

# The Emergence of Black Feminist Theology in South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

When God created the earth, the human being (male and female) was created in God's image. God then gave to both of them dominion over all the earth. This very fundamental biblical account of the creation story gives to the human being a tremendous sense of power and responsibility. The power vested in the human being to rule over all the earth, has embedded in its very essence the nature of responsible people. Surely God could not have filled the earth with all its beauty and splendour without realizing that it would take responsible people to exercise this authority in order to maintain the grandeur of creation, without becoming self-centred and selfish, oppressive and exploitative. At the moment of creation, we are supposed to be crowned with this responsible oversight.

However, because of some irresponsible act in the garden of Eden, authority has been usurped and for greed and disobedience the human race has a history of fighting and wars, all clamouring for power, one over and against the other. People are taken captive by others, reduced to slaves, servants, dumped in prison cells and left to be forgotten. People's land is taken away from them, and they are forced to

work as labourers on their own land. More often than not the very people, also commissioned by God to have dominion over all the earth, do not have enough strength in their starved bodies to wipe away a filthy fly from their parched lips, God then appeared in human flesh to restore to the oppressed people a hope for liberation, in the form of Jesus Christ to set us free. God made us to be human beings and to live accordingly and to have life abundantly. Being Black, this seems like a part of creation not intended for us because: For more than 300 years now, Black people in South Africa have been brutally forced to live as aliens in their own land. Their land was stolen from them, and they were subjugated to become slaves under a master on their own land. This "master" class of whites also brought along with them a religion, named Christianity, for what they taught and lived was not the Christianity of a Christ who had come to set the captives free, but rather of one who said to Black people to be submissive to their bosses and indoctrinating them to believe that they are inferior beings, reducing them to nothingness. Thank God we've never allowed ourselves to be reduced to nothingness. Rather, a theology speaking to the situation and lives of the



oppressed and exploited, giving real concrete hope was born – Black Theology.

Being Black is synonymous to being oppressed and exploited. It means to earn less than what is humanly sufficient to eat, to be housed, to be schooled properly.

It is to see desolation all around you, but not to give up hope. It is to experience total unbelief in the face of army rifles and caspirs, but not to be silenced by fear, and to keep on believing. It is to smell the stench of injustice from the armpits of mineworkers, domestic workers, factory workers, to walk along the roadside, making your way through heaps of faeces and forests of flies and not to have your guts wrenched from your body by nausea, but still to feel clean.

It is to be faced by a board stating whites only to a beautiful park, and not to feel your humanness diminished.

It is to be thrown into prison for saying that you cannot stand under the authority of an unjust system, and being prepared to be imprisoned without ever standing trial.

It is being employed in backbreaking low-paid jobs, or to have no job but still having the inborn desire to work.

It is to see a pregnant woman, a four year old child killed in cold blood by S A riot police, shots ripping their bodies apart, but not giving up the fight.

It is to be restricted in your movements, your speech, but still to have the freedom to sing the Lord's song.

It is to be uprooted from your dwelling place and to be placed in temporary tents, have your family wiped out by the cold of the night and the fumes from heat generating appliances, but still have the will to live.

It is Being. . . . Black. . . . Living.

This is the generally accepted idea

of our oppressions as Black people. Added to this atrocious way of life, is the position of the oppressed and exploited woman in her own community. Now both Black and white woman suffer from a denial of independence and dignity, but no white woman knows the augmented tensions of racial oppression. And so Black women in have an added burden of the effects of oppression and exploitation. Black women are the lowest paid work force in S A. It is known that in boom times they are hired at low wages, and fired during necessary periods. They form 70% of the unemployed community. They have to cook, wash, clean in their own homes after a hard day's work. (Those who are lucky to have jobs.) They form 60% of the church members, but are labelled as weaker, subordinate, and non-thinking people by their own men. They can raise the funds, but are not allowed to determine how the funds will be spent.

With the rise of political violence, more women have been raped by troops in the township than ever before. There are times when the women would fight side by side with their men in street wars against the army, but would have no say in the decision making body of the liberatory struggle. Black women have to leave suckling babies behind to try to find work in a big city, often eventually becoming prostitutes.

The very beginnings of humankind are challenged when living in the face of these demoralizing, dehumanising conditions. It takes a superhuman being to survive. These dehumanizing situations are totally out of line with God's intention as at creation. For dominion over all the earth was given to both male and female, with no specific colour attached to it. God used



Moses to deliver the people of Israel, but it was his mother who had the strength to disobey Pharaoh's orders and save the life of her child, and eventually the house of Israel. The whole Moses' story gives to the oppressed a renewed vision for liberation.

It may be that Jesus chose men to be disciples, very representative of the way in which the patriarchy was designed, and from what jobs the men were doing. But, God so designed the body of the woman that it would bear Christ, the liberator. Mary was not only concerned about her spiritual being only, but also about the social, political and economic well-being of her people. (Lk. 1: 46 – 55). The greatest event in the lives of God's people was performed through an agent – the women. Despite this (and I single Mary out) in the rise of Black Theology, the feminist aspect of liberation was not initially considered.

Any form of liberation which does not address itself to the emancipation of the whole person should be seriously challenged for misrepresenting the concept of liberation. For no person can be free when part of that which gives you your humanity is in chains. A part of the wholeness of black womanness is also caught up in Black Theology, and more specifically, Black Feminist Theology.

(When the women marched to Pretoria in 1956 most of them were Christians.) There needs to be some theological reflection on the doldrums of society in which Black women find themselves. Therefore Black Feminist Theology has to be an integral part of Black Theology.

Our personal experience of God in our oppressed situations has given rise to the inevitable acceptance that God is on the side of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the poor, and God acts

violently against those who perform degrading acts of oppression. God allowed the Red Sea to close up upon the military force of Pharaoh. Now whether we believe that the sea opened up and then closed or not, is not the issue. What is important is that those troops were washed away. I do not want to contend that God will violently wash away our male oppressors, but because male domination over female submission is not God ordained, the position has to be rectified, and reconciliation together with repentance, between Black male and female takes place in a just fashion, each recognizing the one is not the enemy of other, but rather focussing on the real enemy. It has to be accepted that Black women suffer the worst oppression and exploitation. God is no neutral God. God is a God of the poor. (Is 65 : 17ff. and Lk 1 : 46ff). It could then be claimed that Black Women have a greater claim to God's compassion. This might be so, but Black women have come to identify the real enemy, and are committed to struggle for justice and peace, and are prepared to accept that God gave dominion over all the earth to the human being: both man and woman.

Black Feminist Theology in S A has only just begun, although it was written on the table long before people consciously got together to articulate and develop Black Feminist Theology. With the Birth of the I C T in 1982, Black Feminist Theology got off the ground. An exciting new era was evolving in our communities. As the tension, crisis erupted in this country, more women were taking up positions as equals with the men on the battle field, at the drawing table (if and when there was time to sit down, for things were happening at an damning rate). But back home they still became the



slaves in their own homes. Black Women started getting together, and added to the general thrust of Black theology, Black Feminist Theology, not as counter-movement, but as a part of Black Theology.

Black men, at a Black Ecumenical Consultation held at Koinonia, Botha's Hill in 1985 laughed at the cries of anger and distress of Black Feminist Theologians. Nobody laughs at jokes about blacks. The cries of anger were real. The disappointment of realizing the insensitivity of other oppressed people was sad, but not disheartening, for a Black women never loses heart – we cannot afford to. I remember when I was a student at the Federal Theological Seminary (supposed to be the most progressive and Black orientated theological school in S A) some men students would not participate in Communion at the Lord's table when served by me, or my friend and colleague, Muriel Burrows. To add insult to injury, when my husband and I decided that we would like to have a baby and my tummy started pushing out, many of those who had originally received the bread and wine from me, refused to accept the communion.

As the political crisis heightened, the awareness of total liberation grew, and women became more intensely aware of their position in the church and church related organizations, and that our destiny as black women would not be determined by our position as the worst off in the struggle, but by how much we were prepared to fight a war for total liberation.

Jesus says in Luke 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

and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are  
oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of  
the Lord.

•From our own experience we know that the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed refer to both male and female.

Jesus died for all of us as he identified himself with those who did not support the Roman Emperor. Jesus was resurrected for us, or else we would have no reason to live and/or die for justice.

The Black Feminist Theologians in South Africa are not all highly qualified or trained pastors. Black Feminist Theology is preached in the Nyanga bush in Cape Town, in the streets of Soweto, in the shacks of Veeplaas, in the forced removal tents in Kabah. Black women in South Africa are involved at grassroot level in the development of a Theology from both their intellectual capacity as well as their inner strength from their gut feelings.

For this reason we find that Black Feminist Theology does not distance from liberatory political tendencies. They all work together, for it is from the political oppression that Black Feminist Theology emerged.

Since then, slowly, but surely, and now in the 80's a theology challenging the inferior position of Black women has evolved. We are on the way to rediscover our tremendous power as Black women in S A. Obviously, there are still many women who have blossomed from their germinating period, but in the liberating moment, and I have to add, in the light of Black Feminist Theology emerging, the ground has been tilled and now the rains – a fight for total freedom – shall

pour down and beat life into its once dominant receptors, heralding in a new wave of awareness from the shackles of our oppressed beings.

Black Feminist Theology (B.F.T.) does not intend to disqualify oppressed men from the saving grace of Jesus Christ, but rather to instil in them a commitment to view the struggle for liberation in a holistic way. All of the oppressed has to be set free in order to accept that the struggle is a just struggle.

We now have the Bible, the oppressors have the land. Such a reversal of roles is not desirable, for now the oppressor is the better off. It was from the soil of Africa that we were called into a community with God. Now we have no soil of our own. Even the wealth of the soil in the homelands is controlled from Pretoria.

Both men and women were affected by this reversal. Men were forced to leave their homes to go cities and find better jobs, and poverty became a way

of life. Women took control over the whole household and ran the affairs of the family. It was only when money ran out altogether or there was sickness in the home that wives travelled to their husbands in the cities for help, and so the visit of a wife at the workplace of the husband became a symbol of misfortune.

Nothing much has been written about those brave women, but books upon books have been written depicting the struggle for survival of the men.

Black women today still know what it is like to nurse those injured in streets where the struggle for liberation continues – what it is like to care for children not their own.

To cry at the graves of some unknown comrade not having personally known the person, but having known the spirit of person.

To form support groups for victims of the system. They are laying the foundation of a theology that makes God relevant – a Black Feminist Theology.