

FREEDOM IN BONDAGE: BLACK FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to portray the situation of a Black Christian woman in South Africa, thus, the condition of a woman in the church. Despite the fact that the Bible proclaims God as redeemer (OT) and Jesus as saviour (NT), the Black Christian woman in South Africa finds herself in bondage. She is (supposed to be) free in Christ but this freedom cannot be fully realized because she is always in chains. There is therefore an urgent need for a relevant hermeneutics in order to rescue her.

The Black woman in South Africa, unlike her White counterpart is always 'bound'. She is the object of oppression from almost all sectors of society (excluding Black children). Even the latter becomes questionable on the basis of the attitude that modern youth has towards parents today (Masenya 1989:9, 144). These women can be referred to as 'the roots of oppression' to quote Cutrufelli (1983). They suffer a trilogy of oppression (racism, classism and sexism) and therefore Black feminists, unlike their White counterparts, fully grasp the interrelatedness of sex, race and class oppression (Hooks 1984: 14; Cochrane 1991:25).

Being bombarded by this oppressive setting, William (1990:24) poses the following questions:

I wonder which of the many oppressions in my female-ness and in my blackness weigh the heaviest on me. Which of the many liberations do I thirst for most? Do I thirst most of all to be liberated from my colour, from my class, my ignorance of my tradition, from economic domination? Or is it the liberation from all male domination that women all over the world are struggling for today?

1 BLACK WOMEN : THE ROOTS OF OPPRESSION

The three forms of oppression from which the Black (Christian) woman is the victim are foregrounded in the following paragraphs in order to highlight the bondage of this woman.

It becomes frustrating for a person who identifies with God as creator and redeemer to realize that her oppression is caused by her nature as a Black and as a woman. This frustration is caused by the fact that she is not in a position to improve (if this is necessary) or to change her nature as given by God. If as Christians, we believe that man (ha-adam Gn 1:26) which implies undifferentiated humanity (cf Swidler 1979:76-77) and not only males or Whites, was created in God's image, it becomes un-necessary to despise oneself or to allow people to look down upon one as a Black woman, particularly a woman in the Church.

The issue of class oppression also becomes an almost insur-mountable problem for a Black (woman) in South Africa, for in this country class and racial discrimination go hand in glove. As a Black woman, a member of the second race and of the second sex, one can only hope to qualify for membership of a second or even lower class.

Race

Blacks (including women) in South Africa suffered oppression from Whites just because of their God-given colour. The White missionaries who brought the Bible and established churches among Blacks in this country impressed up on them that they were destined to be slaves for Whites and that the latter state of affairs was God-ordained. They therefore used the Bible as a tool of oppression. A socio-political system was built in such a way that a few White South Africans should have tremendous power over many Black people, their land and all the other resources in the country (economic, religious, political, and social; William 1990:25).

They were thus in a position to shape almost all spheres of life to serve their own (not God's) ends at the expense of Blacks and unfortunately this was done in the name of the Bible or of God. The God of the Bible is, however, a God of the oppressed, the poor and the despised of society. This liberating message of the Bible was missed by Blacks in missionary encounters

with the Whites. In there they were socialised to regard Whites as super-humans and to regard themselves as less than humans just because of their colour. Even though the Bible (the Church) proclaims the freedom brought by Christ, the Blacks (including Christian women) do not experience this freedom fully.

Previously, I mentioned that Black women, unlike their White counterparts, are in the worst condition of oppression. A Black woman's position is at the bottom of the occupational ladder. White women can be the victims of sexism (by White men) but racism allows them to oppress Blacks (men and women); Black men may be the victims of racism but sexism allows them to exploit and oppress Black women (Mashinini 1991:350-351; Mpumlwana 1991: 380).

The preceding portrayal becomes unfortunate for a Black woman who identifies with the Bible and turns to religion (Christianity) as a crutch. In black communities, with no access to expensive and more sophisticated forms of social activities, religion tends to be pivotal in the individual's life (Sampson 1991:55). The Bible message was supposed to be liberatory in this setting; this is however, not the case. Hence, these women fail to experience the complete liberation that the era of Christ has ushered. To use the words of Sakefeld (1986:60), these women scarcely experience the '... *shalom*, wholeness or salvation in the broadest and deepest sense of the term'.

Class

Class, race and sex as factors contributing to the oppression of Black women are interrelated. In South Africa, Blacks auto-matically qualify as the lower class due the economic exploitation suffered from the White minority. For the South African Black, race becomes a criterion to qualify the class to which he/she belongs. Due to this political, social and economic deprivation, Blacks could only qualify as the have-nots and thus as members of a lower class. A Black (Christian) woman, as a member of the Black community is the most exploited person in the community. The average Black South African woman is a domestic or farm worker. Domestic workers are the most exploited working group in South Africa. As they are not protected by any laws, they are at the complete disposal of their workers (cf William 1990:25-35; Lawson 1986). Bonnet as quoted by Mandew (1991:122) calls

them '... a rightless group of people who can be exploited in the labour market'.

In such situations, Black women become the object of oppression by a fellow woman who has advantage over her and treats her as slave because of her race. This is not only unique to domestic workers in the Whites' houses. Black women (sometimes under the guise of apartheid, because the latter deprived them of good economic backgrounds) also have the tendency of exploiting fellow Black women. The story of Sarah's treatment of Hagar in the Old Testament also portrays how a female can exploit another female in a position of lesser power. The Black Christian woman is not immune from situations such as these. A Christian woman who finds herself in this condition fails to perceive clearly the liberatory message of the evangelist Luke in 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to set at liberty those who are oppressed ... to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

In lieu of this situation in which Black (Christian) women find themselves, there is a need for a hermeneutics that will liberate them completely.

Sex

A Black (Christian) woman like all other women, is subject to discrimination because of her sex. The domination of women by men is not unique to South Africa; it is universal. In South Africa it took a unique shape for Black women through the combination of racism and sexism. This universal oppression of women is rooted in the phenomenon of patriarchy. The latter indicates the legal, economic and social system that justifies and enforces the sovereignty of the male head of the family over the other members. In such a situation, women, children, workers and property become subject to male heads of families, tribes and societies. Feminists have come to realize how race, gender and class are intertwined to maintain patriarchy in many countries (particularly in Black contexts (Ackermann et al 1991:xvi).

A Black (Christian) woman in South Africa finds herself subjected to patriarchy almost everywhere: (in the work situation (cf the above mentioned section on class), in the family and even in the church.

Family

African culture, like most world cultures (including the cultures that produced the Bible) is patriarchal. The Father is the head of the family. As head he is given all the honour by family members. A wife falls within the category of 'children'. In such family settings, the decisions taken by the heads tend to be final. Some African proverbs reflect on this low status of women and the superiority of men. As a Black/African girl grows, she is under the authority of her parents and confined only to the home under the care of her mother. In this setting, girls are hindered from exercising their intellect and gifts if they go beyond the expected norms. 'By the time the girls are big and they get married, they know what their role is : to serve their husbands with their bodies and strength i.e. cooking, washing etc. If a girl does not do that, she is regarded as abnormal' (Mpumlwana 1991:383).

In an African setting, parents can decide for the girl that she is to be married to a *paternal* relative. In marriage, she becomes subject to the authority of her husband (Christian husbands read this attitude from the Bible) and the in-laws (particularly the mother-in-law). If the latter happens to have a son who is easily controlled by her, the situation becomes very difficult for the bride because the oppression then comes directly from her mother-in-law. In such a situation, the bride is expected to 'prove herself' to be a *woman*. Being 'a woman' in African culture means being a 'super human', for a woman is not expected to be tired. The bride is expected to be a full time domestic servant for the whole family, serving even those who are traditionally expected to engage in household chores, the daughters of that family. This is expected because, as the bride, she must prove that the lobola paid for her was not in vain. This situation is rife in African families, even in Christian-orientated families, particularly in rural areas.

In such a setting, even if the husband is concerned about his wife and would wish to relieve her from some of the duties (though this is mostly unheard of among Black men), he would be looked down upon in ridicule and scorn, particularly by his mother. This situation would remain almost perma-

ment if the couple were to remain permanently in the family of the husband (the latter state of affairs is normal particularly if the man is the youngest son in the family). Even if it becomes possible for the son to leave his house and stay with his wife only, the Black (Christian) woman's situation of bondage still remains. Black men, including Christians, feel that they are not obliged to help in household chores. This situation sometimes leads to conflicts for women as well as men engaged in full time jobs (Kayongo-Male & Oyango 1984:20). Back home from their work situations, the woman in line with the Scriptures and the culture, as it were, is expected to run up and down and serve the husband whose supposed contribution to the family (or to himself) is watching the television or reading the newspaper.

I would agree with Bam (1991:367) men such as these use culture as an excuse not to work in the house. It becomes comfortable for them to use culture and religion for their own convenience. Many aspects of our culture which have proved contrary to Christianity, however, have been changed; in this respect, however, where a husband is supposed to show his love to his wife and to 'nourish her as his own body' the husband fails. Culture, significant as it may be, must not remain static. Under this situation, the Christian woman finds it difficult to reconcile her husband's behaviour with that of Christ, who though he was God, became a servant for our redemption. A Christian woman, though free in Christ, is always in chains.

The Church

The church that preaches liberation and the value of human beings in Christ unfortunately fails to practise that which it preaches. This church, which preaches justice and equality, has been regulated by patriarchy through the years.

On answering the question why this has been the case, why the Church of Christ could perpetuate a system that is opposed to justice and equality (i.e. patriarchy), feminist theologians argue that patriarchy has been persistent due to its religious legitimation which is found in most cultures (Mandew 1991:120).

Patriarchal societies perceived God as a male and thus every male as next to God. A male thus serves as a model human being vis-a-vis a sinful being (hence, a less godly one) - a female. As a result of this patriarchal world-

view, the Church, including the Black church, becomes male-dominated. Women may engage in menial tasks but major decision making is done solely by men or in some circles mostly by men. In the Black church lay leadership is practised by males, even the ordination to ministry (except for a few cases) belongs to men. Some Christian men are still influenced by culture, tradition and the wrong interpretation of Scriptures that femininity cannot lead (Mncube 1991:358; Mandew 1991:126; Mpumlwana 1991: 374-375). One wonders if the new era of salvation heralded by Christ is not above all these (culture, tradition etc). Black women in these churches have little or no freedom to enjoy.

The wrong use of Scripture (mostly always in favour of men against women) by men and by elderly women serve to oppress the Christian woman. Elderly women tend to accept the Bible un-critically taking it as the undisputed word of God (Sampson 1991:56). Deviating from such traditional conservative interpretation of Scripture is unheard of, because one may be designated 'a liberal', 'a backslider' et cetera. Due to the spirit of corporeality typical of Africans, the best a Christian woman can do in this context is to succumb. She thus remains bound, though free, in Christ.

This male church unfortunately fails to copy Christ's example, Christ never looked down upon women nor dehumanized them. When Christ sets us free, we become free indeed. It is high time that Christians in the male-dominated churches take these words of Christ seriously. They need to recognize that as long as gender discrimination persists in churches, they themselves can never become free and whole (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann, J 1974:14).

Most Christian women particularly in Black churches, still value the Bible as a source of divine revelation and as a norm for their lives. From the Bible they understand God to be the redeemer of people, to be the one who identifies with the oppressed; however, due to among others, wrong interpretation of Scriptures, women cannot fully enjoy their freedom in Christ. This situation may not be allowed to continue any longer, particularly in the church for :

The very beginnings of humankind are challenged when living in the face of these demoralizing, dehumanising conditions. It takes a super-human being to survive. These dehumanizing conditions are totally out of line with God's intention as at creation (Jordaan 1987:43).

A need therefore arises for a hermeneutics that will appropriate the liberatory message of the Bible to the oppressed majorities, to the Black (Christian) women. They must be completely free; this freedom they can attain with the co-operation of their oppressors, in particular Black men. Those oppressors should be willing to accept necessary changes, even if these would mean uprooting their long-held precious biases. There is an urgent need for a Black feminist theology; a theology that would acknowledge that '... it is no accident that God created a human being called a woman, a Black woman, in God's own image for God's sovereign purposes ... She has all the reasons to fight (as a member of the Black race and as a member of the female sex) for her human rights, particularly in view of the new freedom in Christ' (Masenya 1993:9).

1 BLACK FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

In Black Christian communities, the Bible still plays a pivotal role in shaping people's lives. In view of the great impact Christianity played on the African continent in the past years and also in view of the religious outlook on life typical of Africans, I perceive that there will be few, if any, revolutionary feminists in Africa, that is, feminists who do not see any hope in the Bible as a tool for the liberation of women (Sakenfeld 1985:63-64).

According to Cady Stanton (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:11) a scholarly feminist interpretation of the Bible is politically necessary for i) throughout history and specifically today, the Bible has been used for the oppression of women and also to hinder their liberation (cf the situation in Black churches).

ii) Not only men but particularly women (cf the great majority of women vis-a-vis men in Black Christian churches) faithfully believe in the Bible as God's word and for both man and woman, the Bible has much authority.

iii) Reform should not be limited to one area of society; one cannot reform the law and other cultural institutions without reforming Biblical religion which contends that the Bible is holy Scripture.

The Bible and the Christian religion has been used previously to subject women due to, among others, improper methods of interpretation. There is a need, particularly in the Black Christian Church (I cite this setting because

this is the immediate setting which was supposed to prove liberatory for the Black Christian woman and one which has much impact on the whole life of the woman) for a revision of the methods of interpretation. These methods should take into serious consideration the conditions under which Black women live. These women should come to a realistic appreciation of the Biblical message of God as a redeemer. This can be achieved through women's commitment to the struggle against their oppression and also through the co-operation of the oppressors, in particular the Black men for the latter are their immediate oppressors (cf sections on the family and the church above).

Black feminist hermeneutics will have to consider the world which produced the text. More harm has been done to Scriptural interpretation due to literal interpretations assigned to the Bible in Black churches (Cochrane 1991:23). The background (cultural, religious, social, historical) information to the Biblical text should be a prerequisite to understanding the meaning of the text to the modern reader (Carmody 1988:6).

Black feminist interpreters should take note that, just as the experiences of those who actively participated in the process of producing the Bible were significant, the experience of modern readers (Black Christian women in this context) is significant in the production of the meaning of the Biblical text. Hermeneutics should thus consider the experience of the Black woman with a view to making her embrace the reality of God as liberator. Thus, to use West's (1991:83) terminology, Black feminist interpreters should read 'in front of the text'. This approach to Scripture is helpful because a (Biblical) text has the capability of projecting a future possible world, a world in front of the text, a world which the text realistically proposes for the reader (Schneiders in West (1991:84-85). In this case, those who accuse the Biblical text may be partly answered, for the oppressiveness of the text serves a twofold function i) to act as witness to that from which we have been saved and ii) to challenge us to act for the course of justice (Schneiders 1989:9 as quoted by West 1991:85).

Black feminist interpreters will, like all other feminists, move from the point of departure of radical suspicion. Patriarchy, played a crucial role in the composition and reduction of the Bible, hence a frank and often painful assessment of the extent of patriarchal bias in the text provides an honest starting point of how the tradition can be meaningful today (Sakenfeld

1986:55-56). This assessment also becomes relevant for a Black feminist Christian because her experience of patriarchy is intensive: in the church through the shallow methods of exegesis and in the family through an African culture with its emphasis on hierarchy.

Sakenfeld (1986:56-63) indicates three emphases that Christian feminists use to approach the text of the Bible. In the following paragraphs a review of each option will be made and how each may contribute meaningfully to Black feminist hermeneutics.

Option 1: Looking to texts *about* women to counteract well-known texts used *against* women.

Under this option, feminists i) reinterpret some of the famous texts and ii) foreground 'forgotten' texts which present women in a positive light. The following examples will suffice: Genesis 2-3 in this option suggests fresh interpretations that are not so negative to women; for example, the creation of a woman out of the rib of a man may mean that as the last person in creation (cf human being as the last item in creation but ultimately the crown of creation in Gn 1) she is a ruler (cf Phyllis Trible in Swidler 1979:78). The discussion on marriage in Ephesians 5 is often approached from the point of emphasis of the theme of mutual subjection that initiates the pericope in V 21 (cf Ward Gasque 1988:8) etc.

Added to this approach, is the new emphasis on the texts that appear to be positive to women (e g Gal 3:28) according to which in view of the new dispensation brought by Christ, both male and female are one and thus equal in Him. This new affirmation in Christ should be viewed by the oppressors of Black Christian woman as being above ideology, tradition, etc.

Included in this approach is the attitude of Jesus' relationship with women as indicated in the gospels, and the leadership roles of women in Scripture (Sakenfeld 1986:57). In this regard, the foregrounding of Jesus' or God's encounters with *despised* women (Mary the poor woman (cf class), the Samaritan woman (race), God's visitation to Hagar (race) could be appealing to the Black Christian woman.

In this option, Jesus' attitude is viewed as exceptional and even revolutionary for his time, an attitude reflecting a critique of the patriarchy of his day and all times. The main advantage of this option is that it focuses attention

on the various Biblical witnesses about women and the retrieval of forgotten or 'lost' positive texts and traditions.

Though this option has its own limitations, it can contribute positively to Black feminist hermeneutics because:

i) It neutralizes male-biased Biblical interpretations by foregrounding women and making them realize that they too (despised as they may be) have a place in God's book, the Bible.

ii) Through this option, Black Christian women will come to an appreciation that the God of the Bible also used women (despite the low esteem they were given by the culture of their time) for God's sovereign purposes (Deborah, Meriam, Mary etc).

iii) Through this approach, Black Christian women will appreciate their Saviour's attitude towards women. This last point I hope, will be even more appealing to these women. One of their chief purposes in life is to follow the example of Christ and to lead lives worthy of Him. That is why such women never tire in their efforts for they *believe* that Christ became a human being to save them, that He now lives to intercede for them and that Christ will eventually liberate them. \$\$

Option 2: Looking to the Bible generally for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy.

In this option, the Bible is approached with a view to establishing the essence of the gospel and applying this to women. What is significant in the Bible according to this approach is understanding how God dealt with the world through Jesus of Nazareth. The key reflection for feminists here falls within the larger option of liberation theology. Hence emphasis in this approach is on the overall redemptive message of the Bible. Reuther, one of the proponents of this option, refers to it as a prophetic-liberating tradition of Biblical faith. According to her, this tradition has four essential themes: i) God's defence and vindication of the oppressed ii) the critique of the main systems of power and those in power, iii) the vision of the coming of the new age iv) a critique of ideology or of religion (Reuther 1983 as quoted by West 1991:85).

This option will still be relevant for Black feminist hermeneutics as it highlights the theme of God as redeemer through Jesus Christ. This theme is

of significance for a Black Christian woman because her perception of her relationship with Christ is that of one who, though she was bound by sin and therefore lost, was found by the loving Saviour.

Liberation as a theme is of course relevant to all feminist hermeneutics.

Option 3: Looking to texts about women to learn more from the history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.

In this option, texts about women are used to address the condition of women as oppressed persons due to their sex and as people yearning for freedom. The Bible is viewed as an instrument used by God to show women their true condition as the oppressed group and who are however, endowed with a vision of a different heaven and earth and different models of how to live toward that vision (Sakenfeld 1986:62). The main strength of this approach is that women (including Black women) may appropriate the Biblical tradition by identifying with the women in the Bible in their oppression as well as in their exercise of freedom.

Through the use of one or more of these approaches, some feminists find themselves drifting away from the Bible, as they do not find it to be a suitable tool for the course of their struggle. As I mentioned earlier on, this may scarcely be the case in the Black church because the average Black Christian woman primarily focuses on her relationship with Christ as it is reflected in the Bible, and secondly, she accepts the Bible as her norm. In it, she finds the revelation of God (the redeemer) through Christ (the saviour); thus, with appropriate hermeneutics, one which recognizes her as a full partner with man in God's plan for the world, this woman, who is in bondage, can attain complete freedom in Christ.

This paper highlights the urgent need for feminist (Black) hermeneutics. Both men and women, Black and White, have an obligation towards such a hermeneutics because

i) It highlights the significance of reception criticism; the role played by the reader despite her position in society, in text production.

ii) As it advocates and embraces certain feminist interests, a feminist interpretation of the Bible challenges Biblical studies to be more human and more transformative of society.

iii) Feminist readings also serve to expose the ideological nature of the text

and fourthly, this last one is in particular significant to the Black woman '... by continuing to appropriate the Bible in spite of the recognition of its dominant patriarchal interests, feminist readings take seriously the Bible's significant role among the poor and oppressed (West 1991:chs 4, 7-8), as well as the need to stand in continuity with the memory (Metz 1980; Welch 1990) of the many forgotten and neglected women within or behind the Biblical text' (West 1991:100) (West 1991:87).

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