosadi* (woman) is redefined to mean a *complete* adult woman/female person who is a whole person in her own right without any attachment to a male person in marriage. Although the latter definition contrasts diametrically with the African cultural notion that neither a man nor a woman can be considered complete outside the state of marriage (cf the preceding section), such a redefinition of *bosadi* helps to affirm the humanness of an individual African woman or an individual girl child.

The sacred texts of Africa (cf African/Northern Sotho proverbs) and ancient Israel (cf the Hebrew Bible) seem to perpetuate this same mentality that a woman or a man can achieve normative adult humanity only when attached to a man or woman in marriage. See, for example, the story of woman's creation from a man's rib in Genesis 2 (cf. Okure 1992), Tamar's 'dangerous' efforts to fit into a patriarchal framework for widows in Genesis 38 (cf Masenya 2006; Mbuwayesango 2007), the mentality underlying the book of Ruth 1-4 (cf Kanyoro 2002, Masenya 2007), and African proverbs in which the word for *mosadi* (woman) is always equated with wife and mother (cf Masenya 2004).

Biko's philosophy of affirming our integrity as worthy human beings despite factors militating against it may enable African women to read such problematic texts and philosophies not only with caution but also in terms of their own experience. In our heavily patriarchal ecclesial contexts – which, ironically, are populated by a powerless female majority – African women need to learn to read these texts and, more importantly, the text of life itself, neither as people of Caucasian descent, nor as men of African descent, but as what they really are: women of Africa.

6 CONCLUSION

The theme of the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Church History Society of Southern Africa focused on women and issues pertaining to gender. During question time Prof L Jafta told how in one meeting he had highlighted the undesirable state of oppressed women. One woman responded, "Who told you I am oppressed?" One cannot but agree with Biko that if the minds of the oppressed are not transformed, any outward transformation – physical, political or cultural – is unlikely to occur, or if it does, only at a very slow pace.

It follows, then, that those of us who feel the itchiness of the sore of marginalisation and oppression, as well as all members of the human race who are convinced that each of us (irrespective of skin colour, class, age, gender, creed, etc) *is* because of the other, should tirelessly challenge the life-denying forces in our midst.

People must not give in to the hardship of life. People must develop a hope. People must develop some form of security to be together to look at their problems, and people must, in this way, build up their humanity. This is the point about Black Consciousness (Biko, quoted by Woods 1978: 203).

If our predecessors refused to give in to defeat even in the face of mortal danger, what should encourage the present-day oppressed masses to fight hardship? What should inspire us to never to succumb to defeat? Like Steve Bantu Biko, we must boldly and adamantly move into the future with hope that, one day, we shall overcome. As for now, the struggle against racism, patriarchy, poverty, corruption and all forms of social injustice unfortunately continues!

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