

Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible:

A South African Perspective and Comments¹

By MW Dube

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Abstract

In a critical appropriation of and engagement with Dube's Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible, the book is investigated for how it challenges and contributes to the current Two-Thirds World, postcolonial, and feminist biblical discourse of liberation. The point of departure here is the South African, post-Apartheid context and the value of Dube's book is evaluated in and for the contemporary South African context.

Keywords: Agency (postcolonial), African Independent Churches (AICs), Biblical interpretation, Empire, Feminism, Imperialism, Marginality, Gender, Queer theory, Patriarchy, Postcolonial theory

Introduction

Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible, published in 2000, is a timely, contextual study by Musa Dube on the inter-relationship between imperialism and patriarchy, as it plays out in biblical studies – broadly conceived and including theories and practices. Postcolonial, feminist analyses are done through an intertextual reading of the Bible with other ancient and modern texts, and with the assistance of the literary-rhetorical method, which culminates in a postcolonial feminist rereading of Mt 15:21-28, Jesus' meeting with the Canaanite woman and her daughter.

The three sections of her book deal, respectively, with the issue of the postcolonial condition, theorising empire and method, and applying these insights to a particular gospel text. In the first part, Dube shows the interconnectedness of the West, the Bible and imperialism which requires serious reflection for framing the concerns of biblical studies and feminist interpretative practice in our postcolonial era. In Part 2, literary-rhetorical methods that characterise the power struggle between the coloniser and the colonised are identified, in order to promote "postcolonial strategies of reading the Bible that resist and decolonize both

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patriarchy and imperial oppression and to seek to articulate the liberation of women and men of different races and nations” (Dube 2000:43). In the third and final part, and working with what she calls “Rahab’s reading prism”, Dube studies two texts: Mt 8 with regard to its historical and ideological position on empire and mission, and Mt 15:21-28 from a postcolonial, feminist perspective.

As it would be impossible to do full justice to the richness and complexity of Dube’s valuable book in a short contribution such as this one, I will focus on a few aspects of the book’s argument only, without claiming that these concerns neatly exhaust all possible elements of discussion in summarising fashion² or that they even necessarily present the book’s most important contributions.³ However, I am of the opinion that these are important considerations for the biblical studies enterprise in South Africa – and maybe even globally – today.

Considering the Project

Musa Dube takes her theoretical point of departure in Postcolonial Feminist theory, which she explains as follows:

Decolonizing feminist biblical practices describes the commitment and the methods of reading the Bible that resist both patriarchal and imperial oppression in order to cultivate a space of liberating interdependence between nations, genders, races, ethnicities, the environment, and development (Dube 2000:111).

More specifically, “the historical experiences and strategies of resistance of Two-Thirds World women” provides her with her most important resource for the discourse she engages in, attending to these strategies to resist their “double colonisation” in (gendered) patriarchy and (colonial) imperialism (Dube 2000:113).

Theoretical Positions

Philosophical Hermeneutics

Dube describes *empire* in relational terms, expressing “an ancient and persistent relationship of dominance and suppression between different nations, countries, races, and continents”, and *imperialism*⁴ as “the process of building an empire through the imposition of political, economic, and social institutions of one nation over a foreign one”. When this led to “geographical occupation and control of one nation by another”, *colonialism* was the result (Dube 2000:47). Therefore, when Dube uses the term *postcolonial* suffice it to say that she refers “to literary theories developed from studying literature and its participation in the institution of imperialism” and “an overall analysis of the methods and effects of imperialism as a continuing reality in global relations” (Dube 2000:48). While one primary aspect of postcolonial theory is to investigate the use of literature by the imperial powers to impose and

² E.g., a comparison of different postcolonial, feminist readings of Mt 15/Mk 7 with Dube’s should also prove interesting. Also, smaller points of difference with Dube’s exegetical findings would fit better elsewhere (e.g. whether verbs such as “endowed with” suggests impersonal, “neutral” receipt of interpretations and traditions).

³ My reading issues from the perspective of a white, South African male and New Testament scholar who has recently moved from a historically black (University of Fort Hare) to a historically white institution (Stellenbosch University), whose institutional make-ups prior to 1994 reflected their allegiance to the roles of subjugated and oppressor respectively – at least to some extent.

⁴ This was motivated by “God, glory and gold”, or “power, moral responsibility and economic interests” or “spiritual, material, and power motivations” (Dube 2000:47); she later adds a fourth “G”, gender, as “central to the narrative strategies of imperialism” (Dube 2000:117-8).

justify,⁵ it secondly also recognises the control over land and its resources as the main subject (Dube 2000:49).

When postcolonial theory is expanded to include in addition to the legacy of colonialism and everything that it entails, also other situations of oppression, subjugation, and hegemony, it provides an interpretative method and approach to think about and address subalterns in various social locations. But this also poises the discussion on a knife-point, since the twin dangers are to localise colonisation to the extent of trivialising it, or to generalise the concept and thereby depriving *postcolonial* of that which provides it with its significance and which allows it its specific form of literary and social analysis.

Bringing Feminist theory into play as well, Dube laments its focus on middle-class women and their classification of patriarchy as the “foundational oppression” which led to Feminism’s isolated existence, removed from the contemporary, postcolonial discourse which again developed among Two Thirds World people and focussed on imperialism. Feminists tended to subsume all imperialist oppression under the heading of patriarchy, blinding them to their cooptation as middle-class, race-privileged women into a generalising discourse on women while participating in the generalised critique (or re-imagination) of all cultures as inherently patriarchal and so disempowering the postcolonial positive reinvention of native culture (Dube 2000:112).

What is ultimately important, is the notion of interdependence or interconnectedness of nations, continents, genders, races, cultures and political and economic systems (Dube 2000:185), while dealing with the problem of under- or non-acknowledgement of the relationships and especially not recognising the uneven nature of the relationships, since the basis of the majority of these relationships are oppressive and exploitative.⁶

Que(e)rying the Gender Discourse

Feminist and Postcolonial theories were two of the important influences on Queer theory,⁷ which questions and destabilises sexual identities and counter cultural prejudice not only against sexual minorities such as homosexuals (Donovan 2001:266 n72). Queer theory also goes up against the entire paradigmatic system of meaning that produces gender and sexual identities, considering religious ideas as that system’s cultural means of production (Schneider 2000a:3; 2000b:208). Queer theory is today well-positioned to feed back into Feminist and Postcolonial theories since it questions fixed gender identity and associated categories, perceiving of identity as multiple, unstable and regulatory, and celebrates difference for contributing to and not threatening truth.⁸ The social constructedness of gender and sex and their multiple meanings renders them fragile, and renders the notion of gender

⁵ E.g. using literature to derogate the subjugated, to justify the superiority of the colonisers and their actions, and providing a rationale reliant upon binary oppositions to show the need for colonisation (Dube 2000:49-50).

⁶ There is probably not the right place for this discussion, but were the competing groups and factions as found in the biblical texts not standing within a longer tradition of development, representative of a greater variety of reasons than Dube is willing to admit? See below.

⁷ Queer theory can be considered as an offshoot of postmodernist feminism (so Donovan 2001:266 n72; cf Jeffrey 1996:359-382).

⁸ Seidman’s (1996:11) notion of identity being composite and therefore constituted by different “elements” (such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, able-ness, etc) is appreciated, but the term “elements” may be dangerous, recalling essentialist images.

identity as well as its supposed intractable depth and inner substance illusionary (Butler 1990:146).⁹

Gender theories often still tend to perpetuate the insider/outsider rhetoric so common in patriarchal identity and power,¹⁰ whereas Queer theory allows for a critical approach not only to social identity and location but also to social systems and institutions. Queer theory critically analyses social dynamics and power structures, and challenges and deconstructs all claims to normality in response to the debates on gender, sexual identity and social power. Avoiding a return to an essentialist notion of identity it aims at a definition of an alternative identity, which amounts to a different stance, in the sense of a position over and against something¹¹ (Moxnes 2003:5-6). With these shifts in its investigations, Queer theory might in the end prove an even more valuable ally of Postcolonial theory with their common concern about the contemporary politics of identity, regarding the categories and institutions, the knowledges and the power plays by means of which social dynamics and people are structured and regulated.

Theological Hermeneutics

Dube reserved some of her harshest criticism for the earlier as well as later work of the prominent feminist, biblical studies scholar, criticising Schüssler Fiorenza¹² first for privileging gender oppression over imperialism, and then for her later attempts to define patriarchy as imperialism (being co-optive); ascribing both positive (the Western roots of Othering difference) and negative (mystifying imperialism) evaluations to kyriarchy; and, disregarding the inherent imperialist notion of the *ekklesia* of women for regulating the aspiration of women to male roles (Dube 2000:26-30,34-39; cf also 180-2 for criticism of her exegesis of Mt 15). Schüssler Fiorenza's work is seen to amount to a conflation of imperialism and patriarchalism through her conceptualisation of kyriarchy, to the detriment of those affected by theologically and biblically imbued imperialism.

The prominent – and at times, exclusive and authorising – place accorded to the Bible by the colonisers and so often reinforced by the subjugated, is a particular source of discomfort for Dube and she therefore argues for its consistent and thoroughly critical appropriation.¹³

⁹ Of late, Queer theory has also grown beyond the constructionist agenda, although it informs its epistemology. It has moved “from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference” (Seidman 1996:9).

¹⁰ Manuell Castells, the famed sociologist well known for his work on the information society, claims there are four reasons why the patriarchal system is being resolved globally. The economy was transformed and the labour market changed as the education opportunities for women increase; people are now exercising control over child birth; feminists are playing an increasingly strong role in society; and the impact of the influence of globalisation and the spread of knowledge on traditional systems and values.

¹¹ In typical postmodern fashion, Queer theory also sits with a dilemma regarding the use of queer to refer to what lies outside the norm, because as soon as queer is defined, it becomes domesticated, “rendering queer no longer outside of anything, and so no longer queer – in theory at least”. In this way Queer theory then also stands to lose its claim to the outsider position in the heteronormative society and its power arrangements, in particular (Schneider 2000b:206).

¹² After praising her for her important work on women in the New Testament, Dube is sharply critical of Schüssler Fiorenza's neglect of the imperial strategies of subjugation amidst her attention to first century-patriarchy, privileging gender oppression over imperialism (Dube 2000:26-30; 34-39).

¹³ The centrality of the Bible for Western culture and the Bible's potent displacement power as sanctioning the dislocation of other texts (Dube 2000:53) seem to be additional, important considerations for Dube's discomfort with the Bible.

Her strategy in displacing the Bible includes its juxtapositioning with secular texts, ancient and modern, as part of an “interdisciplinary, intertextual and boundary-crossing” approach (Dube 2000:53-54). Two issues in this regard require further attention:

- (1) Does the Bible assume a role (for the subjugated!) above and beyond being “public transcript” (Scott) of the colonisers? How does one deal with claims regarding the Bible which are supported with religious and spiritual arguments, without again imposing upon the subjugated? Or is the assumption that both the knowledge and the agency of the postcolonial agent override that of the colonised, claiming – even if subconsciously – a superior intellect if not religious disposition? Is this not also part of the problem of coming to terms with hybridity as inevitable characteristic of the postcolonial condition? To even attempt to present a Bible free from imperialist and patriarchal influence, given its origins and transmission, not to mention its reception, is probably at best a waste of time; but, does that equate to eliding it from theological and ethical discernment?
- (2) The second issue regards the question of apportioning blame, and deals with the question whether the biblical texts or their interpretations – or both – are the *real* culprits for their cooptation in the imperialist or colonialist project? Is the Bible to be rewritten¹⁴ (Dube 2000:14-15) or reread in the interest of using it in democratic, inclusive strategies of circumventing colonial legacies and neo-colonialism (cf Punt 2001; 2002)? Can the biblical texts not be deconstructed so effectively that it loses its positive, constructive role in a society like the new South Africa where we talk much about moral regeneration and “a RDP of the soul”?

Or is the problem maybe a wider, bigger one, namely a problem with authoritative (authoritarian) texts in which case replacing the Bible with *Moya*, which is in authorising potential at least as ambivalent as Scripture, will serve a limited long-term purpose? And should the race and gender affirming *Moya*-readings not be evaluated for its ability to include also other categories of marginalised people (physically challenged people, lesbians; etc)? The anti-imperial approach of the AICs where no “artificial cultural dualisms and hierarchies” are sustained (Dube 2000:194) is laudable, but does it always reflect reality? How does our author’s hermeneutic of suspicion function when it comes to the AICs’ *Moya*-readings? The focus on AICs and their particular style and method of theologising are of course both important and immensely interesting and also provide valuable data for postcolonial, feminist reading of the Bible. But a number of problems are also immediately present, such as the often less than gratifying power rivalries within and amidst AICs and among their leaders, which may be explained as the necessary competition among the subjugated¹⁵ but which does not deal with their involvement in the lucrative “religion/faith market” in Southern Africa.

Another matter requiring attention concerns the socio-rhetorical force of biblical texts and how to juxtapose an ideological critical reading with the faith-affirming hermeneutics of the community of believers? How is the reading of the Exodus narratives from the perspective of authorising imperial expansion into Canaan maintained, and the position that “God as the hero of Exodus is to sanctify and champion a perfect anti-conquest ideology” (Dube 2000:62), without disposing of the ancient and contemporary communities’ claims of faith? Is some form of sanitising of the Bible in the offing, the assignment of sections of the biblical

¹⁴ Other postcolonial African authors like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o suggest that rather than rewriting the Bible and recreating its privileging, it should rather be juxtaposed with other religious and secular texts (Mwikisa 2000:111).

¹⁵ However, pre-colonial Africa already provides some evidence of power struggles among the colonised – but also before or at least outside of colonisation: the Mfekane; the Shaka-Zulu wars; the Khoisan vs Nguni wars, and so forth.

documents to the dustbin of history, or even elision from the Bible? To what extent does the construction of an ideological framework for a particular text invalidate its religious or spiritual claims? Where is awareness and where is agency situated? When does ideological criticism become conspiracy theory? Is this a clash of hermeneutical (suspicion vs retrieval) or theological (materialist vs theist?) frameworks?¹⁶ On our subcontinent, the alternative of taking our leave of the Bible, and thereby consigning it to the devices of fundamentalist groupings on the prowl in Southern Africa, does not seem particularly attractive.

Exegetical Hermeneutics

This is not the best time or place to talk about specific interpretative possibilities of a text like Mt 15,¹⁷ so a few comments will suffice. An important hermeneutical change of course for postcolonial and feminist critical approaches is the challenge they direct at the traditional historical-critical approach on various levels.¹⁸ However, postcolonial feminist hermeneutics can, like all hermeneutical approaches, become a super-grid, a heuristic device like all other conscious and implicit hermeneutical approaches that screens the texts, showing up the expected and either failing or simply being disinclined to identify other aspects in and of the text.¹⁹ On the other side, lurks the danger of imposing one's own ideology under guise of the postcolonial (cf Snyman 2002). The exodus narrative is for example portrayed as an ideological structure which employs divine initiative as authorising leverage to justify anti-conquest ideology in the Exodus narratives about the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery and the consequent conquest of Canaan (Dube 2000:58-76). The elements of the

¹⁶ Some of this tension can be observed in Dube's reference to the Botswanan novel, *The victims* where she relates how in the African Independent Church (AIC) setting portrayed in the novel, the Bible "no longer goes against or above culture" while maintaining that "the implied author by no means privileges the biblical religious stories over the local ones" (Dube 2000:105,107). "[T]he critical twinning of biblical and indigenous religious stories is an anti-imperial decolonizing method" (Dube 2000:108).

¹⁷ Mk 7:24-30 illustrates how Jesus' advocacy of the abolition of the purity laws in the form of an attack on the purity system, is tested by a Gentile woman. "After Jesus declines her, she insisted on the expedient hospitality he proclaimed, even if implicitly. The Syrophenician woman is the stranger who knows to ask questions about Jesus' own praxis and in the process changes him, making him more hospitable" (Isherwood and Stuart 1998:59, referring to Kristeva). Cf also Kwok Pui-Lan (1995:71ff on the Syrophenician woman). Differences in the accounts of Mk and Mt (e.g. in Mt 15:23 JX first ignores the woman) and how Dube deals with these have to be discussed elsewhere.

¹⁸ Six "underlying *principles*" can be identified in the historical critical model of biblical interpretation: the biblical text is approached as historical evidence from and for the time of composition; it has little regard for the text as artistic, strategic and ideological whole; its strong positivistic foundation and orientation (claim to objectivity of results); it presupposed a universal and informed critic, yet neutral and impartial; operating from a strong underlying theological stance that Christian doctrine and life were subject to the guidance and judgement of the Word of God; and, presupposing a very specific and universal pedagogical model: methodological rigour alone – notwithstanding the theological and sociological "moorings" of readers – would ensure that all readers become such informed and universal readers (Segovia 1995:278-280). The emphasis on methodological expertise had, however, a number of salient *weaknesses*: the historical emphasis hampered literary analysis; the ancient world was usually studied without recourse to sociological or anthropological models; and, the overriding concern for the theological content and message of the texts, resulted in a provincial and idealistic approach to the texts with early Christianity correspondingly been seen almost exclusively in terms of theological positions, conflicts and developments. The call for and *negation of partiality* of biblical critics was more apparent than real: the model revealed a serious tension between aim and praxis: no univocal or objective meaning(s) were rendered; the model was exceedingly naïve: personal and social constructions regarding the texts were often presented as scholarly retrievals and reconstructions; and, the model was inherently colonialist and imperialist: the bracketed, male-Eurocentric identity was unreflectively universalised (Segovia 1995:281-285).

¹⁹ Dube's book – even if not intended as such – might also in form and content be seen to participate in the "competition for power among various interest groups" of academy, presenting a more correct interpretation among other feminist or postcolonial scholars.

Rahab narrative (Joshua 2) are also deconstructed and read ideological critically, with Dube concluding “that Rahab is the literary creation of the author of Joshua, the colonizer” (Dube 2000:80).

Dube’s approach and exegesis requires a nuanced reaction. The notion that Dube is “better at deconstruction than at constructive biblical interpretation” (Finger 2003:4) is perhaps more a reflection on some reviewers’ own hermeneutics than an analysis of Dube’s work. It is the postcolonial feminist biblical model which Dube proposes as hermeneutical method, called “Rahab’s prism” (Dube 2000:56; 111-124), that provides her with a constructive reading strategy. It allows a postcolonial, feminist reader to account for the tension between coloniser and colonised; to recognise and subvert the colonising impulses protruding from texts; to create “new creative spaces” through the use of a variety of hybrid discourses of decolonising; to resist imperial and patriarchal oppressive structures and ideologies; and, “to boldly and responsibly begin to utilize postcolonial feminist new spaces without being content with reforming structures that are built on profound inequality and oppressive foundations, but aiming at revolutionizing the structural oppression”.

But a few questions nevertheless remain: Specifically, are text-centred claims not subverted by the very specific historical and political context she presupposes? To what extent does a focus on modern gender concerns and subjugated consciousness incorporate historical contexts such as the first-century Mediterranean world as an agonistic society where honour and shame were core values?²⁰ The first-century world was characterised by a pessimistic worldview, and to the extent that the general sense of socio-political powerlessness contributed to it, the role of what today would be called subversive subservience in and on that world, is difficult to determine today. And since for example Warren Carter’s work, there is a growing reluctance to describe the stance of Matthew’s implied author towards the Roman Empire in overwhelmingly positive terms, especially when compared to local religious leaders (Dube 2000:140-1).

Value in and for Post-Apartheid South Africa

The value of Dube’s approach that combines postcolonial and feminist theory is not to be slighted in post-Apartheid South Africa where neo-capitalism and common patriarchy is reasserting itself in alarming ways. Regardless of the laudable attempts of government and parliament to include women,²¹ newspapers publish and radio and TV-news constantly broadcast the daily headline stories of the abuse, rape and murder of women. Indeed, women of all ages are mostly the victims of violent crime in post-Apartheid South Africa. Not only are the feminist concerns that Dube highlights important, but in particular her ability to combine these with postcolonial disquiet about hegemonic relations, structures and practices. A postcolonial feminist hermeneutic is of great importance in communities of faith, but given the widespread religiosity of South Africans, such a hermeneutic also provides a valuable register of analysis for contemporary society.

²⁰ Even if the notion of a riposte system may be too formalised a notion for understanding social tensions of the time?

²¹ Women representation in President Mbeki’s government comprises more than 40%, and in the first part of 2005, subsequent to the dismissal of Mr Zuma, Ms P Mlambo-Ngcuka was appointed as the first ever woman deputy president of SA.

South African Context

The breadcrumbs of Mt 15 (and Mk 7) as relating to the gospel message for Jews and Gentiles, concerned about the inclusivity of the Kingdom and the privileged access for the marginalised, is a metaphor particularly applicable to socio-economic issues in post-Apartheid South Africa and its continuing unequal distribution of wealth. But it reaches further also, and to those disenfranchised through health issues and HIV/AIDS in particular. And still it is women and children who are most affected!

As mentioned above, the particular value of Dube's work for South Africa is in how she combines in critical theory and practice, feminist criticism with postcolonial theory which is significant in our country where socio-political imperialism complete with landlessness is more often recognised than the imperialism of patriarchal systems. Especially when the latter is defended with recourse to pre-colonial socio-cultural systems and to indigenous culture and where the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of such systems and practices – often sanctioned and confirmed if not established by the colonial masters – are often hidden away from scrutiny.

In addition to these general remarks, a few brief words are in order regarding the specific points of value of Dube's book in the Southern African context:

Specific Points of Value

Marginality and Hermeneutical Privilege

The strong focus on reading texts within and not beyond or above history, with reference to both the situatedness of the historical texts and social location of contemporary readings, is one of the strong points of Dube's work in this book (and elsewhere).

Postcolonial theory and theology focuses on the margins, on those living at the periphery of society and its conventions, values and norms, and practices. It deals with and theorises those excluded from power, but it does not attempt to reverse or switch privilege in simplistic ways.²² However, a particular problem that postcolonial theory shares is that a hermeneutic of marginality could become a privileged hermeneutic, and consequently invert hegemony, retaining it for a group differently defined and composed.²³ "Autoethnographic" literary strategies is when "the literary response of the colonized is partly shaped by the textual forms of their imperial counterparts" which consist of the construal of "myths that validate their right to dominate and dispossess people of distant lands", complete with "sharp dualisms, rigid cultural boundaries, vicious racisms, heightened nationalisms, and hierarchical structures that would licence any power to victimize other nations" (Dube 2000:51-52). In the Southern African context, the land-grabbing in Zimbabwe by the ruling ZANU-PF party and its president, Robert Mugabe, has recently brought this home in stark reality.

Confronting Imperialism in Biblical Texts

Dube's critical stance towards the biblical texts has been emphasised above, as well as her proposed remedy. Her views on cultural imperialism are intricately interweaved with authorising texts such as the Bible, and to be confronted within a broader counter-strategy:

²² One of Dube's reviewers, Finger (2003:4) either misinterprets the argument or tries some provocation herself when she asks in summary, whether Jesus was a coloniser, when the point is really about the discursive structure and content of Mt 15 and how the figure of Jesus is manipulated in this regard.

²³ The privileged position accorded to AICs and the constructive way in which women participate in these churches, can in Dube's book be understood from the perspective or her focus on the postcolonial inquiry of all hegemony, as well as on women. But can even the best-intentioned advocacy not be driven too far in postcolonial terms?

To confront imperialism as a postcolonial feminist, one must, first, recognize that patriarchal oppression overlaps with but is not identical to imperialism; second, recognize its methods and strategies of subjugation in cultural texts and reality; third, identify the patterns of resistance it evokes from the subjugated; fourth, recognize the use the female gender in colonial discourse as well as explicate how postcolonialism exposes some women to double or triple oppression (Dube 2000:43).

Dube's book stays true to its postcolonial focus when it not only critiques colonial and imperialist practices based on the biblical texts and the gospels in particular, but when it also involves other religious and secular texts in her analysis, challenging the exclusive and mostly privileged position of the Bible. And Dube not only destabilises the Bible's position in rendering a liberative contribution but also implicates it in colonialist and imperialist endeavours.²⁴

Bodies: Feminist and Gender Concerns

A postcolonial concern that focuses on race in isolation of other categories often invoked in strategies of marginalisation, and gender and sexuality in particular, is in danger of losing conceptual focus and heuristic acumen.²⁵ Throughout her book, Dube makes the reader poignantly aware of the multiple oppressions suffered by black women in Africa and elsewhere, and with her contextual focus it is their bodily suffering which is addressed.

Corporeality is one of the most obvious, characteristic elements of the Christian faith and theology that is, however, almost consistently ignored, a failure which wreaks havoc in postcolonial theory and discernment, and which in the past has led to critical theories being accused of political ineptness. Offering her critique of the traditional, conventional and familiar readings of the Bible, as well as her proposals towards counter-conventional, anti-hegemonic readings, real women, Dube puts embodied women strongly in focus.

Agency

Dube speaks on behalf of the subjugated, as do all others who take the task of postcolonial deconstruction and demystification upon their shoulders, and this (privileged) position presents a particular challenge: to account for the legitimacy of this position, to do justice to the real and not perceived needs of the subjugated, and to run the risk of being accused of launching such critique from a comfortable and safe position. What is the ability for political action from a postcolonial, feminist position? "Deconstruction's claim to a liberatory praxis is predicated on the idea that by inserting difference between the text and its meanings, it can show meaning to be an ideologically constituted construct, and thus free the reader from the tyranny of preconceived or official meanings" (Mwikisa 2000:112).

The limitations of such a reading are clear, when not only the plurality but also legitimacy of diverse, even opposing, readings is acknowledged. Is the value of deconstructive readings situated in their ability to "violate a pre-existing code and thus expose the artificiality of all

²⁴ Cf Mwikisa (2000:111) for similar comments about the later work of Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

²⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the combination of a rhetorical emphasis with feminist theory will enable the "full-turn" of biblical studies although a paradigm shift in biblical studies has so far stayed out due to the inability of rhetoric to link up with feminist, liberationist and postcolonial studies (1999:13). Attention to rhetoric and especially to its epistemic status is certainly important, but it may in the end be postcolonial studies which offer the theory and practice for exposing configurations of centre and margin, empire and colonised, hegemony and powerlessness. Postcolonial studies is liberatory in nature, and without eschewing the gender component, or indeed issues of race, sexual orientation, class and social status, it offers a framework which is not predisposed towards creating – a new – an insider-outsider rhetoric based on such components.

meanings” rather than in the “meanings they encode” (Mwikisa 2000:113)? A particular challenge posed is how to handle the effect of institutions and ideologies on the hermeneutical processes of reading, writing, and the construal of meaning – these are questions which are always present and include even (and especially) language.²⁶

Conclusion: ‘So what’-questions

[F]eminist biblical rhetoric of liberation must transgress boundaries across texts, across genders, across races, across cultures, across classes, across ethnicities, across nations, across sexual orientations to negotiate with the Other (Dube 2000:109).

It remains for a privileged white male like me, in conclusion, an important task to ask how the advocacy of postcolonial women is carried forward, not so much on their behalf but how to engage in such practices and to enlist such resources so as to enable and assist women in accomplishing their goals. The starting point in this endeavour is not to disempower women, but to be alert from different angles to the impediments imposed upon women by simply conducting business as usual. Postcolonial hermeneutics, together with Feminist hermeneutics, and especially when it teams up with Queer theory involves more than the rereading and reinterpretation of the Bible only, since even the most radical reinterpretation is not enough, but has to be accompanied by the thoroughgoing critical appraisal of institutions and discourses to ensure that the new interpretations are truly radical.²⁷

As I have recently asked, “Do we need postcolonial biblical criticism if we want to open up the guild in South Africa, to be alert to issues of race, gender, class and others in our hermeneutical endeavours, to develop discourses, discursive formations which will not be constituted by and committed to the perpetuation of dominant social systems?” (Punt 2004). In my opinion South African biblical studies need to consider postcolonial theory with both intellectual honesty and social accountability, which does not imply that all work in this field now has to carry a postcolonial label, nor does it imply that this is the only valid scholarly activity. On the other hand, postcolonial discourse has to be included, more effectively, in our mainstream work challenging the ghetto existence of the Bible’s legacy in our cultural heritage, where it has continued to be a “book for life” and often even an identity cultural marker (Brenner 2000:11). But most importantly, biblical scholars and the guild at large have to actively resist producing or contributing to readings which will perpetuate colonialist, imperialist or hegemonic interpretations of the texts of the Bible, or its nature and status as such²⁸ (Punt 2004).

²⁶ Which is one reason why Ngugi wa Thiong’o, notwithstanding his successes in English, is now writing in his vernacular, Gikuyu (cf Mwikisa 2000:95-113, esp 113).

²⁷ It is not clear how the uneasiness with the “violent hierarchical ordering in which the Bible is given greater value than non-biblical religious narratives” (Mwikisa 2000:113), will be addressed in communities of faith, and whether the privileged position rather than the ascription of an exclusivist position and a threadbare hermeneutics are not probably the greater problems.

²⁸ “Postcolonial biblical criticism should not therefore be seen as a new form of ‘thought-police’, but rather as an anamnestic and heuristic framework within which to engage the biblical texts while also retrieving both subjugated voices and unacknowledged voices” (Punt 2004)

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