

Nadar, Sarojini. *Gender, Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther: Engaging Texts of Terror(ism)*. Oxon: Routledge, 2025.

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SHORT BIO

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On October 28, 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the Israeli soldiers he met with at military bases “are committed to eradicating this evil from the world, for our existence, and I add, for the good of all humanity”. He followed this with a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:17, “remember what Amalek did to you”.¹ Since the attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the field of Biblical Studies has been, and remains, divided. Even with blatant (mis)use of the biblical text, biblical scholars—like much of the general public—are being swiftly silenced and labeled as antisemitic for any critique of the modern-day nation-state of Israel. Sarojini Nadar’s book, both unfortunately timely and absolutely needed, explicitly addresses and redresses this popular reading that conflates Palestinians with Amalek. Utilizing a decolonial feminist lens, Nadar links the harem and the herem in the Masoretic Text of Esther, forcing readers to “grapple with uncomfortable

¹ Press Release, “Statement by PM Netanyahu,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2023, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023>.

truths: how victims can become perpetrators, how divine favour can be weaponized, and how sacred narratives continue to justify terror in our own time”.²

Following a preface, Nadar’s monograph is split into seven dense, but digestible, chapters. The first chapter acts as an introduction, guiding readers who might be less familiar with both storytelling and literary-based approaches to biblical interpretation and helping to unsettle the familiarity many have with the book of Esther. Moreover, Nadar assists more hardline, historical, biblical scholars in recognizing the necessity of a contextual stance that is not divorced from the material implications and lived realities of sacred texts. Grounded in African liberative, feminist hermeneutics, she demonstrates how a focus on the intersections of gender and religion form a particular economy of violence, à la Achille Mbembe, that “sanction and enact forms of social [and actual] death”,³ targeting specific bodies that are constructed as the enemy and the other in Esther. This concept forms the bridge to Chapter Two, where these frameworks provide a helpful analysis of the power dynamics in the narrative logic of Esther. Naturally, underpinning “sacred economies of violence” creates a double standard in which violence done by the “right” people is rendered righteous and justified, but violence enacted by the “wrong” people is considered terrorism. As Nadar rightfully shows, this is also pervasive amongst biblical scholars who repeatedly excuse and sanitize the violence found in Esther. Even feminist scholars, who often focus too narrowly on gendered aspects, are deserving of the correction provided in this chapter.

Chapter Three moves us into the biblical text itself, as Nadar revisits her previous work on Esther, specifically, the character Vashti. While the Book of Esther provides no mention of a deity, the scenes involving Vashti, indeed, highlight the stakes that other characters in this ancient Persian regime must face. A reading that seeks out the sacred economies of violence in the text understands that Vashti’s erasure makes visible the hidden ideologies of “chosen-ness”. If one interprets Vashti’s removal as solely prefiguring “the potential annihilation of the Jews while neglecting its equally significant resonance with the actual erasure of the Gentiles at the narrative’s

² Sarojini Nadar, *Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther: Engaging Texts of Terror(ism)* (Oxon: Routledge, 2025), xv.

³ Nadar, *Genocide*, 10.

conclusion”, one has inadvertently bought into the “prioritization of Jewish survival over the broader mechanisms of exclusion that the narrative perpetuates”.⁴ Esther begins and ends its tale as a political horror. The failure of many academics to account for the ethno-religious undertones that frame the text is damning. As Nadar further articulates in Chapter Four, the narrative mechanisms of “invisibility, invalidation, and erasure” that can be found in the treatment of Vashti are also found in the portrayal of the unnamed virgins—and eunuchs(!)—that are trafficked for the King’s pleasure in Esther 2:1-4 and 8-19. These bodies, commodified and abused, remain in obscurity and violation “in service to the preservation of the chosen people”.⁵ Nadar, in feminist tradition, names one of the virgins, Makhera-Devi,⁶ to validate their suffering and disrupt their objectification.

The final chapters of the book focus on the character of Esther and her relationships with the main male characters. As the introduction of the Jewish characters in the story is held together with language of vulnerability and victimhood, Esther is often read as a tale of legitimate violence. Nadar, however, clearly illustrates that this language is wielded as weapon to undergird “a complex dynamic of superiority”.⁷ Although the world of this ancient Persian regime “normalizes the expectation of death, with little regard for the sanctity of life,”⁸ Esther and Mordecai do not just navigate sacred economies of violence but, rather, are complicit and enmeshed in perpetrating and upholding these economies. The sixth chapter unpacks the trope of Amalek as embodied by the villain of Esther, Haman the Agagite, and the never-ending cycle of violence is still anticipated by the close of the book.

The concluding chapter asks what many readers are already thinking: “Can Esther be engaged in ways that resist its own narratives of oppression?”⁹ There have been many who seek to read this book in ways that are

⁴ Nadar, *Genocide*, 32.

⁵ Nadar, *Genocide*, 47.

⁶ Nadar, *Genocide*, 57. Makhera, meaning “suffering” in Amharic, coupled with Devi, meaning “goddess” in Sanskrit, evokes a poignant juxtaposition of suffering and divinity, and the cultural heritages of the empire (Persian, see Esther 1:1) that stretched from India to Ethiopia. The name juxtaposes the weight of their trauma with an affirmation of their divine dignity.

⁷ Nadar, *Genocide*, 72.

⁸ Nadar, *Genocide*, 76.

⁹ Nadar, *Genocide*, 107.

transformative, such as those Nadar mentions that view the text as one containing an ironic, generative critique, reimagining Purim festivals and reading Amalek as metaphor. Nadar instead offers the proposal(s) for liberative readings that center the epistemologies of the materially oppressed, marginalized bible scholars and narrative methodologies, thus paving the future for just interpretations of Esther. Both the past and the present ask us to confront the inequitable valuation of lives, including how we read sacred texts.

As part of the Routledge series “Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible,” in which there is a tight word count limitation, Nadar’s ability to communicate with these strains is astonishing. Although I would have wished to see a decolonial reckoning of the ever-complicated and upsetting ways those who are minoritized and minorities in spaces choose to buy-in to the dominant matrices of power, that of a “colonial logic”, this topic alone would likely need its own book. In a world marked by a kind of “emotional capitalism” that privileges the imaginary suffering of the powerful who claim to be victims at the expense of those actually and structurally vulnerable,¹⁰ we are, and have been, in desperate need of a reorientation. Befitting of a professor who holds the Desmond Tutu chair in Religion and Social Justice, Nadar’s book is clear, incisive, and unflinching about the costs of supremacy and exceptionalism of any kind. This brief work serves as an honest reckoning for both the field of biblical studies and the world. The rest of the story remains open as her book ends: will we refuse to pay these costs? It is up to us to tell good stories. “Once upon a time...”¹¹

¹⁰ See Lilie Chouliaraki, *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024); Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Nadar, *Genocide*, 118.