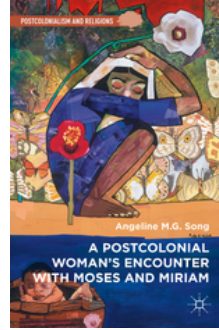


A Postcolonial Woman's Encounter with Moses and Miriam, by Angeline M. G. Song

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Angeline Song's book combines literary and postcolonial methods in a close reading of Exodus 2. After performing a close literary analysis of Exodus 2 using Bal's focalization strategy, she applies insights from her own experience growing up in postcolonial Singapore to understand better the experiences of Moses, Miriam, and other characters in this chapter. Song's book contains some good insights into the characters in Exodus 2, and it exemplifies interdisciplinary biblical scholarship, combining the world within the text (literary criticism) with the world before the text (postcolonial criticism).

Because she foregrounds empathy as a literary tool used to read Moses's birth and youth, Song begins the book with a brief autobiography relevant to her reading of the text (chapter 1). Like Moses, Song was given up for adoption; just as Moses' adoptive father is either nonexistent or unmentioned, Song was raised by a single mom. Song describes some of her experiences as a member of a formerly colonized country still living with the effects of British rule. Song is a member of the Peranakan ethnic group in Singapore, which is still known for collaborating with the British colonial administration and, in Bhabha's terms, mimicking British culture. Song parallels this colonial mimicry with Moses's dual identity as a Hebrew by birth and an Egyptian prince by upbringing. I appreciate Song's frank admittance of some of her own "postcolonial inferiority complex" (e.g., 23–28) and the anxiety and rootlessness of an adoptee (30–32), both of which she later ponders in the person of Moses. This chapter is important because she will later (chapter 6) draw on her experiences to empathetically imagine the psychological dynamics of Moses, his sister, his birth mother, and his adopted mother. Still, while this chapter helps me understand how Song's personal experience impacts her postcolonial lens, it would have been helpful if she had explained her personal reasons for examining the Bible in particular. After all, this book is based on a dissertation in biblical studies from the University of Otago.

In chapters 2–4, Song details the methods she employs in chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 2 describes the method of empathetic reading, which Song

later employs to connect her life experience with Moses's and Miriam's. She begins with a summary of various perspectives on empathy from philosophy and cognitive neuroscience, ultimately defining "empathy" for the purpose of her study on pp. 58–59. For Song, an empathetic reading is "self-specific, self-conscious, and self-reflective" (59–60), and the empathetic reader always has a "similarity bias" toward characters who they perceive as being more like them. The gaps and silences of Hebrew prose narrative, Song writes, actually invite this kind of empathetic reading, since the narrative is often reticent on characters' internal psychological states. Without disagreeing with the need to read any literary text with empathy, a skeptic might wonder whether or not the similarity we imagine with literary characters might be more imagined than real. This is particularly true when studying ancient texts such as the Hebrew Bible, which are written and set in times very different from our own, times which history may not shed much light on. Song could have addressed this problem.

In chapter 3, Song describes the method of postcolonial criticism she will employ in her analysis of Exodus 2. After describing the theoretical contributions of Said and Bhabha and her personal surprise and delight in encountering them, she delineates the contributions of postcolonial biblical scholars in particular to her work. She focuses on Segovia's "flesh-and-blood" reader employing a "hermeneutics of the diaspora," Sugirtharajah's "vernacular hermeneutics," and her own "pragmatic yin yang approach" based on Liew's work. This pragmatic approach combines both literary methods of "the West" with the postcolonial optic of "the Rest" (85). She continues by examining postcolonial feminist thinkers Donaldson and Dube, which she employs later in examining the various female characters surrounding Moses, particularly Miriam. She concludes the chapter by retelling the Malay/Indonesian folktale of *Sang Kancil*, a trickster mouse-deer who uses his brains to outwit bigger creatures' brawn. Song compares herself to this figure in using her brains to "survive—and thrive—in multiple realities if need be" (93). This chapter verges on tedious at times, as much of it is summary, but it has a strong thread of Song's own autobiography running through it that keeps it more lively than a typical literature review.

After specifying both her framework of empathy and her optic of postcolonialism, Song finishes her methodology section in chapter 4, where she introduces Bal's focalization strategies. The focalization method asks: how does the narrator of a story steer its reader toward particular readings of that story? How do the characters within a story point the reader to a partic-

ular reading? In other words: whom and what does a story focalize? For a reading optic concerned with power, one important question for Song is how much Exodus 2 focalizes (and thereby empowers) one character over another. While the method is useful, I had a hard time following some of the elaborate focalizer-focalized schemas Song introduces in this chapter.

After she has elaborated on the hermeneutical toolkit with which she will approach Exodus 2, chapters 5 and 6 dig into the text itself. Chapter 5 employs the focalization method in a line-by-line analysis of the narrative of this chapter, an analysis she builds on in chapter 6 when she applies her empathetic postcolonial optic to the chapter. Because her analysis is lengthy and detailed, I cannot summarize it all; a few of her more insightful points will suffice. Her analysis of 2:6, for example, analyzes the Hebrew closely to see that the narrative repeatedly guides the reader to focus on Moses, even though Pharaoh's daughter is the agent of this sentence. Song finds that this same daughter is given narrative power over other characters because she has a greater ability to focalize the narrative onto others; therefore, "such a narrative structure on the abstract narrative level reinforces the power structure that exists on the story level" (123; cf. 129–30). The narrative of Exodus 2, Song finds, also focuses closely on Moses throughout, and lulls the reader into empathizing with him and taking his perspective (e.g. 134). This close reading of the narrative can seem tedious and technical, but Song finds some interpretive payoffs that really unveil the depth of this story's narrative construction.

The real meat of this book is chapter 6, where Song ties together all the previous chapters into her empathetic postcolonial reading of Exodus 2. Here Song uses her own lived experience as a postcolonial woman to imagine the feelings, thoughts, and motives of Moses, his sister, his birth mother, and his adopted mother. Song remembers the care her adopted mother lavished on her as a child and uses that to imagine what Moses's mom felt like as she built the basket on which he would float down the river (155–57). She imagines Moses's sister as a crafty young girl, able to speak the figurative (and literal) language of the oppressor and sufficiently persuade Pharaoh's daughter to let her find a wet nurse for the baby—an example of the "pragmatic prowess of the powerless," a *Sang Kancil* story of a disempowered, colonized woman using her brains to save her brother's life (165–69). She picks up on the way Pharaoh's daughter immediately recognizes Moses as a Hebrew and speculates on the way physical differences are used by colonizers to Other their colonized subjects (164), and the way she wields her power by getting

to name Moses despite the fact that she does not even care for him as a child (172). As for Moses himself, Song speculates on the “significant silence” (172) of v. 10: how did Moses sustain his sense of Hebrew identity during his childhood? How might the other members of Pharaoh’s family have treated this red-headed stepchild, and how might that have kept Moses’s memory of his birth identity alive as he grew up in the palace? In Song’s empathetic, psychologically insightful reading, Moses’s murder of an Egyptian man (v. 11) is a turning-point in his young adult identity crisis (179–80). The irony is that Moses is now caught between two worlds, rejected with suspicion by both Egyptians and Hebrews (186). Song wonders if Moses ever reconciles his identity anxiety, as shown by his son’s name, “Gershom,” or “a sojourner there” (191–92).

Song ends her close reading of Exodus 2 with that question: “Will the legacy of old, the ghosts of Moses’s past, ever really go away?” (192). Although this book’s birth as a dissertation makes its close focus on one chapter understandable, I was left wishing for more of Song’s close reading of Moses’s character, perhaps an examination of more of the Torah to answer the above question. This book has the typical awkwardness of a dissertation. Song could have condensed the early methodology chapters more; as it was, they took up half the book. As mentioned above, it would also have been instructive to understand why she chose to analyze the Bible in particular. Is this no different from a postcolonial reading of any other work of literature for Song? Is she invested in an ecclesial context for her interpretation? Lastly, her analysis in chapter 6 might have been more effective had she moved thematically rather than verse-by-verse. Despite these shortcomings, this book is a valuable source on the Moses narrative, both for literary and for postcolonial scholars. Given Exodus’s significance in African-American biblical interpretation, it was an interesting counterpoint to read an identity-based reading of Exodus from a different context, and to learn about Singaporean history and culture as it relates to colonization.

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