'HERMENEUTICS OF TRANSFORMATION?'

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF THE MODEL OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES[1]

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Abstract

This paper seeks to critically explore the ideological, academic and socio-political implications of the model of social engagement as developed and espoused by Gerald West, almost two decades ago. It will do so through an examination of three focus areas: Motivation, method and representation. First the paper will discuss the rationale behind social engagement. Thereafter, an exploration and interrogation of the method itself (to be found primarily in the contextual bible study) will be undertaken, by asking vital questions concerning the functions and the responsibilities of both the faith communities and the intellectual/academic in such engagements. Thirdly, the paper will seek to question the ways in which communities of faith are subsequently represented in academic discourse. The paper brings the discussion to a close with an appraisal of the three focus areas explored in the paper, by arguing that each of the focus areas examined produce different results in key areas, when viewed at from the perspective of organic intellectuals. By bringing West's work into dialogue with organic intellectuals who have used similar models, but have done so differently, the paper concludes that collaboration between scholars and the community is a vital one, but that the challenge which remains is for more organic intellectuals to use the opportunities which they have been given through their privileged access to education, to empower those in the community who have afforded them the opportunity.

Keywords: Biblical hermeneutics, Hidden transcripts, Ordinary readers, Organic readers, Social engagement, Representation

Introduction

As a biblical scholar, and graduate student of Gerald West, I feel greatly honoured to critically reflect on my esteemed supervisor's model of social engagement. My dissertation (Nadar 2003) centred on social engagement and the biblical scholar. What follows is a dialogue between his work and that of my own. My paper will seek to explore the ideological, academic and socio-political implications of the model of social engagement as advocated and developed by Gerald West during the past two decades. It will do so through an examination of three focus areas, namely, motivation, method and representation.

Motivation

The question raised here concerns the motivation and rationale behind social engagement. At the 1983 Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) Congress, held in Lenasia, South Africa, in a paper entitled, "Black Theology Revisited," Itumeleng Jerry Mosala made the following observation:

> Theologians and Christian activists must first be rooted in a community before they can begin to evoke a theology meaningful and challenging for and with a community. As painfully 'slow' as the process may seem at times, anything less than this would still be elitist or paternalistic.[2]

Some theological scholars in South Africa have attempted to rise to Mosala's challenge. As Kwame Bediako remarked during a presentation given recently at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the uniqueness of African theological scholarship is that it works with what he termed, 'living data.' This claim of Mosala and Bediako seems more difficult for biblical scholars than theological scholars, for how can a biblical scholar work with 'living data' when the primary source is actually a *written* text, in this case the Bible, or as what Emily Dickinson (1882) characteristically described as 'an antique volume written by faded men.'

Yet, biblical scholars in Southern Africa and in Africa have attempted to do precisely this – to engage, challenge and work with 'living data.' The 1996 *Semeia* volume, *Reading With, African Overtures*, is testimony of this. Here scholars argued persuasively for an engagement between biblical scholars and faith communities, not just as a way to produce 'meaningful' biblical scholarship, but as a way to *transform* society. As John Pobee can cogently argue:

> The scholarly study of Scripture is not an island unto itself; it is answerable to the hopes and fears of the society in which it is done…I do affirm the accountability of scholarship to the community of faith… In short, the Bible proves central in and for human transformation in Africa and elsewhere (1996:162).

If we take what Mosala, Bediako and Pobee are saying seriously, the motivation for a hermeneutical model of social engagement can be three-fold:

1. Scholarship must be firmly rooted in the community if it is to be meaningful;
2. Scholarship that fails to engage 'living data' can be considered elitist and paternalistic;
3. Scholarship must be responsible to the community, if it is to have the potential to transform.

In this paper, I will argue that of these three underlying principles of social engagement the third is the most important, leading to what I would call a *hermeneutic of transformation*. As I have argued elsewhere, "a hermeneutic of transformation cannot be applied to the text. A hermeneutic of transformation can only be applied and tested within a community of real readers" (Nadar 2003:175). This leads to the all important issue of method. Simply put, the question revolves around two related core issues:

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[2]   I am grateful to Gary Leonard for allowing me to use this quote from his unpublished paper, "Revelation in the Information society: Escaping our Cultural Boxes." presented at the ICCJ Youth Conference, Madrid, July 2000. Mosala, IJ 1983. Black Theology revisited. Paper presented at Azapo Congress, Lenasia.

What does this method of social engagement imply, and who does it involve?
Method
Gerald West can be credited with pioneering a methodology that engages with real readers outside of the academy. Leaning heavily upon literary modes of reading the biblical text, West has developed what has become known as the *Contextual Bible Study* (*hereafter*, CBS) method (West 2001:169-184). This methodology, although proving a good tool for social engagement, contains certain epistemological problems. To explicate these, I suggest three crucial questions that need to be answered:

a) *What is the aim of the CBS?*
b) *Who are the participants in the CBS?*
c) *Who is the facilitator and what is the facilitator's role in the CBS?*

What is the Aim of Contextual Bible Study?
If social transformation is to be taken seriously, the aim of the CBS method should be to enable, or at least initiate discussion around social transformation. In order for this to be meaningful, I submit that such method has to be interventionist, while still respecting the community of faith. This, however, is not the primary aim of the CBS method as described by West and practiced by the Institute for the Study of the Bible (*hereafter*, ISB) now known as the Ujamaa Centre. Commenting on issues of process West makes the following comment:

> The socially engaged biblical scholar is called to read the Bible with them, but not because they need to be conscientised and given interpretations relevant to their context. No, socially engaged biblical scholars are called to collaborate with them because they bring with them additional interpretative resources which may be of use to the community group.

West is here clearly making a case for a non-interventionist strategy on the part of the scholar. Although he provides cogent arguments for this, I submit that the reason he argues against an interventionist model has more to do with his own social identity and location[3] than with his need to respect a community's own interpretative resources, although I doubt that this forms part of his original equation.

As a socially engaged, South African Indian Christian woman scholar, I strongly make the case for a conscientisation motive, or interventionist method. An apt way to explain this conscientisation motive is through the wisdom gleaned from a famous Chinese fortune cookie: Knowing and not doing are equal to not knowing at all (Quoted in Messer-Davidow 2002:1).

In other words, sharing the liberating knowledge gained from my academic work, and helping to transform the ways in which my community understands the roles of women in church and society, is what makes my knowledge valuable. Socially un-applied knowledge gained in the academy becomes therefore equivalent to 'not knowing at all.'

Arguing against this view, West calls for a shift of focus of the socially engaged biblical scholar. Utilising the analysis of James Scott (1990) of the way in which the dominated react to their domination, West argues that while the oppressed possess creative ways of dealing with their oppression, they often do not exhibit them because revolution is a dangerous process. Instead, the dominated exhibit a public transcript of subservience until the situation is no longer threatening, after which they activate their hidden transcript of resis-

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[3]   Given that most of the participants in West's CBS's are Black, female and poor as opposed to his social position as a privileged white male.

tance. According to West, the role of the biblical scholar is to activate the hidden transcript of the oppressed, although he freely admits that he is not sure that biblical scholars ever have access to the hidden transcript (1999c: 39-52). I find agreement with West on this point, that the dominated do possess creative ways of dealing with their domination. Scott quotes an engaging Ethiopian proverb to illustrate this point: When the peasant Lord walks past, the peasant bows very low and silently farts.

On this point, West and Scott agree, that the power of the resistance of the dominated lies in the power of their silent fart! Although an interesting simile, I would argue that the silent resistance of the dominated, although admirable, does not result in their much-needed social transformation.

For Latin American liberation scholars, the dominated are in need of conscientisation. I find agreement with this assertion, my contention being that it is only during a period of conscientisation that the hidden transcript (if one exists at all) can be activated. This point has been ably demonstrated in the various community Bible studies I have conducted. Although space does not permit me to give much detail, it is significant to note that the aim of the CBS method, as espoused by West, is not centrally motivated by conscientisation, although it is conceded that conscientisation can be a by-product of the CBS process.

Who are the Participants in the Bible Study?

The term 'ordinary reader' has come to represent those in the faith community with whom scholars engage.[4] West and Dube (1996:7) define the term 'ordinary' in the following way:

> The term 'ordinary' is used in a general and a specific sense. The general usage includes all readers who read the Bible pre-critically. But we also use the term 'ordinary' to designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, those readers who are poor and marginalised.

The ideological underpinnings of the use of the word 'ordinary' to describe the people (of faith) who participate in the CBS have been strongly challenged. Although most African scholars agree that social engagement is important, not all agree on how this goal should be achieved. In this debate, Tinyiko Maluleke (2000:93) has been the most rigorous, contending that West's use of the term 'ordinary reader' is intentionally ambiguous in terms of race, gender and economic location. Central among his carefully argued suspicions, is his line of argument that states:

> While 'ordinary' and 'trained' are power-relation categories, the tentative, evasive and 'innocuous' nature of the terms tends to obscure, trivialise or palliate the economic, race and gender (especially as it relates to Black women) basis of the power discrepancy concerned.

Another notoriously slippery term that is used interchangeably with 'ordinary' is that of 'other.' As with Maluleke's argument concerning the use of 'ordinary' this expression is also patently unhelpful in terms of its generality. Daniel Patte (1996:265-269) has argued that anyone can be 'ordinary' depending on where they are positioned at any given time.[5] In similar vein, I would argue that anyone can be 'other' depending on where they are positioned at any given time. In other words, everyone, including my spouse and my children, can be 'other' to me. My spouse is 'male' and I am 'female' therefore he is 'other' to me. My children are 'younger' and I am 'older' therefore they are 'other' to me. I readily admit that these may seem extremely frivolous examples, and hence, I do not mean to trivialize

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[4]   Although it is commonly asserted that the term was made famous by West (1991), other scholars have used the term regularly within their work. See, Patte, (1995) and Dube (1996) for examples.

[5]   Patte (1996:266) notes that, "The same person can be at any given moment an 'expert-critical reader' or an 'ordinary reader' of the Bible. It is a matter of attitude and not of person."

the issue. However, I think that a critical review of the original use of the term 'other' might help us see that it has to become more nuanced in our discourses; otherwise it might not be as useful as we might think, particularly in the ways in which we appropriate it.

The term was made popular by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1985), where he depicts how Western Europe envisaged the Other, thereby enabling the colonial authorities a means of dealing with the 'otherness' of Eastern culture, customs and beliefs. Since then, the term has been appropriated by the colonised in rhetorical, sarcastic, and even derisive ways. Equally, the term has become commonplace in its use within the academy. For the immediate purpose of describing particular participants in a Community Bible Study session, I think that the term has to be thoroughly interrogated; being careful not to make the assumption that it has been 'ordained from above,' to use Maluleke's telling words.

It seems that the way in which we (scholars) describe those with whom we are socially engaged depends on our own located-ness as scholars undertaking research. For example, James Cochrane (1999:95-117) entitles a chapter of his book, *Circles of Dignity*, "Voices of the Other." In it he gives a series of personal reflections of the processes involved in the conducting of a group Bible Study in Amawoti, a Black township, north of Durban. Throughout the whole chapter, Cochrane attempts to grapple with the question of representivity (*Cf.* Spivak 1988:271-313). For Cochrane, the notion that the participants were 'other' to him (and perhaps also his research assistants, although he does not indicate this) is taken for granted. This fact is assumed from the preliminary questions that were asked by the group committee, namely, "What does it mean for us and who are you? (Why should we trust you?)." In other words, Cochrane contends that inherent in their questions was an indication that they did not trust that as research subjects they would be fully recognised and respected within his research. As Cochrane asserts, "The claim for recognition posits both a self, and in relation to the one spoken to, an otherness," (1999:95). This implies that the participants posited themselves in relation to the researcher as 'other.'

The question I want to raise is not *whether* the sense of 'otherness' was recognised by both subjects as being valid, but *why* either subject felt such a sense of 'otherness.' In other words, it is not enough to assume the position of 'otherness' without first investigating the factors that underlay such 'otherness.' Hence the questions that Maluleke (2000:93) asks about the 'ordinary' have to be asked in relation to the 'other' as well. In other words, we should not take for granted that subjects are 'other,' but we should be asking *how*, *which* and *why* people are 'othered?' I contend that if we socially engaged biblical scholars follow this process before naming our research subjects as 'other' it would reveal that there is what I would call 'degrees of otherness' and that the 'degrees of otherness' determine the amount of trust the 'other' is willing to invest in us. The consequence of this is that the amount of trust that the 'other' endows to us will determine not only the validity of scholars' representation of them, but also the validity of their responses to the scholar as 'other.' This brings us to the role of the scholar in this relationship.

Who is the Facilitator, and what is the Facilitator's Role in the Bible Study?
One of the most significant factors in the CBS process is the person who facilitates the Bible Study. It is important to establish the aims and the role of the facilitator. In West's description of the CBS process it is clear that in his understanding the biblical scholar who writes the academic paper on the bible study is not necessarily the facilitator. This of course raises the issue of a 'double representivity,' since neither the facilitator nor the biblical scholar are neutral participants in the Bible study. There are numerous problems attached to this approach. In what follows, instead of interrogating the problems inherent in that ap-

proach, I choose rather to highlight my own approach, by examining my own role in the Bible Studies I have conducted as both facilitator and biblical scholar.

Who is, or who should be the facilitator? This is an important question. I would suggest that there are three fundamental characteristics of a facilitator:

1. The facilitator should be trained in the tools of critical scholarship (this needs to be unmasked, particularly given the dominance of Global-north training methods in Africa);
2. S/he should be committed to liberation in the community (not simply as a by-product of the process, but as a conscious effort on the part of the facilitator);
3. S/he should be an organic member of the community.

Each of these characteristics is not mutually exclusive, but complementary; hence, I will endeavour to discuss them collectively.

Firstly, *What does it mean to be trained in critical scholarship?* As a critical reader I have been trained to read the Bible critically. Hence, to quote Dube and West, "I have access to the structured and systematic sets of resources that constitute the craft of biblical scholars," (1996: 7) but because of my commitments to the community and to liberation, I choose to read the Bible for the purposes of liberation. This approach does not always imply rejecting the methods I have been trained with. It simply implies a critical engagement with those methods. In other words, it negates Audre Lorde's terse, yet cautionary statement, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (quoted in, Schüssler Fiorenza 2001:4-5).

In making the admission that I may not read the Bible in the same way as other critical readers in the academy already decreases the space in the measurement of the 'degrees of otherness' between myself and the community of women with whom I read; indeed most would be daunted by the use of academic jargon and intellectual methodologies. The need to unmask the identity of the scholar is therefore crucial to this process. Hence, of first importance is the necessity to declare my social location as a South African Indian Christian woman. The groups of women with whom I engaged in my own Bible studies were not as suspicious of me, or of my intentions, as the participants in the Amawoti Bible Study group were of Cochrane and his researchers. In fact their enthusiasm for the Bible Study was at times overwhelming. This may have something to do with the sense of pride which they felt, having someone from their own community who having advanced to the 'centre' has now come back with that knowledge to empower those at the 'periphery.' Mogomme Masoga (2001:146) argues strongly for the organic presence of the biblical scholar when reading the Bible with African faith communities. By locating organic academics at the centre, and the community at the periphery, he argues, "Organic readers are produced by the periphery and advanced to the centre to learn the ropes in the centre, and their sole responsibility is the periphery" (2001:146). Given this assumption, the women from my own community did not need to ask who I was, because most of them already knew me from the community. Some had even watched me as a child grow up, and others had known me from participating in previous Bible Studies on violence against women, conducted in collaboration with the ISB. To say this, however, is not to downplay the question of trust, nor to sound arrogant or completely self-assured in my role. To the contrary, I think that the question of trust is and remains an important concern, even for scholars. I do not think that it is possible that they trusted me completely, but I think being part of the community, and having established a relationship with them through other Bible Studies, and by laying bare my intentions and motivations, they were able to trust me possibly more than they would have, had I been a complete outsider. This makes a difference to the way in which they responded to me. To use the term 'other' to describe them or myself seems to indicate space or dis-

tance, which is not fully compatible with my experience in the community. I did not see the people with whom I interacted as completely 'other.' To be honest, my university education, and even my class status to some degree, did make me different from them, but not to the extent that I can claim with full confidence that those with whom I worked were 'other' than I.

The way in which the facilitator conceptualises her/his role in the Bible Study process is also related to the way in which s/he conceives of their relationship with the community, with regard to the act of reading the biblical text. West (1996:26) uses the term 'reading with' or 'speaking with' as opposed to 'speaking for' or 'speaking to,' to describe the ways in which the biblical scholar and those within the community interact. He argues that the term 'speaking with' or 'reading with' takes seriously the subjectivities of both partners in the dialogue, that is, both the scholar and the poor and marginalised reader. Notwithstanding that it is indeed admirable that a scholar takes the agency of the oppressed seriously, I would argue that this might be an idealistic notion, even though West (1999c:52-53) plainly argues that it is not. One of the central reasons for my argument lies in the fact that West sees the readers in the community as 'other' to himself.

I submit that 'speaking with' or 'reading with' does not ensure a "genuinely dialectical interaction between two vigilantly fore-grounded subject positions" (Arnott 1991:127 in West 1996:25). In fact, I suggest that the preposition 'with' camouflages the respective power categories associated with identity that is associated in each subject position. It implies that the scholar comes alongside the community reader and hence reads 'with' them. West (1996:26) counters this by arguing that 'reading with' accepts real difference. If this is true, there seems little space for conscientisation, as the method itself accepts that real differences exist between the ways in which scholars and those in the community read, but does not move much beyond simple recognition.

I would argue for an alternative perspective. I would suggest that 'reading with' the community should only be a preliminary step to the Bible Study, for 'reading with' implies that the scholar understands (even if the scholar does not agree with) the position from which the community is reading. By first 'reading with' the community, the scholar already grasps the processes involved in the ways in which the community reads, before the actual Bible Study formally begins. In most cases, this phase is almost automatic for organic scholars. In other words, there is a shared or common understanding of the way in which the community approaches the biblical text. In the process of the actual Bible Study it would perhaps be misleading to suggest that the scholar 'reads with' the community. In other words, 'reading with' is a notion that only works as an initial phase in order that the scholar does not simply 'observe' but goes on to genuinely comprehend the community's motivations and principles behind their reading practices. For example, in reading the book of Esther 'with' my community, I understand why the character of Vashti is perceived by the Bible Study group as a bad woman. I understand, both as scholar and as a member of the community, the cultural and the theological codes which embed and aid such an interpretation. It is in this sense that I 'read with' my community. In the process of the Bible Study, however, it is not always possible for scholars and the community to speak together, especially when the scholar sees her/his role as that of conscientisation, as for example in challenging the notion that Vashti is a bad wife. This necessitates a certain distance which in turn requires that the scholar transfer from the 'reading with' paradigm to a 'reading to' paradigm. It is in this instance that I prefer Spivak's (1988:275) use of the term 'speaking to.' Inherent in this paradigm is an acknowledgement that even though we as scholars may gain valuable insights from community wisdom, what is intrinsic to our work is the assumption that we can transform our society. This is not always possible if we stop at the

point of 'reading with' the community. In this sense, I concur with Cochrane when he asserts:

> Gerald West prefers to substitute the term *speaking with* for the term *speaking to* in contexts where the encounter between trained and untrained readers of the Bible take place. Where the trained person is organically one of the local community, this seems to make sense. But where this is not so (as is most commonly the case of clergy in many churches, for example), the preposition *with* seems too strong an indication of common identity (1999:189).

Representation

To engage the issue of representation, I would like to use the postcolonial feminist critic, Gayatri Spivak's evocative question "Can the subaltern speak?" To facilitate the discussion I wish to bring Gerald West, Beverley Haddad and Gayatri Spivak into dialogue. Both Haddad and West argue that the subaltern does speak. In terms of how the subaltern speaks during his engagement with them, West's arguments are based on an understanding of James Scott's (1990) theories of the hidden and public transcript. West argues that intellectuals have assumed that 'ordinary readers' do not speak because intellectuals only have access to their public transcript of 'apparent submission' to the dominant discourse. He asserts, "the subaltern does speak, but in forms of discourse we cannot hear if we only listen." (West 1999:52). West suggests that in order to 'hear' what the subaltern is saying we have to move beyond a 'listening to' or 'speaking for' to a 'speaking with' mode of understanding.

Haddad (2000b:49) concurs with West, but goes further to suggest that poor and marginalised women 'articulate and own their own interpretations of faith' when the intellectual is able to build 'alliances of solidarity' through collaboration with the community. Although acknowledging her relationship (as a non-organic activist-intellectual) with the community of Black Zulu-speaking women as being fraught with racial, class and language politics,[6] Haddad nevertheless argues that their "common experience as women was sufficient, even before we had secured common ground to risk collaboration" (Haddad 2000a:296). As with West, Haddad recognises her role as a socially engaged intellectual, but unlike West, conceptualises herself as being closer to the community than West by virtue of her gender. Haddad thus argues that her solidarity with the community and the safe space that is thereby created is what enables the community to speak.

Both West and Haddad seem to indicate that the community does and will speak if they are sure of the intellectual's commitment to creating 'alliances of solidarity' with them, and hence a safe site is created whereby they can speak and articulate their subjugated expressions of faith.

I concur with West and Haddad concerning the ability of the subaltern to speak and that in most cases they speak most freely when provided with a safe space to do so. Where I differ, is in their use of the term 'reading with' to reinforce their argument that the subaltern does speak in the subsequent representation of them in their scholarship. The reason that both West and Haddad are so intent on foregrounding the notion of 'reading with' or 'speaking with' is captured well by Haddad when she comments that West's argument:

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[6]   See Haddad (2000a:25) where she foregrounds her identity as a South African woman of Lebanese descent, who was "given" white status in the apartheid era, but chooses to align herself with African women, and sees herself as a South African-African woman who is "not quite-white" and who has chosen to be shaped by her "blackness" rather than by "whiteness" as she lives and works in post-apartheid South Africa.

Is crucial if, as activist-intellectuals working with women from different backgrounds, we are to avoid constructing what Mohanty terms *colonising discourse* which merely masks unequal relations of power and falsely suggests a *solidarity* with those less privileged (2000b:47).

Haddad's observation points to a crucial position in the debate, that the 'reading with' notion is principally and especially (and perhaps only) significant for the activist-intellectual working with women from *different backgrounds*. Hence, their position is clear. In such cases, the foregrounding of the 'reading with' method is vital. West (1999:49) acknowledges this, when he says that the 'listening to' or 'speaking to' method:

> Fails to take sufficient account of contestation taking place between the public and the hidden transcript, particularly when we are present – particularly when 'we' are people like me who are not *organic* intellectuals.

In other words, West and Haddad argue that the 'speaking to' model is not possible for those who are not organic intellectuals. But, you may ask, *What if those intellectuals who are working in the community are organic intellectuals?* In other words, *What happens when the 'other' is the 'scholar?'* The starting point of their dialogue is then different to that of West's and Haddad's (and consequently their representation of the community would also be different). In other words, organic intellectuals might not want to make as strong a claim for the 'reading with' paradigm, as seemingly West and Haddad are wont to do.[7] This is because the organic intellectual, (and I refer to myself in this role) might see their role as moving beyond 'reading with' (as this might be an automatic process anyway) to actual 'conscientisation.' On the other hand, Haddad and West do not see their roles as initiating a process of conscientisation. Haddad (2000b:49) explicitly states this:

> I now recognise that my role is not to conscientise but to enter into mutual dialogue and collaborative work with those I work with. In so doing, I recognise the need to be re-shaped and re-made. It opens me up to transformation and re-constitution. I am less bold or hasty than I used to be about what action I think should be taken against the many gendered injustices I see around me. I listen more, speak less and do not rush into any prescribed solutions to these evils…At times in discussions with women of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, I have not been able to be quiet and found myself speaking out my perspective on their oppression. Instead of having the desired effect of moving them into unanimous agreement, it has more often than not elicited silence.

Haddad's statement clearly reveals her paralysis in influencing these women in their journey towards transformation. Her speaking out against their oppression elicited only silence. In other words, the women were not able to 'speak back' to her when she 'spoke to' them. Given that they were not able to 'speak back' to her, her argument suggests that the women have other ways of speaking about their oppression, and that her role is not as an interventionist, but simply that of forging 'alliances of solidarity,' which in turn provides a safe space for the women to articulate their 'survival theologies.' West (1999) sees his role in the same way.

So where does Spivak enter this debate? Spivak illustrates her point by referring to the Indian practice of sati, where a wife burns herself on her late husband's funeral pyre. The practice of sati was abolished by the British in the early nineteenth century. In post-colonialist discourse the abolition might be viewed, Spivak argues, as a classic case of

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[7] This argument does not preclude my argument already made that the "reading with" paradigm is only a first step in the process of collaboration. Here I simply want to point out that it is not the most crucial part of the process.

'white men saving brown women from brown men.' On the other hand Spivak holds that the Indian nativist argument that 'the women actually wanted to die,' would certainly be problematic from the feminist side. So, she concludes that the subaltern is muted in both discourses.

To relate this to the position of West and Haddad, I would suggest that in arguing for survival theologies and hidden transcripts in representative discourse, they substantively agree with what Spivak (1988:297) calls 'the Indian nativist argument' that 'the women actually wanted to die,' forms the public transcript which contains encoded forms of resistance, and that it is the role of the intellectual by 'speaking with' the subaltern to uncover the actual 'hidden transcript' which we assume, may affirm that the women did not want to die. Spivak would argue that this in itself is not a bad assumption. Spivak's (1988:297) problem however would be that with West (or any other scholar from a differing background to that of the Indian widow) making such a conjecture as this, it may replicate the common argument made of the British that this was 'a case of white men saving brown women from brown men.'[8] Both the arguments that 'the women actually wanted to die,' and, 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' are equally unhelpful in foregrounding the voice of the subaltern. Spivak's conclusion is therefore, that the subaltern cannot speak in representative discourse. She does, however, concede that the intellectual is able to offer a critique of the subaltern's position if the intellectual is willing to admit s/he is 'speaking to' the subaltern, by virtue of the intellectual's status. Hence Spivak (1988:295) can assert:

> In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern women, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonised.

It seems clear that West (1999) and Haddad (2000a) in recognising the need to hear the 'ordinary' and 'poor and marginalised women' articulate their struggles in their own voices, and with their own covert strategies, they are 'simply substituting the lost figure of the colonised[9]' (poor and marginalised) without critiquing the postcolonial discourse (in this case patriarchal discourse) which under-girds the reason that the subaltern remains colonised (oppressed by patriarchal forces). Their lack of critique is due to their predilection to close down the conversation as soon as they attempt any form of critique as their identities prevent them from entering a meaningful dialogue. In other words, in taking Spivak's arguments seriously, Haddad and West, gallantly and admirably attempt to avoid the notion of 'white men (and women) saving brown women from brown men,' by claiming that the community are in possession of hidden transcripts, without feeling *able* (as inorganic intel-

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[8]   Spivak (1988:297) notes that even "White women – from nineteenth century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly – have not produced an alternative understanding."

[9]   Sugirtharajah (2001:280) can argue in similar vein, "The validity of an interpretation does not depend on positing an alternative reading or supporting it with new data. Simply replacing an alternative reading with a subaltern one does not make the latter more legitimate than the one it tries to dislodge. Combating one set of data with a counter set is not enough to unsettle hegemonic readings. Instead the discursive modes through which narratives and facts are produced must also be called into question." Cochrane (1999:4), although noting the value of what he calls "community wisdom" or "local wisdom" also concedes with regard to the critique from Black theologians of the African Independent Churches (*Hereafter,* AICs), that, "Black theologians have a point in their negative analysis of the political significance of the AICs. It would be romantic idealism to imagine that the faith and reflection of local Christian communities, because they may be black, poor, or oppressed, is free of distortion, of entrapment in increasingly dysfunctional paradigms, or of contradictions not yet experientially significant. Ordinary believers may well hamper the emancipatory goals for which Black theology strives, and even act as counterrevolutionary agents against freedom."

lectuals) to speak out about why they need such hidden transcripts, or to critique the structures that keep them oppressed, as the reaction they might get (as inorganic intellectuals) would be that of silence, as Haddad's statement above confirms. My point here is not that inorganic intellectuals fail to point out what the structures and constraints of oppression are, because as West's and Haddad's work demonstrate, they do. What is clearly in view however is that, although they acknowledge the oppressions, they feel unable to critique these structures because of their own social locations.

In other words, I am not arguing that the theory of a hidden transcript is invalid. It has validity in that a hidden transcript can be a tool used by the oppressed, most times for the purposes of survival. However, the theory cannot be used in isolation of the inherent questioning and revealing of the structures that necessitate the hidden transcript, through for example, making the subaltern conscious of why it is they need a hidden transcript, and if they do not have a hidden transcript, to expose the ways in which the consciousness of the subaltern has internalised these oppressive structures.

To summarise this tri-partite dialogue on representation, I turn again briefly to my representations with the women of my own community. I am not simply reporting on the ways in which they interpret biblical texts when given a safe space to interpret through their own lenses, because in these cases I would concur with West and Haddad that the women do speak. But, what I also intend reflecting upon is my own role in bringing to consciousness, by helping the women of my own community become more ideological about their own oppression.[10] This crucial process seems to be lacking in West and Haddad's work because as inorganic intellectuals, they do not recognise it as part of their work.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that to be a socially engaged biblical scholar, comes with certain challenges and responsibilities. In examining the focus areas of the motivation of social engagement, the method of social engagement and the subsequent representation of social engagement, I have tried to show the importance of a hermeneutic of transformation. As a socially engaged biblical scholar, the most important function that a hermeneutic of transformation can provide in the academy is that it can highlight my role as an activist. At the heart of such a scholar's reasoning should be the transformation of the community. The feminist scholar, Lilian Robinson once posed this challenge to feminist academics: The most important question we can ask ourselves as feminists is 'so what?

This challenge can equally be made towards socially engaged biblical scholars as well! In other words Robinson was reminding feminist academics that the point of our work is not only to change the academy but to change our societies. Gerald West and others like him, who share similar social commitments, have taken up this challenge, albeit in varying

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[10]   Most of the essays in the 1996 *Semeia* volume on the "reading with" methodology seem to focus on the agency of "ordinary" African readers. Without doubting the seriousness of the agency of "ordinary" Africans, I do think that the intellectual at the same time has to critically examine and expose those areas in our cultural communal mindsets, which oppress (see for example, Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992). As Cochrane (1999:4), has observed: "It would be romantic idealism to imagine that the faith and reflection of local Christian communities, because they may be black, poor, or oppressed, is free of distortion, of entrapment in increasingly dysfunctional paradigms, or of contradictions not yet experientially significant. Ordinary believers may well hamper the emancipatory goals for which Black theology strives, and even act as counter revolutionary agents against freedom." Given Cochrane's point above, it seems that critique and conscientisation are necessary, but the levels of critique and conscientisation offered by the intellectual, will depend largely on whether the intellectual is an organic part of the community or not.

degrees. The challenge which remains is to ensure that our work involves not only patronage, charity or an uncritical acceptance of the hidden transcripts of resistance, but a genuine engagement with the community for social transformation.

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