

**TOWARDS A WOMANIST THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION IN  
SOUTH AFRICA: BLACK DOMESTIC WORKERS  
AS A CASE STUDY  
by Jacqueline William\***

WHO ARE YOU? Who are you? I am a Woman Who bears the children Who brings the children up in this country.

What is your profession? I've got one important role to play not a profession I am a mother

My children are doctors Nurses, academics, farmworkers of this country Ministers of Parliament, soldiers and police, to name a few and I must be brave

Why must I be brave? When my child is forced to overwork himself When my child is made a slave When my child cannot decide for himself When my child is forced to join the army and fight for this country where his rights are not respected When my child is turned into a dog That bites the hand that feeds it It must give support I am a woman Who builds the nation Who is not afraid to shout forward to the freedom of my children

I am a woman who marches on to Pretoria on the 9th August

I am a woman Who is still fighting Cause I am a brave Woman

My offspring are stronger than me For they have sucked fertile milk from the bravest of the brave women In poverty and in richness and in war I am still a woman And I will remain a brave woman

My role shall never be changed I am a woman Who is not afraid to shout

Forward to the freedom of my children! Forward to the people's liberation! Forward to the freedom of our country!  
(Roseline Naapo)

I would like to suggest that the following questions put so well by a fellow South African are often at the back of the minds of black South African women as they are involved in the struggle on a day to day basis.

I wonder which of the many oppressions in my femaleness and in my blackness weight 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?

It is also true that different people come to different answers as they struggle with these questions. The answers depend on the dominant consciousness of the person at different moments in the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

Most literature that looks at the conditions of the domestic worker within the South African context would agree with the following statements:

Domestic workers and farm workers are the most oppressed and most exploited group of all workers in South Africa. They are not protected by any laws and employers can therefore pay them and treat them as they please.<sup>3</sup> There is no minimum wage for domestic workers. Wages are decided by the employers and they vary a lot. In 1981 the average wage for domestic workers was about R32,00 a month (If the cost of food and housing was included it increased to R59,00).

If the above is true why do black women in South Africa continue to do these degrading and dehumanizing jobs? The basic reason is that the South African socio-political system is built in such a way that the minority white South Africans have tremendous power over the bodies of black people, their land and also all other resources in the country, whether they are economic, religious, political or social. Furthermore, the educational system and its possibilities for black people in South Africa are built in a way that makes it very difficult for black people to move out of these service roles. These prescribed roles have been legitimated by White Theology and education. The gospel that first came to our shores with Dutch and British colonialism was a gospel that justified and legitimised colonialism, imperialism and European superiority. Despite their barbaric methods and attitude the colonisers firmly believed that what they were bringing to this part of the world was civilization and the basis of this civilization was the message of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of all the social economic, political and religious structures was to ensure a smooth and efficient way of dispossessing black people of their land and exploiting them. This was very successful, and by the middle of this century 87 percent of the land was in white hands and only 13 percent was and still is at the disposal of the black majority that comprises 79 percent of the nation. This meant that people were forced from their land into ghetto's and absorbed as labourers into the capitalist economy in whose interest is not the well-being of the people of South Africa,

but maximization of profits for the world capitalist market system. Besides being taken from their land laws were put into the South African statutory books that restrict the movement of black people in a very real and effective way. All these restrictions have made black people feel like strangers in their own land.

Besides being alienated from their land black people's education was created, not to promote their interests but so that they could be of service to the white minority. We see below the kind of mindset that went into creating education for the indigenous people:

The school for the children at (Teopholis) must eventually be of advantage to us, as they teach them to speak, read and write English. They will, if taught industrious habits, be useful to us as servants. ...it is altogether an interesting sight, so many little black creatures brought into a state of civilization and improvement.<sup>6</sup>

White rule since especially the earlier part of the first half of this century has been particularly devastating to the rights of women. This damage to the rights of domestic workers (black) was not a marginal or indirect consequence of the simple process of industrialization and urbanization, but a result of deliberate policy and calculations.

About a century ago most of the black South African women were rural women, involved in agriculture. They ploughed land, grew crops and cared for their children as well as made the things they needed for their homes.<sup>7</sup> With the discovery of gold in the Transvaal, urbanization began to take place in a very rapid fashion. This meant that more and more men were needed in the mines. To facilitate the capitalists (indigenous people at this time were still on their land and could live off the land as they had done for centuries before). Those in authority began to enforce laws on the peasants that forced them off their land. The indigenous people had to pay hut and cattle taxes. This they were not allowed to pay in kind but with money which they could only get by working within the capitalist system. Stringent and harsh laws were enforced which forced the peasant from the land. More and more men left the rural areas, to work in the mines but they were not able to take their families with them. (This was against the Law).

These government labour policies treated these migrants as single men and therefore with no benefits going to their families. They could also go only to places which were allocated to them by the authorities. Their wives could only visit them with special permission. Many of the women went to the towns and cities anyhow. They did this at great risk of imprisonment. When women did arrive in

the cities, the only jobs available for them were those entailing domestic work.

In the 1930's life in the rural areas became more oppressive and intolerable for several reasons. One of the key reasons being the gross exploitative Land Act of 1913, and 1933. Very few rural people could survive by farming. They had to rely on money to buy food and other things but there were not many paid jobs in the reserves. And the money black migrant workers earned in the town was too little to support their families in the rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

During this time black women moved into the urban areas in large numbers. (Even now, the only job that the rural peasants (women) can get in the cities is that of domestic work). Many of these women were not in the cities legally and therefore stood continuously in danger of imprisonment. The men who came to the cities earlier were classified legally and treated as single persons and had to live in single men's hostels. The state did not provide any housing for black South African migrant workers as families, forcing black South African women to seek shelter illegally. The discriminating nature of the law forced white people who required their services to act as if the black South Africans were not part of the town community.

Most women who came to the cities were then forced to do domestic work because white homes were the only places where they could have a job and accommodation at the same time: "sleep-in jobs". Because of the above, the relationship between domestic workers and their employers whom they called ("Master" and Madam" even to this day and their employers call them "boy" and "girl") is very oppressive. The conditions of their employment are not protected by the law. These women work very long hours. It looks like a modern day type of slavery. One worker had the following to say about the work schedule in 1984.

"I work very hard. I must start work at seven o'clock in the morning and I finish at 8.30 pm after they have finished their supper and I have to wash up the dishes. Every Friday I have to work until 10 pm, because my madam has people for supper. On Saturday nights I have to come in and look after the children, because the madam and master go out. I don't get paid any extra money for doing it."<sup>9</sup>

There are also those women who have to start their day even earlier than this. These women who do "sleep-in" jobs live in the backyards of their employers and are on call for 24 hours a day. They also do not get much time off. Most domestic workers agree that they do not have much time for themselves, especially during their working day. The following statement by a worker is more or less

universal.

“I stop to drink a cup of tea in the morning for five minutes. I don't eat any breakfast. After I finish cleaning at 1.00pm I cook my food and eat lunch. I must be back inside the house at 1.30 to wash the lunch dishes. I eat supper after I knock off.”<sup>10</sup>

Most of the domestic workers get either the whole of Thursday off or half of it.

This is an important point, because it is on this day that the mothers's unions in most of the black churches meet. It does not matter at all in which denomination you are. These mothers union groups are normally interdenominational.

In a survey done amongst domestic workers they came to the following conclusions. Most of these women are not satisfied with their jobs and their lives. Most of these women feel that they are the slaves of their employers. They feel pushed around. One writer comes to the following conclusions after an indepth study on domestic workers' situation:

“While there is much in the domestic servant's situation which is suggestive of slavery this study suggests that domestic servants are most accurately to be viewed as trapped workers. They are trapped in a situation of subjugation and immobility within which they are subject to intensive exploitation. Such exploitation is evident in the low wages which ensure physical survival but little more their long hours of work and lack of paid holidays; their deprivation of family and social life, their low status; lack of job satisfaction; unsatisfactory relationship with their employers absence of legal protection; and lack of collective bargaining and workers rights this objective exploitation is expressed in the workers sense of being a slave of relative deprivation of leading wasted lives which they are powerless to change.”<sup>13</sup>

She ends this part with the words of Thackeray in his novel *Vanity Fair*: “The worst tyrants for women are other women.” And then concludes with the following words: (In her ninth chapter she deals with the self image of the domestic worker.)

“Certainly the institution of domestic service allows for a measure of domestic tyranny, however it is not individuals that this study is attacking. These domestic tyrants are also in a very real sense, victims of structures.”<sup>14</sup>

## **BLACK WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY**

We shall now look at Christian songs which these women sing.

(It is important to note that most of the mother in the women's group of the black churches are domestic workers).

### **SONGS and HYMNS**

#### **A. Translation:**

usemhlabeni while on earth Baweledi, baweledi baweledi they are across (the river) Ikanan, Ikanana, Ikanana Canaan, Canaan, Canaan Usebenze, usebenze, usebenze, work, work, work engunaphakade Which I love Itemba lam My trust Ndonyuka nalo I will rise with it Ndingene endumisweni And enter into the kingdom.

#### **B.**

Uthando luka baba The love of the Father Lunjengolwandle bo Is like the ocean Lubanzi lujulile It is wide and deep Luyazeka yini pho You can not tell Lwafinyela kimi It came to me Ngisesemhlabeni While I was on earth Alwase lwangadlulu It never passed me Lwangisindis It saved even me. Obaba niujabonga Oh Father I than you nangenhliziyo yami With all my heart Sengiyavuma ngati I now agree Ungusindisi wam With love in my heart Ngizo kwethemba njalo I will always trust you

Ngisemhlabeni As long as I am on earth Ngizoukhonza futhi I will also worship you ngothando enwiziwen with love in my heart

#### **C.**

Uthando lwakhe, uthando lwake, (hisher) love is wonderful Utandi lwakhe luyamangalisa

Sihambanaye We go (walk with itherhim sihlala naye We sit with itherhim Silala naye We sleep with himither Sivuka naye We rise with ithimher

#### **D.**

Igama lika Jesu Kristu malibongwe Igama lika Jesu Kristu malibongwe Malibongwe malibongwe Malibongwe malibongwe

#### **Translation:**

The name of Jesus Christ should be praised The name of Jesus Christ should be praised Should be praised, should be praised Should be praised should be praised.

#### **E.**

Senzenina, senzenina? What have we done, what have we done? Senzenina, Senzenina? What have we done, what have we done? Senzenina, senzenina? What have we done, what have we done?

Senzenina, senzenina? What have we done, what have we done?

Sono sethu babumnyama Our only sin is that we are black. Sono sethu babumnyama Our only sin is that we are black. Sono sethu abumnyama Our only sins is that we are black. Sono sethu babumnyama Our only sin is that we are black.

**F.**

Thuma mina Send me Thuma mina Send me Thuma mina Nkosi yam Send me my Lord Ngiya vuma I agree Ngiya vuma I agree Ngiya vuma Nkosi yam. I agree my Lord

**G.**

Ngenendwawo yam I have my place Ndawo Yam ndawe yam My place, my place Ndawe yam My place Ndawe yam yokuthandoza My place where I can pray. Yiyo le It is here Yiyo le, yiyo le It is here Ndawo yam, yukuthandoza My place where I can pray Ndiwe thuba lam I have my time Thuba lam, thuba lam My time, my time Thuba lam My time

Yilo leli This is it Yilo leli, yilo leli This is it, this is it Thuba lam lokhuthandasa This is my time to pray

Thuba lam lokhuthandasa This is my time to pray Ngino Jesu wam I have my Jesus

Jesu wam, Jesu wam I have my Jesus I have my Jesus Jesu wami engimthandayo I have my Jesus whom I love

Nguye lo He is here Nguye lo nguye lo He is here he is here Jesu wam, engimthandayo Jesus whom I love.

**H.**

Tshollela Moya Pour down your Spirit wa hao Jesu On us Jesus Tshollela Moya Pour down your Spirit Wa hao Jesu On us Jesus

Dipelong tsa Oh pour it Rona Jesu into our hearts, Jesus Tshollele Moya Pour down your Spirit Wa hao Jesu On us Jesus

**I.**

Baya khala baya khala They are crying Emakhaya at home

Khulunkhuli upetwa God we are starving Indlala zethu

Shipa mandla okusebenzela Give us strength to work Ingani zethu For our children

zafa zaphela we-bakithi Oh my God our Children Ingani zethu our dying

Lalelani lalelani we ma Africa Listen listen Africa

Sebezeduza sebezeduza They are near they are near bazo buya they will come

**J.**

Ha le mpotsa tsepo yaka I you ask me from whence Ke tsa re he Jesu Come my hope, I'll say Jesus Kelapetse ho mongale I miss my master (Jusus) Ha hae e haeso His home is my home

Le re ke boneng ho yena You ask me what I have seen in Ke bona phomolo Him, I've seen rest. Thabo e leng ho Morena They joy that is in the Lord Ha ena phetoho Never changes

Kana ka nyorelwa botle I cone longed for perfection Ra tswatswa ke botla And I was searching Ka tsielwa ke ntho tsohle Everything confused me Ka fellwa ke matla I was powerless

Jwaka ke kgotswe ka mehla Now I am finally convinced Mohau wa Modimo Of God's Mercy Ke gadile ha iketla I am at ease Thehepong ya hodimo In his trust

### **INTERPRETATION OF THESE SONGS AND HYMNS**

Song G speaks about a space, a place and a time when these women pray to their Jesus. Why place, space and a time? It is also written in the first person possessive case. This is very unusual because these women are generally very family oriented in their daily life, and are also willing to even die for their kin. This emphasis on space, time and a place is very paradoxical, because these women in their daily life do not have time for themselves. The blatant fact about the life of a domestic worker in South Africa is that all of the time of their lives is taken up with the whims and needs of the white people. Besides not having time for themselves their ability to have physical space also depends on how obedient they are to their employers. This preoccupation with time and space is very real, it comes out of their lives that are crowded with others. It also comes from a group of women who have not only been marginalized in society, but nearly made invisible in their own communities because they are very seldom with their own community. They spend most of their daily life being looked down upon. This issue of space is not only an issue with which domestic workers struggle. It is related to the struggle of all the black people in South Africa. We are hungry for our land. It is a known fact that 87 per cent of the land in South Africa is in the hands of the white minority and the rest is allocated to the black majority. We are a people who crave for space. Lack of housing is a burden and a fact of life in our country ever since urbanization because of the oppressive laws against black people.

This lack of space and time for the self in community is an issue that a womanist theology needs to address if it wants to be relevant to black women. A theology of land needs to be created. This is an issue that has been raised by black theologians in South Africa but not in a systematic fashion.

Another issue raised in this song is its emphasis on the "here and now". It is not about having time and space in the "life hereafter". It is dealing with time and space in the "here and now" and is claiming, in the spiritual realm, this earthly realm, that which they do not physically have, to help them survive this very life-denying life.

Song J is another variation on this topic. Some of the key words in this song are: rest, home, hope, powerless and trust. This idea of seeing a home, of having a home in which a person can find rest and feel secure is a theme in this song. It is interesting to see how the song answers the question in the first stanza concerning hope. Hope is linked with having a home, a home with Jesus who never changes. The issue about Jesus' changelessness is in the second stanza. In South Africa black people can own the house they are in. But until very recently, the land on which the house stands could not belong to the owner of the house. All these small laws in the statutory books of South Africa are there to cause more insecurity in the already insecure lives of black people. Once more, these women are claiming that security in their religion. They are claiming it from their Jesus who is concerned about their time and space.

The idea of trust in these songs is very important. From this random sample of songs we have four (A,B,G and J) out of the ten songs dealing with the issue of trust. Why this preoccupation with trust? It is my understanding that the relationships between the domestic workers and their employers are not based on trust. There is a deep sense of distrust between these different groups. A distrust on the side of the oppressed workers, because of their experience of exploitation, dispossession and exploitation from the hands of white people. This distrust on the part of their employers is manifested because they know how they are not treating black people justly and consequently expect them to revolt or protest. In the general South African society there is basic distrust against the political, economic, religious and social systems. These songs raise the issue of trust because human beings have a basic need to trust and to be trusted. It is only in this relationship of trust that a person and a people can have "rest".

The "rest" these songs are taking about is not rest in a psychological sense. It is rest that has some physical dimensions to it. They need to rest because they are overworked and their bodies

are in need of rest. These women are talking about something very physical. In their songs we see a theology that deals with the body in a very real and day to day basis. Take for example song C. This song deals with a God whose love has to be seen in those ordinary events in life, like sitting, walking, sleeping, and rising. There is no time to find God anywhere else . God is in every moment of life. God is embodying their lives and they are embodying God's life.

Song E and I are lamentations. They are very popular, not only in women's groups but also in the black nation as a whole. Song E is a very sad song. It talks about the particular sin that we as black people have committed that is putting this oppressive curse on us. As the women are searching for our sins, they can come up with nothing but the fact that their blackness is their only sin. This song refers to crisis of identity. How do we deal with something so natural to ourselves: our blackness? Is it a curse? Is it inferior? The song does not answer these questions. It only raises the issues related to blackness in South Africa and leaves them with the community to deal with. A womanist theology needs to take this issue of identity very seriously if it wants to be relevant to black women.

The second song of lamentation I, deals with the death and starvation that Apartheid causes. In this song when reference is made to those who will be coming back, it is speaking about those young people who had to go into exile as well as those comrades who were imprisoned for their political activities by the South African authorities. Dr. Nelson Mandela is an example of one of the imprisoned ones who are referred to in this song. So, even if this song is a lament, it is also a song of hope. A hope that these sons and daughters of South Africa will be coming back to be part of the freedom of the people. It is interesting to note once more in this song that those who sing the song are asking their God to empower them to "work" for their children. It is not an escapist theology. It is a theology that takes seriously the concreteness of the power of God through the Holy Spirit in their every day lives. This would suggest that a womanist theology in South Africa needs to take the concept of "Emmanuel- God with us- in our midst seriously.

The last point that I want to make by looking at these songs is their concept of the Holy Spirit. Any theology that does not take the reality of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these women very seriously will not be able to understand or speak to the faith and life of black women in South Africa.

In conclusion, we wish to summarize by saying that a theology that wants to be relevant to black women in South Africa needs to address the following issues:

(a) Land; (b) Identity; (c) Interpersonal relationships; (d) Hope; (e) Emmanuel — God with us; (f) God's power in the 'here and now'; (g) The Holy Spirit as a source of power; (h) Work.

It is only as we take the above seriously that we can have a theology that will operate as a tool of empowerment to women in the struggle for liberation of Azania.

#### NOTES:

1. See Speak: no 25, 1989. This is a poem written by a South African Woman. Rosaline Naapo. p. 2.
2. Laurretta Ncobo, p. 1.
3. Working Women. p.30.
4. Ibid.
5. A. Nolan. p.1.
6. Jacklyn, Cock. 1979. p. 19.
7. Working Women. p. 15.
8. Ibid
9. Ibid. p. 31.
10. Jane Barrett. p. 31.
11. Ibid. p. 32.
12. Ibid.
13. Preston-white. p.
14. Jacklyn. Cock. 1983. pp. 279-299.

\*1. R./Rand, which is the South African currency. At the moment there one dollar is about two and a half rand. Before the eighties it was quite strong compared to the dollar, one to one. In 1981 it was about one dollar and twenty cents to the rand.

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