

Re-Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective



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1. Contextualisation

It was International Women's Day in 2000. As it is customary in some parishes, women receive special attention at the Eucharistic celebration on this day. I happened to be present at a Church service in an urban Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Bangalore. Contrary to my expectation, the priest himself preached the homily even on a day dedicated to women. What a discriminatory practice by the institutional Church that claims to be a champion of human dignity! I shall use the key issues emerging from his talk as a starting point of my paper.

"My dear people, today's Gospel speaks of women in the company of Jesus' disciples. Their mission is precisely to look after the needs of Jesus and his apostles. In silence and humility they follow Jesus. What a sublime vocation! On this Women's Day I wish to draw your attention on our Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, who is the perfect model of womanhood. Imitate her virtue of docility and submissiveness. Let us all, especially women learn how to obey without questioning authority." A similar homily was given last year in one of the parishes of Mumbai by a middle-aged conservative priest, who rejected women's proposal to have a woman preacher for the day.

Sermons like this speak volumes about the patriarchal mind-set prevalent even in this so-called post-modern era. On the one hand feminist movement has gained momentum since the United Nations Declaration on the Decade of Women (1975-1985) both in society and the Church; and on the other, religious fundamentalism plays havoc in all religions, the Catholic

Church being no exception. Interestingly, religious Scriptures are invoked in support of women's second class citizenship. It is in this paradoxical context that we shall engage in a feminist re-reading of biblical texts with a view to unearth their liberative potential.

At the outset I wish to acknowledge the pioneering works of feminist scholars from different parts of the world, who have been making significant contributions to biblical research and feminist/womanist theologies.¹ I wish to recognise also some of the Indian Christian feminists who are contributing to the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of biblical texts in order to cull from them liberative elements for the empowerment of women and other marginalised groups.² Granted that the terms feminism and feminist/womanist have been used liberally in academic discourse today, the need for clarification of the concept 'feminist' does not arise here. We shall proceed to analysing the radicality of feminist consciousness and hermeneutical method.

2. Radicalism of feminist consciousness and hermeneutics

Women's experiences of marginalisation and subjugation, as well as struggles for legitimate freedom in all spheres of life, and participatory action for justice are central to feminist consciousness and hermeneutics. We need to accentuate that 'women's experience' includes the biological and cultural experiences of being female and the feminist experience that calls for equality and inclusiveness of women and men. The awareness of weakness or victimisation has a positive effect on women, for it leads to the consciousness of one's own power. It unfolds the possibility of "personal growth and the release of energy long

¹ For example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary R. Ruether, Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, among others in USA; Catharina Halkes in Holland; Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel in Germany; Lisa Isherwood and Mary Grey in U.K; Silvia Schroer in Switzerland; Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Africa; African-American Dolores S. Williams; Elsa Tamaz, Ivone Gebara in Latin America; Gabriele Dietrich, Sun Ai Lee Park, Chung Hyun Kyung, Virginia Fabella, Kwok Pui-Lan, Frances Yasas, Jessie Tellis-Nayak and Aruna Gnanadasan among others in Asia.

² For instance, Monica J. Melanchthon, Corona Mary, Evelyn Monteiro, Rekha Chennathu, Margaret Shanti, Shalini Mulackal, Kochurani Abraham, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Lalrinawmi Ralte, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Lorna Barrett, Pearl Drego, Stella Baltazar, Prasanna Kumari, Cyrilla Chakkalal, Virginia Saldanha and Philo Thomas - to name a few. There are men scholars too who are engaged in developing a feminist approach to the Bible.

suppressed”³ and motivates the person to engage in direct forms of struggle against an oppressive system. The late Phoolan Devi⁴ and several other women who have become victims of caste oppression, and who in turn have mobilised their “guilty victim” status to empower others, are typical examples of *victory over victimisation*. Feminist consciousness thus poses a challenge to dominant structures and sexist institutions, and proposes a fundamental change in society.

The feminist demand is for a re-structuring of thought and analysis in view of developing a holistic approach to Divine-human realities. With regard to the Bible, it stands as a critique of androcentric biblical interpretations and theological articulations, presented as *eternal* truths. The Bible, written from the socio-cultural perspective of male authors, as well as its interpretations, have legitimised women’s subordination in the Church. Women have appeared in patriarchal teachings as types: virgins, temptresses, seducers, but not real women. This experience of stereotype makes women suspect the validity of a ‘biblical revelation’ that has come to us solely through male categories. Therefore, a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ should inform any reading of biblical texts and commentaries, and reconstruct them in terms of a praxis for liberation of all. As all theological articulations are based on a particular understanding of the Bible, feminist scholars emphasise the need to scrutinise the androcentric and patriarchal/*kyriarchal* elements in biblical texts and retrieve the position of women and their partnership with God in the story of salvation. To put it differently, “the hermeneutical principles that we choose to employ are determined by our theological stands operative in exegesis and interpretation.”⁵

Through her liberating ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, leading New Testament scholar Schussler Fiorenza makes the female collective, or women-church, the interpretive centre of

³ Sandra L. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination; Studies in Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), p. 16. See also Beverly W. Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in Judith Plaskow & C. P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), pp. 214-225.

⁴ Phoolan Devi was shot dead on 25th July 2001 in the highest security zone of the country, New Delhi. “She will always be remembered as the ‘Bandit Queen’: untamed, aggressive, wild. And her life shall be a colourful collage of the Great Indian Story fraught with caste-wars, gender exploitation, blood and gore.” Cited by S. P. Banarjee, “Not a Player but a Plaything,” *Indian Currents* (August 5, 2001), p. 16.

⁵ M. J. Melanchthon, “Indian Women and the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Issues,” in P. Kumari, ed., *Feminist Theology Perspectives and Praxis* (Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1998), p. 281. For a discussion

feminist hermeneutics where women can “deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them in terms of a critical rhetoric that understands biblical texts and traditions as a living and changing heritage, one which does not legitimate patriarchal oppression but can foster emancipatory practices of faith-communities.”⁶ She offers us a rhetorical model as a feminist interpretative process for transformation, inviting us to move beyond a historical-critical reading and reconstruction of biblical texts to the “cultural-theological practice of resistance and transformation” fostered through storytelling, drama, imaginative ritual, and dance.⁷

Similarly Musa W. D. Shomanah undermines the authoritative position of biblical texts by showing their “male-biased compilation and history of androcentric interpretation.”⁸ Yet she argues that feminist strategies are not meant to dispense with biblical texts. Rather, feminist biblical interpretation aims at restoring the canonicity of the Bible by insisting that “canonicity is measured by the liberation of women and all God’s oppressed people of the world.”⁹ Implied here is an affirmation of the liberative elements in biblical revelation, and the task of hearing the silenced voices within the text, which subvert or bear witness against the androcentric narratives and interpretations. Mary Ann Tolbert’s dictum: “One must defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator,”¹⁰ may be accepted as a valid principle for re-reading the Bible.

For Rosemary Ruether, one of the first Christian feminist theologians to reflect explicitly on methodological issues, the crucial principle for any adequate feminist hermeneutics or theology is that it promotes the full humanity of women. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, she states: “Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is

on 'hermeneutics', see Clodovis Boff, “Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency,” in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London: SPCK, 1991) pp. 9-35.

⁶ Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press 1992), p. 5. See also her scholarly work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

⁸ Musa W. Dube Shomanah, “Scripture, Feminism and Post-Colonial Contexts,” *Concilium* (1993/3), p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.* See also Elsa Tamez, “Latin American Feminist Hermeneutics: A Retrospective,” in Ofelia Ortega, ed., *Women’s Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), pp. 77-89.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Semia* 28 (1983), p. 120. See also her book *Protestant Feminists and the Bible, the Pleasure of Her Text* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

appraised as not redemptive.”¹¹ She compares this critical principle with the ancient principle of the *imago dei* or Christ as the goal of human destiny. The uniqueness of feminist interpretation or theology lies in the fact that women claim this (*imago dei*) principle for themselves.¹² Ruether’s critique of biblical patriarchy and androcentricism has led her to the conclusion that the Bible can be appropriated as source of liberation only if correlation between the feminist critical principle and that of the “prophetic-messianic” tradition can be established.¹³

On the basis of their consultations to formulate an Asian feminist hermeneutics, Asian women have stated that their hermeneutical principle should affirm: (1) the full humanity of women in an authentic and inclusive community; (2) the integrity of creation; (3) the feminine creative principle as life-giving and life-enhancing; (4) the prophetic commitment of women in liberation movements; (5) the solidarity of women among themselves and with other people’s movements struggling for freedom and peace, based on just relationships.¹⁴ Far from rejecting the Bible because of its androcentric and anti-women characteristics, and the many discrepancies within the text, Asian women are engaged in exploring new insights in methodology and hermeneutics. Making use of the tools of historical criticism on the one hand and the hermeneutics of liberation on the other, Asian women are making a substantial contribution to the ongoing research in the field. This is evident *In God's Image*, journal of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology.

Although Indian women theologians have not yet developed a uniquely Indian feminist hermeneutics, we have asserted the need to re-read the Bible informed by a commitment to women’s empowerment in particular and to human liberation and the integrity of creation in general. Rooted in the sufferings, struggles, hopes and aspirations of the *silenced* and *silent*

¹¹ R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹³ To arrive at her goal, Ruether proposes a *method of correlation* which she expounds under: (1) women’s experience and feminist hermeneutics and (2) the correlation of feminist and biblical critical principles. For a comprehensive view, see *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. See also her article, “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation,” in L. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

¹⁴ See Mary-John Mananzan, “Feminist Theology in Asia: An Overview,” in O. Ortega, ed., *Women’s Visions* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), pp. 33-34. The Consultation was done in two phases: the first in Seoul and the second in Chennai. It was organised by EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) Commission on Women, of which I am a member.

women and the marginalised in all strata of Indian society, our hermeneutical method has necessarily to challenge the socio-cultural, religio-political and economic systems, and caste and gender based oppression of a patriarchal society. It is equally important to denounce the prejudice of male chauvinistic prescriptions on women's sexuality, as well as to question the prevailing exclusive male God symbolism and sexist language for God and humanity. Simultaneously, it has to promote a life-affirming, change-oriented and contextual reading of the Bible and theologising. As we owe a great deal to the secular women's movements in India for stimulating our theological reflections along the lines mentioned above, it is necessary to work in collaboration with them. This becomes all the more useful in combating the increasing religious fundamentalism, resulting in communal violence. To quote Aruna Gnanadason, "any reflection on biblical texts has to keep this in mind, because there is enough documented evidence to show that religious fundamentalism and extremism affect the lives of women in deleterious ways and Indian Christian women will have to make strong contributions to the creation of an environment of compassion and dialogue."¹⁵

In the context of India's multi-religious and pluri-cultural reality, it is imperative that we also search in the Scriptures of other great religions and engage in dialogue with women and men of other faiths who are as eager as we are to "move into a healthier, more just world after patriarchy".¹⁶ Lina Gupta, in her fascinating rediscovery of the power of goddess Kali, writes:

The evidence that the systematic subjugation of women has often been sanctioned by mythological stones, symbols and images in world religions is too overwhelming to overlook. However, we have reached a point in history when it is simply not enough merely to recognise and analyse the patriarchal mindset and its effects on our religious and social lives. It is essential for us to seek new forms of religious experience and expression, either through the reinterpretation and reconstruction of our traditions or through alternative

¹⁵ Aruna Gnanadason, "The Bible and Women of Faith," in D. J. Muthunayagom, ed., *Bible Speaks Today: Essays in Honour of Gnana Robinson* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 336. See also Kwok Pui-Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin...*, pp. 299-315.

¹⁶ Lina Gupta, "Kali the Saviour", in Paula Coeey, et al., eds., *After Patriarchy: Feminist Interpretations of the World Religions*, Faith Meets Faith Series (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), p.15. Kali, meaning "dark" is a female name-form associated with Shiva, and is portrayed as the most famous of the terrifying goddesses. She identifies the female as the energy, the divine spark at the heart of reality, which bestows on creation the power of transcendence. Kali is the embodiment of **women power** destroying all evil forces. For this information, see John Renard, *Response to 101 Questions on Hinduism* (Mumbai: Better Yourself Books, 1999), pp.145-146.

models of Ultimate Reality that will emphasise as well as include female experience.¹⁷

Lina Gupta calls for a creative and constructive reading in the light of Tantric scriptural interpretation, which “can allow the *Kali* with her terrifying appearance to emerge as a powerful symbol of life and liberation to women in their passage to post-patriarchy... Under her assurance we confront who we are in reality opposed to what we perceive ourselves to be through the subjugated roles we play.”¹⁸

It must be underlined that a critical feminist hermeneutics does not just aim at understanding biblical text, “but also engages in theological critique, evaluation, and transformation of biblical traditions and interpretations from the vantage point of its particular socio-political religious location.”¹⁹ Feminist perspective thus poses a radical question to the religious and theological thinking stuck in patriarchal moorings. It shows that scripture, tradition and creeds are in need of scrutiny if they are to be authenticated for women.²⁰ Feminist approach, therefore, provides a clear paradigmatic shift in biblical interpretation and Church doctrines. To use the emphatic statement of Letty Russell, “no interpretation of authority that reinforces patriarchal structures of domination would be acceptable for feminist interpretation.”²¹ Without undermining the *scientific seriousness* in reformulation of biblical texts and Christian theology, feminists reject “imposed tradition and realise that their spiritual heritage goes beyond institutionalised religion and official theology.”

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3. Illustration of a feminist re-reading

Applying the feminist hermeneutics of liberation with its ingredients: “a hermeneutics of experience, domination and social location, suspicion, critical evaluation, creative

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.24.

¹⁹ E. Schussler Fiorenza, “Feminist Hermeneutics,” in D. N. Freedman, et al., eds., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 785.

²⁰ Lisa Isherwood & Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 80.

²¹ L. Russell, “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation,” in L. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 140.

²² Mary-John Mananzan, “Feminist Theology in Asia...”, p. 32.

imagination, re-remembering and reconstruction, and transformative action for change"²³, we shall re-image Mary of Nazareth as she plays an important role in shaping the Church's view on women's vocation and ministry. The traditional portrait of Mary as pious, docile maiden, symbol of passivity and humility, has become a powerful means of domesticating women. Mary needs to be rescued from this "masculine perception of idealised femininity"²⁴ inflicted on women and men alike, which many have internalised. A feminist reading of Mary is crucial to discovering the assertive, intelligent, self-confident and strong woman in Mary. Our reflections shall be confined to Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat.

a) Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38)

Annunciation stories are common features in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (see Mt 1:20-21; Lk 1:11-20; 2:9-15). They follow a literary pattern that had its origins in the annunciation stories of the Old Testament: Ishmael (Gen 16: 7-12), Isaac (Gen 17: 1-21; 18:1-12), Samson (Judg 13: 2-21). The pattern is *always* the same. It is particularly evident in Luke's presentation of the annunciation episode.²⁵ We have no intention of examining the Lukan text now. Our purpose is to cull from it relevant issues affecting the lives of women.

Mary is presented as a virgin "betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph" (v. 27). The appearance of the word 'virgin' twice in the same verse indicates Mary's virginal state before the conception of Jesus. As far as the New Testament is concerned, the virginity of Mary is "not about the virtue of Mary, but it is about the origins of Jesus."²⁶ It is to ensure Jesus' divine origin without any human intervention, the only exception being Mary's unique role in God's plan. In other words, the virginity of Mary is more a Christological matter than a Mariological concern.

However, Mary's 'perpetual virginity' was a subject of contention among theologians in the past. Based on Mary's reply to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (v. 34), they argued that Mary intended to remain a virgin even after marriage. But it is untenable in

²³ E. Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 167. To appreciate the nuances of these concepts, see especially chapter VI in the book.

²⁴ Asian Women's Theology Conference, "Who is Mary?" *In God's Image* (Dec. 1988), p. 9.

²⁵ For an illustration of the pattern and further discussion, see Francis J. Moloney, *Woman: First Among the Faithful, A New Testament Study* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), pp. 40-64.

the Jewish religio-cultural milieu of that time. By the very fact Mary was engaged to Joseph shows that she was prepared to marry him. To use the expression of Corona Mary, “Mary’s intention to virginal life should be post annunciation.”²⁷ Moreover, the objection “how can this happen” is a literary device employed by the author to continue the dialogue.

In our attempt to comprehend the concept of ‘Virgin-Mother’, we shall draw on the scholarly work of Corona Mary, who analyses critically the myths and legends built around Mary and the goddesses of the Hindu mythology.²⁸ She points out that Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) and Sakti, despite being the consorts of Brahma and Siva respectively, are virgins. To cite an example from the saivite scripture, Sivajrana Siddiyar,

Though Siva generates Sakti and Sakti Siva
and they both by their joyful union
generate the worlds and beings
Siva is a celibate and Sakti a virgin
those who have attained wisdom by their virtuous deeds
know this nature of Siva and Sakti.

S. Siddiyar. II. 77.

Virginity is understood here as “timeless beauty and absolute independence.” As the female counterpart of a particular male daity, a goddess represents the grace dimension of the male principle. Her graceful presence, while enveloping the entire life of the human person, remains “unmixed and transcendent in her divine aloofness”, whereby she becomes the mother of all. “Thus a virgin stands for eternal youth, timeless beauty, total freedom, infinite receptivity, indwelling transcendence and inexhaustible resources.”²⁹

Sharing a similar vision, Regina Coll probes into the meaning of “virgin” in ancient writings. A virgin has been described as one “who was complete in herself, who did not receive her definition from another; whose being was not owned by a man, father, lover or

²⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁷ Corona Mary, *The Divine Dream* (Tiruchirapally: Np, 1993), p. 63.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 55-75.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 57. Other quotes in this paragraph are also taken from p. 57.

spouse. The goddesses Athena, Diana and Kore were virgins in spite of their sexual activity... The question is not one of biology but one of theology.”³⁰

Seen in this way, virginity is an affirmation of the sacredness of the human body in itself. A woman does not derive her worth from her relationship as wife or mother, but from her very person, created in God’s image, hence sacred and complete. Virginity is not mere sexual rigidity as commonly viewed, but a means of growing in loving relationship with Christ and commitment to his mission (2 Cor 11:2).³¹ It leads a person to total self-surrender to God and accept the risk of leaping into the unknown. In fact, through her ‘yes’, Mary embraces God’s call to become the Virgin-Mother of the Messiah and participate in his redemptive mission. She accepts virginity for the sake of the kingdom (reign of God). In the light of the above reflections, we affirm:

Virginity is not a value in itself. It is a consequence of one’s commitment to God. That is why myths make their virgins mothers. Mary is the concretisation of such myths. She is a sign that committed virginity is always fulfilling and fruitful.³²

What strikes us in Mary’s “Let it be done according to your word” (v.38) is her total openness and availability to God. She has been caught up in God’s plan beyond the realm of human imagination and control, and commits herself to cooperate with God in the realisation of that plan. Hers was a free and responsible act of self-surrender, and not a passive, helpless submission. It was an adult response, a creative fidelity of a fully liberated human being. By this courageous act, she becomes a true disciple who listens to the word of God and acts upon it. Like an exemplary disciple, Mary contemplates the unfathomable ways of her son by treasuring “all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). Jesus himself acknowledges the quality of discipleship of his Mother and praises her obedient response to God’s word, “Here are my mother, my sisters and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 12:49-50).

³⁰ Regina Coll, “A Look at Mary of Popular Tradition,” *Sisters Today*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (August/September 1988), p. 16.

³¹ For a description on physical, moral and personal aspects of virginity, see *Divine Dream*, pp. 58-59.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 65. It is beyond the scope of this section to delve into Mariological dogmas of the Church. For a critical reflection on Mary, see ‘Bibliography’ in *The Divine Dream*, p. 102.

The point to be emphasised here is the fact that God chose Mary, a *woman* to collaborate in God's plan of salvation (Gal 4:4). It is an affirmation of the sacredness of woman's body. The institutional Church's over preoccupation to project Mary as "virgin" immaculately conceived, should not divest her of her *womanhood*. This is important for understanding the dignity and vocation of woman against the background of a patriarchal Jewish society that looked down on woman. The contempt for woman is best summed up in the synagogue prayer in which a Jewish man thanked God that he was not born a woman.³³ As Teresa Okure observes, despite this cultural predicament of the woman, God chose that channel for the birth of Jesus because in the divine scheme only a woman could give birth and nurture life along with God.³⁴ Jesus is indeed Mary's "flesh and blood", "the son of Mary" (Mk 6:3). God has honoured womanhood in Mary and empowered her for libertive mission. The Magnificat is a powerful testimony to this counter-cultural action of God.

b) Mary in the Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55)

Magnificat, found only in Luke's Gospel, is said to be one of the four canticles in the Lukan narrative: "the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2: 13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2: 28-32)."³⁵ Concerning the composition of the canticles, biblical scholar R.E. Brown holds that the canticles were pre-Lukan and Jewish-Christian formulations, which Luke added to his already existing narrative.³⁶

The Magnificat possesses the characteristics of Psalms of praise with three basic parts: the introductory praise of God, the body of the hymn suggesting reasons for praise and the concluding part recounting again the motive for praise along with a blessing and/or petition. One can notice a resemblance between Mary's song and the canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, where Hannah bursts into sentiments of praise and thanks for God's marvellous deeds in bringing about a reversal of order.

³³ B. Menahoth 43b; A. Cohen. *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: Schocken, 1975), p. 159.

³⁴ Teresa Okure, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament: Implications for Women in Mission," *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, Vol.2, No. 2 (October 1995), p. 210.

³⁵ W. F. Maestri, *Mary: Model of Justice, Reflections on the Magnificat* (New York: Alba House, 1987), p. 6.

³⁶ R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977).

The Magnificat proclaims “the great reversal”, which is a major theme in Luke³⁷. The lowly are lifted up; the mighty are cast down; the hungry are filled; the rich are sent away empty. (Lk 1: 51-53). That is revolutionary: in Mary, God has envisaged a new world order, a “three-fold revolution...a cultural, political and economic.”³⁸ An analytical reading of the six verbs used in verses 51-53 reveals that these are “habitual acts of God” in favour of the oppressed, calling us to collaborate with God.³⁹ Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly - the *anawim* and declares her commitment to their liberation and well-being. R. E. Brown helps us perceive the radicality of Mary’s choice:

For Luke, Mary’s virginity was like the barrenness of the O. T. women: both constituted a human impossibility which only the might of God could overcome. In using “low estate” and “handmaid” (i.e., female slave) for Mary, Luke is associating her with all the memories of the Poor Ones evoked by those terms—Poor Ones whom God has helped by his might, whether they were women yearning for children, or Israel reduced by oppression to the status of a “handmaid” (1 Macc 2:11) or “low estate” (1 Sam 9:16).⁴⁰

The Magnificat has been termed “a dangerous story”,⁴¹ that challenges us to resist and transform all political, social, economic, and religio-cultural systems, claiming absolute authority and control. Mary’s song recounts the story of God’s justice, mercy, holiness and mighty deeds on behalf of the *anawim*. In her vision of a new community, Mary sees God’s action on behalf of the poor and exploited. She challenges the patriarchal order and all oppressive forces. Through her song of liberation, Mary announces the coming of the Messianic age and the prophetic mission of Jesus (Lk 4:18-19). Mary is confident that Yahweh will stand by the poor and effect a radical change in the oppressive structures and systems.

³⁷ The theme of ‘reversal’ is not a Lukan invention, it is found in Mark (e.g., 12:41-43; 5:24-34, 14: 3-9) the first of the evangelists. Nevertheless Mark too is not the inventor of the theme. ‘Reversal’ is a theme that runs through the Old Testament. Examples include: the choice of David (1 Sam 16: 1-13), the vocation of some of the prophets (Jer 1: 6-8; Amos 7:14-15; Is 7).

³⁸ Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation* (Sri Lanka: CSR, 1997) p. 114.

³⁹ R.J. Raja, *You are Free: Women in the New Testament* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1993), pp 5-7. The following explanation is found on p 7, No. 10: The verbs put in the greek gnomic aorist tense means this is how God did in the past, this is how God is doing in the present, and this is how God will do in the future, provided we participate in this liberative task.

⁴⁰ R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 361.

⁴¹ Shaun O’Meara, “Mary’s Magnificat,” *Sisters Today*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (August/September 1988), p. 5.

Yahweh will achieve the final liberation of all people, through the death and resurrection of her Son.

Implications for Women and Mariology

Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat repudiates traditional mariology that has been serving the interests of the dominant shapers of society and Church. By interpreting her *fiat* as the unquestioning and passive acceptance of God's will, women have been motivated and even subjugated to assume an attitude of slavish docility and blind obedience to those in authority. In the words of T. Balasuriya, "this presentation of Mary as the obedient, docile, faithful virgin-mother has the impact of rendering Marian spirituality rather pietistic, somewhat passive and even individualistic."⁴²

The type of Marian spirituality practised in the Church is a clear proof of Balasuriya's statement. Mary is honoured not as the daring woman of Nazareth, but rather in symbolic roles as the Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, or Vellankani in Tamil Nadu or Mount Mary in Mumbai. Raymond Brown maintains that "precisely because we do not know much about the historical character and individuality of Mary, she lends herself more freely than Jesus does to a symbolic trajectory. She has been adaptable in various times and places..."⁴³ As Regina Coll observes, every age draws from the popular symbols of that age while at the same time reinforcing those symbols.⁴⁴ Thus we notice a variety of titles for Mary, such as Handmaiden, Virgin, Mother, Queen of purity, humility and so on. They have been presented as models for women. These symbols, as they have been applied to Mary, do not guarantee the empowerment of women or other peripheral groups. On the contrary, they actually disempower them by making them passive and resigned to their fate.

We need to recognise that despite the official Church's exaltation of Mary, women's condition has not improved considerably. Popes down the centuries have kept the Virgin Mary on a pedestal. A citation from John Paul II's address to Women Religious at Washington (Oct 7, 1979) on Mary and womanhood is a classical example:

⁴² T. Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, p. 74.

⁴³ R. E. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crisis Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist, 1975), p. 106.

As a great sign that appeared in the heavens, in the fullness of time, the Woman dominates all history as the Virgin Mother of the Son and as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, as the Hand-maid of humanity. The Woman becomes also, by association with her Son, the sign of contradiction to the world, and at the same time the sign of hope, whom all generations shall call blessed.⁴⁵

Immediately after, the Pope adds: “without herself being inserted into the hierachical constitution of the Church, and yet this woman made all hierarchy possible because she gave to the world the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.”⁴⁶ Thus the Pope reiterates the exclusion of women from hierarchy and leadership in the Church. The humble virgin image serves to maintain this position.

Nevertheless, Mary in the Magnificat contradicts the traditional projection of Marian humility. Far from denying her self-worth on the pretext of humility, Mary asserts her greatness by acknowledging the mighty deeds of God in her life (Lk 1:48-49). She thus gives a new meaning and purpose to the virtue of humility. It is not by denying or burying our gifts and talents that we glorify God but by consciously accepting them with grateful hearts and placing them at the service of humanity. This positive dimension of humility shines out in the life of Mary from Annunciation to Pentecost. Here it would suffice to mention Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56) and her intervention at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11). Both instances unfold Mary’s genuine concern, womanly sensitivity and spirit of service. She combines humility and assertiveness in herself. Subscribing to this view, Pope Paul VI says:

The modern women will note with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions (cf. Lk 1: 51-53).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Regina Coll, “A Look at Mary of Popular Tradition,” *Sisters Today* Vol. 60, No. 1 (August/September 1988), p. 14.

⁴⁵ Sighted in Kevin McNamara, *The Teaching of Pope John Paul II: Mary, the Mother of God* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1982), p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (Bombay: St. Paul Pub. 1974), p. 48.

The distorted portrayal of Mary and other biblical women has led Christian women in general to submit themselves to clerical domination in God's name. As for society, the inequality between women and men in India is so structured and stereotyped that it has become a part of Indian culture and ethos. Consequently the very consciousness of women has been domesticated. The vast majority of women in our country continue to be mute witnesses to their own exploitation and discrimination.

The task of a new Mariology, then, is to let the Virgin of the Annunciation and the radical woman of the Magnificat stand up. Let Marian devotions allow women to emerge as free, faithful and committed like Mary. Church's glorification of Mary and imitation of her virtues must aim at building self-confidence and realistic optimism in people, and instilling in them a sense of 'prophetic protest' against all forms of dehumanising systems. This is the kind of Mariology and spirituality that will do justice not only to Mary but also to other biblical women.

4. Conclusion and call for Action

This brief article has sought to develop a feminist approach to the Bible and illustrate it with examples. In our search for a holistic and liberating hermeneutical principle, we have highlighted the role of feminist hermeneutics in radicalising the androcentric mainstream biblical-theological scholarship. Applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, intuition, vision and hope we have portrayed Mary as a powerful symbol of courageous faith and commitment to realising the prophetic mission of Jesus. As a constructive and holistic enterprise, feminist scholars seek to develop a dialogic and participatory process of doing Bible study. Mindful of our Indian context, we have emphasised the relevance of searching into the Scriptures of other religions.

Call to Action

- ◆ A feminist hermeneutics of liberation has the prophetic task of naming and denouncing the evil effects of a male-defined biblical teachings and religious practices on women. It must at the same time offer an alternative vision of wholeness and inclusiveness, rooted in the belief that women are *human persons*, created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).

- ◆ A conscious effort is to be made to replace exclusive masculine symbols and vocabulary for divine-human realities with an inclusive model capable of “breaking through narrow, rigid, and restrictive structures of the past,”⁴⁸ and moving towards an all-embracing community.
- ◆ In our re-interpretation of biblical texts and theological teachings, we shall affirm that any hermeneutical principle must “take into consideration gender and racial/caste oppression as much as it must take the economic/class dimension seriously.”⁴⁹
- ◆ Given the enormous diversity and complexity of Asian people with their cultures, languages, religions and traditions, women’s theologies and hermeneutics carry different emphases and nuances. The challenge before us is to promote contextual studies from feminist perspectives, which draw inspiration from Christian and other religious traditions.
- ◆ Equally important is our involvement in people’s lives. For participation in movements for political action and social transformation gives authenticity to our faith. Another challenge is to facilitate the process of networking among women’s organisations and like-minded people’s movements at the local, regional, national and international levels.
- ◆ Aware of India’s/Asia’s religious pluralism, commitment to inter-faith dialogue as a means of mutual learning needs to be reiterated. My experience of involvement in interreligious activity since 1992 in our locality at Bandra, Mumbai has deepened my conviction that followers of other religions are our partners in our common search for truth. They are not mere objects of theological discourse. In the process of journeying together, we have learned the skill of giving and receiving, as well as the art of participatory leadership.

The above reflections summon us to outgrow the stage of biblical, theological and “ecclesiastical patriarchalisation” and promote new research findings and feminist scholarship aimed at attitudinal and structural transformation of the Church and society. This would lead to bringing about a community of ‘discipleship of equals’ as envisaged by Jesus (Mt 23:8-10; Gal 3:26-28) for the benefit of all God’s people and the whole of creation.

⁴⁸ S.D. Isvaradevan, “God Language and Women,” in Aruna Gnanadason, ed., *Towards a Theology of Humanhood: Women’s Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1986), p.75. See also my article “Linguistic Apartheid,” *Indian Currents*, Vol. XIV, No.11 (17 March 2002), pp. 30-31.

⁴⁹ Aruna Gnanadason, “What do These Women Speak of?,” *Voices*, June 1993, p. 39.