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## WOMEN, THEY TOO HAVE THEIR STORY: RE-IMAGINING THE FEMALE VOICE AND BODY

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### Abstract

*As women seek self-sufficiency, they must still deal with their hurtful past and look for ways to heal as they strive for alternative means to survive and provide better opportunities for their families. Throughout history, women have been rendered invisible and silenced, with very minimal space for their voices to be heard. Many have over a long period of time been denied the platform to self-represent and have their experiences acknowledged and valued. Oppressive structures continue to be perpetuated because control and power do not seem to be shifting. Many feminist scholars have argued on the importance of acknowledging women's voices and agency. This article looks at ways in which women have been silenced, and actively participated in various ways of reclaiming their voices and power. I examine possible challenges of 'speaking for', the importance of acknowledging the intersectionality of women's experiences, the link between motherhood and nationhood, and the role the church plays in women's everyday life experiences.*

**Key Words:** Voice; Feminist Theology; Fertility; Bodies

### Introduction

Having grown up in a church context where Bible texts that were mostly read focused mainly on men and the role they played, I was under the impression that women were just playing the supporting role. When I visited Jerusalem in Israel (February 2012), I was afforded the opportunity to visit Rachel's tomb. I was pleasantly surprised to find many women and letters from women around the world seeking and asking for mediation for the answering of their prayers. The Bible tells us that Rachel (the wife of Jacob) was a woman of great perseverance and determination. While she struggled with fertility issues, she never gave up until she was blessed with two sons. A strong-willed woman, Rachel's narrative is seldom a theme in church services. This is one of the many examples of how women's voices are silenced, in historical texts, in their respective communities, in churches, and in how we write about them in our academic texts. The patriarchal societies within which we live often render women's contribution invisible, and this can be seen in many aspects of society, including churches.

I start off with this brief self-reflection as a way to position myself and highlight the importance of being critical of the work we do as scholars. Butler (1988:522) makes an argument that "feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context". Feminist critiques

challenge the taken-for-granted and strive towards the acknowledgement of positioned knowledge and experiences. Women have for a long time been denied the platform to self-represent and have their experiences acknowledged and valued. Many feminist scholars (McClintock, 1991:104; Alcoff, 1991:6; Carby, 1997:111; Collins, 1998:62 and Doezema, 2001:16 to name but a few) have argued on the importance of acknowledging women's voices and agency. In this article, I look at ways in which women (more specifically in South Africa) have for a long time been silenced, somewhat reclaimed their voices, and participated actively in various ways of regaining their power. I begin by (a) examining possible challenges of 'speaking for', and then focus on (b) the politics of motherhood and (c) the reclaiming of women's bodies as sacred. I deem these issues crucial as we re-think the role of globalisation as it affects women within the South African context.

### **The Research Process: Speaking for Others**

Conducting research within the human and social sciences in general, and psychology and theology in particular offers us an opportunity to get some understanding of our social world, and also a platform to criticize the injustices, oppression, and inequalities. It provides a space to explore and look for alternatives as we strive for a 'just world'. It is important to think about the reasons that lead us to conduct the kind of research that we do, and to acknowledge our position as scholars representing academia, and more specifically the universities that most of us are a part of. I have multiple locations and represent multiple systems which influence how I may be perceived by my participants when conducting research. The research participants see us as people who have the potential to bring about positive change into their lives (more specifically the marginalised communities, e.g. women). Because of this 'trust', they *allow* us to 'speak for' them, that is, they are willing to share their lived experiences with us. The notion of speaking for is highlighted by Alcoff (1991:7) and MacLeod, and Bhatia (2008:577) in their works and critiques of uncritically representing the other. Where we are located plays a crucial role as it forces us to be aware of whom we speak for. Acknowledging our location, power and positionality within a research context helps us better represent and make meaning of the work we do.

Alcoff (1991:7) argues that speaking 'uncritically' for others may pose the potential danger of silencing their voices and perpetuating oppression under the guise of 'meaning well' or 'doing good'. Allowing people to speak for themselves gives room for situated truths and self-representation. As Alcoff (1991:13) notes, "When I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that, whether I intend to or not, to others, as one possible way to be". Therefore, when speaking for others, we need to acknowledge the privileged position wherein we stand, and the unequal power relations involved in the interaction.

For a long time women have been denied the platform to speak for themselves (through restrictive patriarchal systems and colonial oppression). Many carry with them hidden transcripts of personal experiences and memories that continue to go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Because many have had others speaking for them for a long time, their voices remained silenced but not mute, as what many desire is an audience that will acknowledge their positions and experiences. Kiguwa (2006:13) argues that with the advent of democracy in South Africa, many women were for the first time offered the space to exercise their agency. However, Kiguwa is also quick to mention the patriarchal context

that many of these women still find themselves existing under, therefore complicating the meaning that this freedom entails.

Within psychology, it has been argued by numerous scholars that if people are not offered a space to express themselves, their experiences remain internalised. For many years, Psychology literature has shied away from examining gender issues from a critical perspective in which women's well-being is connected to how they are treated by the structures within which they exist. Women's personal histories and memories are crucial in helping us understand how they view and position their roles within the patriarchal societies that they are a part of. Here I am reminded of Foster (2004), Freire (1992) and Martin-Baro's (1994) assertion that we need to move towards a Psychology and Theology that is liberatory rather than one that is oppressive and prescriptive. This kind of Psychology and Theology will empower those whom we study and allow them to give meaning to their own experiences. We need to think critically about the issues that our disciplines focus on and also apply our theories in a way that acknowledges the context they exist in.

### **Challenges of 'Re-claiming' the Voice**

In her book, *The Global Women's Movement*, Antrobus (2004:3) argues that notions such as Westernisation should be problematised. For example, free trade and neo-liberalism led to less access and more privatisation which directly affected women at the grassroots level. Pui-Lan, (2004:8) asserts that "to reclaim that they are subjects in charge of their own destiny, African women have to fight against patriarchy in their traditions, on the one hand, and the complex legacy of colonialist feminism on the other". Women struggles are tied to political economy, and changes made at the state level affect women socially, economically and culturally. This is a notion stressed by Pui-Lan (2004:10) in her argument that "the social status of women and their culturally prescribed roles affect directly the range of women's economic participation". For Oduyoye, (2001:12) economic and political liberation cannot be divorced from religio-cultural struggles as these are all interconnected. Many women, and specifically African women, have to contend constantly with various economic injustices, for example, a large number continues to be involved in unpaid labour, unequal pay in the workplace, and they form a large percentage of low wage labour. Various oppressive structures continue to be perpetuated against women because control and power are not shifting.

With this in mind, various feminist critiques attempt to challenge the ways in which power operates. The perpetual prescriptive policies continue to silence and oppress women and maintain unjust inequalities. As MacKinnon (1989:5) notes, inequality is about power; and because women often do not have access to this power (both economically and politically), inequality persists. This inequality is not only in the public sphere but the so-called 'private' as well, worming its way into what might be perceived as intimate spaces. For many women, the 'private' pertains to their body and having control over what happens to it. Women's reproductive rights remain a contested terrain where in many societies there continues to be an expectation for a woman to bear children. The notion of motherhood remains complex and requires problematising. In the next section I shall offer a brief critical discussion of the politics of motherhood.

## The Politics of Motherhood

In her article titled *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Butler (1998:520) highlights the problematic nature of *predetermined ways of being*. The predetermination is being fuelled by power and control, and regulates what is accepted and what is not. Motherhood continues to be an unspoken (and sometimes spoken) expectation for many women from various societies. Butler (1988:521) argues further that “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well”. One of the ways in which women are expected to ‘perform their gender’ is through bearing children.

The idea of ‘womanhood’ is always conflated with the biological reality of being female, which holds an implicit assumption of motherhood. In turn, the maternal and nurturing role of women tends to be a major descriptor and marker of their womanhood and femininity. Thus conceived most African women always feel, or are made to feel, incomplete if they do not have children of their own. What of the ‘infertile’ woman? Even more questions can be asked about the professional woman who chooses to forfeit the ‘joys of motherhood’ for professional reasons.

According to Widge (2002:60), in India the estimate of the ratio of couples who experience some sort of infertility in their reproductive lives is 8 to 10 percent. Children play a very important role in many societies (especially within Africa) and therefore childlessness is traditionally viewed as a crisis for the couple and the community at large. Widge continues by expressing the opinion that fertility defines womanhood and womanhood is defined by a woman’s capacity to be a mother. Since it is the woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth, society puts pressure on her to ‘mother’ even though the male may be the one who is infertile. Because she is defined by her fertility, it can then be assumed that a woman internalises the motherhood role to the extent that if she is infertile or childless, she feels worthless. Widge articulates this claim further:

The identity of a woman is formed in relation to the values, meanings and symbols of her society. Her ‘self’ is affected by the cultural world outside. The meanings and values of the cultural identity are internalised. The ideology of motherhood differs according to the socio-cultural context, ethnicity, and class. Motherhood has connotations of respect and power. Real-life mothers are respected to a very limited extent, and that respect is usually for mothers of sons (2002:61).

In many cultures, a woman is considered a ‘real’ woman only after childbirth and infertility/childlessness precludes her from identifying herself as both a woman and a ‘real’ parent. Thus being a mother elevates the identity status of a woman within society. It is not only women who suffer from infertility, it also affects men. However, because of the patriarchal nature of many societies, a man’s fertility is hardly ever questioned (Hlatshwayo, 2004:150). This point is further highlighted by Widge (2002:62) who asserts that the woman who cannot have children becomes a focal point for patriarchal power, which has a majorly negative impact for the woman. The findings of Hlatshwayo’s (2004:150) study further reveal that for many South African women, infertility usually begins with infection of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Most women are vulnerable to STIs as they are unable to negotiate safe sex within their marital relationships due to their lack of power in the patriarchal contexts they live in.

Ideas about womanhood and motherhood are linked to family and marriage. Family organisation and marriage are important in understanding reproduction and motherhood.

The structure of the patriarchal family is one of the major causes of inequality between men and women and of the understanding that motherhood is one of the major roles of a woman in society. Motherhood is seen to be positively significant in many traditional societies, since women consider their reproductive capacity as their source of power which defines their identity and status. Makinde's (2004:164) study of the Yoruba culture in Nigeria supports Widge's (2002:62) findings that motherhood gives a woman status within society. In his study, Makinde (2004:164) stresses the importance of motherhood in the Yoruba culture. He further asserts that the preservation of humanity depends of the role played by mothers in society. The implication here is that without mothers, we will cease to exist.

Infertility plays a very important role in how women perceive themselves. It affects their very identity as finding out that they cannot have children means losing the possibility of being called 'mother' and a possible loss of status acquired through motherhood. According to Gardiner (1981:351) female identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond. A woman starts forming an identity as a female from what she sees in her mother. Gardiner (1981:352) further mentions that "throughout women's lives, the self is defined through social relationships, issues of fusion and merger of the self with others are significant, and ego and body boundaries remain flexible". Society expects a woman to bear children, and a woman who cannot conceive might feel isolated and have a sense that she does not belong. The two main roles available to women are those of wife and mother. As can be seen here this role definition always links the woman to someone else, in this case a husband and a child.

The problem of women's position in society with regard to their health issues should be looked at within a general context of poverty, class, gender inequalities, and unequal access to resources. "The health and well-being of women are important as a value. The politics and organisation of health care in general, the legal system, the nature of sexuality, parenthood and the family, and the present economic structures all are important related issues that impinge on a childless woman" (Widge, 2002:73).

Motherhood within the family structures is perceived as an important aspect of nationhood as women's bodies produce 'the nation' as also highlighted by Hearne (2001:99) in her discussion of 'Civic Motherhood'. In her work on nationhood in South Africa McClintock (1991:105) suggests that motherhood is a political concept under constant contest, and rightly so, considering the increasing number of women 'choosing not to have children' or get married, in the pursuit of professional careers. In this way, women become part of the global economic market at the risk of being perceived as selfish or disregarding their womanly duties. Perceiving women as 'the bearers of the nation' assumes them to be objects, and this objectification of the female body then plays a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of nationalism. While women are often confined to the 'private' sphere (the home/family), what they produce benefits the 'public' sphere (they produce doctors, accountants, presidents, etc. ...). Collins (1998:161) argues that "because women are so often associated with family, home space becomes seen as a private, feminised space that is distinct from the public, masculinised space that lies outside its borders". Collins perceives these gendered spheres as troubling as they assume 'the home' to be a safe space and therefore a place where women belong. This separation through the physical space perpetuates oppression, and exclusion of women's voices. The women then become restricted within the home space (physical space where they live, and their individual countries) borders that limit their free movement. The many times that women get to move between spaces and borders of different countries are usually through human trafficking where young girls and

women are sold into sex slavery. With these forced movements, women do not have a voice in what happens to their bodies. The sacredness of their bodies becomes violated and in the process women are rendered voiceless. The politics of the women's bodies and voices has been looked at and articulated by many feminist theologians who through drawing from various biblical texts highlight and bring to the fore the historical narrative of women's oppression and resilience. It is to this feminist theological perspective that I shall now turn.

### **The Politics of the Body: Reclaiming Women's Bodies as Sacred**

*Every month when I menstruate I am not allowed to enter the church grounds, and at home my duties are restricted as I am considered 'unclean'. The blood which comes out of my body every month renders me 'impure'.*

– Personal conversation with my aunt.

*When the church found out that I was pregnant (out of wedlock) I was considered a disgrace and a sinner. I was immediately expelled and asked never to come to church with my protruding belly.*

– Personal conversation with a friend.

The above excerpts are in line with Pui-Lan's (2004:10) contention that "within African cultural traditions, beliefs and practices such as stereotypical sex roles, the ritual impurity of menstruating women, and the exclusion of females from certain rituals marginalise women and render them second-class citizens". Using a feminist theology approach, Van Schalkwyk (2002:135) looks at reclaiming the female body as sacred. She looks at the interconnectedness or intersections of power-religion-body relationships. She argues that "much religious truth regarding the sacredness of the body was lost and/or denied when the early church formulated its doctrines regarding sin and grace, body and spirit" (136). Often times when trying to understand people's various experiences, the fact that these experiences are embodied goes unnoticed or are hardly discussed. According to Van Schalkwyk, the notion of 'the body' needs to be problematised and interrogated. This is a notion further articulated by Scheper-Hughes (1998:121) who argues that 'the body is text', that people's lived experiences are manifested through and cannot be separated from their bodies. In her chapter on *Violence Against Women's Bodies*, Traitler-Espiritu (1996:75-77) offers four criteria for reconstructing the woman's body, namely:

Women themselves have to think of their body as intrinsically good and beautiful. To claim the body as good, needs a re-reading of our religious tradition, which has passed on ambiguous messages about the body, particularly about a woman's body.

Women must claim their right to bodily integrity (including sexual integrity) and to decisions concerning their bodies. This means that the notion that women's bodies can be owned, used, and abused for whatever purpose must be overcome.

Women must claim their rights to health and well-being as defined by women themselves, and their right to special attention on all health hazards that may arise out of their reproductive abilities.

Re-constructing women's bodies must take as a starting point the needs of the most vulnerable women (e.g. girl child).

Over a long period of time, feminist theologies have played a crucial role in helping to re-define the female body as being sacred. This redefinition is highlighted in Van

Schalkwyk's (2002:138) assertion that "various movements contributed toward a growing counter-culture which recognised the freedom and sensuality of the body over against the exploitation of the body by religion, capitalism, and sexism, and which recognises the interdependence of the living bodies of cosmos, earth and nature and the bodies of the different genders". She further goes on to argue that women needed a space to "rediscover the Divine within their own daily, bodily experience" (139).

There continues to be challenges with regard to this rediscovering as the patriarchal nature of most societies pose a challenge to women's spaces and voices by controlling both the public and what may be perceived as the private lives of women. Against this backdrop, Van Schalkwyk, (2002:152) argues that:

By appreciating the sacredness or the presence of the divine in women's bodies, feminist theologians value women's bodies to such an extent that we wish to protect women from all forms of bodily harm, whether inflicted by themselves or by others. But we also affirm women's innate sensuality and their right to be sexual and body-conscious.

Women activists should deal with the issue of teenage and female sexuality in a manner which is not judgmental and prescriptive, but which makes women responsible and empowered to protect their own bodily integrity, and yet to express their sexuality in 'safe' ways. But such bodily self-empowerment can only occur in a society where patriarchal abuses of women's and children's bodies are ruled as illegal and immoral.

The challenges that most women continue to face due to patriarchy inhibit their upward mobility and render them powerless. For empowerment of the self and the collective to take place, women need safe spaces and platforms to celebrate first and foremost their womanhood. In an attempt to open up spaces for women to have dialogue and share their experiences with one another, Mercy Oduyoye conceptualised the women's movement called *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*. This women's movement was conceptualised in 1978 and officially inaugurated in 1989. The movement offers space for women to tackle issues that contribute to their continuous oppression. Using interfaith perspectives, the circle offers 'safe' space for issues that are usually difficult to speak or write about (issues such as violence, sexuality, rape, sexual abuse, and African rituals to name but a few). The discussions take place in the form of workshops, seminars, and publications. This is one of the ways in which women can have their voices heard and also place themselves in historical texts that so often 'ignore' their contribution.

## **Conclusion: Where the Road leads**

African women also need to engage in a hermeneutics of suspicion, which entails challenging inhuman and domesticating customs and traditions while recovering their historical memory. Because of Africa's peripheral role in the world and the negative stereotypes imposed on its peoples, African women have felt under pressure to keep silent about their oppression. This subtle coercion must be exposed so that African women can feel free to voice their opinions and to struggle for greater justice (Pui-Lan, 2004:16).

In South Africa, while gender equality may be 'official', many women still exist in a state of disempowerment where gender divisions in many aspects of society still exist. Supporting this notion, McEwan (2003:756) asserts that "without spaces for the articulation of memory, black women's citizenship, in terms of social standing and belonging, continues to be compromised. The role of women's personal testimony (through their own voices) in shaping the nation and citizenship is particularly important in a country such as

South Africa, where the legacies of colonialism and apartheid have effectively silenced black women's voices". Differential power relations should be acknowledged if empowerment is to be realised. As Yuval-Davis (1991:6) puts it eloquently, "...such a theory (of citizenship) should not automatically equate participation in the public domain with a higher degree of empowerment".

While there seems to have been a shift in the role of women in society, many continue to struggle to have their voices heard in fields that were previously male dominated. It is crucial to note that simply opening doors to women in places that they were formerly excluded from without changing or shifting the structures is problematic and oppressive. Many continue to be accepted and treated as 'tokens' because significant changes and audible female voices continue to be minimal. Speaking from a theological perspective, Kanyoro (2006:39) notes that "African theology without the faith story of African women is a theology that is incomplete and contextually inept ... in stretching our own theological imagination and our reading of the sacred scriptures, we have become aware of who we are as women of Africa". Positive and progressive change remains an ideal when patriarchal systems of treating women remain unchallenged and unchanged. For change to take place there needs to be a move from only theorising about issues in our writings to a space where practical change can be seen.

Women have stories that remain untold; many of the transcripts of their lived experiences remain hidden as platforms for their voices remain minimal. Various contexts such as the home, the church and the workplace to name a few remain spaces that conditionally accommodate women's agency. It is therefore crucial that as we embark on our scholarly pursuits we acknowledge and use a gender lens that takes seriously situated life experiences of women within various contexts.

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