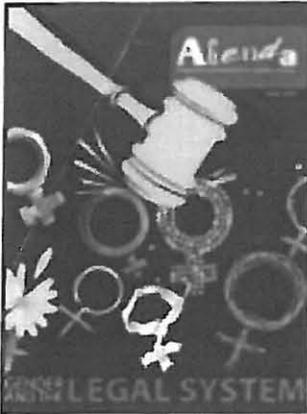


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“Don't touch me on my psychology and religion!” Feminist backlash in a wearable cloak and different voice

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“Don’t touch me on my psychology and religion!” Feminist backlash in a wearable cloak and different voice

Cheryl Potgieter and Sarojini Nadar

abstract

In this article it is argued that feminist successes in South Africa are being ‘overshadowed’ by movements which are essentially anti-feminist and brazenly patriarchal, but which go unchallenged because these movements are protected by the freedom of religion clause in the Constitution. Further, these movements and the messages they preach are drawing large numbers of educated men and women of all ages under the guise of what Nadar (2009) has labelled *Palatable Patriarchy* and what Nadar and Potgieter (2010) have labelled *Formenism*. This article draws on the online advice column run by Gretha Wiid (one of many ‘services’ offered by her) as material for a feminist rhetorical discursive textual analysis, and illustrates how these growing movements are challenging and negating feminist successes with very little (if any) challenge from feminist intellectuals, feminist organisations and especially the State. Two rhetorical discourses emanating from the movement are identified - termed psychologisation and pastoralisation. These movements are offering a space whereby everyday challenges (bankruptcy, global economic crisis, unemployment, marriage problems, crime) of persons from a range of backgrounds are being addressed in “ways” and by people who they identify with and aspire to. In conclusion the article engages with how feminists could respond to these challenges.

keywords

religious movements, South Africa, feminism, backlash, feminist response, psychology, gender

Introduction

Gretha Wiid is the founder and leader of the ‘Worthy Women’ movement. This movement has a number of programmes under its banner, the most popular being a conference called The Worthy Women’s Conference (WWC). This ‘conference’ is meant to parallel the Mighty Men’s

Conference (MMC) and is often held around National Women’s Day (9 August) in various parts of South Africa. It attracts thousands of women, mostly White women but a growing number of Black women are also attending. Both the MMC and WWC movements have been scrutinised through feminist lenses by Nadar (2009) and

Nadar and Potgieter (2010).

In this article we wish to deconstruct the advice given by Gretha Wiid to women in what is constructed as a typical (albeit online) advice column. This advice column forms part of the broader package of the Gretha Wiid movement. The services she offers on her website are varied from children's camps to conferences, DVDs and media events. The aims and objectives of this movement and its beliefs and programmes are available on her website www.grethawiid.co.za. On this website she has a section entitled '*Hoekom ons doen wat ons doen*' ('Why we do what we do'). This is what she has to say about why they started this movement and why she continues with its various programmes (taken from her website and translated from Afrikaans):

"The road that Francois and I were on in terms of our marriage brought us certain insights. We made so many mistakes and we went through so many things – from pornography and adultery to bankruptcy and the emotional hurt of a near divorce. It is our heart's desire to share our experiences with others – not just to give them hope and inspiration about God's healing and forgiveness but also to provide practical help in order to have a great marriage. Many of the things that we engaged in are as a result of the hurts of our childhood. That is why we are passionate that children should know what their value is, and that they should have the privilege to grow up in an emotionally stable home where their parents prioritise love, unconditional acceptance and recognition on a daily basis."

Following her claim to be able to offer help and advice to women in marriages, many women write to Wiid asking for advice. While there are numerous examples of the kind of questions which women ask and the responses which Wiid provides (because they are fairly similar in content and response), we

chose two questions and two responses from Wiid in order to conduct an in-depth analysis.¹

"I am a dynamic woman with a strong personality. How can I be subservient without compromising my personality?" (Anonymous #1)

"I work a full day, have three children, but I feel like a single parent! I battle alone every night with supper, bathing the children, assisting with their homework, really, with EVERYTHING! And my husband? He plonks himself in front of the TV! What do I do before I go mad or run away?" (Anonymous #2)²

Both the above women seeking advice seem deeply troubled, but the latter seems to be desperately seeking a resolution to what seems to be an unbearable situation in her home, as evidenced by her desperate plea for help before she goes "mad" or runs away. The use of exclamation marks, sarcasm and capital letters serves to further emphasise her desperation.

When viewed through a feminist lens, the advice offered to these women from Gretha Wiid is at the very least a cause for disquiet in a country which has made enormous strides in ensuring gender equity. In what follows, we analyse the advice given by Gretha Wiid to these two anonymous women, using a feminist discursive rhetorical analysis, and engage with the two dominant discourses which emerge, which we have labelled *psychologisation* and *pastoralisation*. Following rhetorical theorists such as Steven Hunt (2003: 378), we argue that

"Anything that influences the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of the public, anything within the purview of modern persuasion, can [and must] be the object or subject of criticism. Modern rhetorical critics work not only with political speeches and legal courtroom rhetoric, but also with editorials, pamphlets and monographs, books, docudramas, radio

and television news, movies, music, and even the Internet."

Simply put, rhetorical criticism is an examination of how a text persuades us of its point of view. Feminist rhetorical analysis goes a step further. As Sonja Foss (2004: 157) asserts, feminist rhetorical criticism is "the analysis of rhetoric to discover how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a means for domination and how that process can be challenged so all people understand that they have the capacity to claim agency and act in the world as they choose."

Foss's assertion regarding how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a means for domination is important for our analysis, because we will show how the various discourses emanating from Wiid's responses are used to entrench *formenism*, a concept which has been developed by Nadar and Potgieter (2010: 163):

"Formenism, like masculinism, subscribes to a belief in the inherent superiority of men over women, but unlike masculinism it is not an ideology developed and sustained by men, but an ideology designed, constructed, and sustained by women. Like its phonetics suggests, this is a concept for men – that is to say, men are the chief beneficiaries of the hierarchical social positioning that it advocates."

We illustrate through an analysis of verbatim excerpts from Wiid's responses in her advice column how, what we label the discourse of psychologisation and the discourse of pastoralisation/prophetisation, serve to construct gender roles within a paradigm which promotes and entrenches *formenism*.

Psychologisation

In *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (1991), Nikolas Rose argues that psychology has become one of the most popular means by

which people seek to make meaning out of their everyday life. Rose (1991: 244) calls this process "a psychologization of the mundane" and explains it as:

"... the translation of exigencies from debt, through house purchase, childbirth, marriage, and divorce into 'life events,' problems of coping and maladjustment, in which each is to be addressed by recognizing it as, at root, the space in which are played out forces and determinants of a subjective order (fears, denials, repressions, lack of psycho-social skills) and whose consequences are similarly subjective (neurosis, tension, stress, illness) ... It is pedagogic in that it seeks to educate the subject in the arts of coping. It is subjectifying in that the quotidian affairs of life become the occasion for confession, for introspection, for the internal assumption of responsibility."

While this process is often taken up through an engagement of the services of a professional psychologist, increasingly in religious communities such services are being sought from those with religious authority. One could therefore argue that the 'business' of religion has become a 'business' of psychology too. This point is clearly illustrated through the advice column that is found on the website of Gretha Wiid. By Anonymous #1 and Anonymous #2 writing to Wiid and asking for advice, they set up mutually affirming discursive subject positions, which invariably translate into that of psychologist and client/patient.

There is ample evidence of the way in which the subject position of psychologist is taken up by Wiid throughout the advice column. For example, a psychologist may argue that many problems experienced in adulthood can be traced back to childhood trauma. Wiid draws on the discourse of a psychologist when she advises Anonymous #1 to engage with her husband in a way that would enable him to "repair the hurt of his childhood years when his perception of being a man were formed. If he

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was raised with criticism, refuse to criticise him. Did he as a child first have to attain something before he would be recognised? Honour his mistakes. Did he have a father that did not show any interest? Shower him with attention."

As her advice illustrates, she devolves the man of any responsibility for bad behaviour but blames it on family background, including a father that was emotionally absent.³ Her advice to Anonymous #2 follows a similar argument. Her diagnosis for men's selfish behaviour is attributed to their upbringing. The following excerpt illustrates the point:

"If your husband was always a bit on the lazy side, then this is actually an upbringing and character thing. Although in this case the solution lies with him, you are more likely to get pregnant from an ill wind than him realising this on his own and changing. Remember, tradition determines that housekeeping and children are a woman's work. He is the breadwinner?! Tradition blinds him to the fact that you also

contribute to the household income. In his case, YOU will have to get the ball rolling."

From her advice it is clear that men's behaviour is constructed as inherent, and as a result of culture and "being born that way." Taking the argument to its logical problematic conclusion is that women should not get mad as men are not bad, they are as Potgieter and Reddy (2009: 87) assert: "just behaving in a way which was perfectly acceptable in his [their] culture." Men will not change and therefore it is women who must change. It is because of women's emotional and strategic deficits that men react in selfish ways, as asserted in the next excerpt:

"A man's selfishness and absence ensures that bitterness easily breeds in a woman's heart. This bitterness easily manifests itself in our attitude towards our kings. We walk around the house as if we have a crumb in our bra, or a panty of which the elastic is too tight! We easily take up small issues, unwittingly

form an alliance with the children. The result is an irritating and dead feeling inside. Our irritation easily chases the men to a safe place ... the TV! To break this vicious cycle will firstly need introspection and then a strategic plan.

"Without pointing a finger at you, you should ask yourself if there was a time when your husband was involved with the children and the household? If so, what did his absence cause? Have you done everything to help him, as if his attempts were not 100% correct? Instead of a bit of thankfulness for the bit of help he gives, have you pointed out that which he failed to do? If one of these rings a bell, the solution lays with you."

Her 'psychological' advice is that Anonymous #1 should understand her husband's problem and "not attack his honour or manipulate him to gain control". The language of psychology which Wiid usurps is a current-day discourse which women identify with, but the actual message is one of *formenism* and is a classic example of palatable patriarchy.

Her psychologisation is linked to women being smart, and here again she uses language that is current and is palatable to the contemporary ear. She is Gretha Wiid "the psychologist" that is entrenching so-called liberation through submission. She states "Think a bit about this strategy. Tall order? Remember that it takes a very strong and dynamic woman to let a man be king and against all odds to hold onto God-like strategy." The irony of Wiid's discourse is that she uses progressive almost feminist language with words such as "strong" and "dynamic" to entrench what is essentially patriarchal ideologies. As Potgieter (1997:42) states: "...Discourse is not merely an instrument of communication, but is linked to power."

Furthermore, strategy and strategic plans are concepts which Gretha Wiid's audience of women engage with in their everyday workplaces. However, she uses them to entrench the anti-

feminist *formenist* notion that "the man is king". It is a wife's duty to take on the tasks of making the marriage a good one for "her king" and understanding the role that his childhood played in "the way he is." Gretha Wiid's advice to women draws on a psychological discourse which discourages women to be angry with their husbands, but equally worrying is the fact that it argues for them to not take action, even when there are various forms of abuse similar to what she and her husband experienced. Note the tone of complacency which she encourages Anonymous #2 to adopt regarding her husband, by giving a dangerous example of being submissive to "your king" even when there is violence in the marriage, as she illustrates using her own example:

"When my husband, Francois, and I stood on the brink of divorce, my mother continually reminded me that I should place and keep the crown on his head. I threw a tantrum and made a thousand excuses. I had walked the difficult path of pornography, adultery (and sometimes violence also) with my husband."

Our laws in South Africa encourage women to take action for various forms of abuse, but Gretha Wiid's message argues against the route of women using the law to protect them. She also advises that children should grow up in emotionally stable homes. We would argue that a home where the man is king and the woman submissive is not one that we would classify as emotionally stable, yet here again the patriarchal discourse which argues for women's submission to the king and head of the household is cloaked in current-day psychology language – similar language to that popularised by women's magazines and talkshow hosts.

An important and fundamental question that should be posed is: if women have agency, why are they 'buying' into the *formenism* discourse which Wiid promulgates? Our understanding is linked to the psychologisation and internalisation

of ideology, especially because the ideology is sacred, but also because male dominance is portrayed as benevolent and as rewarding. (For example, she ends her advice to Anonymous #1 with the words: "Remember, extra assistance/help is at risk.") As Stopler (2008: 380) notes about patriarchal discourse:

"Dominance is disguised as benevolence, and sexism – the ideology of male supremacy and superiority over women – serves as the 'factual' basis that explains to women why they need this form of paternalism while simultaneously allowing men to convince themselves that they are only acting in everyone's, especially women's, best interests ... Because women's subordination is maintained primarily through paternalistic dominance within the structure of the family, which is traditionally understood as a haven of loving relations, it lends particular credibility to the claim that benevolent domination obscures the political implications of women's subordination."

Ideologies offer explanations for the real world in which people live, and Wiid in her message is helping her followers make sense of issues such as "why the husband is beating her and cheating" or alternatively "why they are on the verge of divorce" or "why he is unemployed and not making an effort to find work". In each of these cases the leader (Wiid) provides a response which encourages women to see the benevolent aspects of obedience to patriarchy. As she says to Anonymous #1, "I want to challenge you today to be strategic about your husband's headmanship. Crown him as the king in your home and pluck the sweet fruits of being treated as a queen." Wiid is creating the opportunity for women to have an illusion of control to effect changes in their lives, which is the function of an ideology of patriarchy. "Depending upon the quality of leadership and the leaders' capacity for compelling, even charismatic,

action the community of followers expands or declines" (Lipman-Blumen 1995: 121).

Through the 'psychologisation of the mundane' Wiid is setting the agenda for women to be in relationships where the power lies with the man. In the next section we look at how Wiid sets up a pastoralisation or prophetisation discourse, and how this too affirms and entrenches a formenist discourse.

Pastoralisation and prophetisation

One of the first things that Gretha Wiid 'shares' with Anonymous #1, who asks how she can be subservient while being dynamic, is that "God is mad about dynamic women." By making this statement, Wiid takes on the role of a prophet, but also surpasses it. A prophet is regarded as a person of authority who speaks through divine inspiration or conveys what God is saying, typically through the use of the phrase "Thus says the Lord." By asserting what God feels (God is mad about dynamic women) and what God does (God uses them), Wiid immediately establishes herself as an authority. She wields the power of a prophet and a pastor (even though she has training in neither).

Speaking of the United States of America, Hunt (2003: 378) makes the point that "our cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes are (also) prominently affected by religious leaders...". Hunt's assertion holds even more true in a continent like Africa, which has been described by the African philosopher John Mbiti as "notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1990: 1). By establishing herself as a religious leader (a prophet and a priest), Wiid imbues herself with a particular authority. In traditional Aristotelean rhetorical terms she imbues herself with a particular ethos. The *ethos* of a speaker encompasses those characteristics which establish authority and credibility. While post-modern rhetorical theorists such as Reynolds argue that ethos is not fixed and "changes over time, across texts and around competing spaces" (Reynolds, 1993: 330), we would still maintain that religious ethos has a particular credibility, especially to believing audiences.

So, the inherent patriarchy within the discourses of Gretha Wiid becomes masked and neutralised by the 'ethics of character' she establishes through what she portrays as a prophet and her priestly role. Hence her believing audience do not hear Gretha Wiid's voice anymore, but God's voice! She becomes the mediator. Edwin Black (1988: 136) notes the way a person's "real identity" becomes masked through this process of ethos creation:

"When, for example, the judge is robed, the garment neutralizes the individual appearance; it depersonalizes the wearer. The person is concealed. Similarly, the white sheet of the Klansman obscures an angry redneck, and proposes instead an embodiment of social interests and moral emotions. It is, indeed, not the person but the role that is elevated and the subordination of the person to the costume assists this process."

In the same way that the white sheet masks the racist ideology of the Klansman, feigning a 'communal interest', Gretha Wiid's religious ethos masks the sexism and patriarchy lurking beneath. The religious ethos is combined with a rhetoric of pathos for maximum effect. The pathos is harnessed for full effect through the process of identification with her autobiographical narrative, which she invites the reader to share in.

"When my husband, Francois, and I stood on the brink of divorce, my mother continually reminded me that I should place and keep the crown on his head. I threw a tantrum and made a thousand excuses. I had walked the difficult path of pornography, adultery (and sometimes violence also) with my husband. I wanted to stand on the top of the mountain and shout: 'Why should I submit to someone the does not even serve God and definitely does not show Jesus' love for me? And why should I be the one to show kindness when

God is the one who makes me strong!' You can probably identify with this feeling. But my challenge stands: If today you are prepared to buy into a few basic plans, you may eventually be blessed with a changed man (such as my Francois) who respects your opinions and is proud of your strong personality."

Hence, the combination of ethos (the authority of the priestly and prophetic role she sets up for herself) as well as pathos (the emotional autobiographical narrative she invites the reader to participate in) places Anonymous #1 and #2 under the powerful influence of *formenism* that is being entrenched within Wiid's discourses.

While we agree with post-structuralist feminist thought that would contend that Anonymous #1 and #2 are not merely powerless and ignorant subjects of Gretha Wiid's control, we would nevertheless argue that the ethos and pathos established through the genre of an advice column and bolstered by Wiid's prophetic and priestly claims begs an analysis of the power dynamics present in these discourses. The role of psychologist and priest which are conjured up in the advice columns cause women not to reject the discourses.

However, as Stopler (2008: 378) notes:

"Patriarchal religions are not alone in using male domination of knowledge and truth to control women ... scientific, psychological, and cultural male-generated 'truths' have served, as late as the second half of the twentieth century, to reduce women to the role of complacent, procreative machines. The hegemony of patriarchy is subsequently maintained through mutually reaffirming religious, cultural, and scientific knowledge and discourses."

This religious authority combined with the psychological authority is, we would argue, a potent force for patriarchy.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have attempted to show ways in which religious discourses are entrenching patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa. While this is happening 'under our noses', so to speak, it can be argued that in the past decade and a half South Africa cannot claim any broad-based womanist or feminist movement, be it linked to a party political agenda or one that is based within civil society.

While movements for gender justice have been slack, we have illustrated through our analysis of the Gretha Wiid movement that such essentially anti-feminist movements or what we label formenist movements are growing.

It must be noted that within the field of religion and theology, there has been a strong movement, called the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle), which has been agitating for change of the patriarchal structures within religion and culture. The Circle was started in 1989 by Ghanaian feminist theologian Mercy Oduyoye. In its 21 years of existence the Circle has published over 100 books, and several hundred articles. While the Circle is a strong and vibrant movement, it remains an academic movement, and its theologies have not penetrated popular grassroots women's movements. More reflection around how the liberating theologies of the Circle can be harnessed against oppressive theologies such as those peddled by Wiid needs to be undertaken.

The discourses present in these movements are dangerous in the sense that they are very subtly challenging and in fact arguing against the 'spirit' of the Constitution. The movement is anti-gay (homophobic), anti-equality between men and women, and we would go as far as to argue that its message is one that does not support a Constitution that is secular. It is thus rupturing the post-apartheid State's message as regards women's rights, with little challenge from political parties, civil society organisations or even from academic feminists other than Nadar (2009) and Potgieter and Nadar (2010).

There are at least two reasons why this is so. Firstly, because the assumption is that movements such as these are mainly supported by mostly White middle and upper working class women, and is thus not affecting Black women (irrespective of class), and therefore does not warrant the attention of feminist activists, feminist academics, civil society or the State. We contend that this is a dangerous denial and mistake. We cannot and must not under-estimate or overlook Mbiti's (1990) statement that Africans are "notoriously religious." A growing body of research indicates that while the Global North has entrenched secularity, Africa is leaning towards conservative interpretations of religion discourses. One just has to take note of the homophobic discourses in countries such as Zimbabwe, Uganda and Malawi which look to The Bible to defend their stance.

That this online column and Gretha Wiid's conferences take place within the safe and protected (by the Constitutional right to freedom of religion) space of religion, means that feminists and the State have been reluctant to engage with the anti-feminist messages and in fact ideology of these meetings. Religious belief is therefore one of the answers to Weedon's (1996: 1) question "why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men."

Feminists ignore patriarchal religion at our own peril. As Stopler (2008: 386) argues:

"The assumption that by simply ignoring patriarchal religion and its misogynistic teachings it is possible to negate their current influence remains as futile as the assumption that by simply ignoring power we negate its existence ... The consequences of women's inequality within religion and culture are far reaching."

Footnotes

- 1 Additional examples can be found on her website.
- 2 All quotations on the advice column are taken from <http://grethawiid.co.za/menu-huwelik-god-se-plan> accessed on 16 August 2010.

3 Again here too her advice seems to follow classic Freudian psychoanalysis. In terms of infantile trauma Freud would argue that "one must always look to the childhood history of the individual" (Hook 118).

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