Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation
An investigation into paradigms of feminist biblical interpretation
and their potential for liberating action

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Theology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For
The Degree of
Master of Theology

By

Yong Ting Jin

Advisor: Rev. Dr. Wu Fu Ya

Tainan Theological College and Seminary
Taiwan

May 2006
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**THESIS ABSTRACT**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**INTRODUCTION**
1

Doing Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Methodology for Socio-Personal and Structural Liberation and Transformation

Statement of the Problem
Importance of the Problem
2 Elaboration of the Problem
7
Research Method
9

**CHAPTER ONE**

11

ON THE ROAD

Women as Subjects
Beginning with Social Personal Self as Subject
My Social Personal Journey and the Bible as one of the Crucial Sites of My Struggle

14
16

**CHAPTER TWO**

31

MARKERS ALONG THE JOURNEY… CROSSROADS BY THE WAY…

A Critique of the Existing Feminist Methods of Biblical Interpretation
A New Paradigm: Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm

49

**CHAPTER THREE**

56

FINDING WISDOM WAYS

A Biblical Methodology: Dance of Liberation and Transformation

56

**CHAPTER FOUR**

75

WISDOM WAYS

Practising the Dance and Interpreting Selected Biblical Texts using CFBI Methodology

75
Doing Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Methodology for Socio-Personal and Structural Liberation and Transformation

Doing Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation (CFBI) as a Site of Struggle for Liberation according to the steps of the Dance of Liberation and Transformation\(^1\) is a new and effective “methodology” or more appropriately, a hermeneutical tool kit for socio-personal and structural liberation and transformation. I will state the problem and justify its importance and clarify the subject matter in the subsequent paragraphs. A summary of the chapters about the main thoughts of this investigation will also be provided. Terminologies and definitions of words and concepts can be found in their respective footnotes. A selected bibliography will also be given.

**Statement of the Problem**

There is in need for a radically critical, liberating and transformative biblical interpretative methodology for Asian Christian Wo/men\(^2\) throughout the region through the past decades. The problem springs from the lived experiences of oppressed women and

\(^1\) This phrase “Dance of Liberation and Transformation” was first heard from Lieve Troch, consultant at the Ecclesia of Women in Asia Conference in November 2002, Thailand. Lieve introduced this in her input on “The hermeneutical spiral dance”. The Dance is full of dynamism and is inclusive. It includes all the elements of wo/men’s intuitive, emotive, passion and bodily/spiritual experiences. It is a spirituality with “body-heart-mind-spirit and also community” experiential knowledge rather than merely individualistic objective head knowledge. Furthermore, it pulsates with life and creates the community of faith struggling for change/ transformation. The Dance evokes serious but also joyous involvement and movement. It is also light and not burdensome... it has elements of joyful voluntary and not forced participation. It is an expression of the celebration of life...

\(^2\) Wo/man (wo/men) – A way of writing proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza to indicate that the category woman/women is a social construct. Wo/men are not a unitary social group but are fragmented by structures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, colonialism and age. This destabilization of the term wo/men underscores the differences between wo/men and within individual wo/men. This writing is inclusive of subaltern men who in kyriarchal systems are seen ‘as wo/men’ and functions as a linguistic corrective to androcentric language use (Term as explained in Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001).
their struggle to be free as well as to engage in the transformation of the very structures of existence that hold them in captivity. Such women try to deal with this reality on the personal, social, economic, political and religious level. They discover that the interconnectedness of personal and structural oppression and domination is often linked with a religious component: religion has often been and continues to be used as a tool to rationalise, justify and legitimise their subordination. Although women have also experienced religion as a source of comfort and even power for change, an analysis of this double function of religion can bring us to a different way of reading the bible. The way may aptly be described as the method of Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation.

**Importance of the Problem**

The starting point is the experience of self/women in struggle - as victims of dehumanising violence and injustice at home, at the institutions of learning and higher learning, at the work place, in Church and in society and as women struggling for socio-personal liberation, socio-political and structural transformation. This struggle began in various ways at different points of time located in unique contexts and circumstances. At all these varying circumstances while there were gains and limited successes in their struggles, there appeared to be no radical critical understanding, no thorough going and liberating breakthrough out of the situations of injustice. The problems experienced by oppressed women seemed impossible to overcome. Many views have been raised, many understandings brought forward but always these have been partial or parochial answers that never seem to be touching radical causes and providing holistic “solutions” towards liberating, transformational change. These were in the main never integrated nor integral, always lacking in one way or another, although at various stages some analyses may have offered some degree of understanding the problem and even may have resulted in limited breakthroughs.
and compartmentalised solutions. As a matter of fact even women in their search for liberation and transformation are trapped within the limits of the dominant and dominating hegemonic discourse. This brings them to rather reformist approaches and not really liberating ones.

The "methodology" or hermeneutical tool kit, as Schüssler Fiorenza prefers to call it, the writer intends to research on a deeper level, namely Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation (CFBI) offers a holistic integral approach beginning with the restoration of the Self as Subject of change and critical theological reflection. This “methodology” is also able to analyse and transform basic structures of domination and exclusion.

The critical point/premise/criterion of CFBI is that men in power or men in collusion with power, authority and the ruling male’s hegemonic interest wrote the bible. Biblical reading has become problematic because it was these elitist educated freeborn men in power or in collusion with power, writing, reading, interpreting, canonising and preaching it as the Word of God. It is kyriocentric androcentric in thought form, in socio-cultural, political thinking and worldview. Hence the language is also entrenched and immersed in kyriocentric/androcentric biases/values.

There is thus a dire need to go beyond the old paradigms of interpreting biblical texts and make a qualitative leap towards a critical feminist biblical interpretation (CFBI). Many women and feminists who have been engaged in feminist theologising have unwittingly become a part of the hegemonic discourse, arguing within the logical framework of an

---

3 Kyriocentric is derived from the term Kyriocentrism coined by Schüssler Fiorenza. Kyriocentrism (like androcentrism) operates on 4 levels:
On the grammatical-linguistic level: Language is not just androcentric but it places elite men in the centre, marginalises elite wo/men and other men, and makes slave women or poor wo/men doubly invisible.
On the symbolic cultural level: Kyriocentrism constructs and naturalises gender, race, class and colonialism as essentialist differences
On the ideological level: Kyriocentrism makes gender, racial, class and colonial prejudice look normal and hides the fact that such differences are socially constructed. It constructs these differences as relations of domination.
On the social institutional level: Kyriocentrism maintains the second-class citizenship of all the others of elite men. It does so through economic and legal-political means and especially through socialisation, education and internalisation (Wisdom Ways, glossary)

The term “Kyriarchy” is a neologism coined by Schüssler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (kyrios) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (archein) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which elite, educated, propertied men hold power over wo/men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. (Wisdom Ways, glossary)
oppositional dichotomy of men and women based on gender. For as long as the analysis of
the oppression of women is defined and argued along gender terms only and does not take
into account the questions of class, race, religion, nationality, colonial and postcolonial
realities, age, sexual orientation/sexuality, etc. it will not truly reflect and correctly analyse
the reality of domination and violence against women and subordinated men. Thus, this
approach is both “critical” and “feminist”.

It is “critical” in its response to what has been passed off as “feminist” among Euro
centric and American (as well as “white washed” Asian feminists) white middle class
feminists struggles for gender equality which conveniently leaves out the class and race
and also its ugly imperialist and colonial history among other blind spots. And it is
“feminist” in its radical and revolutionary response to the marginalisation of women and
of the women’s question in all the male dominated and male dominating attempts at
historical social change (mere male rebellions and revolts against other males in
power…at best reformist but always racist and sexist). The “critical” and “feminist”
approach uses the methodologies of both theologies but also takes a critical stand in
relation to both: liberation theology rather simplistically takes the bible and its tradition
of liberation from slavery as the starting point thus basing its political stance as an
“option for the poor” without critical analyses and considerations of race and gender
injustice through its kyriocentric patriarchal androcentric bias. The “critical feminist”
approach critiques the ideology of patriarchy and makes a critical analysis of gender in
general. But it goes beyond gender analysis. It critiques and analyses the specific as well
as different situations of women’s oppression across class, race, nationality, sexual
orientation, colonialism, age, culture and religion. It uses a feminist theoretical and
social analytical framework that exposes the structures of dominations and relations of
power in specific and different contexts affecting women. It is a complex feminist social
analysis of oppression over and against a simplistic gender analysis.

The word “feminist” is used as a critical political term whilst woman/women and
gender are socially constructed categories within a largely male dominating and power over
political characteristic. The notion of feminism or feminist is being redefined in the light of
backlashes against wo/men who are feminists. It has been candidly asserted that “feminism is
the radical notion that wo/men are people”\textsuperscript{4} when wo/men locate themselves as people within
the radical democratic discourses. This brings home the historical struggles for equal
citizenship and powers in decision-making in religion and society at large. Theologically

\textsuperscript{4} Schüssler Fiorenza, “A Critical Christian Feminist Theology”, Lecture delivered at Union Church, Tokyo,
speaking, wo/men are the people of G*d\textsuperscript{5} and feminism names the powers of oppression as structural sin and life-destroying evil. Hence “critical” feminism offers a theoretical perspective that derives from a historical movement of wo/men engaged in liberation struggles and experiences accumulated in the struggle towards reclaiming/attaining their full citizenship as wo/men. It also opts for liberation from as well as for the transformation of socio-cultural and ecclesial structures of domination and exploitation, towards peace and justice. In these multiple struggles for full democratic citizenship, the “Male dominated and male led” historical movements for change have been exposed and laid bare for their neglect and exclusion of the struggles of wo/men through their use of such generic labels/words as “human”, “worker”, the “poor” or “civil society” all of which are empty rhetoric with no meaning for women. “Many women who were in the forefront of such movements soon experienced the reality that these movements were male centred and that wo/men were second-class citizens in them. They soon realised that they were ‘shit-workers’ without much say or power. They were relegated to secretarial jobs, made sex objects or seen as the muses of the ‘great men’ of the movements”.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, feminist movements learned their lessons and made the option to struggle for wo/men’s rights and self-determination in society and church.

The term “critical feminist” employed in this approach thus means:

1) Taking women as subjects and engaging in critical reflection on women's experience as starting point as well as a valid source for doing theology (other than using bible or existing systematic concepts as sources).

2) Making a critical reflection on this experience in the framework of an overall systemic analysis of Kyriarchy and Kyriocentrism.

\textsuperscript{5} G*d – Schüssler Fiorenza’s way of writing ‘God’ that acknowledges the insufficiency and inability of human language to adequately name the Divine. It seeks to indicate that G*d is ultimately unnamable and ineffable. (Wisdom Ways, glossary)

3) Working on a deconstruction of the existing paradigms and concepts, pointing out where they are oppressive or where they are supporting dominant ideologies of power.

4) Working towards a reconstruction of theological concepts using 1) and 2), and the results of 3).

By doing CFBI, a fundamental break with the dominating kyriarchal/kyriocentric discourse is made. Critical feminist biblical interpretation begins with a critically conscious understanding of the experience and social location of the interpreter as well as the various existing paradigms developed within the kyriarchal order. This order is kyriocentric in character within which its citizens are “socialised”. It calls for a radical break with and change of dominating power structures and its transformation on socio-personal and societal structural levels as well. To read the texts as products of the same situation and looking for liberative perspectives, will bring us to a different approach to the texts, their understanding and functioning.

The thesis to be written will reflect a faith journey and experiential process of personal struggle and liberation. It will also reflect a social personal engagement with others in transformation. It is the hope of the writer that other women and men in faith communities can also engage in and find liberation and empowerment through this methodology.

To engage in this process using the biblical methodology of CFBI, attempts will be made to develop a new reading of certain selected biblical texts that have implications for wo/men in general, and which can be used for future programmes of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology.

---

7 Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) for Culture & Theology is a small group of ecumenical women engaged in feminist theologising. Through its theological journal, *In God’s Image (IGI)*, programmes and other occasional publications AWRC aims to be “a forum through which Asian women can share their theological thinking” with the hope that it “will be a growing medium of communication between theologically orientated women in Asia.” It was also aimed at encouraging Asian women to articulate their theological thought in a variety of writings towards developing contextual theology. It is also a community of wo/men engaging in critical feminist social personal liberating and transformative theologising.
Elaboration of the Problem

It is very important that wo/men get the critical tools to interpret the Bible. New biblical scholarship is more realistic and inclusive as it brings different perspectives, different experiences and different viewpoints from different social locations to how the text is read. This generates new questions and new horizons to the reading of texts. Reiterating that the Bible is written in a patriarchal/kyriarchal framework, biblical text must be read with a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is important to look at the social location of both the writer as well as the interpreter, and to read and interpret in context.

Feminists must concern themselves with the bible and religion if they are concerned with the liberation of wo/men. For many wo/men the bible is the inspiring authority with great influence in their lives. Biblical teachings/interpretations can be a source of empowerment and hope as it has also been a source of self-alienation, discrimination and oppression. Hence feminist must address this issue of biblical interpretation.

In asserting the need to doing critical feminist biblical interpretation, I am suggesting that it is important to self-critique and struggle with the following challenges:

i) To break away from the old paradigms of interpreting biblical texts and make the leap towards CFBI.

ii) To go beyond gender analysis and perspective, e.g. men over women, or in certain feminist analytic of patriarchy, the prevalent perspective goes by this analysis: domination of men over women; gender equality means women have access to the same power and status and rights as men.

iii) To be liberated from dualistic notions as in ‘either or’ binary and/or oppositional conceptual frameworks and mindsets in human and theological discourse that hampers one’s struggle for change and transformation.
iv) To identify the existing paradigms and models as deficient and lacking in involving the subject in naming the struggle as her own. Hence the interpreter must assert the critically conscious self as a subject using a more liberating and effective methodology. This methodology is one that adopts a feminist systemic analytical framework that challenges women to reject being defined and accepted only on gender terms which does not take into account seriously the multiple structures of domination from the perspectives of class struggle, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, colonialism, post-colonialism, sexuality, age, etc. It is also a framework of systemic analysis that critiques the kyriarchal/kyriocentric model and ideology in culture, religion and society at large.

Research Method

The guiding perspective in addressing the subject title is the critical feminist hermeneutic of liberation, reinforced by the biblical visions of justice and well being, that would liberate wo/men, change and transform structures of oppression both in religion and society.

This research begins in chapter one with a primary source – my social personal journey and experience of the oppression of woman are the starting points in the framework of an overall systemic analysis. It begins with my own socio-personal experience of struggle for liberation and justice and my faith journey to reclaim Self as a subject having come from a colonial, neo colonial and postcolonial oppressed woman’s experience of socialised captivity. The struggle with others for social personal liberation and social-structural transformation has been over a period of thirty long years and it is still going on. Critical feminist systemic analysis will be used as the tool of socio-personal and structural analysis.
Chapter two focuses on the bible/Scriptures and methods of interpretation. This involves a critical survey of the existing feminist paradigms of biblical interpretation where previous methodologies fell short. In the final analysis, a new paradigm and alternative is proposed to establish the need for Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation along with the hermeneutical circle, as a biblical methodology (Dance of Liberation and Transformation).

Chapter three presents and discusses a biblical methodology of “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” expressed in terms of the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation”. It is thus far the most radical, comprehensive and relevant socio-systemic analytical tool for understanding and analysing the woman’s experience of subordination and at the same time also offering direction to the struggle for liberation.

The last chapter is an attempt to demonstrate how the dance methodology can be applied in interpreting selected biblical texts: Mark 5: 21 – 43 and 1 Tim 2: 1-15.

The concluding pages “The Journey is Home: Towards a Praxis for Liberation and Transformation” is a challenge to Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology (AWRC) to adopt CFBI as the way to promote socio-personal liberation and structural transformation for wo/men in general and her own members in particular. Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation is a process of conscientization for liberation and transformation.

In closing, a point of clarification about the use of new words/terminologies and also the use of old words but with new meaning/nuance is in order. I have adopted new words and terminologies because old words are inadequate to explain new discourses, new imagination, new spaces, and new paradigms. Old words are limiting. They cannot stretch the imagination and challenge us to a new creativity. This is an experienced reality in language that is largely androcentric in character. There are three ways of looking at language:
1) Language is used as an expression of reality, we believe what is being said as it relates to reality.
2) Language can also be used to create and reproduce reality. For e.g. GOD as father creates in our mind that GOD is a father and further implies that fathers are gods.
3) Language can also be used to change reality – Reality changes when we use wo-men to include men. In the light of what language can do and the ideology that lies behind it, attempts are made to adopt new words and terminologies to envision and express a change of reality for liberating action.
CHAPTER ONE

ON THE ROAD

Women as Subjects

Feminist struggles and women’s movements for socio-personal liberation and socio-structural transformation in history have become a worldwide phenomenon:

- Where Women’s lived experiences of discrimination, violence and oppression are manifested in various forms through multi-layered structures of domination where culture and religion, economy and politics, educational and other socialising institutions like work places, home and church all actively participate and contribute to this most heinous crime against humanity.

- Where Women are found in diverse situations with our different/specific experiences within our particular socio-cultural, religious, economic and political conditions and realities.

- Where women are different and must be seen in terms of our class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, culture, religion, colonial and postcolonial realities, sexuality, personality, etc. in short within the contexts of our unique historical particularities and peculiarities…

Given the above understanding, it is important to be guided by a more holistic vision and perspective:

1) The women's struggle forms an integral part of the total human struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression towards a new humanity. This calls for a critical feminist and systemic analysis of women's oppression in the context of socio-cultural, economic and political struggles in particular situations and context. Such an analysis exposes the double, triple, multiple oppression faced by women; it also addresses and links the close relationship between class, race and gender, culture and religion, colonial and neo/postcolonial realities; and critiques patriarchy as an ideology of gender tainted by
male-bias. It goes beyond gender analysis and critiques the power relations and structures of kyriarchy.

2) Christian feminists who use this approach of systemic analysis are led to question again the relevance of faith in G*d: how do we link our faith with our stories and the many stories of women in church and society? How do we re-interpret scriptures and engage in critical praxis of action-reflection? How can women desiring freedom commit themselves to working towards change, liberation and transformation on socio-personal and socio-political levels?

In the 1970s many women began to reclaim themselves as Subjects. Women asserted they are also people, although the majority of the world did not consider women as people. They fought for their civil rights, including the right to make decisions of their own, and decisions to own their bodies and sexuality. One sticker has expressed the point in a candid manner: “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people”. Such a definition describes women as full and freeborn citizens, fully human, fully made in the image of G*d. When women say we are people, we are people of G*d and the reign of G*d is present and here!

United Nations figures and statistics show the violence and injustice experienced by women the world over:

1) Although women do 65% of work
15% of the salaries paid for work go to women
Women own 1.5 % of property

2) In terms of violence:
1 out of 4 women are victims of sexual violence
1 out of 6 women are victims of incest
The home/family is the worst place where women experience violence and abuse
In every 15 seconds 1 woman is raped
More than 100 million women in the world are missing because they are not given possibilities to live - maybe infanticide, foeticide, abortions, etc. resulting in women dying from health problems.
75% of people who died of starvation are women

---

8 The statistics were provided by the resource person, Lieve Troch at the AWRC Feminist Theology Workshop in August 2004, Malaysia.
3) In education: 2 out of 3 illiterates are women

4) In positions in the world and structural injustice: 98% of decisions on structure are made by men and 2% by women

On a macro level, women claim to be Subjects and struggle for freedom from all forms of oppression and violence. But on a micro, socio-personal level, many women individuals continue to live as objects, as colonised self, as selfless, sacrificial, socialised selves who exist for the sake of others and self as defined and created by social cultural construct. They have no identity of their own except in relation to males in the family - father, brother, husband, son. The internalisation of such values and attitudes go right down to the core of women’s psyche. This process of gender socialisation begins from childhood and even from birth: “In the FAMILY, boys are encouraged to go out and play, explore the world, be brave, and not show their emotions by crying; girls are encouraged to stay at home, learn to do housework, take care of younger siblings, are allowed to cry, and grow up observing a scenario where the wife usually serves the husband. In SCHOOL, boys and girls are streamlined into courses that are supposedly in line with their gender stereotypes, e.g., girls for tailoring and cooking; boys for woodwork. In RELIGION, men conduct most if not all of the important rituals and ceremonies, sometimes with the assistance of women; leadership is predominantly in the hands of men… At the WORKPLACE, men usually receive higher wages than women and hold top-level positions while women’s work is simply an extension of their gender roles and are not highly valued.”

In POLITICS, male leadership in the character of the practice of power as power over or the power to dominate is still the norm while women’s leadership is frowned upon or questioned although recently women have also been conscripted into positions of leadership, but only in order to exercise power according to power over paradigms.

Within a male dominated socio-cultural and religious construct, a woman is defined as one in relation to others rather than as a unique being valued for herself. Her sexuality is confined and controlled/possessed by the male in a power over relation to her regardless of class, race, nationality, colonial-post colonial conditions, sexual orientation, age, etc. She is not a Subject who can exercise her own free will. Through religion, the woman is taught to be obedient and sacrificial as exampled by the sacred texts or scriptures.

**Beginning with Social Personal Self as Subject**

Speaking as a struggling-to-be Subject Self, I am fully/unceasingly engaging in critical feminist liberationist theologising in my daily struggle, taking my socio-personal, socio-political experiences and social religious location as a starting/reference point. My faith struggle experience and journey is located within the Malaysian realities as well as within the international and ecumenical communities. On a socio-personal level, I have multiple/intersectional identities. I am a Chinese by race/ethnicity yet do not subscribe to being strictly nor fully Chinese; I do not subscribe to certain chauvinistic elements within the Chinese culture, traditions, social customs nor other negative elements within the Chinese culture that rob me of my dignity and self respect as a person and woman. I was born female by sex/biology yet have refused and resisted being stereotyped and socialised further as feminine or “lady” by gender. By nationality I became a Malaysian (1963) yet I do not have a sense of patriotism or chauvinistic nationalism/identity defined and imposed upon Malaysians by the governing political parties/authorities. By religion I am Christian yet I do not subscribe to the understanding of G*d and Jesus as defined by the institutional church. I can hardly experience the spirit of G*d and Jesus that I know in the church institutions of today. I am an object of colonialism that is yet not a thing of the past as new configurations of borderless globalisation have masked this domination. However it is my belief that the notion of “post-
colonial concept and imagination” may provide a liberating insight and more political space to be myself...even if it is only in the space of my own mind, nurtured and sustained by the community of faithful friends within the “ekklesia”. This implies also my need to resist any form of cultural-religious and political ideologies that subverts my struggle to be liberated from all forms of oppression. It is a daily struggle to nourish and to sustain my being as the Subject of my life.

This account/reflection of my socio-personal journey is grounded upon and motivated by a vision and commitment to work for change, for liberation and for transformation in my own life and in the lives of the wo/men, especially those with whom I associate and work with in community, in ekklesia and in the AWRC. As a Subject Self in struggle, I am determined to define and create a space for myself with/among wo/men, - a faith community, an “ekklesia of wo/men”, where I, together with others in the community of faith, aspire and attempt to live out my commitment through the process of struggle for change and transformation. This is for me the most fundamental requirement and credible expression in the praxis of theology. My experience is both that of a colonised and neo/postcolonial oppressed woman “demonised” by socialised captivity and also that of an individual engaged in struggle, together with others, for social personal and structural liberation and transformation from such. The first twenty odd years of my life took a drastic turn and twist soon after I entered the seminary. A fundamental crisis of faith led me on to question many things – my faith, my G*d, my life as well as developments within the larger global historical Life around me. Subsequently the next thirty years took me through many lightning filled rains and thunderous storms, occasional rainbows and some sunshine too that brought many levels and stages of dynamic/”traumatising” changes in my life.
My Social Personal Journey and the Bible as one of the Crucial Sites of My Struggle

In the first twenty years of my life, my Christian faith may be characterised as that of a staunch conservative and “evangelical”, believing in the triumphant Jesus religion as promulgated by Western missionaries and later “Western-trained” local “evangelical” pastors. It was characteristically a colonised/colonising biblical religion. The bible was revered and upheld as Holy and sacred Scripture. It was used and referred to as the most important, the sole document of faith for Christian living. My mother was my model for Christian piety and faithfulness. She placed the greatest importance in reading the bible daily - the Word of G*d studied daily was imperative in a Christian’s life. She believed firmly in the bible as the revealed and eternal Word of G*d. During my childhood she left behind this deep impression in me, a traditional image of piety that I was later drawn to follow consciously as well as unconsciously. The bible thus played a central role in my life from Sunday school, to catechism class, in the youth fellowship, the church choir, bible study classes/groups, and women’s fellowship as well as preaching in the pulpit. It was this type of theology and ideology that led me to what I then strongly believed was “G*d’s call to ministry” when I entered the theological seminary at the age of 21. I happened to be one among the many hundreds of thousands of Christian followers who submitted to and lived under such a colonised “biblicised” religion.

Western Christianity and colonialism came to Malaysia as one. As a popular saying has it: when the colonizers arrived they held the bible on one hand and the gun on the other. Roman Catholicism came hand in glove with the Portuguese colonizers in 1511 whose rallying cry as they bombarded the seacoasts of Malacca was “for God, for Glory and for Gold”10. Such a God, one can surmise would certainly be blind to the plundering, the attendant injustice and sufferings laid upon its victims. And so it should not come as a

---

surprise that such a religion would not contain the proclamation of the Good News of the Kin-dom\(^\text{11}\) of G*d come as was preached and practiced by Jesus. Instead an institutionalised hierarchical religion was established that churned out triumphalistic claims about the Almighty G*d, King of Kings, Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient G*d, Lord of Lords whose power was manifested/came through the barrel of a gun, in this case of cannons, spreading the fear of G*d and by association the fear of the conquering imperialists powers into the hearts of the vanquished, many of whom later turned out to be opportunists “rice”\(^\text{12}\) Christians as they embraced the religious ideology of the colonisers.

The Christianity and G*d in Jesus Christ that was borne witness to with the coming of the Dutch colonial masters in 1614 also arrived in all its glory and power as the Portuguese forts were in turn bombarded. By the time the British took over from the Dutch, with two hundred years of rule through fire power the colonized/underdogs had learnt their lessons well whose G*d was/is the most powerful on Earth. Britain ruled the waves and when it suited her also “waived the rules”! Such was the power and whimsical possibilities of the G*d/Christ the colonial religious enterprise championed. Along with crude firepower that put the fear of G*d into the faint-hearted, the more shrewd strategy was to develop a system of thought control and change of mind sets that would submit to the lordship of the foreign masters and this was done through the schooling system and the theological/religious institution through the Church!

\(^{11}\) “Kin-dom” is a word coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz in Mujerista Theology (See bibliography). She has two reasons not to use “Kingdom”: “First, it is obviously a sexist word that presumes that God is male. Second, the concept of kingdom in our world today is both hierarchical and elitist. The same reasons hold for not using reign. The word kin-dom makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers - kin to each other.”

\(^{12}\) “Rice” Christians refer to people who became Christians for the sake of rice and for greater opportunities for jobs and positions of power and privilege in Christian mission schools and institutions. Political links with the Christian Colonial masters could also enhance possibilities for economic gain.
Thus the dominant elements and character of the religious teachings promoted were those that were apolitical, a-historical and otherworldly-centred, a religion of rewards for good, obedient submissive behaviour – “a pie in the sky when you die” if you will. Shallow shows of charity, token acts of social concern, welfare and dependency creating handouts were religious practices/habits considered as reflective of Godliness. A flourish of missionary activism under the aegis of British colonialism/neocolonialism brought protestant denominations like Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, Lutheranism and many other types and shades of Christianity into the country. With the advancement of capitalist development throughout the global order even the gospel of G*d’s blessings through financial and material prosperity has become popular.

The missionary portrayal of Christ was that of a colonial/colonising triumphalist Christ, only Son of G*d, Lord of Lords!! Christianity and Christology were not only Western Euro-centred but also equally Kyriarchal and androcentric. The traditional images and teachings propagated by Western missionaries remain till this day in churches and religious institutions. It was from the beginning a triumphalist/populist theology: Jesus Christ is Lord, the Way/the only Way, Jesus is the Saviour, Jesus the Suffering Servant, Jesus the Son of G*d, Jesus Immanuel (G*d-with-us) and so forth. Based on this theology and ideology, the question, “Who do you say that I am?” and what is the substance and character of this Christ were answered and interpreted through Western imperialist lens. They were forced on the colonized peoples over and above their indigenous traditions, which were judged as “pagan” or “heathen”. The Jesus-biblical religion that was brought into my cultural context is complex. It was colonialism and neo-colonialism that have impacted culture and gospel, gospel and culture in Malaysia. Today this brand of Christianity features predominantly in most churches and religious institutions. The biblical teachings are merely sets of doctrines and dogma for all faithful believers of this religion. It is a paradigm that is both doctrinal and dogmatic. The
The premise of this paradigm is that only certain people can interpret the sacred texts. The basic assumption is that the bible is the Word of G*d inscribed in the text. It is divine revelation. This gives power to the benevolent white and elitist freeborn male “of the present day global village” to use and interpret but also to abuse and misinterpret more often than not based on his social location and self interest. The authority of the bible can, by association, be equated/identified with the authority of the religious, the priests/pastors, preachers and laymen in the hierarchy and kyriarchal structures of church and society.

This is the Christianity that I was brought up in. The pastor and clergy exercise their authority through their power to interpret the Word, posing themselves to be holier and closest/nearest to their Lord G*d, Almighty and Omnipotent thus deriving some divine authority of sorts over others. This kyriarchal/political-cultural biblical religion has shaped my identity as female, girl, and young woman by turning me into a passive and submissive slave, obedient to the laws and teachings of the bible as preached/interpreted by the missionaries and the churches. By the time I realised what had happened, the weight and baggage of a gender-socialised “Christian” identity by virtue of being born a female/girl/woman had already been imposed upon and internalised into me right to the core of my being, deeply rooted in my psyche. Culture and religion and the bible all worked together to create and nurture this identity and also impose a dominant colonial victim ideology upon me. The struggle to “exorcise” such a demonic cultural-religious identity/ideology that held sway over me and also held me captive for more than the first twenty years of my life has been a long and tough nightmare and battle. I was an object, at best an “alienated self ” made in the image of this western colonising Christianity.

Although I went through many changes in my self-awareness and experience of liberation through the many social religious locations and contexts due mainly to the various types of work and commitment in my life, the bible continues to have a powerful influence in
my life but in a different way. I became more conscious of the various types of biblical interpretations or misinterpretations that did so much damage to my life and personality. I also became aware of the ugly politics of interpretation attached to them. In response, I took on personally, for my own life and as a vocation, the urgent need and task to engage in “liberating” as opposed to enslaving biblical interpretations, this time with the insights from the new lens that grew out from the women’s perspective and struggle for liberation.

From my twenties on to a further stage particularly over the next thirty long years, there have been many “conversions” and moments of liberation. In my faith journey I have become aware at various and different stages of my life that I lived as a subordinate, subjected to socio-cultural and religious authorities and institutions. For over the next thirty long years the bible continued to play a central role in my life and work. Various as well as contending schools of thought took me through endless paths and sometimes towards extreme destinations offering both negative authority dependent states of being as well as positive liberating possibilities of being subject and being responsible.

In my first four-year theology course I learned new hermeneutical tools for biblical interpretations. Reading the biblical texts in its original context is important. Examining the historical, socio-political situation of the time, determining the purpose of the author/writer and the community to which it was written in a specific period of time are all necessary factors to take into account when making exegesis and exposition. Along with this model or method, often when the text is interpreted, or preached or done in bible study groups, attempts are often made to translate or apply the cultural meaning of the text to the reader’s cultural situation and context. These two methods of scientific and cultural hermeneutics appeared then to be more relevant and liberating as it went beyond the uncritical and “unthinking” doctrinal/dogmatic method.
The subsequent years (for three decades) were a full exposure to a plurality of theologies and biblical interpretations - from evangelical to liberal, to radical and progressive, "ecumenical", liberational and feminist. In my lived experiences, I have journeyed through many years of practical struggle to make sense of faith within global historical realities, the Asian regional realities with its rich and varied, diverse, multicultural mix, national and personal (as woman individual) history - first as a woman Christian youth, then as a woman theological student, a woman pastor of a congregation, the wife/woman partner of a pastor, the (first woman) Regional Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Asia-Pacific, and recently as the Coordinator of Asia Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology.

The “new” hermeneutics of biblical interpretations became widely used and propagated in ecumenical meetings and programmes, in liberation theologies and later feminist theologies on national, regional and international levels. It became the dominant interpretations along with the explosion of broad and diverse biblical-theological writings and publications by a wide range of ecumenical groups and organisations committed to work for peace, justice, integrity of creation; workers’ rights, women’s rights and human rights the world over. I found myself fully engaged and involved in applying these methods of biblical interpretations enlightened by women’s perspective, particularly in my work with churchwomen, the WSCF community on all levels, AWRC and ecumenical women on various levels.

Through all these, although in the course of my faith journey, progressive, ecumenical, malestream biblical and theological works have been very helpful at various times, they were still fraught with many shortcomings. The most painful experiences felt were incidents of being discriminated as a woman, based on my gender, both directly and indirectly. Violence
against women was deeply felt when the bible was used to rationalise, justify and play down the status, image and position of women in the home, church and society.

Biblical texts in I Corinthians 11 and 14, I Timothy 2, Ephesians 5, the two creation accounts and stories of Adam and Eve, and other similar texts on household codes have been commonly used and quoted to put down women in order to keep them in their place, to keep them from ordination and church leadership. Strong, authoritarian clergy and men who abuse their power tend to use the doctrinal approach and interpret the bible in order to subjugate women even up to the present time.

Beyond such crude and shocking experiences are also the more horrifying experiences from the so-called progressive “liberated” men, male theologians and colleagues in the ecumenical movement. In ecumenical meetings, they peddle liberation theologies, mouth progressive, ecumenical, Marxist-Socialist language of liberation and transformation, employ the new scientific and cultural hermeneutics in biblical interpretations but in practice continue to discriminate, dominate and condone violence against women. Their progressive, radical language often turns doctrinal and reactionary when they use/quote “household codes” and texts to justify the inferior position of women and to further silencing them.

On a social personal level, I became increasingly sceptical and felt a deep sense of despair and even insult and betrayal as such encounters continued in almost every Christian or ecumenical programme/meeting. The bible was becoming a heavy burden like a stone of truth or rock that fell on me, making me helpless and devastated. The “positive” objectivist, historical and critical method of paradigm two that I have relied on for so long began to fall apart. It did not come to my rescue or provide any consolation but became a source of stress and health hazard in my life. I could not reconcile paradigm two with my painful struggling experiences of being marginalized, excluded and suffocated. It could neither witness to the gospel/good news of the bible nor bring forth freedom and liberation in Christ. Often times I
experienced living death rather than life or wholeness. The paradigm resulted in my submission to the bible and to kyriarchy rather than to liberating me to claim freely my right and responsibility to be a Subject self.

Through all these different circumstances and experiences, while there were gains and limited successes in terms of making progress and building awareness and understanding of the violence done to women, there appeared to be no radical critical method/model or paradigms to bring about a total liberating change. Ultimately, the new hermeneutical tools of biblical interpretations did not really usher in a new day for women. There was no change, no thorough liberation nor any breath taking transformation happening. Many interpretive views have been tried, many understandings brought forward but always these have been partial or parochial answers that never seem to be touching radical causes and providing holistic “solutions” towards social personal and social structural transformation. In the end all such methods remained rather reformist and not truly liberating.

What are the problems with the traditional as well as the acclaimed positivist-scientific “liberationist” biblical interpretations? Why are they inadequate in bringing about genuine or substantial changes and breakthroughs? Here I speak as a Subject Self to make an analysis of the various interpretations based on my own experience and quest for genuine liberation and transformation both socio-personally and in socio-structural ways too.

The Jesus-biblical religion imported by Western missionaries and later inherited by the local churches has held up the bible as the inspired Word of G*d for centuries. It is the doctrinal-revelatory paradigm that sees scripture as a sacred text. It gives the impression that G*d speaks to us as we read the bible. The meaning and message of the text have moral truths and values that are not only applicable but also imperative for us to follow. It focuses on biblical text as doctrine. The premise of this paradigm is that only certain people “called and ordained by G*d” can interpret the text. The basic assumption of this paradigm is that the
biblical text is the Word of G*d inscribed in the text…it is divine revelation. Thus the approach to the reading of the bible is one of reverence, submission, seeing it as stone of truth, immutable, authoritative, and its teachings, rules and principles valid for all times. It has a divinely sanctioned authority in the faith community that has very often been used to silence people. It is a literal reading of the bible. This paradigm is used to control and dominate people. The priests/pastors have the WORD in their hands. Its starting point is the bible and its texts and leaves little or no room for human experiences to defer or question its interpretation. Such a reading maintains the hierarchy and keeps the power structures or kyriarchy intact. To my horror, I came to realise that more than twenty years of my life had been spent living faithfully by this slavish, self-alienating theology of bondage that arose from reading the bible in such a manner.

After going beyond this interpretive method and acquiring the new hermeneutics of biblical interpretations, I imagined that in the ensuing thirty years, I had already broken out of such a mould. But soon enough I felt a certain vacuum along the way. I found myself continuing the search for something more radical, critical and liberating by doing liberation theologies including feminist theology. What is still lacking in these new paradigms or approaches and hermeneutical tools? What has failed? Again I have been asking more questions and searching for answers, for a breakthrough that would realise the deep longing for liberation, change and transformation in my life and in the lives of wo/men with whom I am in community. These new hermeneutical tools can be named/grouped into two paradigms: scientific-positivist and cultural paradigms. In both, the women’s perspective and experience is present and allowed space to explore and expand. The scientific-positivist paradigm dates back to the period of enlightenment when biblical scholars [mainly male and white] saw the need to make sense of faith and move beyond the doctrinal-revelatory paradigm. However, this model still tended to leave out the women’s experience of oppression and marginalisation
and her right and responsibility to engage in theological reflection relative to her experience and from her standpoint in life. It failed to take the experience of women seriously and as valid starting points for critical reflection. It involved one having to know externalised facts and having a sense of history that was mainly men centred and from men’s point of view. The study and understanding of biblical texts in the historical and cultural contexts provided a semblance of the rational but it also hid the real life experiences and involvement and contribution of women.

The cultural paradigm is a way of reading the bible as cultural text. It guides you to see and understand G*d in the cultural context of the texts. It creates the need to understand people in their dynamic cultural context, applying this cultural model to the reader’s cultural situation. It is saying that the message for that time has a message for our time. Hence if people do not know the culture of the time then they do not understand Jesus’ message for them. All in the text is seen as a message wrapped in a cultural package.


Based on my experience, the first and third paradigms are used in community and church. Paradigm two is used largely in theological institutions and universities. People who are certified as having knowledge but make other people dependent on them use paradigms two and three for that purpose. All the three paradigms begin with the bible and texts. They do not begin with the reader as a subject who has his or her own experience and is capable of engaging in critical thinking and analytical reflection. The reader is subjected to the text and bible. The Subject Self is missing or ignored or taken for granted as the object instead. This is a characteristic trait of malestream knowledge accumulation that actually demands one to
become self-alienated. Many questions can be raised here: how is the text used? How does the text function in the process of oppression and liberation? If paradigms one, two and three have not helped to fully liberate my state of oppression and wo/men’s oppression then they are keeping people in suffering and enslaving existence. The fourth paradigm will be discussed in the next chapter.

Thus far, in my experience I have come across three types of paradigms for biblical interpretation that are widely used by different holders and doers of a diverse variety of theologies, including feminist theologies. More often than not, in applying the women’s perspective it has in fact gone beyond these two paradigms in many ways. Many women or feminists theologians and biblical scholars have developed feminist approaches to reading the bible and biblical interpretations in multiple ways. All this goes with the blooming of feminist theologies the world over. There are many resourceful methods and approaches looking at multiple forms of women’s oppression and justice issues.

The Bible as the Site of Our Struggles

It became an immense task for many ecumenical women and myself in taking on a re-reading of the bible from the “oppressed but struggling for liberation” women’s perspective. Based on a wide range of sharing and analyses of women’s rich experiences over the years in bible study and theology programmes, women voiced that the bible is patriarchal, written mostly by male, interpreted by the same and imposed upon all as the WORD OF G*D! It came into being in societies that were patriarchal and androcentric. The language is androcentric as well as malestream in thought form and “objective” knowledge which leads to self alienation. The problem remains as it is still proclaimed and taught today in our
societies that are patriarchal, androcentric and kyriarchal as well. The problem is even compounded because today churchwomen are still largely the faithful readers of the bible following the doctrinal and cultural interpretations, which keep them in subordination and submission to the male dominated hierarchies and power structures of the church institutions, at home, at work and also in society at large. In pursuing my search and committing to the task of feminist biblical interpretation, I will share my lived experiences, my encounters and work with a diverse variety of women’s groups who come from many different Confessions as in the Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches.

In light of the above situation, many women began to search for ways that would enable them to critique and to break free from the disempowering, debilitating ways in which the bible has been put to use. By engaging in such efforts, it has empowered and sustained me in the journey to reclaim my self as a Subject, being able to rely on my own experiences and that of Christian women in the same journey seeking for our own emancipation for transformation of life. In this ongoing exercise, women have drawn many similar and common conclusions in our attempts of a feminist re-reading and interpretation of the bible. We have identified, named and critiqued the use/misuse of the bible in the following ways:

- The bible is recognised as a patriarchal document but different responses among women have arisen from this.
- The bible is a historical product of a kyriarchal/patriarchal society, culture, language and religion.
- The authors were socialised and influenced by the above factors and the products of the specific contexts they were in.
- Compilers, editors, redactors, translators, etc. who were mainly males, were profoundly influenced and gender socialised by their kyriarchal/ patriarchal settings.
- The logical conceptual framework, thought form and language structure and substance were of the character of the domineering male, biased and androcentric.
- The bible is not the inspired word of G*d. It is not the Word of G*d. It is not a divine revelation. This has raised a serious question on the authority of the bible.
• It contains texts and books that are discriminating and violent against women.
• It has been used to distort, sanction and justify the lowly and subordinate status, image and position of women in church and in society.
• Many texts have been used for centuries till the present day, to legitimate patriarchy and sexism as the will of G*d, e.g. Genesis 2 –3.
• The bible is used as the single most important sustaining rationale for the subjugation of women in church and society.
• The bible itself is a problem. It is not just a matter of male misinterpretation but it contains degrading teachings about women.
• These teachings are used effectively as weapons against women and they form the foundation of the Christian view and theologies of women.
• The bible is used as a divinely ordained book, revealing the will of G*d for women to be held captive and dependent.
• Most evangelists, preachers, pastors, bible teachers and Christian educators tend to read the bible through the socialised eyes of their cultures and religions which look upon and treat women with contempt. They can be both men and women who are patriarchal in their mentality, behaviour and attitudes.

The list is long and endless. Given the above, the effects and impact on the lives of women are unimaginably negative and burdensome. Women live their lives with an overwhelming sense of guilt and feelings of being sinful. The Doctrinal-Revelatory paradigm has been consistently and intentionally used to keep women in their state of oppression. This is the dominant model used by churches and Christian communities.

The bible is also a source of empowerment, liberation and positive experiences. Though the bible itself is a problem in many instances and there are many oppressive elements and texts of terror for
women, women still hold dearly to it
experiencing that there are also liberating
messages, themes and texts for their
empowerment and salvation. Hence they seek
to lift up such texts and elements. Most
popular examples quoted are the models of
the Exodus and the Magnificat, the creation
story in Genesis 1: 27-28, prophetic books.
Women like Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Ruth and
Naomi, Sarah and Hagar, Mary Magdalene,
Mary, Priscilla and Phoebe are often referred
too as heroines and models for the inspiration
and uplift of women in their daily struggle.
Specific texts that affirm women’s
participation, leadership and discipleship are
used as counter voices used against women.
The bible has served to inspire and empower
movements for radical equality, human rights and wo/men’s well-being. Such feminist readings has touched many women’s lives and empowered them to persevere in the ongoing search for alternative ways of interpreting the bible from women’s perspective.

Concluding Reflections

For many Christian wo/men, the bible is the inspiring authority and major influence in their lives. Biblical teachings/interpretations can become a source of liberation, empowerment and resource for hope and faith. Hence feminists must address this issue of biblical interpretation that has worked both ways for liberation as well as for subjugation in the lives of many wo/men. It is very important for wo/men desiring to reclaim their Selves and becoming the subjects of their own lives to have access to the liberating critical tools to interpret the bible. All the three paradigms mentioned above begin with the text. Feminist biblical interpretations can be found in these paradigms, but from a pre-critical approach. Women in the bible are ‘constructed’ by the men writers and used as models for other women to identify with. The bible has many inscriptions directing how women should behave, providing standards and models of historical women and men to model after. From these paradigms wo/men are the objects of the text and the bible continues to be for such wo/men a stone of truth, rather than bread of wisdom. Women can and will experience total liberation and transformation when they re-claim their Selves as subjects, overcoming self-alienation and moving on
from there to experience life in all its abundance and fullness. In becoming a Subject, the woman will discover gems of wisdom in the bible, by reading it using the fourth paradigm within the “ekklesia”, the community of the discipleship of equals.

To sum up, my life’s story and women's experience are my starting points within the framework of an overall systemic analysis. It begins with addressing my own socio-personal experience and faith journey where the Self engages in the struggle to reclaim self as a subject in the midst of demonic distortions arising from a colonised and post/neo-colonised oppressed woman’s experience of socialised captivity. I have been struggling with other women and men for social personal and structural liberation and transformation for over thirty long years. The bible and its interpretation has been the site of my faith journey in this struggle for liberation.

CHAPTER TWO

MARKERS ALONG THE JOURNEY…CROSSROADS BY THE WAY…

A Critique of the Existing Feminist Methods of Biblical Interpretation
This chapter begins with a feminist critique of the bible as a product of Patriarchy and Kyriarchy, or in layperson’s terms, as the dominating man’s word royally canonised as the WORD OF G*D. This will then be followed by a critical survey of the various feminist methods of biblical Interpretation, including those attempts by “Asian Feminist” theologians as well as other previous methodologies that also fell/fall short. From my experience, in my journey, many so-called 'feminist theologies' and Asian feminists, while they have come up with enlightening insights along the way, ultimately miss the mark and fall short. What are the problems with these “feminist liberationist” biblical interpretations? What is still lacking in their endeavours?

It is my conviction and contention that a new paradigm and alternative: the Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm or what has been described as the method of Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation that is most appropriate and thorough for the liberation of wo/men including the transformation of the structures within which they have been socially constrained and constructed. The use of the hermeneutical circle developed as The Dance of Liberation and Transformation, as a methodology for biblical interpretation promises liberation and transformation for all who are part of the “ekklesia of wo/men” in the here and now.

Locating the Bible as A Site of Struggle in Feminist Hermeneutics

Prior to making a critical survey of the existing methods of biblical interpretation, it is necessary to locate the bible as the site of women’s oppression as well as her struggle for
liberation. This involves a critical review of how women and feminists regard the bible based on their lived experiences of violence and oppression in multiple ways and at various levels. In this discussion, the questions of interpretation, misinterpretation and reinterpretation are raised time and again in relation to the changing and “progressive” positions taken over the years in the overall history of feminist biblical interpretations. Particularly in the last three decades, a new perspective has emerged: feminist reading of the bible with a wide range of interpretive methods and approaches, all of which contributed to the development of a new discipline in the burgeoning field of feminist theologies.

The bible has always been upheld as central to and pre-eminent for Christian identity and for Christian living. Christian education, the proclamation of the gospel, teachings about discipleship, mission, evangelism and the many ministries of the church derive their very substance and content from the bible...as it has been interpreted/misinterpreted by its institutional authorities, most if not all of whom, have been, for centuries now, from the male, as in the domineering male’s standpoint. Such patriarchal-kyriarchal androcentric-kyriocentric interpretations/misinterpretations have been upheld as the standard, the foundation and reference point of all and for all things Christian. Thus it should come as no surprise that the bible has been used, abused and distorted in multiple ways in the church institutions and by many, against women. It has generated more negative but also some positive effects for Christian women in all spheres of life (as elaborated and listed in chapter one.) The negative effects include giving women a heavier burden of responsibility to bear and more guilt and shame to contend with. While women experience discrimination and violence both inside and outside of the Church, the bible, as it has been interpreted/misinterpreted by the ruling/dominating Male authorities, continues to be used to sanction and legitimise gender inequality, unjust power relations and power for domination as something that is divinely ordained. As a counter cultural struggle for freedom, liberated
Christian women, aware of their being as Subject Self, struggle to reclaim the rich resources and wealth of Wisdom from the bible through a feminist reading and reinterpretation of texts.

The biblical scholarship of Kwok Pui-lan and Schüssler Fiorenza (see bibliography), have contributed much to the demystification of scriptural texts as the WORD OF G*D by exposing them to be mere domineering androcentric man’s words made sacred, as mentioned, through being royally canonised. Going beyond original pro-testamentum intentions, the “sacred” texts themselves have been analysed, exposed and critiqued for what they are. They expose the “worldliness of the texts” and bring out male bias, colonial bias, Empire/androcentric/kyriocentric bias within the original texts as well as when they are interpreted by male custodians, colonisers, propertied, free born elite white males, educated men and certified women scholars too. Every text in the bible is a product of power struggle. It is prescriptive. It can involve and result in politics of interpretation. The bible is a theological document that reflects a community of peoples’ faith experience and shared beliefs and values in pluralistic hierarchical contexts.

Kwok Pui-lan treats the bible as one of the resources and Christian traditions in feminist theologising. She values the bible as an important resource for feminist and third world theologies. As the bible occupies an important place in the Christian tradition, the interrogation of the ideology of colonization in Christianity, as well as its decolonising potential, must begin with a reappraisal of the biblical heritage. So Kwok traces the bible as a political text in the early church, e.g. its very canonisation being used as a political ploy to exclude women’s voices and demarcate orthodox and heresy, etc.

As an Asian and Chinese woman, she approaches the bible in the context of a vast and diverse Asia, the plurality of peoples, multiple Asian traditions, and addresses the complex issues of using the bible in feminist theology. More than this, she examines the challenges of Asian critics to western interpretations of scripture and exposes the sharp issues of colonial
oppression. For her it is necessary to situate the multiple oppressions of women as a context to rediscover the liberating message of the bible. She highlights and uplifts Asian women’s theological reflections that focus on reinterpretation of the bible. Many women theologians have used the myths, legends, and cultural resources from within Asia to re-appropriate biblical stories. Asian Christian women emphasize that race, class, and religion divide women in the bible, just as women are today. She maintains, “The Bible is a product of complex interaction among many cultures. Discovering the cultural dynamics shaping the biblical narrative helps us understand how the Bible functions cross-culturally.”

In light of the negative as well as positive experiences, the last three decades that saw women engaged in feminist theologies have begun the immense task of biblical interpretation and feminist hermeneutics that required in-depth biblical-theological scholarship. We will tap on the biblical scholarship and contributions of Kwok Pui-lan and Schüssler Fiorenza in the field of feminist hermeneutics and biblical interpretation.

Also a biblical scholar, Kwok brings a new perspective and voice to the task of biblical feminist hermeneutics in reading the bible in multidimensional ways. She draws on the ancient Chinese and various Asian traditions and commentaries on the 'Book of Change', the 'Dao de Jing', and the 'Bhagavad Gita'. In creative and imaginative approaches, she makes interconnected links between the reader, text and context. She also incorporates her insights of contemporary feminist and Third World theologies; and all these in her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.

Kwok advocates that racism and ethnocentrism perspectives must be adopted in feminist reading of the bible. In her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*,

---

she has in her last chapter developed ten theses on “Racism and Ethnocentricism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation”.¹⁴

**Theses 1** The politics of biblical authority must be carefully examined from a feminist liberationist perspective. The bible has been understood as the most important foundation of faith for the Christian Church, particularly Protestant. It is not in fact true within the Catholic or the Orthodox tradition where the recorded word is one among other elements involved in the discernment of what might be the will of G*d in a given historical context. There is the bible and its context, the lived situation and its context and the accumulated experience and wisdom of the custodians of the tradition as well as the faith community in struggle who interprets what might be the will of G*d. All these elements plus "factors/elements outside the faith" which have to be dialogued with and influenced need to be taken into account for the living Word to be discerned.

There is no doubt that within the heretical Protestant tradition the bible as the Word of G*d has been distorted no end to rationalise and justify the bully, the subjugation and oppression of coloured men and women by the Christian colonising West. The chief character though is its lending itself to the rationalisation and justification of kyriarchy where the use of power as power over or the power to dominate is accepted as G*d given. This goes beyond gender analyses although women have also experienced being put down within kyriarchy. It is the canonisation of the bible as the Word of G*d under the aegis of the kyriarchal Roman Empire that must be the key hermeneutical consideration rather than merely gender element/considerations. Its kyriarchal and kyriocentric power over or power to dominate character is far more consequential than its gender oppositional/divide binary matrix.

Kwok has provided us with some sharp and interesting insights into how bible and the politics of the authority of bible as the Word of G*d has been used to justify racism and sexism. However, too much attention is focused from a gender feminist liberationist perspective rather than the power and its characteristic power over spirit of domination. In analysing it from a gender and feminist liberationist perspective it seems to me that Kwok allows kyriarchy to remain unchallenged and unchanged asking only for a greater involvement and share of power for women within it. Liberation from does not result automatically in liberation towards something radically new and qualitatively different. It is liberation and transformation from kyriarchy to the ekklesia of discipleship of equals.

**Theses 2** Historical Critical Method and its shortcoming. Kwok points out that this is a typical middle class Eurocentric cultural off shoot. It allows the middle class the space to critique the ruling class as well as keep the oppressed class in a state of subjugation. Its pretension to impartiality and objectivity serves the aforementioned political function. As Kwok rightly pointed out its impartiality is reflective of non-commitment other than its own survival. It does not challenge the status quo in a revolutionary manner thus ultimately reinforcing kyriarchy and the consequent subjugation of women within it. If patriarchy is seen as the main cause for the oppression of women then a gender reading is sufficient to point to root causes and possible solutions. But in fact it does not do so.

**Theses 3** The need to include the contributions of third world women in the development of feminist critique of Scriptures can appear like she's a champion of the oppressed women of the third world in relation to white women. But in fact the issue is again a question of challenging and transforming kyriarchal power over rather than creating space and remembering the contributions of third world women.

**Theses 4** Kwok seems to want to go beyond only gender considerations by asserting that race and class power dynamics need to be taken into account too in the multiple
oppressions of women. While this sounds correct theoretically one gets the feeling that there is a neat compartmentalisation of sorts that does not perceive class, race and gender as one but rather as disparate parts of the whole. Again because her perspective springs from gender rather than from a critique of kyriarchy, hence the analysis is lacking as to how structures of power and domination can be tackled.

**Theses 5** Kwok cautions against racist anti-Jewish tendencies as reflected in the Christian scriptures and by interpreters. The fact that the scriptures were canonised under the Roman Empire probably gave rise for such an anti-Jewish slant. It would not have been politically correct and possible to blame the Roman Empire for the killing and crucifixion of Jesus. But again this reflects the kyriarchal context within which such tendencies of the scriptures are more consequential than its racist and gender biased tendencies.

**Theses 6** Kwok asserts that scripture should not be used to discriminate and oppress persons of other race or ethnicity.

**Theses 7** The bible is the product of a complex interaction among many different cultures. Discovering and understanding this dynamic process that went into the shaping of biblical accounts might give one insights into how the bible functions cross culturally today.

The social milieu within which the Jews and early Christians lived was multicultural and pluralistic. Despite attempts at maintaining purity there was much intermarriage and cross fertilisation of cultures and probably religious beliefs as well leading to what is today described as religious and cultural syncretism. Against the barriers of racial and cultural chauvinism various peoples were drawn together and the early Christians had to cope with their growth as a popular movement in the midst of a pluralistic world. The story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman is an example of a meeting between two persons from different cultures, religions, class and genders. Theissen sees the miracle not so much in the healing of someone far away but in the overcoming of the divisive prejudiced based
distance between nations and cultures. For some feminists the story takes a slant from the usual Christocentric perspective when Jesus is taken to task with regard to his power and privilege as a Jewish male. Yet others see that although the Syrophoenician woman was from the elite urban class that exploited the Galilean hinterland she was despised by the Jews and oppressed as a woman. Even so she took her Gentile and female identity seriously enough to challenge Jesus in the process teaching him a lesson and broadening his horizons and self-understanding.

**Theses 8** The bible must also be read from the perspective of other faiths. Multi-faith hermeneutics looks at ourselves as others see us so that we may be able to see ourselves more clearly. Given that Asian Christians live in a continent populated by adherents of all the major historical religions of humankind and that they are a mere 3%, Kwok feels that a multi-faith hermeneutics must be given serious attention. This may well be a timely advice and a long overdue responsibility in the face of the rather triumphalist stance Christians, influenced by Western imperialism, have taken so far. In the midst of growing tensions projected by the “clash of civilisations” and demonstrations of Islamic fervour Christians will do well to understand the sensitivities of other religions and bear witness through the heightened knowledge of our scriptures in the eyes of other faiths. There is an urgent need to change from traditional triumphalism to a more reconciliatory and sensitive understanding of various religions. In the words of Kwok biblical scholarship must be more responsible to the wider human family.

**Theses 9** Women under multiple oppressions have multiple identities, which in turn help women to interpret the bible in multi-dimensional ways. Quoting from an Asian American, Rita Nakashima Brock, “a person with multiple identities is one who has the capacity to search for multiple voices that affirm complex cultural meanings and identities
and thereby creating a fluid, multilayered self.”\textsuperscript{15} As persons with multiple identities they are able to perceive multi-dimensionally as well as through the multilayers of meanings the bible contains as a document of multiplicity and plurality.

**Theses 10** Kwok feels strongly that racism and ethnocentrism are issues for all biblical scholars and not for third world women or minority women only. Asking the question why third world women and minority women focus on the multiple oppressions of women in the bible, she replies that it is because these stories speak the reality and shed light on their existence. They seek to use these texts to uncover the interlocking oppression of racism, classism and sexism in the past and in the present thereby helping all of us to liberate ourselves from bondage. They wish to develop a biblical hermeneutics that addresses the liberation of all peoples not only women. Such a concern should be shared by all biblical scholars and men and women reading the bible for insights. The search for a liberating hermeneutics from one’s social and historical location should be the responsibility of all.

Kwok has raised many insights and helpful significant points in her ten theses that are of great relevance not only for biblical scholars from the third world but for all. Her final challenge raised to everyone is “What price have you paid in your study of the bible?”.\textsuperscript{16} The answer to this is that of a costly discipleship.

This brings me back to recall the history, albeit in passing, of women’s attempts in general and initiatives by women in Asia and women from the third world in particular, who wanted to reclaim and re-read the bible for themselves. As an example of one initiative in Asia, “Starting as a small group of ecumenical women based in Singapore, the group met for bible studies and reflection from their perspective as women shared their stories and faith in


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 95.
response to God’s call in their time.” Following this pattern of re-reading the bible from women’s perspective, diverse and broad initiatives soon spread all over Asia among newly “conscientized” Christian women. This was happening from the early 1980s onwards among local groups of women in ministry and theology; among the constituent groups of women’s commission in various national council of churches under the umbrella of the Christian Conference of Asia Women’s Concerns Desk (CCA Women); the then newly formed Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) for Culture & Theology in November 1987; and the World Student Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Regional Women’s Programme (WSCF-AP Women). Many and various programmes in these different network groups have gone on a re-reading of the bible from the women’s perspective on a wide scale whenever they were gathered together. The main thrust of such a re-reading was to interpret both negative and positive texts about women in the bible. Upon a critical reading the process of empowerment focused on remembering positive texts of women characters that had been heroines or exemplary women of courage and success in the biblical world of patriarchy. Most of these exercises ranged from attempts to recover and uphold the feminine aspects of G*d as Mother, to retrieving texts that were “texts of terror” for women, to texts that expose in the most crude fashion the patriarchal, misogynist, anti-women character of the scriptures to the more positive examples of how Jesus the “enlightened” man, Saviour, Lord was sensitive to and favourable towards women including and “allowing” them to be followers as well as partners in the leadership circles of the Jesus movement, to even raising question about the qualification of Jesus as Saviour given that he is a Male, born of and nurtured within a patriarchal androcentric cultural context – women’s groups went through the gamut of possibilities that was reminiscent of a second Tillichian “shaking of the foundations”. Indeed Kwok Pui Lan in her Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology has gone so far as to

raise very radical and fundamental questions like requeering sexuality, going beyond heterosexist paradigms, redoing feminist theology from the perspectives of other religions and secular spiritualities etc. opening up a new vista of questions to be addressed and work to be done for doing postcolonial imagination perspective feminist theology in the Two-Thirds World!

**Feminist Hermeneutics and Methods of Interpretation**

Affirming that the interpretation of scripture is human-made, there is no absolute way of understanding the bible. It is plausible to question the church’s interpretation of scripture. There is no single interpretive meaning and method but many different approaches and perspectives. There are many revisionist or remedial methods of biblical interpretation used by women and feminist biblical scholars. This goes back to a history of more than two centuries that is even earlier than the well-known Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s work of the *Woman’s Bible*. The next few pages will make a critical survey of the various feminist methods that have developed over the years, which have been widely used by women/feminist theologians particularly in the last three decades of feminist theologising.

In Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *Wisdom Ways*, she presents a wide range of feminist methods of interpretation. The main approach is remedial and revisionist in character resulting in a great variety of steps or interpretive methods. The main thrust of this approach assumes that “the bible does not prohibit but rather authorizes equal rights and liberation of

---

18 *Third World/Two-Thirds World* – A geopolitical term used to indicate countries that are not in the so-called “First World”; the economically privileged countries of North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe (Communist eastern Europe was the “Second World”). In response to the hierarchical implications of “Third World”, the term “Two-Thirds World” was introduced to acknowledge the greater portion of the world’s citizens who do not live in economically privileged countries (*Wisdom Ways*, glossary).

wo\/men if it is understood correctly\textsuperscript{20}. These methods go back to a long history of feminist biblical interpretations, which have great impact on subsequent feminist reading and approaches to the bible.

In Asia among Christian women and feminists, I can now trace how this historical trend developed within the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics, which have had great influence and tremendous impact on Asian Christian women doing theologies and biblical studies. Particularly in my work and experience with WSCF-AP women and AWRC for Culture and Theology, methods and models of biblical studies have been well received with new women’s perspectives that gave new answers to new questions asked in the light of women’s lived experiences of the prevalent multiple form of oppression. For more than two decades Asian Christian women have been intensely engaged in this process of feminist biblical studies. However, many methods and approaches used in these biblical studies have been mainly based on a gender or women’s approach, which has its limitations and constraints. For example in many of AWRC’s feminist theological journal and publications on biblical studies\textsuperscript{21}, this gender and women’s approach/method is reflected, even in the most recently held feminist theology programmes and bible study workshops\textsuperscript{22}. These shortfalls have been critiqued by Kwok particularly those that she analysed in her ten theses, and


\textsuperscript{21} Looking at \textit{In God’s Image} journal, take for example the past five to ten years where biblical studies/reflection have been done. In terms of AWRC publications, e.g. \textit{Women of Courage, Proceeding Reports of Study Workshops I and II, Unleashing the Power Within Us, Transforming Attitudes Towards Sexuality}, and even the latest module Book 1 on \textit{Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies} (please see bibliography for specific references).

\textsuperscript{22} In terms of regional programmes held, for e.g. three Bible Study Workshops held in Cambodia from November 1999 to 2002; three Women’s Alternative Leadership for Transformation Workshops in Cambodia from 2000 to 2002; Seminar on Introduction to Feminist Theologies in Malaysia, 2003, Bible Study and Sexuality Workshops held in Sri Lanka, 2004. In my local involvement in biblical studies with two groups of women, namely the Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology; and especially with Women’s Voice over the immediate past five years, which is still ongoing.
Schüessler Fiorenza’s in the revisionist and corrective methods that she has identified and traced in the history of feminist hermeneutics.

From the outset Schüessler Fiorenza’s premise is based on the fact that corrective steps need to undo structures of domination and alienation inscribed in biblical texts and for reading “otherwise”. She critiques that such corrective steps must be taken in conjunction with critical liberationist analytic. Feminist biblical studies need to keep in tension the basic contradiction of how the bible is understood – on one hand it is regarded as G*d’s Word in male words, written in kyriocentric language, while at the same time the bible has served to inspire and empower movements for radical equality, human rights and well-being. These contradictions are not exclusive of each other but must be braided together in the process of interpretation. It is an ongoing engagement in the process and movement of conscientization.

In Schüessler Fiorenza’s critical evaluation, she traced the history of four major methods developed and evolved over the centuries, which emerged out of the praxis of feminist biblical interpretation and process of conscientization by wo/men and feminists. They are:

1) corrective methods, 2) historical reconstructive methods, 3) imaginative interpretive methods, and 4) methods of conscientization. She gives a concise and critical analysis of the steps taken in the various interpretive methods as in the following:

1) Corrective Methods of Interpretation

- **Textual** criticism was the first step in critical biblical studies. Feminists studied Greek and Hebrew in order to correct false translations and commentaries. However, there was inadequate attention given to analyse how kyriocentric language was equated to generic language. For example Phoebe’s status is a case in point. In Romans 16: 1-2 it says a wo/man by the name of Phoebe is given the title *diakonos*. But this title reflects a

---

masculine form grammatically, although it refers to a wo/man. In the Greek grammatical gender it can work in a three-way classification system: masculine/feminine/neuter.

- Translation of “generic” language depends on intellectual frameworks and socio-political location of the translator and interpreter. For example the word Holy Spirit in original Hebrew or Greek biblical text is feminine, grammatically. Also Jews and Christians believe the Divine is above gender construct. But the Holy Spirit was masculinized and soon perceived as “common sense” or natural language through the Latin translation of the Roman Catholic doctrine the Vulgate, which has the prevalent masculine gendering.

- The method of Feminist textual criticism shows kyriocentric tendencies, which marginalize wo/men not only in translations and editions but also in the selection and redaction of traditional materials by biblical writers, including selective canonization of early Christian texts.

- Using Biblical literacy and knowledge about wo/men approach in the bible can be enhanced through liturgical readings of wo/men and ritual celebrations of biblical women.

- This remedial approach does not restrict merely to canonical writings but encourages extra-canonical & cross-cultural research.

- In the apologetic hermeneutics approach, it seeks to recover forgotten traditions about wo/men. But on the other hand it may possibly remove centuries of kyriocentric interpretations that have covered original true meaning of the text, which have either neglected wo/men’s presence in the text or distorted original meaning of female characters in biblical stories.

- Another corrective step is the revisionist interpretation with special focus on wo/men as biblical authors. But this remedial interpretation from wo/men’s perspective is insufficient and even presumptuous. Wo/men in their socio-religious location and context might have possibly internalized feminine values and might not have written liberating
texts. Instead through them they might reproduce kyriocentric text that would communicate values and visions of kyriarchy.

- **Classification** is used to bring out the negative and positive statements about wo/men, e.g. positive texts and traditions are perceived as different from stories of terror and wo/men’s victimization in the texts. Other interpreters/scholars classify the feminine imagery of G*ød as positive, ambivalent or negative. However, underlying such a division or dichotomy they show the biases and prejudices over and against Jewish traditions, post-biblical writings of Judaism, Gnosticism, later Christian testament writings and that of church fathers. This corrective step of pure intent to reclaim the bible as a positive support for wo/men’s emancipation may at the same time re-inscribes kyriarchal dualisms.

- Different from the classified negative role of wo/men in Judaism, some revisionist efforts highlight the Greco-Roman culture where wo/men were culturally socialized. Hence it is necessary to have the negative injunctions in texts like 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, which restrict wo/men’s freedom in speech and leadership/authority in public. In asserting that they cannot be used as “proof texts” against wo/men, they have also put the blame on wo/men in “depraved” cultures in order to ‘save’ the text rather than indict the misogynist texts of the bible.

The common conclusions drawn may be useful interpretive methods in the process of conscientization in feminist reading of the bible, but they fall within the evaluative appraisal and critique as being insufficient or inadequate although they are to a large extent remedial and corrective steps in interpretation.

2) Historical Reconstructive Methods
Feminist historical reconstruction is proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza\(^{24}\) as one of the critical tools in feminist biblical hermeneutics. It is useful to deconstruct the androcentric and kyriarchal understanding of history and biblical texts. It seeks to bridge the gap between contemporary readers and the text constructed by historical positivism. Also it seeks to displace literary and historical kyriocentric dynamic of biblical text by de-contextualising the text in different socio-political-religious-historical contexts so as to make visible and audible the subordinated and marginalized “others”. In the process, attempts are made to recover wo/men’s heritage, both wo/men’s religious historical agency and the memory of their victimization, struggle, and accomplishments. Her first major classic work of feminist theology, *In Memory of Her*, probes the history of the origins and attempts to read the silences and gaps in the biblical texts that might have produced repressed memories of women’s voices and presence. She seeks to reclaim the past, and to critically reconstruct the agency and full participation of women within the whole history of early Christianity. Her feminist method of history is not simply a conception of wo/men’s oppression by men but “the story of wo/men’s historical agency and struggles against kyriarchal subordination and oppression.” (p. 144). Her groundbreaking reconstructive approach breaks away from the positivist scientific as she asserts that history is a story of power relations and struggles. It is a conscious historical and complex ideological-political reconstruct. Hence she asserts “Recognizing the absence and marginalization of wo/men in kyriocentric texts, feminist historians have sought to articulate the problem of how to write wo/men back into history and how to capture the memory of women’s historical experience and contribution.” (p. 144)

In her critique of various feminist reconstructive attempts by feminist historians, Schüssler Fiorenza points out that though many did so with an expressed intention to reclaim wo/men’s history, they ended up re-inscribing kyriocentric biblical texts in the process. She

---

\(^{24}\) As there are several quotations used in this section that are taken from her book *Wisdom Ways*, I have stated the page number after each quote instead of making them into footnotes.
says “Kyriocentric biblical texts tell stories and construct social worlds and symbolic universes that mythologize, reverse, absolutize, and idealize kyriarchal differences and, in so doing, obliterate or marginalize the historical presence of the devalued ‘others’.” (Pp. 145-146). It is crucial in feminist biblical interpretation to use “models of historical and socio-cultural reconstruction that can subvert the biblical text’s kyriocentric dynamics and place the struggles of those whom it marginalizes and silences into the center of the historical narrative.” (p. 146). In this reconstruction it requires a critical investigation into the androcentric and kyriocentric language and also “the theological hermeneutics as well as the positivist assumptions of historical, sociological, and theological biblical scholarship contained within their scientific models of reconstruction.”

3) Imaginative Interpretive Methods

The earliest feminist attempts in re-reading the bible have sought to use creative ways and methods to make the biblical stories come alive through role-play, bibliodrama, dance and song. One early method was that of personal identification with the wo/men characters and those in ‘generic’ stories that do not mention their presence but give the impression or assumption that wo/men are present. For some faith became identified with the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew bible and with the long-suffering but ultimately victorious Jesus. Another different technique of story telling was that of asking the question “what if”. “Interviews” as a method, are also used for role-playing the writers or biblical characters. An imaginative interpretive method as in Midrash is also used. It puts wo/men’s voice back into the text and retells the story that renders the spirit of mending and healing the world. The process of imagination also creates an inclusive language when all people are affirmed and

---

valued as gifted by G*d. These methods are experiential and text oriented, which in many ways give some visual narratives of wo/men’s stories.

4) Methods Of Conscientization

Critical feminist interpretive methods of the bible, as suggested by Schüssler Fiorenza, are effective means of engaging in the process of feminist consciousness-raising. It is an ongoing movement of conscientization embraced by committed feminists who seek to subvert the subtle and persuasive power of kyriocentric texts by placing wo/men in the centre of attention. Feminist conscientization has its task, which “seeks to shift attention from the kyriocentric text to wo/men as reading subjects.” (p.152) Taking the subject position is most fundamental as the reader assumes her/his subjectivity in acceptance or rejection of or resistance to the given texts.

A feminist method of conscientization exercises “methods of resistance that develops alternative visions to deconstruct, debunk, and reject the kyriocentric politics of the canonical text.” (p.152) To read the text as critical, and thus “resisting” readers going against the grain of kyriarchy, a different radical egalitarian imagination is needed. But the method of imaginative identification with biblical wo/men has its limitations, as wo/men characters are constructs of kyriarchal texts and authors. Readers must be conscious that wo/men stories in the biblical texts are shackled by and entrenched within the kyriarchal culture and religion. Hence, this must go hand in hand with hermeneutics of suspicion and critical evaluation before it can re-imagine and re-create them in a feminist key. It will shift its focus on subordinates and dependents by decentering leading men and wo/men of high status. For example, focusing on Hagar instead of Sarah has brought to fore the prejudices and power relations that exist between women.

In places where the texts and stories are told in generic way, questions can be raised if the human values apply to men and wo/men. If the text or story does not make sense then it
should be marked as kyriocentric. (p. 157) This whole process and movement of feminist consciousness-raising challenges the use of “common sense” and takes a conscious reading of text ‘as a wo/man’ or ‘from a wo/man’s perspective’ in a radical democratic space such as *ekklesia of wo/men*. Such readings need to be done from “different socio-political global-cultural, pluralistic religious subject locations.” (p. 157)

In Kwok Pui-lan’s biblical discourse, she brings out the many hermeneutical obstacles and principles in reading the bible in an Asian context as shown in her ten theses. She takes the Asian context seriously by taking into account the diverse, multi-religious and pluralistic situations. She has brought to our attention a very critical insight and a critical principle for liberation as well as feminist biblical interpretation through what she has described as “postcolonial imagination”.

Schüssler Fiorenza has developed in her critical feminist theology of liberation a specialised field most extensively in tackling critical feminist biblical interpretation.

**A New Paradigm: Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm**

In my struggle for social personal freedom leading me to search for biblical interpretations that were liberating, in particular a liberating feminist hermeneutic, I was not only looking for an adequate theory but more importantly a liberating and transformational praxis. I was in search of practical, achievable, experiential liberation, which would of necessity include the transformation of systemic and structural realities in the “real” world of the here and now, that oppressed all wo/men including my self. In my previous search, I had

---

26 *Ekklesia of wo/men* – The radical democratic assembly of free citizens who gather in order to conduct critical debate and determine their own communal, political and spiritual well-being. When found in the Christian Testament (New Testament), the word is translated as ‘church’. Since throughout history, full citizenship and democracy were restricted to elite males, it is necessary to qualify *ekklesia* with wo/men in order to overcome its kyriocentric determination. (*Wisdom Ways*, glossary)

been exposed to many malestream and androcentric albeit “critical” models of knowledge, as well as seemingly liberating paradigms of biblical hermeneutics and interpretation. It was an engaging and at times even fascinating process that was very involved. But through deeper analysis and the praxis of liberation for wo/men in general and in particular women who were engaged in struggle for liberation and for myself personally all these proved to be insufficient to provide the answers to the questions that we had. Many were attractive and progressive sounding but to a large extent they stayed at the level of the mind and in theory. To go back to what I had set out to do in this chapter, the questions remain: What are the problems with even “feminist liberationist” biblical interpretations? Based on my experience in my struggle personally and in relation to groups, what was still lacking or wanting in these various “answers”? We reviewed the various interpretive methods, which feminist interpreters have employed over the years in the history of feminist biblical interpretation. We “tested” these through practice over time. From the outset in her book chapter five of Wisdom Ways, Schüssler Fiorenza remarks that there is no single reading strategy and interpretive method. Feminist interpreters have in fact used a variety of different methods to re-read the bible and text. So there is no blue print formula as to which method is to be used or followed. However since the exegetical-historical methods are often kept or even owned by experts and scholars, usually in the academy, it is not accessible to ordinary human beings many of whom do not even know how to read. She therefore asserts that with a critical, rhetorical feminist interpretation, it is available and usable by everyone, without any training. This is also understood as a feminist process for the reader/doer who as a Subject is engaged in the process and movement of conscientization. Such is also a process and movement for socio-personal and socio-political change and transformation.

Based on my experience and to my mind, Schüssler Fiorenza has thus far, developed the most comprehensive praxiological “method”, for want of a more appropriate word, for
women and men to refer to in their quest to live out faith in community committed to personal, socio-personal and socio-structural liberation and transformation. She offers a “methodology” or in her terms a “dance movement with appropriate steps” that provides a feminist theoretical framework and feminist social analysis in reading the bible and any other theological themes or issues affecting wo/men. She is the most holistic, relative to my own social religious location and faith journey. Her profound work found in her latest book in English, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* contains and expresses most succinctly and “comprehensively” my personal beliefs and theological positions on the question of what then is to be done after all has been said and done! Along with her pioneering work in critical feminist liberation theology, she has done groundbreaking work and opened up new paths in this field of critical feminist biblical interpretation (CFBI). In her various books (see bibliography) written extensively and developed on this central theme she says it is very important that wo/men get the critical tools to interpret the bible. Schussler Fiorenza is of the opinion that the new biblical scholarship is more realistic and inclusive because it brings different perspectives and different experiences and different viewpoints from different social locations to bear upon how the text is read. This generates new questions and opens new horizons to the reading of texts. Reiterating that the bible is written in a patriarchal-kyriocentric framework, biblical text must be read with a hermeneutics of suspicion. She stresses that it is important to address and critically analyse the social, economic political context, and to read and interpret biblical texts in the context of the larger patriarchal/kyriarchal hegemonic context. It is also just as important to critique the interpreters of the texts without forgetting that the critic too comes at all the above with pre-constructed ideas and prejudices. She maintains that feminists must concern themselves with the bible and religion if they are concerned with the liberation of wo/men. For many wo/men the bible is the inspiring authority with great influence in their lives. Biblical
teachings/interpretations can be a source of strength and hope as they have been a source of guilt and misery. Hence feminist must address this issue of biblical interpretation that has been a source of great power in the lives of many wo/men.  

CFBI begins with a conscious understanding of the paradigms and models from which we operate. She identifies four paradigms that are used in biblical interpretation, three of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. In short, all the three paradigms begin with the text. Feminist biblical interpretations can be found in the paradigms, but from a pre-critical approach. Women in the bible are ‘constructed’ by the men writers and used as models. The bible has many inscriptions of how women should behave with given standards and models of historical women and men to model after. From these paradigms wo/men are the objects of the text and the bible continues to be for many wo/men a stone of truth, rather than as bread of wisdom.

The fourth paradigm, that is, the **Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm**, understands the biblical texts as rhetorical-political because the texts are aimed at an audience who can be persuaded. The word ‘emancipation’ is revisited to restore its original meaning over against its negative label. Emancipation can be traced back to the liberation process from slavery and tutelage. Hence it is deemed fitting as an interpretive approach, which aims at “overcoming structures of domination” and seeing to/concerned with everyone’s welfare. “It is a new paradigm and yet has been evolving in the past twenty years”, said Schüssler Fiorenza. It has already “a long history in political-radical democratic struggles for emancipation.” The paradigm “investigates the ways in which biblical texts exercise influence and power in

---


29 Ibid., p. 44.

30 Ibid., pp. 43 – 44.
social and religious life.”

The interpreter is guided to investigate “how the bible is used to inculcate mindsets and attitudes of submission and dependency as ‘obedience’ to the will of G*d that disposes us to accept and internalise violence and prejudice.” This paradigm bears in mind and assumes that texts are persuasive and can yield power and control in specific situations, where they function to legitimate or challenge the status quo. There are four models in this paradigm. I have opted for the fourth model named as **Critical Feminist Liberationist model**.

This paradigm starts with *who* is interpreting the bible, and in what *context*. The Subject of the text is the one interpreting the text. It is imperative and essential that the reader realises that she/he is the Subject of any text. It begins with the Subject’s experience and social religious location along with systemic analysis of the structures of domination within the context of the socio-political arena of that experience. To adopt this model one has to make a qualitative leap from the first three paradigms, though Fiorenza says that these paradigms and models are not exclusive of each other but are alternative reading strategies that can be learned. Schüssler Fiorenza said, “Historical critical scholarship emphasizes strongly the authors of the text, for instance, Paul or Timothy, and reads the text only as a descriptive communication of the author but not from the perspective of the audience. A critical rhetorical method... understands the text always in context.”

The text then communicates what arises from the context. The social location of the author, the expected audience and reason for communicating what the author intends are important factors when reading the text. This means other than giving attention to Paul the reader must see that the

---

32 Ibid., p. 44.
text itself is a communication between people. The question then leads to who are the people
Paul has written to. She then quoted an example: “The book on the Corinthian wo/men
prophets by Antoinette Clark Wire, for instance, reads Paul’s letter from the perspective of
wo/men in Corinth. Usually, scholarship on the Pauline writings understands the people to
whom Paul writes in terms of the malestream historiographical model of orthodoxy and
heresy. Paul is then of course seen as orthodox whereas his so-called opponents are seen as
heretics, who are often labelled as gnostics. Scholarship constructs the arguments of Paul as
arguments between Paul and those who are deviant. However, if one reads Paul from the
perspective of those in the communities to whom Paul writes, then we can read Paul’s text
from the perspective of wo/men who were there and were leading in the communities to
whom Paul writes. Thus the whole argument becomes a different argument in a feminist
historiography.”34

She suggests that this big leap to operate from the Critical Feminist Liberationist
Model can be engaged by hermeneutic mediation, aided by a methodology in a dance step of
suspicion-reconstruction-evaluation-imagination, a process by which transformation and
change can be brought about. The model contains three main elements: 1) socio-political
analysis: experience-systemic analysis; 2) hermeneutical mediation: suspicion-reconstruction
–evaluation-imagination; 3) goal: struggle, change and transformation. Each main part flows
one into another and yet each can be used without following the order or excluding the other.
This is the methodological model of “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” that she
has developed over the years, which she presents in her book Wisdom Ways in a most
systematic way in Chapters One and Six.

The new CFBI paradigm is a fundamental break with/from the dominating
kyriarchal/kyriocentric discourse. Here she has also developed most sharply and

34 Woon Yoke Heng, “An Interview with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ”, in In God’s Image, Vol. 24 No. 3,
September 2005, p. 44.
systematically tools for a systemic analysis of kyriarchy that goes beyond the traditional male
biased materialist reading and social analysis of society. Critical feminist biblical
interpretation begins with a critically conscious understanding of the experience and social
location of the interpreter as well as the various existing paradigms developed within the
kyriarchal order. This order is kyriocentric in character within which its citizens are
“socialised” to accept the use of power as power to dominate as opposed to the notion of
power as power to liberate for justice and for mutual enhancement. Within kyriarchy power
as power to dominate is the only way to exercise power. It calls for a radical break with and
change of dominating power structures and its transformation on socio-personal and societal
structural levels as well. To read the texts as products of a patriarchal/kyriarchal cultural
context and to seek for liberation and transformation through the hermeneutics of imagination,
will bring us to a different approach to the texts, their understanding and functioning.

The next chapter will be a presentation of the hermeneutical circle, the dance steps,
which are developed as a methodology for “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation”. It
is the biblical methodology that promises social personal liberation as well as the
transformation of those very structures that have constrained and oppressed wo/men since
time immemorial.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING WISDOM WAYS

A Biblical Methodology: Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation
“Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation”, according to Schüssler Fiorenza can also be expressed in terms of the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation”. I have experienced it to be the most radical, comprehensive and relevant tool of systemic analysis for understanding and analysing the wo/man’s experience of subordination and at the same time also offering direction to the struggle for liberation. It must be emphasized that this exercise is something done personally, individually as well as in relation to others within the community of faith, the ekklesia of wo/men, which is inclusive of men and women committed to socio-personal liberation and social structural transformation. Wo/men and men of faith as a community of the faithful live out what it means to be members of the Jesus movement practicing radical democracy in mutuality. Their vision is of an ekklesia of wo/men, which is an assembly of freeborn citizens who make their own decisions as opposed to the hierarchical structure in existence.

In working on this biblical methodology there are many important presuppositions that are foundational, which must precede the methodology if it has to be holistic, integral, liberative and transformational rather than technical. The pre-requisites and presuppositions must be clear from the outset. It must show that the subject-interpreter possesses the following:

- Beginning and claiming oneself as the Subject self and agent involved in the process of conscientization for liberation and transformation.
- Engaging with the bible and doing biblical interpretation as a site of struggle for liberation.

---

35 Based on my varied and long years of experience with many groups engaged in such struggles for women's liberation and structural transformation, the above conditions and considerations help to ensure maximum success in their attempts for change. These pre-requisites/conditions are arrived at after many years of working with various groups of women struggling for personal liberation and structural transformation. It is not exhaustive but open to new insights in the nature of wisdom gained through constant learning and experience.
Clarifying one’s vision with commitment to human struggle for total liberation and transformation of life within the free space of the ekklesia of wo/men.

Locating oneself within the open space of ekklesia of wo/men as a site of struggle and commitment to liberation and transformation of self and community.

Having a critical feminist social analytic perspective that will sustain a systemic analysis of the situation.

Nurturing a more holistic understanding in critical feminist biblical interpretation through the perspectives of class, race, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion age, nationality, colonial experiences, heterosexism and sexuality.

Keeping in view constantly a wide variety of hermeneutical methods and principles particularly those suggested by Kwok Pui Lan, which are resourceful guides for specifically the first two dance steps.

The methodological model of “A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” is akin to a dance with seven major steps (see diagram36 on page 62). To reiterate, I have mentioned these seven steps of the model in chapter two which contains three key elements: 1) socio-political analysis: experience-systemic analysis; 2) hermeneutical mediation: suspicion-reconstruction-evaluation-imagination; 3) goal: struggle, change and transformation. All the spiral dance steps have theories of interpretation. The dance can begin at any point and it can be going back and forth in praxis without being orderly from one to seven. It is a dynamic spiral type of moves and turns. The movement is not linear, the steps can be retraced, repeated, never ending.

Working through this hermeneutical spiral dance can be emotionally difficult as it may raise and surface many psychological issues that have been suppressed. It is a

methodology that does not work just on the intellectual level. Instead it yields to a strong possibility of challenging the various multiple identity constructs of the Subject interpreter in terms of her/his social and religious location, in terms of gender, race, class, culture, religion, nationality and colonial conditioning and so forth. Thus, the dance acknowledges and accepts the presence of anger and anguish within the dancer, who recognizes the injustice done by the structures of oppression. S/he is aware of the tension and temptation that it would be easier to delete all history of oppression and struggle for liberation. But it is only in connecting with the history of the struggle, can there be possibilities leading to commitment to change and transform situations of injustice, and to imagine a more just future, inspired by the biblical visions of justice and well being.

A Hermeneutics of Experience

It begins usually from the hermeneutics of the experience of the Subject interpreting the text. Questions asked at this step of the dance would include questions such as: What values and mindset have I internalised? What ideological function do these texts have, the kinds of values they reinforce? From my experience, how have the interpretation of these texts dominated and enslaved wo/men? The hermeneutics of experience can call forth all the hermeneutical steps and towards transformative action for change. Schüssler Fiorenza points out the difference between wo/men’s experience and feminist experience. Wo/men’s experience remains in the social-cultural and religious constructs that keep and trap them in terms of their gender position. She then makes a concise analysis beyond such wo/men’s experience into this feminist category of experience in four crucial components:

1. Experience is mediated linguistically and culturally. There is no “pure experience” that can be distilled from its kyriocentric contexts and texts.

2. The personal is political. Personal experience is not private but public; it is socially constructed in and through race, gender, class, heterosexuality, ethnicity, age and religion.

3. Since personal experience is determined socially and religiously, it demands critical analysis and reflection that can explore the social location of experience.

4. Experience is a hermeneutical starting point, not a norm. Only certain experiences, namely the experiences of struggle and liberation for justice and radical equality, can be articulated as feminist norms.

A Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location

A hermeneutics of domination and social location requires a feminist social analysis of the powers and structures of domination that operate in the lives of wo/men. Schüssler Fiorenza names this structural domination as ‘kyriarchy’, which goes beyond the meaning and practices of patriarchy. This feminist social analysis is a complex systemic analysis that identifies categories of wo/man, gender, patriarchy, androcentrism, kyriarchy and kyriocentrism, which function in multiple layers not only in structures of domination but that they are inscribed in the biblical texts. Hence it is a crucial task to work through this step of hermeneutics in order to break through the multiplicative structures that are perceived and assumed as common sense or natural. We need to look at the structural patterns or social choreography inscribed in biblical texts and in our own lives. Critical interpretation for liberation has two reference points: 1) the social-ideological locations of biblical interpreters; 2) the structures of domination inscribed in biblical texts. To breakthrough this hermeneutical
step, Schüssler Fiorenza provides biblical interpreters the tools of feminist social analysis, which she has developed in chapter four of her book *Wisdom Ways*. She suggests that various categories of analysis must be examined critically: primary categories and dualistic categories.

In primary categories of analysis, it looks at woman/women and their oppression. To analyse wo/men’s situation and multiple oppression, it is necessary to acquire a complex model of analysis that deals with wo/men’s multiple identities and social location. Both this identity and social location are criss-crossed and structured by different powers of domination. This is a feminist liberationist analytical approach that goes beyond gender analysis. Many women’s movements have not moved beyond essentialism, on the nature that wo/men have in common. But the wo/man’s multiple identities and social-cultural and religious location are more than just gender. It shows how the intersections of class, race, nationality, colonialism, age, sexuality, etc. have shaped the wo/man’s identity and social location. This systemic analysis also tackles the question of power and relations of power in the structures of domination.

The dualistic categories of analysis are based on the notions of gender, androcentrism and patriarchy. Till the present time, some feminist movements maintain their analysis of patriarchy based on the notion of domination of all men over all women, which is in fact outdated. Some understand it as gender oppression. Various feminist theories that were developed through the social political movement have also influenced such an analysis of woman/gender/patriarchy categories. It is thus necessary to develop a feminist systemic analytical framework that goes beyond a simple and liberal gender analysis of oppression if feminist movement is a social political movement for radical change and transformation. In this feminist social and systemic analysis, many words and terms come under scrutiny. For instance, Patriarchy means all men dominate over all women. A critical reflection of the various feminist theories is explored. Women’s oppression was analysed from a woman’s
perspective. It was later changed to a paradigm of gender perspective and analysis. Some approached it from a feminine perspective. But all of them are theories to explain and analyse towards change in the struggles of the social political movement. This includes the movement of feminist biblical interpretation. These feminist theories have influenced and guided the women/gender/patriarchy perspectives in the feminist re-reading of the bible. Traditional or classical theology uses this theory to explain men on top of women, men’s power over women. Colonialism and missionary movement to Asia had also adopted this to reinforce cultural-religious oppression of wo/men.

There are two theories that attempt to explain the difference between woman and man, male and female. They are essentialism and gender theories. Essentialism believes on biology, based on nature. Women and men are essentially different due to their biological differences. It is a naturalized and common sense thinking. Male or female body determines the biological difference. It explains and rationalise on the roles, patterns, models, characteristics of each. It is a theory of femininity and masculinity because it can be explained by biology, a theory of complementarity and nature.

The second is the gender theory. Gender is a social cultural construct. It is a process of socialization that stereotype female/woman in femininity and male/man in masculinity. It is a construction not only by culture and education but fully sanctioned by religion. The construction makes it natural but women are not born as women. We are made as women. Men too are constructed to be male and men.

However, a feminist social analytic perspective insists on the importance of a systemic analysis that goes beyond the above theoretical explanations. Feminist thinking or
Biblical Interpretation as a Site of Struggle for Liberation

- Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change
- Hermeneutics of Experience
- Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location
- Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction
- A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation
- Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination
- Hermeneutics of Suspicion
- Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation
feminism is perceived as more dangerous than “gender” theory. It exposes “gender” which creates a double thinking, androgenity as in a dualistic system. It is a dual system of woman and man categories but it combines their characteristics of femininity and masculinity into a relationship of “complementarity”, making it natural. However, feminist experience points to gender analysis or category as insufficient to explain the power differences that exist in power structures and relations. For e.g. an upper/higher class woman using a lower class woman to clean her house has power over this woman of lower status. As long as gender does not explain the difference in power between upper and lower class women, between women of different race, nationality and colonialism, this analysis is weak and lacking in any strategies for change. In light of the above categories of analysis, a complex systemic analysis of kyriarchy is most urgent and needful. This model of analysis tackles questions of power and its abuse; language which is androcentric and generic in character; including the biblical texts that are androcentric and kyriocentric. Thus far gender and patriarchy analyses as well as models/paradigms used for biblical interpretation have not addressed or are inadequate in dealing with biblical language and texts that are oppressive, heterosexist, kyriarchal and based on malestream thinking and thought form. The old paradigms and revisionist models have not brought about genuine radical changes and liberation in the lives of wo/men. A complex analysis of kyriarchy exposes the multiplicative structures of sexism, racism, classism, colonialism that are operative within to sustain multi-dimensional domination and oppression.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidical system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of super-ordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. The structure of kyriarchy can be understood in these aspects:

- Kyriarchy is not simply the domination of men over wo/men… it is a complex pyramidical system of domination that work through the violence of economic exploitation and lived subordination.
- Kyriarchy must not be understood as a-historical or monolithic but must be seen as realized differently in different historical contexts.
- Not only the gender system but also the stratification systems of race, class, colonialism, and heterosexism structure and determine a kyriarchal system.
- Kyriarchal societies and cultures need for their functioning a servant class, a servant race, a servant gender, and a servant religion of people.

---

• In a radical democratic system, power is not exercised through “power over” or through violence and subordination, but through the human capacity for respect, responsibility, self-determination, and self-esteem.

Kyriarchy is supported and reinforced by kyriocentrism as an ideology. It is an ideology of the Greek model of democracy that operates on four levels: 1) Grammatical-linguistic level; 2) Symbolic-cultural level; 3) Ideological-cultural level; 4) Social-institutional level.

The above is a good feminist social analytic framework that deals with a hermeneutics of domination and social location. It is a most necessary step that locates not just the wo/men’s experience but feminist experience and social location; and not just only by description but probing into the root causes of domination by analysis. This empowers and heightens the process of conscientization in CFBI for the Subject and agent as reader-interpreter.

A Hermeneutics of Suspicion

To suspect is to doubt or disbelieve in something. Suspicion means caution, something dangerous for our health is happening because we no longer want to believe in everything. Suspicion and evaluation is the critical turning moment between deconstruction and reconstruction. Suspicion is difficult because it makes one insecure and we are told that it is sinful to suspect and disobey/disbelieve. But wo/men need to practise suspicion as a virtue, not a sin as we have been taught to be obedient to the authority, to accept and be submissive. The authority wants wo/men to believe that it is the best for us. It is the same process and spirit when we are told to trust the bible rather than to question it. Suspicion is not just only a
step in the dance but it is a virtue for wo/men to survive as well as to live fully and become full self-determined subjects. When we realise and experience we are not subjects we should apply more suspicion. Similarly when people and others are marginalized and treated as objects. We need to see and think differently and critically when persons are not regarded as subjects. Hence when wo/men begin to think, suspect and question, the process of change begins in us.

Suspicion can be applied on 2 levels, which is in terms of language and ideology. In language we have to suspect the male religious knowledge because the founders are men, texts are written by men and interpretations are done by men. Language is andro-kyriocentric, including biblical languages. There are three levels of looking at language\(^{39}\): 1) Language is used as an expression of reality, we believe what is being said as it relates to reality. 2) Language can also create and reproduce or reinforce reality because when we say GOD is father, it creates in our mind that GOD is a father. It reinforces the idea the God is indeed a father. 3) Language can change reality because we can see reality changing in the classroom or anywhere when we use wo/men to include men. Language is a dangerous tool for consolidation or transformation. Hence wo/men have to be very suspicious of the language being used. Our suspicion can empower us to probe for a deeper analysis of the andocentric and kyriocentric language. Since masculine terms function as generic terms, wo/men always have to ask twice whether we are meant or included. This is the basic starting point of a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is an important move and step in biblical interpretation.

The second level of suspicion dwells on ideology and its function. This proves to be even more difficult because we have internalised the ideology of kyriarchy-kyriocentrism since birth and it becomes dangerous when we take things for granted. For instance it is dangerous to assume that all men are oppressors; poor people cannot think; the poor are

\(^{39}\) These three levels on language were notes that I have taken down during the AWRC Feminist Theology Workshop facilitated by Lieve Troch in August 2004, Malaysia.
better than the rich; women are better than men in being natural nurturers, or are identified
with nature and possess natural mother instinct, etc. These are deeply embedded thinking and
assumptions which are structured pyramids built inside us. These assumptions are deceptive
and we have to question and suspect these ideologies.

Schüssler Fiorenza adopted the tools provided by the black American activist, Patricia
Hill Collins40 to analyse ideologies, that we be guided by asking simply three sets of
questions: 1) Who is saying what? That is, what message and who is that person talking? 2)
How does that message function? How is it used and for whom? E.g. how does it function
when we say that Jesus died for our sins? 3) What is the purpose of what is being said? Why
is it spoken? What do they want us to believe? Does it have to do with a dream and a vision
of liberation or does it have to do with denial of people or oppression of people? For example,
when the Church says that women should be servants: we then ask who and what is being
said, how does it function, and what is the purpose, what kind of political ideology that exists
to subjugate women to service and sacrifice, etc.?

To apply a hermeneutics of suspicion in biblical interpretation, it is necessary then to
suspect and question the biblical texts in terms of andro-kyriocentric language and ideology;
how kyriocentrism functions and naturalise oppression as “common-sense”. But we should
then pursue further the pertinent theological questions and issues of what kind of G*d do we
believe in and confess/profess. A deeper analysis then would bring us to recognise and
expose the structures of domination, which cultural and religious texts and symbols are made
natural and common sense. Beyond this, we must make a theological analysis exposing
domination as structural sin. Therefore, as a Subject self and interpreter in one’s socio-
political religious location, s/he must investigate “kyriocentric texts and symbol systems and

their ideological functions”\textsuperscript{41} and “kyriarchal contexts of texts and interpreters”.\textsuperscript{42} This being the task, “a hermeneutics of suspicion is best understood as a deconstructive practice of inquiry that denaturalises and demystifies linguistic-cultural practices of domination rather than as working away at the layers upon layers of cultural sediments that hide or repress a ‘deeper truth’”.\textsuperscript{43}

A Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation

Critical evaluation completes the spiral step of suspicion. Schüssler Fiorenza explains the necessity of taking a hermeneutics of critical evaluation by providing a double reference point\textsuperscript{44}:

1) Cultural questions of ideological assessment

To take a critical feminist hermeneutics of evaluation we should on one hand consider how we have internalized cultural and religious teachings and values, which also legitimize kyriarchy. On the other hand, as a counter-culture effort we identify values and visions inscribed in the text that may lift up a plausible alternative radical democratic visions and values. To deconstruct a text that reinforces structures of oppression we promote and reconstruct values and visions for liberation and emancipation. Schüssler Fiorenza says particular focus must be given in a feminist critical analysis of a biblical text in the following\textsuperscript{45}:

\textsuperscript{41} Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation}, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 176

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 178 and p. 200.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 200.
• “point of view” which expresses the ideological-rhetorical aims of a text; readers align themselves with the dominant voice, values, and characters of the text (e.g., the Syrophoenician wo/man)
• drawing out and underscoring superior/inferior, we/others, masculine/feminine roles and values inscribed in the text and actualized in the act of reading
• explicitly articulating the “point of view” or ideological strategy of the text in terms of our cultural value-systems and to making the text’s interaction with this system explicit
• determining and circumscribing the rhetorical situation and context in which the text operates today (e.g., anti-Judaism)

2) Theological questions of biblical authority

A critical evaluation is motivated by the purpose of what is then the proclamation of the gospel, who and what kind of G*d does one believe in the light of the hermeneutics of suspicion cast on biblical religion and biblical texts. If we do not want to go on to proclaim G*d as a G*d of oppression and violence, this means the language of the sacred text and how texts function with persuasive power in the contemporary cultural and religious contexts must be seriously assessed. The interpreters may be taught how to deal with the biblical text in the context of the first century. But they do not go further by asking how texts function in their contemporary social, cultural and religious situations. Feminist theology of liberation emphasizes on both context of the biblical text and contemporary interpreters as well as both their social cultural and religious locations. A hermeneutics of evaluation makes us conscious that we should not simply accept and obey all texts of scripture as the “Word of God” but to critically evaluate them as guided by a new and different vision based on feminist justice-based and emancipatory values.
Imagination is a state and feeling of freedom and space the interpreter as a Subject among other subjects, can claim. This is a space, which is not bound by socially constructed constraints, and it is an imaginary space that breaks free from time with “open” possibilities. It gives a free space to memory and encourages longings and dreams to be materialised and re-experienced. Feelings, emotions and views that were suppressed or repressed can be fully expressed in this open, free, space of personal and corporate imagination. This can also enhance our imaginative abilities in empathy with the feelings and struggles of wo/men. A hermeneutics of creative imagination motivates the subject interpreter to conceive of change in response to the situations. Schüssler Fiorenza recommends that historical imagination is absolutely necessary in order to understand biblical texts. It causes us to suspect the silences, read in between lines and to fill in the gaps so as to make sense out of the story. It causes us to perceive and tell the story differently as well as see history in a new light. Biblical stories can now be retold and spiritual vision reshaped. With creative religious imagination we can employ such creative interpretive methods as described in chapter two, making the biblical stories come alive through role-play, biblodrama, poem, midrash, dance and song. She said, “Retelling biblical stories and re-imagining biblical characters in creative imagination and play is a catalytic process that liberates us from the false images that we have made.”

possible in the hermeneutics of creative imagination to see citizenship as an *ekklesia*, a
democratic assembly of full citizens of wo/men oriented towards *basileia* - the reign of God.

A Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and

Reconstruction

Suspicion and critical evaluation must lead to a hermeneutics of remembering and
reconstruction of that which had been deconstructed based on historical imagination. History
is a record and a subjective interpretation of the winners who tell their stories. It is never a
record of “what actually happened”. Historians write history to record the victory of the
dominating powers and from their point of view and exegetes tend to do the same when they
interpret historical texts. They depend on their imagination to interpret history when they
examine the people of the past as history makers and agents/participants. Historians tend to
want to depict and present their historiography as something derived from objective data and
sources going by textual and historical positivism, gathering evidence of how things “really”
happened as if every historical account was not, in fact, at its best, merely another interpreted
point of view. But in fact, it is a historical construction when they make history a narrative
account by remaking and retelling the reality. It is certainly not reality itself. Hence, to
deconstruct and reconstruct history we need a critical remembering that will bring us to make
a feminist reading of history that is totally new, liberating and different from the malestream
perspective of reading and writing history. Historiography has to be “fair” both to the sources
and to the silenced or marginalized, the historical losers. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies these
perspectives and models in creating historiography and construction of history critically as
theological models of early Christian history.
As a counter-reading to history making created by historical winners, she proposed feminist models in this hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. In historical reconstruction, we look at history and tradition. For wo/men’s history is our heritage and strength. But wo/men have been made invisible and silenced. Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to uncover as well as to recover the full participation and leadership role of women in the life and history of the early Christian beginnings. Her first major classic work of feminist liberation theology *In Memory of Her* probes into the history of the origins and attempts to read the silences and gaps that might have produced repressed memories of women’s voices and presence. She seeks to reclaim the past, and to critically reconstruct the agency and full participation of women within the whole history of early Christianity. Hence, early Christian origins are women's history as well (albeit in need to be reconstructed...), which is the history of the Discipleship of Equals. She is not interested to prove whether the actual events had happened, as it is not a search for true pristine orthodox beginnings. Catholicism excluded the role and contributions of women in the origins of Christian history and the Orthodox condemned efforts to revive women’s contribution as heresy. In making a historical re-­visioning and revisiting, she writes, “My own work elaborated early on that a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins must critically investigate androcentric (or more precisely, kyriocentric) language and theological hermeneutics as well as the positivist assumptions of historical, sociological, and theological biblical scholarship contained within their scientific models of reconstruction.”

A Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for

Change

Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation, (CFBI) in using the methodology of the hermeneutical spiral dance, has, as its ultimate goal, social personal liberation and social structural transformation and action for change. Let us, at this point, recall the whole critical rhetorical process of interpretation. There are several pre-requisites in the dance towards this transformation. To begin with, the biblical interpreters must strive to be Subject selfs struggling for socio-personal liberation and socio-structural transformation. It is also a commitment to do justice in society and struggle, through a process of conscientization, with biblical studies as a site of social, political and religious transformation. The ekklesia of wo/men is a constant site of struggle and free open Wisdom space to continue this spiral dance and CFBI based on feminist visionary pragmatism\textsuperscript{48}. Describing this as Wisdom spirituality in her book, Schüssler Fiorenza opts for this as an alternative vision of the world for justice and well being in the praxis of \textit{ekklesia} and \textit{basileia}. This praxis is a process of imaginative pragmatism that places importance on one’s struggles on the road because the site of struggles is current, which is within the larger human struggle. Hence it is a visionary praxis, a pragmatic action that the subject interpreter must be alert and be responsive to the everyday life situations of injustices. With this feminist visionary pragmatism in mind, she

\textsuperscript{48} Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation}, p. 188.
makes a concise summary\textsuperscript{49} in working through this last hermeneutics suggesting the areas that are in need of liberation and transformation, which have been discussed in the previous steps. These areas are: kyriocentric language and text; kyriocentric symbol systems; kyriarchal structures; common-sense assumptions; languages of hate; biblical authority; biblical texts of terror; prejudices/kyriocentric frameworks/mindsets; ourselves; our society and our religious communities. In response to these areas, a hermeneutics of transformative action for change is committed to transforming biblical texts\textsuperscript{50} as Schüssler Fiorenza has listed in the following:

1. Identifying with historical wo/men rather than with kyriocentric biblical texts
2. Inclusive reading: inserting wo/man or female into androcentric texts
3. Reversal: reversing male and female, rich and poor, etc. characters
4. Placing multiply oppressed wo/men in the center – constructing an alternative perspective to that of kyriocentrism
5. Articulating the perspective of the most marginalized and dehumanized wo/men
6. Reading the wo/men passages as the tip of an iceberg – reconstructing the submerged part of the story
7. Reading kyriocentric text not as descriptive but as a prescriptive projection of male elites
8. Critically analyzing female characters as exchange objects which are the means by which readers are bonded to the elite male protagonist (Emily Cheney)
9. Reading against the grain: mapping kyriarchal relations inscribed in the text and constructing an alternative story-text-image
10. Hearing the silenced and forgotten into speech (Nelle Morton)

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 205.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 205.
To conclude, “A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” as expressed in the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation” is a thorough going Wisdom movement developed as a liberating and transformative methodology for biblical interpretation. It begins with the critical analysis of Self as a product of androcentric/kyriarchal socialisation, through the hermeneutics of experience, of domination and social location after which the conscientized self “becomes” a Self as “reclaimed” Subject able to and ever engaged and engaging in critical praxiological reflection exercising the critical ability to engage in the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of critical evaluation, the hermeneutics of imagination, of remembering and of reconstruction and finally the hermeneutics of transformative action for change. A critical rhetorical emancipatory paradigm for biblical interpretation is finding wisdom ways for a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation. The turns and moves and its repeats are wisdom ways that lead to changing or transforming situations of injustice, imaging a more just future that can transform situations, recognise injustice and name the situations of injustice. Wisdom ways enable us to recognise and trust we are not the first ones or alone in this struggle. We imagine people in the past who have struggled against situations of injustice like we have today. We recognise we are required to struggle continuously for justice and well being of everyone because the new heaven and new earth are yet to be realised.
CHAPTER FOUR

WISDOM WAYS

Practising the Dance and Interpreting Selected Biblical Texts using CFBI Methodology
The critical rhetorical emancipatory paradigm for biblical interpretation is a useful and necessary aid for wo/men seeking socio-personal liberation and wo/men committed to the struggle for social structural transformation towards life in all its fullness and abundance. Wisdom and wisdom ways for a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation can be reaped/experienced through such a method/process of engaging scriptural texts. I have come into contact with liberating wisdom through this “methodology” as a Subject Self and will attempt to work through the steps of the “spiral dance” on three selected texts. They are **Mark 5: 21-43** (two texts blended together for a purpose) and **1 Tim 2: 1-15**. In this chapter there are three aspects I would like to focus on, develop and process in the reading and critical re-reading of each text. Firstly I will go into a short description of how the texts were interpreted before either by myself or other women. Secondly, we will take a look at how these texts can be critically re-read using the CFBI paradigm through the hermeneutical dance steps. Lastly, we will show/highlight what could be the outcome on the social-personal and social-political levels through such a critical re-reading! This third aspect is in fact the last hermeneutical step on transformative action and change. Let us now take a look at these texts, and I will imagine reading them with a group of friends in the ekklesia of wo/men through the praxis process of conscientization. I will be attempting to interpret and engage the texts by going through the “steps of the dance of liberation and transformation”. It should be noted that due to the lively dynamics and vibrant interactions/dialogues between different characters and events, overlapping points that interpenetrate each other is bound to occur. This gives a multi-faceted diversity and richness to the interpretation of the texts.

**MARK 5: 21-43**
THE HAEMORRHAGING WOMAN AND THE DAUGHTER OF JAIRUS

In this pericope Mark narrates 2 stories as if they were one. Although two stories are told, they must be read and interpreted as a single text as they reflect the common experience of both “younger” and “older” women. In fact any critical feminist analytic would hold them together as one, as each story is a tale of the socially constructed oppression of women within the kyriarchal/patriarchal culture of living death. Thus by a feminist systemic analysis of the structures of kyriarchal/patriarchal domination, it will be seen/shown to be in fact, one single story. Thus I will attempt to engage in the text narrative as one by going through the full process and circle.

Reading the Text From Past Experience

Several groups of women have read and interpreted this ONE text in various ways at different occasions and places. Most groups took a more specific focus/emphasis on either one of the stories though touching both in the entire pericope. To name three here: 1) A Sri Lankan group gave more emphasis to the girl child though the bible study covers two stories.51 It has “the raising of Jairus’ daughter” as the title of it’s study. This reading places Jesus in the centre, performing healing to the two females. This is essentially a cultural interpretation in dialogue with the text and context. 2) A feminist hermeneutical study on Jairus’s daughter.52 As the third example 3) I have chosen one that was done at the World Student Christian Federation Women’s Pre-Assembly. It is my biblical-theological reflection of two stories and here too the specific focus was on the girl child.52 All three studies went beyond the


traditional interpretation that tended to reduce women to being helpless victims or perceived and regarded women through the patriarchal/male gaze. Quite often, even the gender and women’s perspective can ultimately be revisionist in their conclusion. The above three biblical studies did resort to the second and third paradigms mentioned in chapter one. They are also, as are many “feminist” “critical” studies, somewhat remedial and corrective as described in chapter two. Altogether, these can be commended as “good” “feminist” biblical studies and exegesis that applied certain hermeneutical steps, as for example the hermeneutics of experience as well as a reading that took into account context-text-context. These studies did to some extent focus on women in the text. Many times, such readings, however, unconsciously reinforced the victim position of women as it lacked what may be described as critical feminist social analysis and the hermeneutics of suspicion. It ultimately falls short of the full critical process or adoption of all the steps contained within the critical feminist biblical methodology. They are two stories read as one single text but usually give greater focuses on only one story. For my part, for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to interpret both the stories as one single text because in my mind, in the final analysis, it must be read as one narrative account. Here I would like to acknowledge the work of Lieve Troch,53 who was facilitator/resource person for AWRC feminist theology workshop in Malaysia, August 2004. During this workshop she led us in a critical feminist reading of this text by leading the workshop participants through the various dance steps. Based on this learnt experience I would now like to read the text by going through the complete process of the hermeneutical circle of critical feminist biblical interpretation.

Practising Interpretation with the Hermeneutical Dance

53 Lieve Troch is professor of Feminist Studies in Sciences of Religion at the Ecumenical Postgraduate Institute of the Methodist University in São Paulo Brazil and teaches systematic and intercultural theology at the Catholic Radboud University in Nijmegen the Netherlands.
Hermeneutics Of Experience and Social Location: Beginning with my own as well as women’s experiences of socially constructed oppression, this first step starts with a critique of our social location within our social context. Hence I approach and read the text as a Subject and as a process of critical consciousness-raising. The text will be read as if I am reading it for the first time but this time through critical feminist “eyes” in relation to my own experience of, but also focused on the socially constructed oppression of women, their liberation and the struggle for structural transformation. I begin by telling and reminding myself that there is no one single meaning and interpretation of the text. I am aware that no interpreter is neutral but that every interpretation is biased and serves an ideological political function within the social context of the reader as well as of the text itself. My own struggle to be free from socially constructed oppression and my own desire to be a full human person is a legitimate struggle in itself, a guiding principle in critiquing the text, and does not need the bible to justify it.

When I began to do feminist theology, I recalled how I was born a female and how I was socially constructed within a historical kyriarchal/patriarchal culture of living death. I grew up moulded, “disabled” and bound as a socially constructed female/girl, within the confines of historical colonialism and also Kyriarchal/patriarchal culture and religion. When I was a child until my teenage years, my grandmother repeated time and again her own story of how she was already engaged to my grandfather at the tender age of eight. Today child marriage is still a horrendous reality in many parts of Asia and Africa. Young women from the age of twelve face many physical, emotional and psychological health problems, apart from the stress and trauma of marrying a total stranger and coping with life as a subordinate to the men, with their extended families, of their lives. Many of us know too well that child marriages have existed for centuries. It has long been an issue of grave and great injustice to women. While many women living in this modern age of globalisation are getting married at
a later age, there are still more than 51 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 who are married or forced into marriages. The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) recently launched a photo essay giving attention to the stories and experiences of many young girls forced into girl child marriage.\textsuperscript{54} Some reasons have been offered for girls to be married early most of which arise from their unequal gender status; kyriarchal/patriarchal, dominating men control her sexuality; social, economic and political oppression and subsequent poverty drive them into early marriages. This often gives rise to tragic consequences and great risks for the vulnerable girl child. These are deprived of basic human rights to education, good healthcare, equal economic opportunities and ordinary life experiences of growing up as human beings with dignity.

Today, even women who marry “older” are often subjected to a culture of subordination and submission. While the experiences of women are varied and should not be too easily generalised, women as a whole are oppressed through what has been named as gender socialisation. Women are unduly weighted down and stressed by family and societal pressures. Male-female relationships are unequally weighted to the advantage of the men and women’s sexuality is severely limited to and defined by the dominant heterosexist paradigm. Many traditions and laws control women’s lives and their freedom and their right to be. Her sexuality is externally defined and controlled and she does not even own her own body. When she goes through menstruation she is considered as unclean. To date, many Christian women of Indian origin in Malaysia still keep away from the sanctuary or altar and abstain from partaking in the Eucharist when they are having their menstruation. In Bali, Indonesia, I visited an old Hindu temple marked as a tourist. Right in front of the entrance was written: “Menstruating women are forbidden to enter”. At the National Mosque located in Putrajaya,

\textsuperscript{54} International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Too Young to Wed: Child Marriage In Their Own Words, http://www.icrw.org/photoessay/html/shadows_subs/rakiya.htm
the administrative centre of the Malaysian Government, there is also a notice at the entrance: “Menstruating women are not allowed to enter”. Culture and religion have severe negative impact on the lives of women across race, class, ethnicity, nationality, heterosexuality and age, etc. Apart from such laws that restrict and control women’s lives, women face many varied and different socio-psycho-physical-emotional health problems in relation to their menstruation cycle from the start till menopause. There may be all sorts of disorder or complication in this life cycle.

Taking as our starting point, my experience and the experience of the women as subjects in the text, many new and different insights come alive. Both the stories interweave and interpenetrate into each other. The story of the daughter of Jairus begins in Mark 5 verse 21, but is interrupted almost immediately by another incident from verses 25 to 34: the woman with a haemorrhage for twelve years. Then it continues from verse 35 and finally ends only in verse 43. It is a scenario with 2 happenings, one placed within the other. For a start I ask myself at least two questions, which were provided for small groups discussion by Lieve Troch at the feminist theology workshop. Are there new insights and striking things that I never saw before? What are the differences and similarities between the two stories in this text? The answers and insights to these questions provide an amazing array of materials in the first two steps of a hermeneutics of experience and social location, which leads on to an analysis of the situation of domination, and subsequently to the rest of the dance steps within the full circle.

Hermeneutics of Social Location: It is very important to look at the various characters at play and their social locations in the context of the text as well. It gives the interpreter an idea why and what each character is all about from his/her socio-historical situation and the social political structures that shape and condition him/her. The story of the haemorrhaging woman who is socially, economically and politically lowly is interwoven with
the story of Jairus, a powerful religious elite of his time. A critical reflection will bring out differences and similarities as well as the interconnectedness of the two accounts:

- They are stories of healing and of being cured. One is cured the other “resurrected”.
- Both subjects are female: a woman and a young girl. Then the “mother”. But all three have no names or are nameless.
- The woman with a haemorrhage has been suffering for a significant twelve (12) years while the girl is dying at the tender age of twelve.
- Jesus called the woman “daughter” while the little girl is the “daughter” of Jairus.
- Jairus is a man of power who is forced by his own circumstance of his daughter’s “sickness unto death” to acknowledge/recognise the power of Jesus.
- Both Jairus and the woman fell at Jesus’ feet.
- Both the woman and Jairus have faith.
- The crowd is mentioned in both stories. The woman is healed in the crowd while Jesus sends the crowd out of Jairus’ house.
- Both of them are “afraid”.

While noting the “similarities” in these two stories, their “differences” or “contrasts” also stand out in the text:

- The woman touches Jesus while Jesus touches the little girl.
- Jesus is named. Though father and mother are mentioned, only the father Jairus, is named.
- The woman is cured on the spot in the crowd while the girl rose up in Jairus’ house.
- Both of them are differently cured, the girl with her father acting as the mediator.
- Jairus a high-ranking official of the Synagogue is named while the names of the women are not mentioned.
- The woman is an “unclean” person: impure and outcast. She sneaks behind Jesus for healing.
- Jairus has a high and better social position so Jesus goes to his house. But the woman struggles amidst the crowd in order to see and get the attention of Jesus.
- The death symbol rings strong: the outcaste woman is “the living dead” while the girl is physically “socially” dead.
- The girl’s mother is almost invisible; her emotions/feelings are not shown or described.
The social, cultural religious lines about what is “pure” and what constitutes “impurity” is clearly defined.

Only the woman touches Jesus while everybody touches everyone else in the crowd.

Jesus commends the woman for her faith whilst Jesus tells Jairus the religious official to have faith and to “believe”. Jairus needs assurance and encouragement to have faith.

On reflecting based on my experience and the plausible experience of the woman and Jairus, the above are some insights especially the significance of certain key words and actions described in the text: “twelve”, “touch”, “daughter”, “crowd”, “fell”, “faith”, “belief” and “afraid”.

These key words and actions are important indicators of the context. Twelve is significant number of fullness as in twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples. For twelve years the little girl lives but she is now dying. For twelve years, which amounts to the lifetime of Jairus’ daughter, the woman suffered and sought for a cure but it was all for nothing. For twelve years, the woman with a haemorrhage has been socially, religiously and economically excluded from the community because she is considered “unclean” by the socially constructed system of what constitutes “purity” and “impurity”.

Everybody touches each other given the scenario of a crowd rubbing each other or being squeezed amidst crowdedness so it is accidental touching. But there are different ways of touching. The woman touched Jesus through an act of conscious intention. Jesus holds the hand of the little girl, who is pronounced dead. The haemorrhaging woman could only touch Jesus by his garment. The crowd condemns her presence due to her impurity. “Culturally”, she pollutes the crowd and environment due to her ailment. She is an outcaste! Without permission as an “unclean” person she reached out to “touch” Jesus as if her belief was that coming into contact with the man and the kind of community the man represented would be healing and bring about healing in her life and condition.

The writer seems to have an important message to convey to the readers by linking and giving significance to the two “daughters”. What did Jesus say to the woman? Jesus affirmed her and called her “daughter”, as in daughter of Abraham.

**Hermeneutics of Domination:** In this section we will do an analysis of the structure of domination by looking at the socio economic, political system, the laws, traditions, culture and societal prescriptions imposed on the woman and the little girl. According to the socially constructed cultural values reinforced by religious teachings and practice, the social cultural code is a living death sentence for the “impure”. Jesus proclaimed his gospel and taught counter cultural community values within the context of Roman domination and oppression over the people in Palestine. The Jewish elite themselves collaborated with the foreign rulers of the system and of that society. Jesus also rejected the system of religion built on the distinction between the “pure” and “impure” (Mk 7:
He broke this barrier by coming into close contact with the “polluted” dead girl’s corpse. The social and religious structures imposed their power and domination on men but especially upon woman. The laws and system confined and imprisoned her, drawing severely limiting boundaries in her life and determining how she should live and conduct herself. Her mobility and freedom to be were denied her. Who created these social religious structures? Who is responsible for their implementation and enforcement? What are the responsibilities of the community and society? What symbols and ideology rationalise and nurture such domination and power over people with the potential of reducing them into weak, needy and marginalized objects in that situation in Palestine at the time of Jesus?

Unlike the nameless woman with a flow of blood who was on her own, Jairus was a man of economic, social and religious standing. He was a “beneficiary” of that socially constructed system of power and authority; he commanded honour and respect as a religious leader. He spoke for his daughter as head of his family. By virtue of his status and privileged position he presents and represents the religious order, which are in conflict with Jesus’ and the “Jesus movement’s” proclamation, teachings, words and actions. But he is now desperate and seeks out Jesus to heal his daughter as a last resort. What are the power relations between the woman and Jairus, the woman and Jesus as well as Jairus and Jesus? How are they manifested? Jairus is a respected member, an authority of that social order that is responsible for marginalising and condemning the woman as an outcaste in religion, community and society. He is the one upholding and maintaining the rules and laws of religion that oppressed the haemorrhaging woman. He reinforces and perpetuates the suffering and oppression of the woman. Jairus is the symbol of the woman’s marginalization because he represents the group of power elites who instituted the system of religion and maintained the law and order in and outside of the temple benefiting in one way or another from such.

The socio-religious power structures exclude, control and shut out her entire life. She is now caught under the full weight of the laws of social purity. Worse still she is standing in the centre and right under the scrutiny of the very public, a large hostile crowd that considers her as a condemned person. It is an unspoken yet vivid sentence of weighty guilt passed on her who is now exposed, “came in fear and trembling and fell down” (verse 33). Earlier she did not have to fall before Jesus unlike Jairus. But now why does she tremble and fall to Jesus’ feet? The law finds her guilty for daring to be in the presence of the whole big crowd whom she pollutes by her presence. Now the whole crowd is polluted. Now she has to declare that she is unclean and explain herself. These emotive experiences of “fear”, “trembling” and “fell” describe well her state as she steps forward to tell the “whole truth” to Jesus when Jesus identifies her for touching his garment. She tells the “whole truth” (verse 33) about her twelve years of suffering. Amazingly Jesus responds to her “go in peace” and “be healed” of her “disease” (verse 34)! What “disease”? Is it her illness or biological problem a “disease” that ostracises her? Or is it the disease of the system that is the cause of her problem for twelve full years, one full cycle of life! She rejects and disobeys that system and presses herself into the crowd. Shockingly Jesus affirms and confirms her act of faith in rejecting the socially constructed system that rejects and condemns her, “your faith has made you well” (verse 34)!

**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** Questions and points are raised here to show how this text is normally interpreted within a traditional interpretation. Usually Jairus is highlighted due to his position of power. Jesus is identified with Jairus and focused on the journey to his house. Jesus is the central focus who performed miracles and healed the woman even as he was on his way to heal the little girl. Both the females are portrayed as passive though they are given due attention because of the focus of the narrative. Traditional reading has it that Jesus healed the woman because of her faith in him. The text absorbs and submerges the reader into its world and sees the women as sick objects in need of healing through Jesus. It is read in favour of Jairus and it is Christ-centred and focussed.

Through this critical exercise in the hermeneutics of suspicion, more questions come into play. The text has an ironical situation. The woman is pro-active. She interrupts the healing of Jairus’ daughter and delays not only Jesus on his way to “heal” the dying girl but also by telling Jesus the whole truth causes Jairus deep anxiety. In the midst of the urgent plea by Jairus to heal his dying daughter, how can Jesus be taking his time talking to the woman and even recognising the woman’s faith by calling her “daughter”? Jairus’ daughter’s healing has to be delayed so that Jesus can address the matter arising before him and Jairus. And it was such that the problem this woman faced had a direct bearing on the religion that Jairus was the president of. When the whole truth was told it must have seemed apparent to Jairus what was the main cause of the woman’s sickness as well as his daughter’s “sickness unto death” (verse 23). It is not a coincidence that the healing of the woman occurred at the same time that his daughter’s death was announced. Jairus found himself, as it were, at the crossroads of his life. What hope was there anymore? What belief to hold on to anymore? For Jairus, it was a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation. To believe would mean going against all that he upheld as president of the synagogue but not to believe would leave him without hope for his daughter’s recovery! Although it is not explicitly expressed, it was surely to Jairus’s credit that he believed! Just when the woman became well through the telling of the whole truth, it was reported that the little girl had died and there was no need to trouble Jesus anymore. The different power and quality that Jesus/the Jesus movement stood for is borne witness to as Jesus tells him to keep faith and continues the journey towards his house. Although Jairus felt that all was lost, Jesus tells him to keep faith and to believe anyway. What an ironic moment! Jairus, the religious leader, is fearful and doubtful so that Jesus had to say “do not fear, only believe” (verse 36). Why is Jairus disbeliefing? Why is he afraid? Earlier, Jairus had not seemed to be afraid regarding his daughter’s healing. He seemed now to be afraid after the woman told Jesus her whole truth and became healed.

Jesus is portrayed by Mark to be amazingly “gracious” towards Jairus and his religiosity that rationalises the system of domination of which he is a high official and beneficiary. The question and suspicion must be raised and taken up later whether Mark has inadvertently if not intentionally submitted the Jesus movement and its counter cultural values relative to Roman domination and Jewish elitist collaboration. Jairus has a religion that oppresses women including his own daughter. He represents and is a custodian of that religion, the same religion that operated in collaboration with the Roman kyriarchal domination of Palestine, that is the cause of his daughters impending death, the same religion that discriminated the haemorrhaging woman, condemned her and could not heal her. Jairus is desperate and needs Jesus to perform a miracle but at the healing of the woman, which was accompanied by a thorough and trenchant critique of all that he believed and stood for, Jesus tells him not to be afraid but believe yet. In such a situation for Jairus, to believe would be the cause of his own undoing! Yet to
disbelieve would be disastrous for his daughter. Jairus’ belief has to come at the end of the story, a real challenge and testing of faith where Jairus is allowed to do privately as he was a public figure and one in a position of authority but of a system of beliefs that spelt “death” for his daughter. While the woman in isolation and is hidden seems to appear hastily from nowhere, she is now allowed in the open public crowd. She is revolting against the religion of Jairus that oppresses her. In front of the crowd and Jairus she challenges the laws and the religion by telling Jesus the whole truth. Jairus becomes afraid, shocked by such a revelation! The woman sees Jesus moving away with Jairus a high-ranking ruler of the Synagogue, the one presiding the institution that determined her fate! Jairus is a symbol of domination and power in Jesus’ time in Palestine. She made a choice for liberation and for life. She believed in another “power” that liberated and was liberating than that of Jairus, a power that dominated and held people captive and caused “sickness unto death”. Even the medical/healthcare system discriminated against her as it caused her much suffering “under many physicians” (verse 26) costing her all her life saving till she had nothing left but only her self-determination to live against all odds! That is one crucial part of the “whole truth”!

**Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation/Proclamation:** This step is especially critically alert to kyriarchal/androcentric elements and attempts on the part of the gospel writers, in this case specifically of Mark, to rationalise, mystify and/or justify Roman kyriarchal power to dominate and Jewish elitist collaboration with it.

Whereas the older traditional ways of interpretation began with the text as the word of G*d to be accepted and received without question and critical response, the hermeneutics of critical evaluation and proclamation seeks to expose any explicit as well as implicit attempts to rationalise and justify the use of power as the power to dominate, to enslave and to contain. Traditional methods of interpretation takes as its starting point Scripture as the word of G*d demanding reverence, respect, consent and obedient submission. Traditional paradigms of interpretation imposed itself upon readers directing the reader as an object as well making the women objects in the text. The reader submits and waits for the text to speak to him/her. It alienates the reader from his/her social context and location without taking seriously a hermeneutics of experience and his/her own domination and social location into account. Hence it is void of or lacking in critical social analysis for liberation and justice.

In the “old” method of scripture reading and interpretation, to suspect or question the text shows a lack of faith. Hence suspicion is forbidden and absent in the traditional reading. It prevents the reader from knowing or suspecting if the text is androcentric. It uncritically re-inscribes its kyriarchal character and the politics of domination by reducing the woman and girl to mere victims and objects, waiting for Jesus to perform miracles of healing upon them. It also portrays Jesus wrongly as super hero and miracle man in the story.

The androcentric text does not allow the mother to speak. Though the text is totally silent about the girl’s mother, we can imagine that she must have been heartbroken and feeling helpless as she watched her child in a state of “sickness unto death”. Perhaps she played a crucial role in pressuring Jairus to seek out Jesus for their daughter’s healing! Under those restrictive social, cultural and religious norms, she must, herself have experienced that system of domination in her own life and felt the full weight of reaching “womanhood” with all its socially constructed restrictions, responsibilities and expectations, at the tender age of twelve. And now that same religion and society must
be reminding her as a mother what her own child might be going through and having to put up with!!

The writer of the gospel of Mark is not only covering/hiding the mother’s feelings through socially choreographed selective inattention but also perceived as saving face for Jairus by showing Jesus going with Jairus and doing the healing privately. Mark subscribes to, reinforces and maintains kyriarchy by identifying Jesus with Jairus even though Jesus challenges Jairus and the system of domination. But Mark still narrates Jesus as going with Jairus and holding the hand of a corpse, which is against the law of purity and pollution. Perhaps that may have been the reason it had to be done privately and away from the crowd! Is Jairus the symbol and controller of the purity and pollution system not afraid because Jesus will have to face a dead corpse that pollutes? And this dead corpse is his beloved daughter. How is he going to justify himself or answer in allegiance to his lawful religion? He is certainly afraid on a second count apart from showing his fear upon the woman’s healing. But still he has to believe as Jesus tells him. The question that begs to be raised is whether it is Mark’s creative genius in telling the story as it is told or it is merely a reflection of the re-inscription of kyriarchy/patriarchy resulting from early Christian collaboration with the powers that be.

Today the “getting up and walking about” (verse 42) symbolises for the girl child her right to be fully human, to be independent, to be safe. Jesus and the movement or social order he represented with its grand vision of liberation and promise of life in all its abundance and fullness provided for her the space to be and “empowered” her to rise up, stand tall and walk about freely. Today, a girl child waking up to her right to be and to be herself in community with the promise of life in it abundance is a milestone that has been reached for some but remains a vision for many.

Jesus as he is portrayed and his proclamation that the kin-dom of G*d/kin-dom of humanity has arrived, and the movement of people who gathered around such a vision reconstructing a social order with its potential for liberation and structural transformation, where power is used for the well being of wo/men rather than for their domination is a vision around which the ekklesia of wo/men can be gathered.

**Hermeneutics of Imagination:** For this next step of the hermeneutics of creative imagination, we will engage in attempts to rewrite the text and make it liberating and transforming. Imagination can recapitulate what happened but transform the situation of domination and oppression into one of liberation. In the group work during our workshop some guide questions were given and participants were encouraged to creatively imagine a future transformed scenario: When the woman and Jairus meet later what might they say to each other? And imagine the daughter of Jairus when she is 25 years old and is fully aware of what happened to her, she writes to her father. What might she say to her father when she talks about her story? How might she share her story with other Jewish girls and friends around her? Imagine if she got married ten years later and met the haemorrhaging woman, what might be the conversation between them? It must have been deeply embedded into the lives of both the women. As an example, I will do only one exercise: Imagining Jairus writing a letter to the woman ten years later.

**A Letter to the Woman: Subject of her own Self-Validation, Self-Esteem and Self-Determination**

Dear Miriam,
Today my family and I celebrate the tenth anniversary of my daughter’s healing by the Prophet Jesus of the Jesus movement/community committed to the liberation of persons and transformation of society. I remember vividly what happened ten years ago especially your determined action and the cutting words of truth you told Jesus. I am putting on record my confession to you on this tenth anniversary of the event. I wish as well to celebrate with you the freedom to be that you have struggled for and obtained for yourself through your act of faith. I was totally astounded by what you said and made to realise how our system of religion imprisoned the lives of women and caused them to experience a life of living death. Our system is a terrible social disease and our power structures that discriminated and made you an outcaste of the society are evil and sinful. I am ashamed to acknowledge that I am product of this system and religion and was for a time its custodian too. Since that encounter I have been constantly burdened by the thought of how I have used my power and authority to marginalize so many people around me. I have sinned against you and G*d. I appeal to G*d to continue to use me as an agent to change such structures of power, to be an agent for the liberation of many who have been held captive and in bondage because of our religious system of domination. This includes my daughter and my wife, who have been subjected to its many laws and rules. Today, my daughter has become a freeborn person who has reclaimed herself as a subject and no longer allows the system to control her sexuality and life.

May you continue to enjoy the fullness of life and continue to be a gift of G*d to every human person as you have been to me.

May Sophia our G*d of wisdom be with us all. Warmest greetings from Jairus.

Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction: To remember is to recover what was lost: the historical involvement, participation and contribution of the marginalized in general and of women in particular. It is an attempt to reconstruct such a history by bringing back into it the active agency of women. Applying this to the text: The woman finally spoke as a subject, named her experience of oppression, critiqued, analysed and came to the conclusion that the socially constructed kyriarchal/patriarchal order was the root cause of her ailment and that which ostracised her so that she could not be healed! She tells Jesus the “whole truth” (verse 33). The Markan writer sounds vague and ambiguous about the “whole truth”. It is important to activate and give voice to the woman her precise story of truth revealed to Jesus in the presence of Jairus and the crowd. I think this “whole truth” goes way back to the point of her birth where her problems as a woman in a socially constructed order that oppressed her was experientially rooted. Her conditioned worsened until her own body bore the marks of the years of suffering under the yoke of that system. After seeking for a cure for twelve years (the figure which symbolises a complete cycle) which ended in vain within that socio-political set up, she decided to go for broke and make a clean break from the kyriarchal master/slave social system that kept her in bondage and could not provide her any healing! Her decision/option for liberation is a decision to become a self-conscious intentional subject who takes control of her own destiny and her life into her own hands. She has nothing more to lose having spent all her life savings for treatment. By her faith and action to move out of the confines and boundary she is no longer bound by those laws oppressing her. She has broken the rules that marginalize her. When is she healed? She is healed the moment she left her house and braved the crowd to seek for Jesus. She took a stance, albeit in fear and trembling, breaks out of the system of kyriarchy, the power and domination that prevents her even from thinking that she is capable of doing such a thing. Jesus, the agent and agency of the counter cultural order perceived rightly
that her faith had made her well. Therefore Jairus was afraid. By a leap of faith she goes forth to look for Jesus and his new community whom she believes will give her the space and lend her the solidarity she was in need of affirming her wholeness. She overcame living death and landed on the threshold of life the community whose vision was one of life in its fullness and abundance!!

Meanwhile the little girl had died. According to the account Jesus says in a voice borne of deep belief and conviction: “Talitha, koumi, Little girl! Get up!” (Verse 41) The girl awakes, stands up and begins to walk about. But what is going to happen to the girl? Will her life be normal again, like before as though nothing had happened? Will the parents who have a foretaste of Jesus’ new order of life follow the Jewish tradition of marrying her off as a girl child or in a few years later? Except for her action of walking about, the text is silent about what will happen to her thereafter.

Why is a twelve-year-old girl pronounced dead in this story? We know that within the Jewish culture and social customs, a girl of her age attains puberty and is immediately ready for marriage. But strangely she is on the verge of losing her life. She is facing two things: a socially constructed transition towards womanhood; and “she is likely to pass from the authority of her father to that of her husband”. Living under a kyriarchal/patriarchal culture, she is subjected to the religious law of purity and impurity when she goes through the menstrual cycle. She is “vulnerable to subjugation, abuse and violence because she is woman. Reaching womanhood is perhaps even considered death.” We do not know exactly how the young woman’s life will turn out to be. Perhaps she was dying due to the fact that there was already marriage arrangement being made for her, a contract to marry her off to a Jewish man once she attains puberty. So while the girl is ready to be a mature female, the woman suffers from her femaleness. Jesus and what the Jesus movement offered was the possibility of greater wholeness of being – wholeness (shalom) in which they would experience social, religious, and spiritual well-being. Jesus and the proclamation of the Jesus movement, their social teachings, values and social practice offered the possibilities of life in its fullness and abundance. The text is somehow silent and the story ends rather abruptly.

I will now move on to the last spiral step on transformative action for change, the third and final aspect.

**Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change**

The dance of transformative action for change aims at changing or transforming situations of injustice towards liberation, justice and the praxis of radical democracy for the well being of all but especially for those wo/men who struggle at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of discrimination and domination! In the case of the text at hand, what action for change is necessary? How can one change the text or use the text for change? What are the areas that need liberation and transformation?

---


It may well be a case of divine wisdom’s providence that at this very point of time of my writing, the group of wo/men with whom I belong and have been actively engaged with in the past few years over issues of the oppression of women in the world and in society at large but also closer to home at the very centres of our faith and religion, specifically within our very own church institutions were recently faced with a living/life issue of kyriarchal/patriarchal domination. Every year for the past few years we had taken the opportunity to make use of the worship mass closest to the commemoration of International Woman’s Day to promote awareness about the domination and subsequent oppression of women in society, church and at home and the need for communities of faith to bear positive witness to the cause of women’s struggle for liberation, justice and the transformation of society. This year our group was given notice that the Archbishop seemed somewhat reluctant to grant us this avenue and opportunity for witness and celebration. Our annual masses (services) had been met with varying degrees of positive enthusiasm to downright reaction from many quarters. A priest was heard to have mislabelled our contribution as International Male bashing day. With reference to our text about the haemorrhaging woman who came before Jesus and Jairus with much fear and trembling, in the face of the dominating religious male power in our own day and age, transformative action for change takes on a very concrete confrontation with the powers that be. Unlike Jairus whose “weakness” was his own daughter experiencing a “sickness unto death” (verses 23 and 35) because of his belief/religious conviction, our celibate priests are not as vulnerable! The difference with the text at hand is that our women will not be approaching the Archbishop with fear and trembling. Rather the powers that be will be taken to task for their misogynist stance. Although Mark’s account was written well over a thousand years and more and Jairus a president had seen the light of day our twentieth century Archbishop has taken a stance that is pre-Jairus!! A meeting has been planned to address this matter arising and positive transformative action for change is expected to result from it.

1 TIMOTHY 2: 1-15

Reading the Text from Past Experience

I have neither come across any women’s bible study nor heard any sermon based on the text of I Tim 2: 1-15. There were two occasions when the second part of this text was used by a pastor and a priest to justify the case against the ordination of women. For most women and women’s groups, this and many other texts of such vein have, by and large, either been left unaddressed or have been insufficiently dealt with. Yet in their silence, in their state of apparent neglect, these unspoken cultural “common sense” injunctions, now raised to the level of religious moral household codes and the faith community’s sanctioned modes of
behaviour during worship, given the authoritative stamp and approval of the Divine, having found a place in Holy Scriptures, have wreaked untold havoc in the lives of women.

Both the pastor and the priest were clearly using the Doctrinal-Revelatory Paradigm to interpret the text in a manner that served their own authoritarian interests. Over the last two to three decades, much of the biblical scholarship done on such texts, have been rather apologetic. Biblical scholars, including women and feminist theologians, have made commendable attempts to correct or remedy and redeem the text to save Paul or rationalise that it is time-bound and culture-conditioned.

Practising the Hermeneutics of Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation through the Dance of Liberation and Transformation

_Hermeneutics Of Experience:_ Beginning from my own and other women’s experience/s, this first step also touches on our social location within our social context. Such an approach involves my reading the text as a Subject through the process of critical consciousness-raising. On two different occasions in two different Church denominations, separated by a long lapse of twenty-six (26) years, this text was quoted as the official, traditional, Word of God based reason against the ordination of women, both done during a church debate. The first encounter and experience shook me to the core of my being when I had just begun church work one year after my theological training. This occurred in November 1979 in my mother church, the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia, during the Bi-Annual Church Synod. An item on the Agenda was a debate regarding the ordination of women as a vote was to be taken in this Synod. During the debate, the pastor who was assigned to present his findings from his research paper on the matter at hand, stated that there were no theological or cultural grounds that barred women from being ordained. In the ensuing hour, the debate was opened for discussion and debate. The most senior pastor spoke up. I had noticed earlier, that he was jotting down some notes. He stood up and held a piece
of paper in his hand with several texts written from which he quoted and “preached” against women’s ordination. I was then more shocked and displaced than feeling angry or offended. This senior pastor quoted a few texts, among which I remember vividly at least three – he started with Genesis 2 on how Eve was created from Adam’s rib; then ran to Pauline theology using 1 Cor. 12: 33b – 35 that women should keep silent and not be permitted to speak; finally, he used 1 Tim 2: 11–15 as reason from G*d’s Word that women were not permitted to teach or have authority over men.

The second occasion happened recently in early September 2005 in the Anglican Church, Diocese of West Malaysia. To date, this Church has been most resistant to the ordination of women in the whole of Malaysia. A deaconess and a priest at the Cathedral were elected to speak “for and against” the idea. It was shocking and stunning for me to hear that the same text from 1Tim 2 was again used as the biblical reason, since this was the Word of G*d, to bar women from ordination! 26 years ago and 26 years later, but in fact for more than a thousand years already, the text has been resorted to justify, manipulate, limit and control women’s participation and leadership in the church. The priest relied heavily on Paul’s writings and quoted many of the household code texts, among them 1 Tim 2: 11-14. His interpretation was typically male biased, misogynist and androcentric, resorting to the Doctrinal-Revelatory Paradigm with an expanded pseudo intellectual exegetical exposition of the text.

When I heard the reading of the text at the forum, it triggered a whole range of mixed feelings - anger, anguish, offence, insult and injustice, etc. The priest was nothing more than a divinely sanctioned agent of violence against women and had been battering her psyche for centuries with such interpretations of the texts. Women were being reduced to subservient objects and beaten into a state of obedient submission by a man of the cloth!!! On the other
hand men were held up and glorified as divinely sanctioned subjects, bestowed power and authority from above. 1 Tim 2: 9 – 15 is a household code text prescribed for women.

**Hermeneutics of Social Location and Domination:** For this next step, we will be engaged with the hermeneutics of social location and domination of the author as well as the community involved and addressed. This will help us to locate the author and the community within their socio historical context and also their location within the social political set up which can either limit or enhance the space for the exercise of their freedom. In doing the hermeneutics of domination, we look at the system, its laws and traditions, its culture and prescriptions imposed upon the women and men. An analysis of the structures of domination will be done here.

1 Tim 2 is a text that reflects as much as it “defines” the order regarding church worship, its procedures, petitions and prayers; how men and women should conduct themselves, and what women can/should do to increase/effect their chances for salvation. The text seems to have a clear order and prescription of conduct for different groups of people based on gender in these verses:

1 - 4: Supplications, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for all men, for kings and all in high positions. God our Saviour desires all men to be saved and have knowledge of the truth.

5 - 6: Relationship between God and men; Jesus Christ is the mediator between them, a ransom for all, the testimony.

7: Paul is an appointed preacher, apostle and teacher of Gentiles. That’s the truth, not lie.

8: Men should pray in every place and lift up holy hands with no anger or quarrel.

9 - 10: Women should adorn modestly, sensibly in seemly apparel, no braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, fitting as they profess religion.

11-12: Woman learns in silence with all submission; no woman permitted to teach or have authority over men; keep silent.

13-14: Adam first, then Eve. Adam not deceived. Woman deceived and transgressor.

15: Woman will be saved through childbearing, if she continues in faith, love, holiness and modesty.

The order of worship and the manner in which men and women are to conduct themselves are both hierarchical and kyriarchal in character. The instructions for prayer
intercession are also reflective of kyriarchal/patriarchal patterns of power relations and androcentric/kyriocentric bias in their character, procedure, form and language. It is clearly a pyramidal kyriarchal order drawn by the author of Timothy. Prayers are made for all “men” with specific mention first for the king and high officials. This reflects an implicit acceptance of the kyriarchal hierarchical order as something sanctioned by G*d. These are then followed by instructions and commands to men and women, each group with different “privileges” and responsibilities. It stands out like a sore thumb that more specific prescriptive instructions are issued to the women, it seems with the sole intention to nurture, reinforce and ensure a spirit of submission and obedience.

Who is the author, what is he/she saying/trying to say and what could be the purpose and effect of all that is being said? Why? To whom is he/she giving these prescriptions? What is the social context and political social location of the author? What is the socio-religious and political context of the early Christian community or church? Joanna Dewey reveals many important insights from her research on the socio-historical situation and context of the author and the community that the “Epistle” was addressed to. She informs us that I Timothy is one of the three Pastorals written probably in 125 C.E. already a few decades after Paul’s death. Yet the author has used Paul’s name and authority to write his Pastoral Epistles to Timothy with the political intention as if it was Paul addressing the second-century churches. Not only were they not real letters written, the form and style of that script was not even that of an “epistle”. It appeared instead to be a kind of handbook or manual for church worship. The author was more likely a man as he took a very androcentric view about women and set out to order women’s conduct in a most crudely dominating manner. By so doing the dye was cast for the creation and development of a hierarchical structure within the


60 Ibid., p. 353
household of faith. Dewey thus concludes “since a major concern of the writings was to limit the role of women in the church, the author was probably a man,” a dominating one at that! The author thus turned the church into a power over “hierarchical household” set up by imposing such ideals and commands to be observed and practised. Such prescriptions however may be reflective of something else happening on the ground! J. Dewey asserts that such “prescriptive material is often historical evidence that the opposite is happening”, meaning it was likely that the various groups of Christians did not hold the same beliefs or act in ways recommended by the author. Thus he seemed very determined to impose these rules and laws for those men and women. To ensure and to lend weight to his intention, Paul’s name and authority as preacher, apostle and teacher was resorted to. If these rules were passed they would become permanent orders for men but especially for the women as well. They would be written into the power structures of the day and set the pattern for the future. This was thus one definite effort at creating, nurturing and maintaining a system of kyriarchal domination in the life of the community of faith. The household church thus took on the form of a kyriarchally-based order in the pattern of the kyriarchal Roman imperial order. His writings show that he was bent on separating “the congregation into groups according to age, gender, and free or slave status, prescribing different behaviors for each: The leaders (older freemen) should be upstanding citizens and heads of households; the members should be obedient, submissive and silent.”

The culture of kyriarchal power over politics and the use of power for domination as acceptable social practice was created, nurtured and maintained in the community of faith

---

61 Ibid., p. 353.


63 Ibid., p. 354.

64 Ibid., p. 353.
through a process of conscious intentional political manipulation of religious meaning, creating an ideology that rationalised and justified the system of control and using a theology of obedience and submission in the name of G*d. The author began with a generally acceptable gesture of goodwill and a statement of the obvious that it was important and necessary to give thanks and make prayer intercessions for all “men”, for the royalty and high officials in order to maintain peace and order in life. Various types of prayers in worship for different people in hierarchy were emphasized to ensure peace and order.

He then resorted to the ideology of gender inequality to separate the congregation into different categories based on the socially constructed top down power over hierarchical positioning of men and women. It was also the dominant ideas/values and culture of the Greco-Roman world. All men must pray lifting up holy hands. All men should do so without getting angry or quarrelsome (effectively doing away with the responsibility and power to object and resist). While one verse out of the eight verses in the text was prescribed for men, the rest were injunctions for women. All women should not be improperly dressed with frills and fashions but they must be modest (a reflection of men’s insecurity that they would lose their possession to some other men). All women must not teach and have authority over men and they must all keep silent and be submissive. Therefore it was of utmost importance that all women regardless of age, status and social standing behaved submissively and in a subservient manner in relation to men. They have all been classified as women who adorn themselves and misbehave; women who could not keep silent or refrain from teaching. The author imposed this patriarchal thinking onto the church where all men have power over all women. In fact he desired to establish a kyriarchal order in the church using the existing model of kyriarchy in the Roman Empire. Schüssler Fiorenza says that the “Ideology of kyriocentrism is inscribed in Christian Scriptures in and through the so-called (household)
codes of submission.” 65 She said these so-called household codes in the New Testament “admonish wives to be subordinate, slaves to be submissive, and children to be obedient - texts are found in the post-Pauline literature such as Colossians, Ephesians, I Timothy and I Peter.” 66

In this ideology the politics of kyriarchal submission is linked to the teaching of wo/men’s wickedness and hence their need for salvation through “good deeds” (verse 10) and “childbearing” (verse 15). To institute and reinforce his politics of religious meaning, ideology of gender inequality and kyriocentrism, the author consciously and intentionally peddled a theology of submission and obedience for wo/men. Not only did he impose upon women’s bodies and the manner of their looks, he went further into their sexuality by linking any sexual expression and activity to reproduction and motherhood and subsequently to family and home management as if these were G*d’s will for all women! This would effectively shut them up from any life of responsibility in the larger society. The injunction to obedience and submission prescribed on women to keep them quiet would discourage dissent and forbidding them to teach and participate in church life would in the long run stunt any possibilities for meaningful participation and leadership in the church institution! Women were to learn in silence and submission in order to regain their salvation as they had brought sin into the world through Eve who was deceived. More than this, salvation could only be attained and guaranteed if women were willing to perform their role of childbearing and motherhood. In her systemic analysis, Schüssler Fiorenza exposed the politics of the pseudo-Pauline Pastoral Epistles asserting that they “explicitly link the kyriarchal theology of submission with the teaching on wo/man’s sinfulness. They prescribe the silence of wo/men


and prohibit wo/men’s authority over men by claiming that not Adam but ‘the woman’ was deceived and became a transgressor (I Tim 2: 11-15).”

**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** Under this section we will make a critical assessment of the manner this text has been traditionally interpreted. We will read the text again to look at the language and what might have been hidden and unspoken behind the text. As pointed out, in the two debates on the question of women’s ordination, the pastor and the priest made use of these texts as the authoritative and unquestionable “Word of God” revealed for all time to justify their position that women should not and could not be ordained! They also quoted and relied heavily on “Paul” as their authority. This raises many questions and doubts regarding what might have been the true situation behind the text or the “pre-text” and social context of the time in early second century. What could have been the reason for the need to command people over how they should pray, what to pray about and who should be in the priority list of those prayers? Why were there religious rules for men to improve themselves, to pray everywhere, if they were already praying and why had they to be told not to show anger or to quarrel unless they were doing exactly that? Were the men in fact angry and quarrelsome? And what might they have been angry about and quarrelsome over? As for the women: why was there a need for a set of moral and religious prescriptions for women if they were already following the author’s ideals? Were there women who were improperly dressed as implied by the author and did all women talk and teach? If women were not already actively speaking and teaching why did the author have to order them to keep quiet and forbid them to teach?

In the eyes of the author there was disorder and misbehaviour. Women were blamed for this disorder. The author’s prescriptions may well have been a reflection of his own hang-ups as a person who had a need to be in control. He was probably unable and unwilling to cope with a community practicing radical democracy in the spirit of liberating wisdom. Thus

---

he himself might well have been the problem to the community rather than as the epistle
implies. He did not like what he saw but it was not for him to set himself up as the standard!
He wanted to structure everything according to his personal preferences and thus imposed a
set of moral standards for people within the community of faith as if they were unable to
think and decide for themselves. Thus he asserts, “I desire” (verse 8) men and women should
do according to what they were told, particularly women. He specifically instructed women
to be subservient to the men and not to teach and assume authority over men, as this would
offend the men in power. Why was there a need to prove that “Paul” was a preacher, apostle
and teacher; and that he was speaking the truth (not lying) if there was no dispute or distrust
about the author’s credentials? Perhaps he had many opponents and was in competition with
other apostles or Christian groups during his time. He resorted to the misogynist political use
of the culture of gender inequality to counter and silence the voices of women leaders and as
a consequence set the trend for the future subjugation of women in the community of faith.

J. Dewey is convinced that “the author’s injunction is evidence that women were
publicly praying and teaching.”\(^68\) It was also quite likely that there was a group of elitist
educated men who with the author desired to latch on to the political culture of the Greco-
Roman world and expected women to be submissive to them (were they in cahoots with the
Roman rulers who needed to quell the rising tide and popularity of the Jesus movement and
their practice of radical democracy?). Dewey\(^69\) also suggests that the fact that these
prescriptions were being “imposed” upon the church worship suggests that they must in fact
not have been the order and pattern of worship currently practised by those groups. It reflects
that there must have been a very varied and different form and style of worship that the early
Christian groups were comfortable with. This must have been different from the author’s


\(^{69}\) Ibid., pp. 353 - 358.
personal agenda to have a uniform and set order for all those communities. Thus the need for
his impositions that led to and resulted in quite dire consequences for the community of faith
in general and for women in particular!!!

Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation/Proclamation: “While a hermeneutics of trust
and consent, which is advocated by the doctrinal paradigm of interpretation, reads the bible
for guidance and edification and obediently accepts its teachings on submission, a critical
hermeneutics of evaluation seeks both to make conscious the cultural-religious
internalizations and legitimizations of kyriarchy and to explore the values and visions that are
inscribed as counter-cultural alternatives in biblical texts.”70

In the light of the aforementioned 1 Tim 2:1-15 can at best, only be accepted as one
among many other “time-conditioned ethical injunctions.”71  The reason for this is obvious. 1
Tim 2:1-15 is a clear example of the re-inscription of and legitimization of kyriarchal values
of submission and the politics of domination by reducing wo/men to mere subservient victims
and objects. In assessing the text critically we need to ask again these questions: Whose
interest would ultimately be enhanced through the imposition of such “laws” and modes of
behaviour? Why did the author insist on imposing such injunctions and what political
function would it serve in the larger society and to whose interest? What consequences would
follow if the community of faith did submit to it? What about the language of the text? What
is the function of language in the text? In what ways does it function to maintain and
reproduce reality under kyriarchal Roman domination and that status quo? The language is
plainly and clearly kyriarchal/hierarchical and androcentric. It reinforces the superior position

of men over women and establishes gender inequality as the norm. Dewey\(^{72}\) says the translation of “men” or “anthropos” is a generic term inclusive of both males and females. The two Greek words with different meaning for “men” are used “anthropos” in verses 1-7 and “aner” referring only to males in verses 8 to 15. She adds that though the New Revised Standard Version now used inclusive language, most of the older versions still remained generic and androcentric in their language.

It is a highly androcentric-kyriarchal text promoting an ideology and theology that served the interest of the authorities of the state under Roman domination. The bible, canonised as the “Word of God”, thus legitimised colonising injustice and lent its support to the oppression of wo/men.

This is obviously a difficult emotional roadblock to breakthrough as all believers have been taught/brainwashed to regard the bible as the sacred Word of G*dd. To challenge or even worse, to reject this, evokes a terrible sense of emotional guilt and unbearable psychological, spiritually enslaving weight from the deepest recesses of our beings as wo/men, who have been for centuries socialised and demonised by such biblical religious beliefs and values of obedience and willing submission. At the same time such a liberating exercise frees us to realise that the bible is not written by G*dd as such but by elite, “educated” freeborn albeit infantile and insecure men intent upon controlling and dominating others for their own benefit and unholy self interest.

The author of Timothy was most likely an elitist, educated, freeborn citizen who submitted to the dominant and dominating Roman Kyriachal/Imperial culture, order and system. In her systemic analysis and critical evaluation of the so-called household code texts, Schüssler Fiorenza informed us in an interview that she is convinced by Susann Moller Okin, a feminist political philosopher who questioned Aristotle’s misogynistic opinion that women

have a deficient nature which sprang from their biological make-up. She said Susann Loller Okin “argued that the argument of Aristotle was not developed, because he had a faulty biological understanding, but because he was one of the philosophers who argued against the democratic understanding that would have required that women would be full citizens. Hence, Aristotle and other philosophers gave the rationale why women could not be full citizens, why slaves could not be full citizens, and so the argument of subordination, women’s second-class citizenship was developed over and against the democratic political idea.”

Furthermore in the interview, Schüssler Fiorenza has an important piece of information regarding the politics and ideology/theology of the prescriptions of household codes text. She said “At the same time in New Testament studies, scholars came to see that these household codes were not based on Stoic but on Aristotelian philosophy, and feminist political science scholars showed the Aristotelian argument was a political argument rather than an argument based on biological nature.” The household codes are “Neo-Aristotelian injunctions. They take over Aristotle’s political philosophy, which has influenced not only the understanding of woman and the pyramid of domination in the New Testament, but also of Thomas of Aquinas and medieval and modern Catholic theology. Until then, the theory was that because Aristotle and his successors had a wrong biological understanding, they said women were deficient men and slaves deficient human beings. Aristotle stressed that a woman had to be subordinated and was not able to rule over men because of her nature. That is why Thomas of Aquinas said women could not be ordained because they could not be in positions of power and ruling.”

74 Ibid., p. 46.
75 Ibid., p. 46.
76 Ibid., p. 46.
**Hermeneutics of Imagination:** Engaging in creative imagination involves rewriting the text in order to make it liberating and transformational. Imagination begins with the recapitulation of what happened but transforms the situation of oppression towards one of liberation thus liberating the text in the process. For this exercise in creative imagination, a Pastoral Epistle is written to the author of Paul’s letter to Timothy in response. Following this a recommendation will be made to the AWRC for transformative action.

**Letter to whoever used the name of Paul for the most devious purposes/Author of the**

**Letter of Paul to Timothy from the ekklesia of wo/men**

We, the community members of the discipleship of equals, the ekklesia of wo/men, are writing this in response to the Pastoral Epistle you sent. We met and re-read your text as a community of faith and feel strongly that we have liberating wisdom to share with you as the Sophia-Wisdom of G*d guides us. We invite you to read our text as a response to the one you sent out to us with all the prescriptions for women to adhere to in the church order of worship and life.

First of all we want you to know the painful struggles we have gone through as a community upon reading your prescriptions in I Timothy 2. To say the least, we are insulted and humiliated each time your texts have been used over the centuries and abused by clergymen and males in positions of power to this day, to put down, dominate and control women. Your prescriptions have contributed to reinforce and perpetuate the demonic reality of women’s oppression. As a result of your prescriptions, religion, sacred scriptures, the bible and worst of all the name of G*d has been used to do the work of the Evil One!

The model of political hierarchical power that you imposed upon us is none other than the Roman system of domination. This is contrary to the teachings and practice of the Jesus movement and our community of the discipleship of equals. You also imposed upon us, using the name of Paul, an ideology and theology of submission to the dominating imperial
dehumanising values and culture of the Greco-Roman world order. This violent system of domination is unjust and oppressive to all men in general and to us women in particular. It is sinful in its multi-layered structures that discriminate, marginalize and exclude people. You have set up structures of war and division instead of building and establishing peace among us as the ekklesia of wo/men. You have brought upon us untold suffering when church fathers and kyriarchal minded people of power and positions in the churches used your text as the eternal unchanging Word of G*d to further restrict and prevent the work of the Spirit through the participation and leadership of women in the community of faith.

The church of the people, the ekklesia of wo/men is the discipleship of equals that is based and founded on the vision, teachings and values of the “basileia” this kin-dom of G*d as proclaimed by Jesus and practised by the Jesus community. We are of one mind and intent to practice inclusive participatory radical democracy as a way of life. It is entirely different from and even “opposed to” your kyriarchal top-heavy Roman Imperial model and political style to say the least. Since we have struggled hard for our liberation and the transformation of the structures that have kept us oppressed we are no longer able nor are we willing to subject ourselves to your dominating power over political option.

We are deeply concerned that your prescriptions and injunctions have turned the church into a hierarchical household along authoritarian lines in the character of Roman kyriarchy. To be faithful to the calling of G*d we who have opted to be in the community of the discipleship of equals are resolved to resist all attempts on your part to establish and to impose kyriarchal structures and kyriocentric ideas and values and the theology of submission that comes along with it for the next two thousand years and forever. In G*d’s grace and love, peace with justice we are working and journeying towards the liberation of all persons and the transformation of social constructs that prevent them from living life in its fullness and abundance. We therefore urge you to read our response to your text carefully and
seriously. We wish to invite you for a dialogue in the ekklesia of wo/men from the AWRC for Culture and Theology. Signed by the ekklesia of wo/men.

**Proposed Action Plan to the Ekklesia of Wo/men in AWRC Network**

Following this letter to clergymen and those who we know have used such household code texts in churches through various means of communications (sermon, bible study, debate on ordination, etc) including especially those who have used the texts as the proclaimed “Word of God”, a recommendation/plan of action will be forwarded to the AWRC for Culture and Theology to follow up this matter:

1. To publish the above letter in our AWRC newsletter *Womenet* in order to make known to AWRC members and women in our network our position regarding the text, draw response from them for discussion and further action.

2. Make available this letter and this feminist interpretation of I Timothy text in AWRC journal, *In God’s Image*, to stimulate discussion as well as to call and engage readers for dialogue and action.

3. AWRC to organise a one-day feminist dialogue. AWRC invitation will be issued to the clergy to whom the letter is addressed and to all interested in an open dialogue on this and such household code texts. During this session a critical feminist biblical interpretation of I Timothy 2 will be shared, followed by dialogue. A list of feminist theologians will be invited to participate and dialogue in a series of panels. The focus will be on household code texts. A plan of action for transformation and change will be drawn up at the end of the dialogue.

4. This dialogue will include facilitators and resource persons. They are: AWRC Coordinating Team Members and *In God’s Image* Editorial Advisory Committee. Special invitation will be extended to a number of feminist theologians.
5. This dialogue will be hosted by two local groups of wo/men in ekklesia with whom I belong. They are the Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology and Women’s Voice. This recommendation for plan of action will be a part of the hermeneutics of transformative action and change.

_Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction:_ To remember is to recover the loss - the voice, the active agency and contribution of women who were marginalized and written off the history of early Christian origins. In places where women are mentioned or even highlighted, they are often painted in very negative light and played down by the androcentric politics of history writing and meaning making. Remembering then is also an attempt to reconstruct such a history by bringing wo/men back to the centre, to highlight their agency in active and prominent leadership as discipleship of equals in the early Christian community. It is restoring early Christian history to women and writing women back into this history that is part of wo/men’s heritage.

Women were definitely prominent leaders, teachers, and prophets. They also played other important leadership roles and positions in the churches as confirmed by other New Testament passages (e.g. I Corinthians 7 and 11; and Romans 16). There is however a great possibility, as it has in fact happened in church history, that texts like those found in 1 Tim. 2:1-15 can give rise to the subjugation of women’s voices and eventually result in wiping off this memory of women participation, contribution, and leadership in the life and development of early Christian communities of faith. In verses 2:11-12, “the author’s injunction is evidence that women were publicly praying and teaching.”77 Verses 2:13-15 “presents a theological argument justifying the author’s instructions, one of the very few theological discussions about anything in the Pastorals. The fact that the author spends so much time to

---

enjoin silence on Christian women suggests that the actual and accepted practice of women was active and vocal and that the author was attempting to change this behaviour.”

The process of remembering and reconstruction is not aimed at writing wo/men’s history in early Christianity. It is a feminist reconstruction of Christian beginnings. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s own words, “but I wanted to write a feminist history of early Christianity. That means I wanted to rewrite the history of the early church in light of the fact that wo/men were central agents and subjects in early Christian communities. Since traditional history was written only in terms of male actors, I felt the historical record needed to be corrected.”

Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change

The dance of transformation for change begins with naming the situations and structures of injustice/oppression and leads to the struggle for socio-personal liberation and the transformation of the structures of injustice/oppression. In the case of the text at hand, what action for change is necessary? How can one change the text or use the text for change? What are the areas that need liberation and transformation?

Recalling the areas cited by Schüssler Fiorenza that require changes and action, how can the interpretive text be used as a site in the process of conscientization towards change and transformation? In dealing with I Timothy 2, the areas that can be identified where actions/changes can be taken are: In terms of kyriocentric language and text we look at the overall language of the text and how it reproduces/re-inscribes the reality of power

---


domination, language of gender inequality and ideology employed to divide men and women into superior and inferior positions; and the use of theological language and religious meaning to keep women in a position of submission to the power over dominating system of kyriarchy/patriarchy. In this way, the system and structures of power within the Roman kyriarchal order are maintained. The text reflects the kyriocentric mindset of the author and perhaps the elite group of freeborn educated men in power who submitted to and thus supported and endorsed kyriocentric ideas and values. Furthermore biblical authority and the authority of “Paul” were made use of to support their ideology and theology of submission. These areas as elaborated can be used as points in the struggle for liberation with the subject self who is struggling with the bible, based on her/his negative experiences in biblical religion and her/his religious community.

On a social personal and community level, there is another group, Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology (MWMT), which I belong to, among whom are Anglican women and deaconesses who are still struggling with the issue of ordination. It is a live and current issue, as the vote for women’s ordination was not passed. While there is a point in struggling for “gender equality” at one level, there is yet the other consideration to be taken into account. This is with reference to being ordained into a position of privilege and power within the larger dominating kyriarchal order. There is a need to deepen our discussion among this group as well as within the Catholic Women’s Voice in the re-reading and “reformulation/reconstruction” of this text (and other so-called household code texts). Through a critical feminist reading of this text, it is my hope that the MWMT will see the more radical and fundamental issues at stake in their struggle for women’s ordination. A critical feminist biblical interpretation in the manner of the dance of liberation and transformation will help remedy and correct inequalities without the danger of falling into revisionist positions that re-inscribe Kyriarchal ideas, values and practices!
CONCLUSION

THE JOURNEY IS HOME

Towards A Praxis for Liberation and Transformation

My socially constructed journey began the day I was born... without my consent nor was my permission sought for... so I did not, could not feel at home... and so I began as an alien selfless self, homeless... and a homeless self alienated self was I...

But I journeyed on or was forced to journey on nonetheless... alienated as I was from myself, from other people around me, and from all of creation as well... even the past and so the future... truth be told, I did not feel at home even within the present moment...

The social scripts that rationalised, justified and yes even mystified the socially constructed reality around me, especially those religious sounding ones, that was forced upon me, telling me who I was, given that particular historical moment in time within the space that had its peculiar set of socially constructed global, regional, national structures... and so I was... by religious affiliation, a Christian/protestant, by nationality a Sabahan, a Malaysian under the colonial power and domination of Great Britain, by race, a Chinese, by dialect a Hakka, according to sex/gender categories a female a woman... these social constructs defined what my limits were and who I could be, was supposed to be... this socially constructed reality even offered me a range of configured possibilities regarding who or what I might choose to be... in my state of socialised ignorance I did make choices and so I became and so I was, for quite a while even... alienated... self from self... self from other... and self from creation... and self from the past, the future and the present too... but soon enough this socially constructed culture of living death did not and could not contain the spirit and the being that I was and was made to be...!!!

81 The phrase was inspired and made famous by Nelle Morton in her book The Journey is Home (Boston: Beacon Press), 1985.
And thus was begun another journey… this time a little more conscientised, a little more of a “conscious intentional” journey of struggle, the struggle to be… which would involve a struggle to be liberated from all forms of socially constructed oppression that tried to contain me and prevent me for LIFE in its splendour, abundance and fullness… it was a journey of self discovery, which soon was realised to be a struggle for self recovery or the reclaiming of self, the re-naming of self, the overcoming of self alienation, of becoming Subject, of owning self, exercising faith that one was/is made in the Image of G*d, albeit still defined within and by the socially constructed “religious” reality for a while yet within the larger context of a global historical construct within which religion and religious scripting also played a great part and was hand in glove with the powers that be who kept persons, women, and people, wo/men in captivity within the kyriarchal/patriarchal order… for generations already and for a while yet…

And so the journey took me beyond the self seeking for itself to join the larger Journey with other women/wo/men, the marginalised selves, creation seeking for the same liberation from…also seeking for liberation towards self-authentication, self validation, overcoming alienation, breaking free from the yoke of socially constructed kyriarchal/patriarchal captivity…“women making the option for self” to be self as self made in G*d’s image!

And over time and through many struggle experiences, the journey began to be informed by wisdom/Wisdom who led us from the need to seek liberation from global historical social construction, to the need for the transformation of those structures in the manner, form and vision of people from the Jesus movement, fellow travellers of that same journey. And so the Journey took on new dimensions and opened up new vistas of possibilities… from an object that was held in captivity through being misnamed, we became Subjects empowered to engage in naming and exercising liberating power, empowered to
struggle for structural transformation… thus the journey developed into the Journey of the 
ekklesia of wo/men this time aided by the Spirit of wisdom/Wisdom through the Dance of 
Liberation and Transformation, the Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation in general 
and Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation in particular… Home at last… the journey is the 
home… the JOURNEY IS HOME…. the basileia is here and yet to be…

It is my conviction that CFBI to date offers the most complete approach for women in 
their struggle for liberation to connect with liberating wisdom within the Scriptures that can 
free them from that which they have been influenced/mesmerized and in many cases 
dominated by.

It is my hope that AWRC can be an agency and a regional/global vehicle to promote 
and spread this Dance of Liberation and Transformation for all wo/men through its 
publications and regional programmes.

It is my longing that all wo/men seeking socio-personal liberation and engaged in the 
struggle to transform socially constructed structures that dominate and hold them in captivity, 
will, with and through their ekklesia of wo/men, get to experience life in all its fullness and 
abundance.

May all who dance the Dance of Liberation be blessed by the spirit of Wisdom/Sophia 
and as we continue in the journey, may we find peace in the knowledge that the JOURNEY 
IS HOME!!!
BIBLIOGRAPHY


**INTRODUCTION**

**Doing Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Methodology for Socio-Personal and Structural Liberation and Transformation**

Doing Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation (CFBI) as a Site of Struggle for Liberation according to the steps of the Dance of Liberation and Transformation is a new and effective “methodology” or more appropriately, a hermeneutical tool kit for socio-personal and structural liberation and transformation. I will state the problem and justify its importance and clarify the subject matter in the subsequent paragraphs. A summary of the chapters about the main thoughts of this investigation will also be provided. Terminologies and definitions of words and concepts can be found in their respective footnotes. A selected bibliography will also be given.

---

53 This phrase “Dance of Liberation and Transformation” was first heard from Lieve Troch, consultant at the Ecclesia of Women in Asia Conference in November 2002, Thailand. Lieve introduced this in her input on “The hermeneutical spiral dance”. The Dance is full of dynamism and is inclusive. It includes all the elements of wo/men’s intuitive, emotive, passion and bodily/spiritual experiences. It is a spirituality with “body-heart-mind-spirit and also community” experiential knowledge rather than merely individualistic objective head knowledge. Furthermore, it pulsates with life and creates the community of faith struggling for change/ transformation. The Dance evokes serious but also joyous involvement and movement. It is also light and not burdensome... it has elements of joyful voluntary and not forced participation. It is an expression of the celebration of life...
Statement of the Problem

There is in need for a radically critical, liberating and transformative biblical interpretative methodology for Asian Christian Wo/men throughout the region through the past decades. The problem springs from the lived experiences of oppressed women and their struggle to be free as well as to engage in the transformation of the very structures of existence that hold them in captivity. Such women try to deal with this reality on the personal, social, economic, political and religious level. They discover that the interconnectedness of personal and structural oppression and domination is often linked with a religious component: religion has often been and continues to be used as a tool to rationalise, justify and legitimise their subordination. Although women have also experienced religion as a source of comfort and even power for change, an analysis of this double function of religion can bring us to a different way of reading the bible. The way may aptly be described as the method of Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation.

Importance of the Problem

The starting point is the experience of self/women in struggle - as victims of dehumanising violence and injustice at home, at the institutions of learning and higher learning, at the work place, in Church and in society and as women struggling for socio-personal liberation, socio-political and structural transformation. This struggle began in various ways at different points of time located in unique contexts and circumstances. At all these varying circumstances while there were gains and limited successes in their struggles,

54 Wo/man (wo/men) – A way of writing proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza to indicate that the category woman/women is a social construct. Wo/men are not a unitary social group but are fragmented by structures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, colonialism and age. This destabilization of the term wo/men underscores the differences between wo/men and within individual wo/men. This writing is inclusive of subaltern men who in kyriarchal systems are seen ‘as wo/men’ and functions as a linguistic corrective to androcentric language use (Term as explained in Schüssler Fiorenza’s Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001).
there appeared to be no radical critical understanding, no thorough going and liberating breakthrough out of the situations of injustice. The problems experienced by oppressed women seemed impossible to overcome. Many views have been raised, many understandings brought forward but always these have been partial or parochial answers that never seem to be touching radical causes and providing holistic “solutions” towards liberating, transformational change. These were in the main never integrated nor integral, always lacking in one way or another, although at various stages some analyses may have offered some degree of understanding the problem and even may have resulted in limited breakthroughs and compartmentalised solutions. As a matter of fact even women in their search for liberation and transformation are trapped within the limits of the dominant and dominating hegemonic discourse. This brings them to rather reformist approaches and not really liberating ones.

The "methodology" or hermeneutical tool kit, as Schüssler Fiorenza prefers to call it, the writer intends to research on a deeper level, namely Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation (CFBI) offers a holistic integral approach beginning with the restoration of the Self as Subject of change and critical theological reflection. This “methodology” is also able to analyse and transform basic structures of domination and exclusion.

The critical point/premise/criterion of CFBI is that men in power or men in collusion with power, authority and the ruling male’s hegemonic interest wrote the bible. Biblical reading has become problematic because it was these elitist educated freeborn men in power or in collusion with power, writing, reading, interpreting, canonising and preaching it as the Word of God. It is kyriocentric^55/androcentric in thought form, in

---

^55 Kyriocentric is derived from the term Kyriocentrism coined by Schüssler Fiorenza. Kyriocentrism (like androcentrism) operates on 4 levels:
On the grammatical-linguistic level: Language is not just androcentric but it places elite men in the centre, marginalises elite wo/men and other men, and makes slave women or poor wo/men doubly invisible.
On the symbolic cultural level: Kyriocentrism constructs and naturalises gender, race, class and colonialism as essentialist differences
On the ideological level: Kyriocentrism makes gender, racial, class and colonial prejudice look normal and hides the fact that such differences are socially constructed. It constructs these differences as relations of domination.
On the social institutional level: Kyriocentrism maintains the second-class citizenship of all the others of elite men. It does so through economic and legal-political means and especially through socialisation, education and internalisation (Wisdom Ways, glossary)
socio-cultural, political thinking and worldview. Hence the language is also entrenched and immersed in kyriocentric/androcentric biases/values.

There is thus a dire need to go beyond the old paradigms of interpreting biblical texts and make a qualitative leap towards a critical feminist biblical interpretation (CFBI). Many women and feminists who have been engaged in feminist theologising have unwittingly become a part of the hegemonic discourse, arguing within the logical framework of an oppositional dichotomy of men and women based on gender. For as long as the analysis of the oppression of women is defined and argued along gender terms only and does not take into account the questions of class, race, religion, nationality, colonial and postcolonial realities, age, sexual orientation/sexuality, etc. it will not truly reflect and correctly analyse the reality of domination and violence against women and subordinated men. Thus, this approach is both “critical” and “feminist”.

It is “critical” in its response to what has been passed off as “feminist” among Eurocentric and American (as well as “white washed” Asian feminists) white middle class feminists struggles for gender equality which conveniently leaves out the class and race and also its ugly imperialist and colonial history among other blind spots. And it is “feminist” in its radical and revolutionary response to the marginalisation of women and of the women’s question in all the male dominated and male dominating attempts at historical social change (mere male rebellions and revolts against other males in power…at best reformist but always racist and sexist). The “critical” and “feminist” approach uses the methodologies of both theologies but also takes a critical stand in relation to both: liberation theology rather simplistically takes the bible and its tradition of liberation from slavery as the starting point thus basing its political stance as an “option for the poor” without critical analyses and considerations of race and gender injustice through its kyriocentric patriarchal androcentric bias. The “critical feminist” approach critiques the ideology of patriarchy and makes a critical analysis of gender in general. But it goes beyond gender analysis. It critiques and analyses the specific as well as different situations of women’s oppression across class, race, nationality, sexual orientation, colonialism, age, culture and religion. It uses a feminist theoretical and social analytical framework that exposes the structures of dominations and relations of power in specific and different contexts affecting women. It is a complex feminist social analysis of oppression over and against a simplistic gender analysis.

The term “Kyriarchy” is a neologism coined by Schüssler Fiorenza and derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’ (kyrios) and ‘to rule or dominate’ (archein) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which elite, educated, propertied men hold power over wo/men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. (Wisdom Ways, glossary)
The word “feminist” is used as a critical political term whilst woman/women and gender are socially constructed categories within a largely male dominating and power over political characteristic. The notion of feminism or feminist is being redefined in the light of backlashes against wo/men who are feminists. It has been candidly asserted that “feminism is the radical notion that wo/men are people”\(^\text{56}\) when wo/men locate themselves as people within the radical democratic discourses. This brings home the historical struggles for equal citizenship and powers in decision-making in religion and society at large. Theologically speaking, wo/men are the people of G*d\(^\text{57}\) and feminism names the powers of oppression as structural sin and life-destroying evil. Hence “critical” feminism offers a theoretical perspective that derives from a historical movement of wo/men engaged in liberation struggles and experiences accumulated in the struggle towards reclaiming/attaining their full citizenship as wo/men. It also opts for liberation from as well as for the transformation of socio-cultural and ecclesial structures of domination and exploitation, towards peace and justice. In these multiple struggles for full democratic citizenship, the “Male dominated and male led” historical movements for change have been exposed and laid bare for their neglect and exclusion of the struggles of wo/men through their use of such generic labels/words as “human”, “worker”, the “poor” or “civil society” all of which are empty rhetoric with no meaning for women. “Many women who were in the forefront of such movements soon experienced the reality that these movements were male centred and that wo/men were second-class citizens in them. They soon realised that they were ‘shit-workers’ without much say or power. They were relegated to secretarial jobs, made sex objects or seen as the muses


\(^{57}\) G*d – Schüssler Fiorenza’s way of writing ‘God’ that acknowledges the insufficiency and inability of human language to adequately name the Divine. It seeks to indicate that G*d is ultimately unnamable and ineffable. (Wisdom Ways, glossary)
of the ‘great men’ of the movements’. Thus, feminist movements learned their lessons and made the option to struggle for wo/men’s rights and self-determination in society and church.

The term “critical feminist” employed in this approach thus means:

1) Taking women as subjects and engaging in critical reflection on women's experience as starting point as well as a valid source for doing theology (other than using bible or existing systematic concepts as sources).

2) Making a critical reflection on this experience in the framework of an overall systemic analysis of Kyriarchy and Kyriocentrism.

3) Working on a deconstruction of the existing paradigms and concepts, pointing out where they are oppressive or where they are supporting dominant ideologies of power.

4) Working towards a reconstruction of theological concepts using 1) and 2), and the results of 3).

By doing CFBI, a fundamental break with the dominating kyriarchal/kyriocentric discourse is made. Critical feminist biblical interpretation begins with a critically conscious understanding of the experience and social location of the interpreter as well as the various existing paradigms developed within the kyriarchal order. This order is kyriocentric in character within which its citizens are “socialised”. It calls for a radical break with and change of dominating power structures and its transformation on socio-personal and societal structural levels as well. To read the texts as products of the same situation and looking for liberative perspectives, will bring us to a different approach to the texts, their understanding and functioning.

The thesis to be written will reflect a faith journey and experiential process of personal struggle and liberation. It will also reflect a social personal engagement with others.

---

in transformation. It is the hope of the writer that other women and men in faith communities can also engage in and find liberation and empowerment through this methodology.

To engage in this process using the biblical methodology of CFBI, attempts will be made to develop a new reading of certain selected biblical texts that have implications for wo/men in general, and which can be used for future programmes of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology\(^59\).

**Elaboration of the Problem**

It is very important that wo/men get the critical tools to interpret the Bible. New biblical scholarship is more realistic and inclusive as it brings different perspectives, different experiences and different viewpoints from different social locations to how the text is read. This generates new questions and new horizons to the reading of texts. Reiterating that the Bible is written in a patriarchal/kyriarchal framework, biblical text must be read with a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is important to look at the social location of both the writer as well as the interpreter, and to read and interpret in context.

Feminists must concern themselves with the bible and religion if they are concerned with the liberation of wo/men. For many wo/men the bible is the inspiring authority with great influence in their lives. Biblical teachings/interpretations can be a source of empowerment and hope as it has also been a source of self-alienation, discrimination and oppression. Hence feminist must address this issue of biblical interpretation.

---

\(^{59}\) Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) for Culture & Theology is a small group of ecumenical women engaged in feminist theologising. Through its theological journal, *In God's Image (IGI)*, programmes and other occasional publications AWRC aims to be “a forum through which Asian women can share their theological thinking” with the hope that it “will be a growing medium of communication between theologically orientated women in Asia.” It was also aimed at encouraging Asian women to articulate their theological thought in a variety of writings towards developing contextual theology. It is also a community of wo/men engaging in critical feminist social personal liberating and transformative theologising.
In asserting the need to doing critical feminist biblical interpretation, I am suggesting that it is important to self-critique and struggle with the following challenges:

i) To break away from the old paradigms of interpreting biblical texts and make the leap towards CFBI.

ii) To go beyond gender analysis and perspective, e.g. men over women, or in certain feminist analytic of patriarchy, the prevalent perspective goes by this analysis: domination of men over women; gender equality means women have access to the same power and status and rights as men.

iv) To be liberated from dualistic notions as in ‘either or’ binary and/or oppositional conceptual frameworks and mindsets in human and theological discourse that hampers one’s struggle for change and transformation.

iv) To identify the existing paradigms and models as deficient and lacking in involving the subject in naming the struggle as her own. Hence the interpreter must assert the critically conscious self as a subject using a more liberating and effective methodology. This methodology is one that adopts a feminist systemic analytical framework that challenges women to reject being defined and accepted only on gender terms which does not take into account seriously the multiple structures of domination from the perspectives of class struggle, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, colonialism, post-colonialism, sexuality, age, etc. It is also a framework of systemic analysis that critiques the kyriarchal/kyriocentric model and ideology in culture, religion and society at large.

Research Method
The guiding perspective in addressing the subject title is the critical feminist hermeneutic of liberation, reinforced by the biblical visions of justice and well being, that would liberate wo/men, change and transform structures of oppression both in religion and society.

This research begins in chapter one with a primary source – my social personal journey and experience of the oppression of woman are the starting points in the framework of an overall systemic analysis. It begins with my own socio-personal experience of struggle for liberation and justice and my faith journey to reclaim Self as a subject having come from a colonial, neo colonial and postcolonial oppressed woman’s experience of socialised captivity. The struggle with others for social personal liberation and social-structural transformation has been over a period of thirty long years and it is still going on. Critical feminist systemic analysis will be used as the tool of socio-personal and structural analysis.

Chapter two focuses on the bible/Scriptures and methods of interpretation. This involves a critical survey of the existing feminist paradigms of biblical interpretation where previous methodologies fell short. In the final analysis, a new paradigm and alternative is proposed to establish the need for Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation along with the hermeneutical circle, as a biblical methodology (Dance of Liberation and Transformation).

Chapter three presents and discusses a biblical methodology of “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” expressed in terms of the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation”. It is thus far the most radical, comprehensive and relevant socio-systemic analytical tool for understanding and analysing the woman’s experience of subordination and at the same time also offering direction to the struggle for liberation.

The last chapter is an attempt to demonstrate how the dance methodology can be applied in interpreting selected biblical texts: Mark 5: 21 – 43 and 1 Tim 2: 1-15.

The concluding pages “The Journey is Home: Towards a Praxis for Liberation and Transformation” is a challenge to Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology (AWRC) to adopt CFBI as the way to promote socio-personal liberation and structural
transformation for wo/men in general and her own members in particular. Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation is a process of conscientization for liberation and transformation.

In closing, a point of clarification about the use of new words/terminologies and also the use of old words but with new meaning/nuance is in order. I have adopted new words and terminologies because old words are inadequate to explain new discourses, new imagination, new spaces, and new paradigms. Old words are limiting. They cannot stretch the imagination and challenge us to a new creativity. This is an experienced reality in language that is largely andocentric in character. There are three ways of looking at language:

3) Language is used as an expression of reality, we believe what is being said as it relates to reality.

4) Language can also be used to create and reproduce reality. For e.g. GOD as father creates in our mind that GOD is a father and further implies that fathers are gods.

3) Language can also be used to change reality – Reality changes when we use wo/men to include men. In the light of what language can do and the ideology that lies behind it, attempts are made to adopt new words and terminologies to envision and express a change of reality for liberating action.

CHAPTER ONE
ON THE ROAD
Women as Subjects

Feminist struggles and women’s movements for socio-personal liberation and socio-structural transformation in history have become a worldwide phenomenon:

➢ Where Women’s lived experiences of discrimination, violence and oppression are manifested in various forms through multi-layered structures of domination where culture and religion, economy and politics, educational and other socialising institutions like work places, home and church all actively participate and contribute to this most heinous crime against humanity.

➢ Where Women are found in diverse situations with our different/specific experiences within our particular socio-cultural, religious, economic and political conditions and realities.
Where women are different and must be seen in terms of our class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, culture, religion, colonial and postcolonial realities, sexuality, personality, etc. in short within the contexts of our unique historical particularities and peculiarities…

Given the above understanding, it is important to be guided by a more holistic vision and perspective:

1) The women's struggle forms an integral part of the total human struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression towards a new humanity. This calls for a critical feminist and systemic analysis of women's oppression in the context of socio-cultural, economic and political struggles in particular situations and context. Such an analysis exposes the double, triple, multiple oppression faced by women; it also addresses and links the close relationship between class, race and gender, culture and religion, colonial and neo/postcolonial realities; and critiques patriarchy as an ideology of gender tainted by male-bias. It goes beyond gender analysis and critiques the power relations and structures of kyriarchy.

2) Christian feminists who use this approach of systemic analysis are led to question again the relevance of faith in G*d: how do we link our faith with our stories and the many stories of women in church and society? How do we re-interpret scriptures and engage in critical praxis of action-reflection? How can women desiring freedom commit themselves to working towards change, liberation and transformation on socio-personal and socio-political levels?

In the 1970s many women began to reclaim themselves as Subjects. Women asserted they are also people, although the majority of the world did not consider women as people. They fought for their civil rights, including the right to make decisions of their own, and decisions to own their bodies and sexuality. One sticker has expressed the point in a candid manner: “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people”. Such a definition describes
women as full and freeborn citizens, fully human, fully made in the image of G*d. When women say we are people, we are people of G*d and the reign of G*d is present and here!

United Nations figures and statistics show the violence and injustice experienced by women the world over:

1) Although women do 65% of work
15% of the salaries paid for work go to women
Women own 1.5% of property

2) In terms of violence:
1 out of 4 women are victims of sexual violence
1 out of 6 women are victims of incest
The home/family is the worst place where women experience violence and abuse
In every 15 seconds 1 woman is raped
More than 100 million women in the world are missing because they are not given possibilities to live - maybe infanticide, foeticide, abortions, etc. resulting in women dying from health problems.
75% of people who died of starvation are women

3) In education:
2 out of 3 illiterates are women

4) In positions in the world and structural injustice:
98% of decisions on structure are made by men and 2% by women

On a macro level, women claim to be Subjects and struggle for freedom from all forms of oppression and violence. But on a micro, socio-personal level, many women individuals continue to live as objects, as colonised self, as selfless, sacrificial, socialised selves who exist for the sake of others and self as defined and created by social cultural construct. They have no identity of their own except in relation to males in the family - father, brother, husband, son. The internalisation of such values and attitudes go right down to the core of women’s psyche. This process of gender socialisation begins from childhood and even from birth: “In the FAMILY, boys are encouraged to go out and play, explore the world, be brave, and not show their emotions by crying; girls are encouraged to stay at home, learn to do housework, take care of younger siblings, are allowed to cry, and grow up observing a scenario where the wife usually serves the husband. In SCHOOL, boys and girls are

---

The statistics were provided by the resource person, Lieve Troch at the AWRC Feminist Theology Workshop in August 2004, Malaysia.
streamlined into courses that are supposedly in line with their gender stereotypes, e.g., girls for tailoring and cooking; boys for woodwork. In RELIGION, men conduct most if not all of the important rituals and ceremonies, sometimes with the assistance of women; leadership is predominantly in the hands of men… At the WORKPLACE, men usually receive higher wages than women and hold top-level positions while women’s work is simply an extension of their gender roles and are not highly valued.”\textsuperscript{61} In POLITICS, male leadership in the character of the practice of power as power over or the power to dominate is still the norm while women’s leadership is frowned upon or questioned although recently women have also been conscripted into positions of leadership, but only in order to exercise power according to power over paradigms.

Within a male dominated socio-cultural and religious construct, a woman is defined as one in relation to others rather than as a unique being valued for herself. Her sexuality is confined and controlled/possessed by the male in a power over relation to her regardless of class, race, nationality, colonial-post colonial conditions, sexual orientation, age, etc. She is not a Subject who can exercise her own free will. Through religion, the woman is taught to be obedient and sacrificial as exampled by the sacred texts or scriptures.

\textbf{Beginning with Social Personal Self as Subject}

Speaking as a struggling-to-be Subject Self, I am fully/unceasingly engaging in critical feminist liberationist theologising in my daily struggle, taking my socio-personal, socio-political experiences and social religious location as a starting/reference point. My faith struggle experience and journey is located within the Malaysian realities as well as within the international and ecumenical communities. On a socio-personal level, I have multiple/intersectional identities. I am a Chinese by race/ethnicity yet do not subscribe to

\textsuperscript{61} Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies, Modules on Asian Feminist Theologies, Book 1, Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture & Theology, Kuala Lumpur, 2005, pp. 14-15.
being strictly nor fully Chinese; I do not subscribe to certain chauvinistic elements within the Chinese culture, traditions, social customs nor other negative elements within the Chinese culture that rob me of my dignity and self respect as a person and woman. I was born female by sex/biology yet have refused and resisted being stereotyped and socialised further as feminine or “lady” by gender. By nationality I became a Malaysian (1963) yet I do not have a sense of patriotism or chauvinistic nationalism/identity defined and imposed upon Malaysians by the governing political parties/authorities. By religion I am Christian yet I do not subscribe to the understanding of G*de and Jesus as defined by the institutional church. I can hardly experience the spirit of G*de and Jesus that I know in the church institutions of today. I am an object of colonialism that is yet not a thing of the past as new configurations of borderless globalisation have masked this domination. However it is my belief that the notion of “post-colonial concept and imagination” may provide a liberating insight and more political space to be myself…even if it is only in the space of my own mind, nurtured and sustained by the community of faithful friends within the “ekklesia”. This implies also my need to resist any form of cultural-religious and political ideologies that subverts my struggle to be liberated from all forms of oppression. It is a daily struggle to nourish and to sustain my being as the Subject of my life.

This account/reflection of my socio-personal journey is grounded upon and motivated by a vision and commitment to work for change, for liberation and for transformation in my own life and in the lives of the wo/men, especially those with whom I associate and work with in community, in ekklesia and in the AWRC. As a Subject Self in struggle, I am determined to define and create a space for myself with/among wo/men, - a faith community, an “ekklesia of wo/men”, where I, together with others in the community of faith, aspire and attempt to live out my commitment through the process of struggle for change and transformation. This is for me the most fundamental requirement and credible expression in
the praxis of theology. My experience is both that of a colonised and neo/postcolonial oppressed woman “demonised” by socialised captivity and also that of an individual engaged in struggle, together with others, for social personal and structural liberation and transformation from such. The first twenty odd years of my life took a drastic turn and twist soon after I entered the seminary. A fundamental crisis of faith led me on to question many things – my faith, my G*d, my life as well as developments within the larger global historical Life around me. Subsequently the next thirty years took me through many lightning filled rains and thunderous storms, occasional rainbows and some sunshine too that brought many levels and stages of dynamic/”traumatising” changes in my life.

My Social Personal Journey and the Bible as one of the Crucial Sites of My Struggle

In the first twenty years of my life, my Christian faith may be characterised as that of a staunch conservative and “evangelical”, believing in the triumphant Jesus religion as promulgated by Western missionaries and later “Western-trained” local “evangelical” pastors. It was characteristically a colonised/colonising biblical religion. The bible was revered and upheld as Holy and sacred Scripture. It was used and referred to as the most important, the sole document of faith for Christian living. My mother was my model for Christian piety and faithfulness. She placed the greatest importance in reading the bible daily - the Word of G*d studied daily was imperative in a Christian’s life. She believed firmly in the bible as the revealed and eternal Word of G*d. During my childhood she left behind this deep impression in me, a traditional image of piety that I was later drawn to follow consciously as well as unconsciously. The bible thus played a central role in my life from Sunday school, to catechism class, in the youth fellowship, the church choir, bible study classes/groups, and women’s fellowship as well as preaching in the pulpit. It was this type of theology and
ideology that led me to what I then strongly believed was “G*d’s call to ministry” when I entered the theological seminary at the age of 21. I happened to be one among the many hundreds of thousands of Christian followers who submitted to and lived under such a colonised “biblicised” religion.

Western Christianity and colonialism came to Malaysia as one. As a popular saying has it: when the colonizers arrived they held the bible on one hand and the gun on the other. Roman Catholicism came hand in glove with the Portuguese colonizers in 1511 whose rallying cry as they bombarded the seacoasts of Malacca was “for God, for Glory and for Gold”62. Such a God, one can surmise would certainly be blind to the plundering, the attendant injustice and sufferings laid upon its victims. And so it should not come as a surprise that such a religion would not contain the proclamation of the Good News of the Kin-dom63 of G*d come as was preached and practiced by Jesus. Instead an institutionalised hierarchical religion was established that churned out triumphalistic claims about the Almighty G*d, King of Kings, Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient G*d, Lord of Lords whose power was manifested/came through the barrel of a gun, in this case of cannons, spreading the fear of G*d and by association the fear of the conquering imperialists powers into the hearts of the vanquished, many of whom later turned out to be opportunists “rice”64 Christians as they embraced the religious ideology of the colonisers.

63 “Kin-dom” is a word coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in Mujerista Theology (See bibliography). She has two reasons not to use “Kingdom”: “First, it is obviously a sexist word that presumes that God is male. Second, the concept of kingdom in our world today is both hierarchical and elitist. The same reasons hold for not using reign. The word kin-dom makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers - kin to each other.”
64 "Rice” Christians refer to people who became Christians for the sake of rice and for greater opportunities for jobs and positions of power and privilege in Christian mission schools and institutions. Political links with the Christian Colonial masters could also enhance possibilities for economic gain.
The Christianity and G*d in Jesus Christ that was borne witness to with the coming of the Dutch colonial masters in 1614 also arrived in all its glory and power as the Portuguese forts were in turn bombarded. By the time the British took over from the Dutch, with two hundred years of rule through fire power the colonized/underdogs had learnt their lessons well whose G*d was/is the most powerful on Earth. Britain ruled the waves and when it suited her also “waived the rules”! Such was the power and whimsical possibilities of the G*d/Christ the colonial religious enterprise championed. Along with crude firepower that put the fear of G*d into the faint-hearted, the more shrewd strategy was to develop a system of thought control and change of mind sets that would submit to the lordship of the foreign masters and this was done through the schooling system and the theological/religious institution through the Church!

Thus the dominant elements and character of the religious teachings promoted were those that were apolitical, a-historical and otherworldly-centred, a religion of rewards for good, obedient submissive behaviour – “a pie in the sky when you die” if you will. Shallow shows of charity, token acts of social concern, welfare and dependency creating handouts were religious practices/habits considered as reflective of Godliness. A flourish of missionary activism under the aegis of British colonialism/neocolonialism brought protestant denominations like Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, Lutheranism and many other types and shades of Christianity into the country. With the advancement of capitalist development throughout the global order even the gospel of G*d’s blessings through financial and material prosperity has become popular.

The missionary portrayal of Christ was that of a colonial/colonising triumphalist Christ, only Son of G*d, Lord of Lords!! Christianity and Christology were not only Western Euro-centred but also equally Kyriarchal and androcentric. The traditional images and teachings propagated by Western missionaries remain till this day in churches and religious
institutions. It was from the beginning a triumphalist/populist theology: Jesus Christ is Lord, the Way/the only Way, Jesus is the Saviour, Jesus the Suffering Servant, Jesus the Son of G*d, Jesus Immanuel (G*d-with-us) and so forth. Based on this theology and ideology, the question, “Who do you say that I am?” and what is the substance and character of this Christ were answered and interpreted through Western imperialist lens. They were forced on the colonized peoples over and above their indigenous traditions, which were judged as “pagan” or “heathen”. The Jesus-biblical religion that was brought into my cultural context is complex. It was colonialism and neo-colonialism that have impacted culture and gospel, gospel and culture in Malaysia. Today this brand of Christianity features predominantly in most churches and religious institutions. The biblical teachings are merely sets of doctrines and dogma for all faithful believers of this religion. It is a paradigm that is both doctrinal and dogmatic. The premise of this paradigm is that only certain people can interpret the sacred texts. The basic assumption is that the bible is the Word of G*d inscribed in the text. It is divine revelation. This gives power to the benevolent white and elitist freeborn male “of the present day global village” to use and interpret but also to abuse and misinterpret more often than not based on his social location and self interest. The authority of the bible can, by association, be equated/identified with the authority of the religious, the priests/pastors, preachers and laymen in the hierarchy and kyriarchal structures of church and society.

This is the Christianity that I was brought up in. The pastor and clergy exercise their authority through their power to interpret the Word, posing themselves to be holier and closest/nearest to their Lord G*d, Almighty and Omnipotent thus deriving some divine authority of sorts over others. This kyriarchal/political-cultural biblical religion has shaped my identity as female, girl, and young woman by turning me into a passive and submissive slave, obedient to the laws and teachings of the bible as preached/interpreted by the missionaries and the churches. By the time I realised what had happened, the weight and
baggage of a gender-socialised “Christian” identity by virtue of being born a female/girl/woman had already been imposed upon and internalised into me right to the core of my being, deeply rooted in my psyche. Culture and religion and the bible all worked together to create and nurture this identity and also impose a dominant colonial victim ideology upon me. The struggle to “exorcise” such a demonic cultural-religious identity/ideology that held sway over me and also held me captive for more than the first twenty years of my life has been a long and tough nightmare and battle. I was an object, at best an “alienated self” made in the image of this western colonising Christianity.

Although I went through many changes in my self-awareness and experience of liberation through the many social religious locations and contexts due mainly to the various types of work and commitment in my life, the bible continues to have a powerful influence in my life but in a different way. I became more conscious of the various types of biblical interpretations or misinterpretations that did so much damage to my life and personality. I also became aware of the ugly politics of interpretation attached to them. In response, I took on personally, for my own life and as a vocation, the urgent need and task to engage in “liberating” as opposed to enslaving biblical interpretations, this time with the insights from the new lens that grew out from the women’s perspective and struggle for liberation.

From my twenties on to a further stage particularly over the next thirty long years, there have been many “conversions” and moments of liberation. In my faith journey I have become aware at various and different stages of my life that I lived as a subordinate, subjected to socio-cultural and religious authorities and institutions. For over the next thirty long years the bible continued to play a central role in my life and work. Various as well as contending schools of thought took me through endless paths and sometimes towards extreme destinations offering both negative authority dependent states of being as well as positive liberating possibilities of being subject and being responsible.
In my first four-year theology course I learned new hermeneutical tools for biblical interpretations. Reading the biblical texts in its original context is important. Examining the historical, socio-political situation of the time, determining the purpose of the author/writer and the community to which it was written in a specific period of time are all necessary factors to take into account when making exegesis and exposition. Along with this model or method, often when the text is interpreted, or preached or done in bible study groups, attempts are often made to translate or apply the cultural meaning of the text to the reader’s cultural situation and context. These two methods of scientific and cultural hermeneutics appeared then to be more relevant and liberating as it went beyond the uncritical and “unthinking” doctrinal/dogmatic method.

The subsequent years (for three decades) were a full exposure to a plurality of theologies and biblical interpretations - from evangelical to liberal, to radical and progressive, “ecumenical”, liberational and feminist. In my lived experiences, I have journeyed through many years of practical struggle to make sense of faith within global historical realities, the Asian regional realities with its rich and varied, diverse, multicultural mix, national and personal (as woman individual) history - first as a woman Christian youth, then as a woman theological student, a woman pastor of a congregation, the wife/woman partner of a pastor, the (first woman) Regional Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Asia-Pacific, and recently as the Coordinator of Asia Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology.

The “new” hermeneutics of biblical interpretations became widely used and propagated in ecumenical meetings and programmes, in liberation theologies and later feminist theologies on national, regional and international levels. It became the dominant interpretations along with the explosion of broad and diverse biblical-theological writings and publications by a wide range of ecumenical groups and organisations committed to work for
peace, justice, integrity of creation; workers’ rights, women’s rights and human rights the world over. I found myself fully engaged and involved in applying these methods of biblical interpretations enlightened by women’s perspective, particularly in my work with churchwomen, the WSCF community on all levels, AWRC and ecumenical women on various levels.

Through all these, although in the course of my faith journey, progressive, ecumenical, malestream biblical and theological works have been very helpful at various times, they were still fraught with many shortcomings. The most painful experiences felt were incidents of being discriminated as a woman, based on my gender, both directly and indirectly. Violence against women was deeply felt when the bible was used to rationalise, justify and play down the status, image and position of women in the home, church and society.

Biblical texts in I Corinthians 11 and 14, I Timothy 2, Ephesians 5, the two creation accounts and stories of Adam and Eve, and other similar texts on household codes have been commonly used and quoted to put down women in order to keep them in their place, to keep them from ordination and church leadership. Strong, authoritarian clergy and men who abuse their power tend to use the doctrinal approach and interpret the bible in order to subjugate women even up to the present time.

Beyond such crude and shocking experiences are also the more horrifying experiences from the so-called progressive “liberated” men, male theologians and colleagues in the ecumenical movement. In ecumenical meetings, they peddle liberation theologies, mouth progressive, ecumenical, Marxist-Socialist language of liberation and transformation, employ the new scientific and cultural hermeneutics in biblical interpretations but in practice continue to discriminate, dominate and condone violence against women. Their progressive, radical language often turns doctrinal and reactionary when they use/quote “household codes” and texts to justify the inferior position of women and to further silencing them.
On a social personal level, I became increasingly sceptical and felt a deep sense of despair and even insult and betrayal as such encounters continued in almost every Christian or ecumenical programme/meeting. The bible was becoming a heavy burden like a stone of truth or rock that fell on me, making me helpless and devastated. The “positive” objectivist, historical and critical method of paradigm two that I have relied on for so long began to fall apart. It did not come to my rescue or provide any consolation but became a source of stress and health hazard in my life. I could not reconcile paradigm two with my painful struggling experiences of being marginalized, excluded and suffocated. It could neither witness to the gospel/good news of the bible nor bring forth freedom and liberation in Christ. Often times I experienced living death rather than life or wholeness. The paradigm resulted in my submission to the bible and to kyriarchy rather than to liberating me to claim freely my right and responsibility to be a Subject self.

Through all these different circumstances and experiences, while there were gains and limited successes in terms of making progress and building awareness and understanding of the violence done to women, there appeared to be no radical critical method/model or paradigms to bring about a total liberating change. Ultimately, the new hermeneutical tools of biblical interpretations did not really usher in a new day for women. There was no change, no thorough liberation nor any breath taking transformation happening. Many interpretive views have been tried, many understandings brought forward but always these have been partial or parochial answers that never seem to be touching radical causes and providing holistic “solutions” towards social personal and social structural transformation. In the end all such methods remained rather reformist and not truly liberating.

What are the problems with the traditional as well as the acclaimed positivist-scientific “liberationist” biblical interpretations? Why are they inadequate in bringing about genuine or substantial changes and breakthroughs? Here I speak as a Subject Self to make an
analysis of the various interpretations based on my own experience and quest for genuine liberation and transformation both socio-personally and in socio-structural ways too.

The Jesus-biblical religion imported by Western missionaries and later inherited by the local churches has held up the bible as the inspired Word of G*d for centuries. It is the doctrinal-revelatory paradigm that sees scripture as a sacred text. It gives the impression that G*d speaks to us as we read the bible. The meaning and message of the text have moral truths and values that are not only applicable but also imperative for us to follow. It focuses on biblical text as doctrine. The premise of this paradigm is that only certain people “called and ordained by G*d” can interpret the text. The basic assumption of this paradigm is that the biblical text is the Word of G*d inscribed in the text…it is divine revelation. Thus the approach to the reading of the bible is one of reverence, submission, seeing it as stone of truth, immutable, authoritative, and its teachings, rules and principles valid for all times. It has a divinely sanctioned authority in the faith community that has very often been used to silence people. It is a literal reading of the bible. This paradigm is used to control and dominate people. The priests/pastors have the WORD in their hands. Its starting point is the bible and its texts and leaves little or no room for human experiences to defer or question its interpretation. Such a reading maintains the hierarchy and keeps the power structures or kyriarchy intact. To my horror, I came to realise that more than twenty years of my life had been spent living faithfully by this slavish, self-alienating theology of bondage that arose from reading the bible in such a manner.

After going beyond this interpretive method and acquiring the new hermeneutics of biblical interpretations, I imagined that in the ensuing thirty years, I had already broken out of such a mould. But soon enough I felt a certain vacuum along the way. I found myself continuing the search for something more radical, critical and liberating by doing liberation theologies including feminist theology. What is still lacking in these new paradigms or
approaches and hermeneutical tools? What has failed? Again I have been asking more questions and searching for answers, for a breakthrough that would realise the deep longing for liberation, change and transformation in my life and in the lives of wo/men with whom I am in community. These new hermeneutical tools can be named/grouped into two paradigms: scientific-positivist and cultural paradigms. In both, the women’s perspective and experience is present and allowed space to explore and expand. The scientific-positivist paradigm dates back to the period of enlightenment when biblical scholars [mainly male and white] saw the need to make sense of faith and move beyond the doctrinal-revelatory paradigm. However, this model still tended to leave out the women’s experience of oppression and marginalisation and her right and responsibility to engage in theological reflection relative to her experience and from her standpoint in life. It failed to take the experience of women seriously and as valid starting points for critical reflection. It involved one having to know externalised facts and having a sense of history that was mainly men centred and from men’s point of view. The study and understanding of biblical texts in the historical and cultural contexts provided a semblance of the rational but it also hid the real life experiences and involvement and contribution of women.

The cultural paradigm is a way of reading the bible as cultural text. It guides you to see and understand G*d in the cultural context of the texts. It creates the need to understand people in their dynamic cultural context, applying this cultural model to the reader’s cultural situation. It is saying that the message for that time has a message for our time. Hence if people do not know the culture of the time then they do not understand Jesus’ message for them. All in the text is seen as a message wrapped in a cultural package.

Schüssler Fiorenza named four paradigms of biblical interpretations in a systematic manner in her recent book *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Critical Feminist Biblical
Interpretation. The first three are: 1. Doctrinal-Revelatory Paradigm. 2. Scientific-Positivist Paradigm. 3. Hermeneutic-Cultural Paradigm. 4. Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm.

Based on my experience, the first and third paradigms are used in community and church. Paradigm two is used largely in theological institutions and universities. People who are certified as having knowledge but make other people dependent on them use paradigms two and three for that purpose. All the three paradigms begin with the bible and texts. They do not begin with the reader as a subject who has his or her own experience and is capable of engaging in critical thinking and analytical reflection. The reader is subjected to the text and bible. The Subject Self is missing or ignored or taken for granted as the object instead. This is a characteristic trait of mainstream knowledge accumulation that actually demands one to become self-alienated. Many questions can be raised here: how is the text used? How does the text function in the process of oppression and liberation? If paradigms one, two and three have not helped to fully liberate my state of oppression and wo/men’s oppression then they are keeping people in suffering and enslaving existence. The fourth paradigm will be discussed in the next chapter.

Thus far, in my experience I have come across three types of paradigms for biblical interpretation that are widely used by different holders and doers of a diverse variety of theologies, including feminist theologies. More often than not, in applying the women’s perspective it has in fact gone beyond these two paradigms in many ways. Many women or feminists theologians and biblical scholars have developed feminist approaches to reading the bible and biblical interpretations in multiple ways. All this goes with the blooming of feminist theologies the world over. There are many resourceful methods and approaches looking at multiple forms of women’s oppression and justice issues.
The Bible as the Site of Our Struggles

It became an immense task for many ecumenical women and myself in taking on a re-reading of the bible from the “oppressed but struggling for liberation” women’s perspective. Based on a wide range of sharing and analyses of women’s rich experiences over the years in bible study and theology programmes, women voiced that the bible is patriarchal, written mostly by male, interpreted by the same and imposed upon all as the WORD OF G*D! It came into being in societies that were patriarchal and androcentric. The language is androcentric as well as malestream in thought form and “objective” knowledge which leads to self alienation. The problem remains as it is still proclaimed and taught today in our societies that are patriarchal, androcentric and kyriarchal as well. The problem is even compounded because today churchwomen are still largely the faithful readers of the bible following the doctrinal and cultural interpretations, which keep them in subordination and submission to the male dominated hierarchies and power structures of the church institutions, at home, at work and also in society at large. In pursuing my search and committing to the task of feminist biblical interpretation, I will share my lived experiences, my encounters and work with a diverse variety of women’s groups who come from many different Confessions as in the Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches.

In light of the above situation, many women began to search for ways that would enable them to critique and to break free from the disempowering, debilitating ways in which the bible has been put to use. By engaging in such efforts, it has empowered and sustained me in the journey to reclaim my self as a Subject, being able to rely on my own experiences and that of Christian women in the same journey seeking for our own emancipation for
transformation of life. In this ongoing exercise, women have drawn many similar and common conclusions in our attempts of a feminist re-reading and interpretation of the bible.

We have identified, named and critiqued the use/misuse of the bible in the following ways:

- The bible is recognised as a patriarchal document but different responses among women have arisen from this.
- The bible is a historical product of a kyriarchal/patriarchal society, culture, language and religion.
- The authors were socialised and influenced by the above factors and the products of the specific contexts they were in.
- Compilers, editors, redactors, translators, etc. who were mainly males, were profoundly influenced and gender socialised by their kyriarchal/patriarchal settings.
- The logical conceptual framework, thought form and language structure and substance were of the character of the domineering male, biased and androcentric.
- The bible is not the inspired word of G*d. It is not the Word of G*d. It is not a divine revelation. This has raised a serious question on the authority of the bible.
- It contains texts and books that are discriminating and violent against women.
- It has been used to distort, sanction and justify the lowly and subordinate status, image and position of women in church and in society.
- Many texts have been used for centuries till the present day, to legitimate patriarchy and sexism as the will of G*d, e.g. Genesis 2–3.
- The bible is used as the single most important sustaining rationale for the subjugation of women in church and society.
- The bible itself is a problem. It is not just a matter of male misinterpretation but it contains degrading teachings about women.
- These teachings are used effectively as weapons against women and they form the foundation of the Christian view and theologies of women.
- The bible is used as a divinely ordained book, revealing the will of G*d for women to be held captive and dependent.
- Most evangelists, preachers, pastors, bible teachers and Christian educators tend to read the bible through the socialised eyes of their cultures and religions which look upon and treat women with contempt. They can be both men and women who are patriarchal in their mentality, behaviour and attitudes.
The list is long and endless. Given the above, the effects and impact on the lives of women are unimaginably negative and burdensome. Women live their lives with an overwhelming sense of guilt and feelings of being sinful. The Doctrinal-Revelatory paradigm has been consistently and intentionally used to keep women in their state of oppression. This is the dominant model used by churches and Christian communities.

The bible is also a source of empowerment, liberation and positive experiences. Though the bible itself is a problem in many instances and there are many oppressive elements and texts of terror for women, women still hold dearly to it experiencing that there are also liberating messages, themes and texts for their empowerment and salvation. Hence they seek to lift up such texts and elements. Most popular examples quoted are the models of the Exodus and the Magnificat, the creation story in Genesis 1: 27-28, prophetic books.
Women like Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Ruth and Naomi, Sarah and Hagar, Mary Magdalene, Mary, Priscilla and Phoebe are often referred too as heroines and models for the inspiration and uplift of women in their daily struggle. Specific texts that affirm women’s participation, leadership and discipleship are used as counter voices used against women. The bible has served to inspire and empower movements for radical equality, human rights and wo/men’s well-being. Such feminist readings has touched many women’s lives and empowered them to persevere in the ongoing search for alternative ways of interpreting the bible from women’s perspective.

Concluding Reflections

For many Christian wo/men, the bible is the inspiring authority and major influence in their lives. Biblical teachings/interpretations can become a source of
liberation, empowerment and resource for hope and faith. Hence feminists must address this issue of biblical interpretation that has worked both ways for liberation as well as for subjugation in the lives of many wo/men. It is very important for wo/men desiring to reclaim their Selves and becoming the subjects of their own lives to have access to the liberating critical tools to interpret the bible. All the three paradigms mentioned above begin with the text. Feminist biblical interpretations can be found in these paradigms, but from a pre-critical approach. Women in the bible are ‘constructed’ by the men writers and used as models for other women to identify with. The bible has many inscriptions directing how women should behave, providing standards and models of historical women and men to model after. From these paradigms wo/men are the objects of the text and the bible continues to be for such wo/men a stone of truth, rather than bread of wisdom. Women can and will experience total liberation and transformation when they re-claim their Selves as subjects, overcoming self-alienation and moving on from there to experience life in all its abundance and fullness. In becoming a Subject, the woman will discover gems of wisdom in the bible, by reading it using the fourth paradigm within the “ekklesia”, the community of the discipleship of equals.

To sum up, my life’s story and women's experience are my starting points within the framework of an overall systemic analysis. It begins with addressing my own socio-personal experience and faith journey where the Self engages in the struggle to reclaim self as a subject in the midst of demonic distortions arising from a colonised and post/neo-colonised oppressed woman’s experience of socialised captivity. I have been struggling with other women and men for social personal and structural liberation and transformation for over thirty long years. The bible and its interpretation has been the site of my faith journey in this struggle for liberation.
CHAPTER TWO

MARKERS ALONG THE JOURNEY…CROSSROADS BY THE WAY…

A Critique of the Existing Feminist Methods of Biblical Interpretation

This chapter begins with a feminist critique of the bible as a product of Patriarchy and Kyriarchy, or in layperson’s terms, as the dominating man’s word royally canonised as the WORD OF G*D. This will then be followed by a critical survey of the various feminist methods of biblical Interpretation, including those attempts by “Asian Feminist” theologians as well as other previous methodologies that also fell/fall short. From my experience, in my journey, many so-called ‘feminist theologies' and Asian feminists, while they have come up with enlightening insights along the way, ultimately miss the mark and fall short. What are the problems with these “feminist liberationist” biblical interpretations? What is still lacking in their endeavours?

It is my conviction and contention that a new paradigm and alternative: the Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm or what has been described as the method of Critical
Feminist Biblical Interpretation that is most appropriate and thorough for the liberation of wo/men including the transformation of the structures within which they have been socially constrained and constructed. The use of the hermeneutical circle developed as The Dance of Liberation and Transformation, as a methodology for biblical interpretation promises liberation and transformation for all who are part of the “ekklesia of wo/men” in the here and now.

**Locating the Bible as A Site of Struggle in Feminist Hermeneutics**

Prior to making a critical survey of the existing methods of biblical interpretation, it is necessary to locate the bible as the site of women’s oppression as well as her struggle for liberation. This involves a critical review of how women and feminists regard the bible based on their lived experiences of violence and oppression in multiple ways and at various levels. In this discussion, the questions of interpretation, misinterpretation and reinterpretation are raised time and again in relation to the changing and “progressive” positions taken over the years in the overall history of feminist biblical interpretations. Particularly in the last three decades, a new perspective has emerged: feminist reading of the bible with a wide range of interpretive methods and approaches, all of which contributed to the development of a new discipline in the burgeoning field of feminist theologies.

The bible has always been upheld as central to and pre-eminent for Christian identity and for Christian living. Christian education, the proclamation of the gospel, teachings about discipleship, mission, evangelism and the many ministries of the church derive their very substance and content from the bible…as it has been interpreted/misinterpreted by its
institutional authorities, most if not all of whom, have been, for centuries now, from the male, as in the domineering male’s standpoint. Such patriarchal-kyriarchal androcentric-kyriocentric interpretations/misinterpretations have been upheld as the standard, the foundation and reference point of all and for all things Christian. Thus it should come as no surprise that the bible has been used, abused and distorted in multiple ways in the church institutions and by many, against women. It has generated more negative but also some positive effects for Christian women in all spheres of life (as elaborated and listed in chapter one.) The negative effects include giving women a heavier burden of responsibility to bear and more guilt and shame to contend with. While women experience discrimination and violence both inside and outside of the Church, the bible, as it has been interpreted/misinterpreted by the ruling/dominating Male authorities, continues to be used to sanction and legitimise gender inequality, unjust power relations and power for domination as something that is divinely ordained. As a counter cultural struggle for freedom, liberated Christian women, aware of their being as Subject Self, struggle to reclaim the rich resources and wealth of Wisdom from the bible through a feminist reading and reinterpretation of texts.

The biblical scholarship of Kwok Pui-lan and Schüssler Fiorenza (see bibliography), have contributed much to the demystification of scriptural texts as the WORD OF G*D by exposing them to be mere domineering androcentric man’s words made sacred, as mentioned, through being royally canonised. Going beyond original pro-testamentum intentions, the “sacred” texts themselves have been analysed, exposed and critiqued for what they are. They expose the “worldliness of the texts” and bring out male bias, colonial bias, Empire/androcentric/kyriocentric bias within the original texts as well as when they are interpreted by male custodians, colonisers, propertied, free born elite white males, educated men and certified women scholars too. Every text in the bible is a product of power struggle. It is prescriptive. It can involve and result in politics of interpretation. The bible is a
theological document that reflects a community of peoples’ faith experience and shared beliefs and values in pluralistic hierarchical contexts.

Kwok Pui-lan treats the bible as one of the resources and Christian traditions in feminist theologising. She values the bible as an important resource for feminist and third world theologies. As the bible occupies an important place in the Christian tradition, the interrogation of the ideology of colonization in Christianity, as well as its decolonising potential, must begin with a reappraisal of the biblical heritage. So Kwok traces the bible as a political text in the early church, e.g. its very canonisation being used as a political ploy to exclude women’s voices and demarcate orthodox and heresy, etc.

As an Asian and Chinese woman, she approaches the bible in the context of a vast and diverse Asia, the plurality of peoples, multiple Asian traditions, and addresses the complex issues of using the bible in feminist theology. More than this, she examines the challenges of Asian critics to western interpretations of scripture and exposes the sharp issues of colonial oppression. For her it is necessary to situate the multiple oppressions of women as a context to rediscover the liberating message of the bible. She highlights and uplifts Asian women’s theological reflections that focus on reinterpretation of the bible. Many women theologians have used the myths, legends, and cultural resources from within Asia to re-appropriate biblical stories. Asian Christian women emphasize that race, class, and religion divide women in the bible, just as women are today. She maintains, “The Bible is a product of complex interaction among many cultures. Discovering the cultural dynamics shaping the biblical narrative helps us understand how the Bible functions cross-culturally.”

In light of the negative as well as positive experiences, the last three decades that saw women engaged in feminist theologies have begun the immense task of biblical interpretation

and feminist hermeneutics that required in-depth biblical-theological scholarship. We will tap on the biblical scholarship and contributions of Kwok Pui-lan and Schüssler Fiorenza in the field of feminist hermeneutics and biblical interpretation.

Also a biblical scholar, Kwok brings a new perspective and voice to the task of biblical feminist hermeneutics in reading the bible in multidimensional ways. She draws on the ancient Chinese and various Asian traditions and commentaries on the 'Book of Change', the 'Dao de Jing', and the 'Bhagavad Gita'. In creative and imaginative approaches, she makes interconnected links between the reader, text and context. She also incorporates her insights of contemporary feminist and Third World theologies; and all these in her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.

Kwok advocates that racism and ethnocentricism perspectives must be adopted in feminist reading of the bible. In her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, she has in her last chapter developed ten theses on “Racism and Ethnocentricism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation”.

**Theses 1** The politics of biblical authority must be carefully examined from a feminist liberationist perspective. The bible has been understood as the most important foundation of faith for the Christian Church, particularly Protestant. It is not in fact true within the Catholic or the Orthodox tradition where the recorded word is one among other elements involved in the discernment of what might be the will of G*d in a given historical context. There is the bible and its context, the lived situation and its context and the accumulated experience and wisdom of the custodians of the tradition as well as the faith community in struggle who interprets what might be the will of G*d. All these elements plus "factors/elements outside

---

the faith" which have to be dialogueed with and influenced need to be taken into account for the living Word to be discerned.

There is no doubt that within the heretical Protestant tradition the bible as the Word of G*d has been distorted no end to rationalise and justify the bully, the subjugation and oppression of coloured men and women by the Christian colonising West. The chief character though is its lending itself to the rationalisation and justification of kyriarchy where the use of power as power over or the power to dominate is accepted as G*d given. This goes beyond gender analyses although women have also experienced being put down within kyriarchy. It is the canonisation of the bible as the Word of G*d under the aegis of the kyriarchal Roman Empire that must be the key hermeneutical consideration rather than merely gender element/considerations. Its kyriarchal and kyriocentric power over or power to dominate character is far more consequential than its gender oppositional/divide binary matrix.

Kwok has provided us with some sharp and interesting insights into how bible and the politics of the authority of bible as the Word of G*d has been used to justify racism and sexism. However, too much attention is focused from a gender feminist liberationist perspective rather than the power and its characteristic power over spirit of domination. In analysing it from a gender and feminist liberationist perspective it seems to me that Kwok allows kyriarchy to remain unchallenged and unchanged asking only for a greater involvement and share of power for women within it. Liberation from does not result automatically in liberation towards something radically new and qualitatively different. It is liberation and transformation from kyriarchy to the ekklesia of discipleship of equals.

Theses 2 Historical Critical Method and its shortcoming. Kwok points out that this is a typical middle class Eurocentric cultural off shoot. It allows the middle class the space to critique the ruling class as well as keep the oppressed class in a state of subjugation. Its pretension to impartiality and objectivity serves the aforementioned political function. As
Kwok rightly pointed out its impartiality is reflective of non-commitment other than its own survival. It does not challenge the status quo in a revolutionary manner thus ultimately reinforcing kyriarchy and the consequent subjugation of women within it. If patriarchy is seen as the main cause for the oppression of women then a gender reading is sufficient to point to root causes and possible solutions. But in fact it does not do so.

**Theses 3** The need to include the contributions of third world women in the development of feminist critique of Scriptures can appear like she's a champion of the oppressed women of the third world in relation to white women. But in fact the issue is again a question of challenging and transforming kyriarchal power over rather than creating space and remembering the contributions of third world women.

**Theses 4** Kwok seems to want to go beyond only gender considerations by asserting that race and class power dynamics need to be taken into account too in the multiple oppressions of women. While this sounds correct theoretically one gets the feeling that there is a neat compartmentalisation of sorts that does not perceive class, race and gender as one but rather as disparate parts of the whole. Again because her perspective springs from gender rather than from a critique of kyriarchy, hence the analysis is lacking as to how structures of power and domination can be tackled.

**Theses 5** Kwok cautions against racist anti-Jewish tendencies as reflected in the Christian scriptures and by interpreters. The fact that the scriptures were canonised under the Roman Empire probably gave rise for such an anti-Jewish slant. It would not have been politically correct and possible to blame the Roman Empire for the killing and crucifixion of Jesus. But again this reflects the kyriarchal context within which such tendencies of the scriptures are more consequential than its racist and gender biased tendencies.

**Theses 6** Kwok asserts that scripture should not be used to discriminate and oppress persons of other race or ethnicity.
**Theses 7** The bible is the product of a complex interaction among many different cultures. Discovering and understanding this dynamic process that went into the shaping of biblical accounts might give one insights into how the bible functions cross culturally today.

The social milieu within which the Jews and early Christians lived was multicultural and pluralistic. Despite attempts at maintaining purity there was much intermarriage and cross fertilisation of cultures and probably religious beliefs as well leading to what is today described as religious and cultural syncretism. Against the barriers of racial and cultural chauvinism various peoples were drawn together and the early Christians had to cope with their growth as a popular movement in the midst of a pluralistic world. The story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman is an example of a meeting between two persons from different cultures, religions, class and genders. Theissen sees the miracle not so much in the healing of someone far away but in the overcoming of the divisive prejudiced based distance between nations and cultures. For some feminists the story takes a slant from the usual Christocentric perspective when Jesus is taken to task with regard to his power and privilege as a Jewish male. Yet others see that although the Syrophoenician woman was from the elite urban class that exploited the Galilean hinterland she was despised by the Jews and oppressed as a woman. Even so she took her Gentile and female identity seriously enough to challenge Jesus in the process teaching him a lesson and broadening his horizons and self-understanding.

**Theses 8** The bible must also be read from the perspective of other faiths. Multi-faith hermeneutics looks at ourselves as others see us so that we may be able to see ourselves more clearly. Given that Asian Christians live in a continent populated by adherents of all the major historical religions of humankind and that they are a mere 3 %, Kwok feels that a multi-faith hermeneutics must be given serious attention. This may well be a timely advice and a long overdue responsibility in the face of the rather triumphalist stance Christians,
influenced by Western imperialism, have taken so far. In the midst of growing tensions projected by the “clash of civilisations” and demonstrations of Islamic fervour Christians will do well to understand the sensitivities of other religions and bear witness through the heightened knowledge of our scriptures in the eyes of other faiths. There is an urgent need to change from traditional triumphalism to a more reconciliatory and sensitive understanding of various religions. In the words of Kwok biblical scholarship must be more responsible to the wider human family.

**Theses 9** Women under multiple oppressions have multiple identities, which in turn help women to interpret the bible in multi-dimensional ways. Quoting from an Asian American, Rita Nakashima Brock, “a person with multiple identities is one who has the capacity to search for multiple voices that affirm complex cultural meanings and identities and thereby creating a fluid, multilayered self.” As persons with multiple identities they are able to perceive multi-dimensionally as well as through the multilayers of meanings the bible contains as a document of multiplicity and plurality.

**Theses 10** Kwok feels strongly that racism and ethnocentrism are issues for all biblical scholars and not for third world women or minority women only. Asking the question why third world women and minority women focus on the multiple oppressions of women in the bible, she replies that it is because these stories speak the reality and shed light on their existence. They seek to use these texts to uncover the interlocking oppression of racism, classism and sexism in the past and in the present thereby helping all of us to liberate ourselves from bondage. They wish to develop a biblical hermeneutics that addresses the liberation of all peoples not only women. Such a concern should be shared by all biblical scholars and men and women reading the bible for insights. The search for a liberating hermeneutics from one’s social and historical location should be the responsibility of all.

---

Kwok has raised many insights and helpful significant points in her ten theses that are of great relevance not only for biblical scholars from the third world but for all. Her final challenge raised to everyone is “What price have you paid in your study of the bible?” The answer to this is that of a costly discipleship.

This brings me back to recall the history, albeit in passing, of women’s attempts in general and initiatives by women in Asia and women from the third world in particular, who wanted to reclaim and re-read the bible for themselves. As an example of one initiative in Asia, “Starting as a small group of ecumenical women based in Singapore, the group met for bible studies and reflection from their perspective as women shared their stories and faith in response to God’s call in their time.” Following this pattern of re-reading the bible from women’s perspective, diverse and broad initiatives soon spread all over Asia among newly “conscientized” Christian women. This was happening from the early 1980s onwards among local groups of women in ministry and theology; among the constituent groups of women’s commission in various national council of churches under the umbrella of the Christian Conference of Asia Women’s Concerns Desk (CCA Women); the then newly formed Asian Women’s Resource Centre (AWRC) for Culture & Theology in November 1987; and the World Student Christian Federation Asia-Pacific Regional Women’s Programme (WSCF-AP Women). Many and various programmes in these different network groups have gone on a re-reading of the bible from the women’s perspective on a wide scale whenever they were gathered together. The main thrust of such a re-reading was to interpret both negative and positive texts about women in the bible. Upon a critical reading the process of empowerment focused on remembering positive texts of women characters that had been heroines or exemplary women of courage and success in the biblical world of patriarchy. Most of these

---

68 Ibid., p. 95.
exercises ranged from attempts to recover and uphold the feminine aspects of G*d as Mother, to retrieving texts that were “texts of terror” for women, to texts that expose in the most crude fashion the patriarchal, misogynist, anti-women character of the scriptures to the more positive examples of how Jesus the “enlightened” man, Saviour, Lord was sensitive to and favourable towards women including and “allowing” them to be followers as well as partners in the leadership circles of the Jesus movement, to even raising question about the qualification of Jesus as Saviour given that he is a Male, born of and nurtured within a patriarchal androcentric cultural context – women’s groups went through the gamut of possibilities that was reminiscent of a second Tillichian “shaking of the foundations”. Indeed Kwok Pui Lan in her Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology has gone so far as to raise very radical and fundamental questions like requeering sexuality, going beyond heterosexist paradigms, redoing feminist theology from the perspectives of other religions and secular spiritualities etc. opening up a new vista of questions to be addressed and work to be done for doing postcolonial imagination perspective feminist theology in the Two-Thirds World70!

**Feminist Hermeneutics and Methods of Interpretation**

Affirming that the interpretation of scripture is human-made, there is no absolute way of understanding the bible. It is plausible to question the church’s interpretation of scripture. There is no single interpretive meaning and method but many different approaches and perspectives. There are many revisionist or remedial methods of biblical interpretation used by women and feminist biblical scholars. This goes back to a history of more than two

---

70 *Third World/Two-Thirds World* – A geopolitical term used to indicate countries that are not in the so-called “First World”, the economically privileged countries of North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Western Europe (Communist eastern Europe was the “Second World”). In response to the hierarchical implications of “Third World”, the term “Two-Thirds World” was introduced to acknowledge the greater portion of the world’s citizens who do not live in economically privileged countries (*Wisdom Ways*, glossary).
centuries that is even earlier than the well-known Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s work of the Woman’s Bible. The next few pages will make a critical survey of the various feminist methods that have developed over the years, which have been widely used by women/feminist theologians particularly in the last three decades of feminist theologising.

In Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *Wisdom Ways*\(^7\), she presents a wide range of feminist methods of interpretation. The main approach is remedial and revisionist in character resulting in a great variety of steps or interpretive methods. The main thrust of this approach assumes that “the bible does not prohibit but rather authorizes equal rights and liberation of wo/men if it is understood correctly”\(^2\). These methods go back to a long history of feminist biblical interpretations, which have great impact on subsequent feminist reading and approaches to the bible.

In Asia among Christian women and feminists, I can now trace how this historical trend developed within the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics, which have had great influence and tremendous impact on Asian Christian women doing theologies and biblical studies. Particularly in my work and experience with WSCF-AP women and AWRC for Culture and Theology, methods and models of biblical studies have been well received with new women’s perspectives that gave new answers to new questions asked in the light of women’s lived experiences of the prevalent multiple form of oppression. For more than two decades Asian Christian women have been intensely engaged in this process of feminist biblical studies. However, many methods and approaches used in these biblical studies have been mainly based on a gender or women’s approach, which has its limitations and constraints. For example in many of AWRC’s feminist theological journal and publications


on biblical studies\textsuperscript{73}, this gender and women’s approach/method is reflected, even in the most recently held feminist theology programmes and bible study workshops\textsuperscript{74}. These shortfalls have been critiqued by Kwok particularly those that she analysed in her ten theses, and Schüssler Fiorenza’s in the revisionist and corrective methods that she has identified and traced in the history of feminist hermeneutics.

From the outset Schüssler Fiorenza’s premise is based on the fact that corrective steps need to undo structures of domination and alienation inscribed in biblical texts and for reading “otherwise”. She critiques that such corrective steps must be taken in conjunction with critical liberationist analytic. Feminist biblical studies need to keep in tension the basic contradiction of how the bible is understood – on one hand it is regarded as G* d’s Word in male words, written in kyriocentric language, while at the same time the bible has served to inspire and empower movements for radical equality, human rights and well-being. These contradictions are not exclusive of each other but must be braided together in the process of interpretation. It is an ongoing engagement in the process and movement of conscientization.

In Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical evaluation, she traced the history of four major methods developed and evolved over the centuries, which emerged out of the praxis of feminist biblical interpretation and process of conscientization by wo/men and feminists. They are:

\textsuperscript{73} Looking at \textit{In God’s Image} journal, take for example the past five to ten years where biblical studies/reflection have been done. In terms of AWRC publications, e.g. \textit{Women of Courage, Proceeding Reports of Study Workshops I and II, Unleashing the Power Within Us, Transforming Attitudes Towards Sexuality}, and even the latest module Book 1 on \textit{Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies} (please see bibliography for specific references).

\textsuperscript{74} In terms of regional programmes held, for e.g. three Bible Study Workshops held in Cambodia from November 1999 to 2002; three Women’s Alternative Leadership for Transformation Workshops in Cambodia from 2000 to 2002; Seminar on Introduction to Feminist Theologies in Malaysia, 2003, Bible Study and Sexuality Workshops held in Sri Lanka, 2004. In my local involvement in biblical studies with two groups of women, namely the Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology; and especially with Women’s Voice over the immediate past five years, which is still ongoing.
1) corrective methods, 2) historical reconstructive methods, 3) imaginative interpretive methods, and 4) methods of conscientization. She gives a concise and critical analysis of the steps taken in the various interpretive methods\(^{75}\) as in the following:

1) **Corrective Methods of Interpretation**

- *Textual* criticism was the first step in critical biblical studies. Feminists studied Greek and Hebrew in order to correct false translations and commentaries. However, there was inadequate attention given to analyse how kyriocentric language was equated to generic language. For example Phoebe’s status is a case in point. In Romans 16: 1-2 it says a wo/man by the name of Phoebe is given the title *diakonos*. But this title reflects a masculine form grammatically, although it refers to a wo/man. In the Greek grammatical gender it can work in a three-way classification system: masculine/feminine/neuter.

- Translation of “generic” language depends on intellectual frameworks and socio-political location of the translator and interpreter. For example the word Holy Spirit in original Hebrew or Greek biblical text is feminine, grammatically. Also Jews and Christians believe the Divine is above gender construct. But the Holy Sprit was masculinized and soon perceived as “common sense” or natural language through the Latin translation of the Roman Catholic doctrine the Vulgate, which has the prevalent masculine gendering.

- The method of *Feminist textual criticism* shows kyriocentric tendencies, which marginalize wo/men not only in translations and editions but also in the selection and redaction of traditional materials by biblical writers, including selective canonization of early Christian texts.

- Using *Biblical literacy and knowledge about wo/men* approach in the bible can be enhanced through liturgical readings of wo/men and ritual celebrations of biblical women.

• This remedial approach does not restrict merely to canonical writings but encourages extra-canonical & cross-cultural research.

• In the apologetic hermeneutics approach, it seeks to recover forgotten traditions about wo/men. But on the other hand it may possibly remove centuries of kyriocentric interpretations that have covered original true meaning of the text, which have either neglected wo/men’s presence in the text or distorted original meaning of female characters in biblical stories.

• Another corrective step is the revisionist interpretation with special focus on wo/men as biblical authors. But this remedial interpretation from wo/men’s perspective is insufficient and even presumptuous. Wo/men in their socio-religious location and context might have possibly internalized feminine values and might not have written liberating texts. Instead through them they might reproduce kyriocentric text that would communicate values and visions of kyriarchy.

• Classification is used to bring out the negative and positive statements about wo/men, e.g. positive texts and traditions are perceived as different from stories of terror and wo/men’s victimization in the texts. Other interpreters/scholars classify the feminine imagery of G*d as positive, ambivalent or negative. However, underlying such a division or dichotomy they show the biases and prejudices over and against Jewish traditions, post-biblical writings of Judaism, Gnosticism, later Christian testament writings and that of church fathers. This corrective step of pure intent to reclaim the bible as a positive support for wo/men’s emancipation may at the same time re-inscribes kyriarchal dualisms.

• Different from the classified negative role of wo/men in Judaism, some revisionist efforts highlight the Greco-Roman culture where wo/men were culturally socialized. Hence it is necessary to have the negative injunctions in texts like 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, which restrict wo/men’s freedom in speech and leadership/authority in public. In asserting
that they cannot be used as “proof texts” against wo/men, they have also put the blame on wo/men in “depraved” cultures in order to ‘save’ the text rather than indict the misogynist texts of the bible.

The common conclusions drawn may be useful interpretive methods in the process of conscientization in feminist reading of the bible, but they fall within the evaluative appraisal and critique as being insufficient or inadequate although they are to a large extent remedial and corrective steps in interpretation.

2) Historical Reconstructive Methods

Feminist historical reconstruction is proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza\textsuperscript{76} as one of the critical tools in feminist biblical hermeneutics. It is useful to deconstruct the androcentric and kyriarchal understanding of history and biblical texts. It seeks to bridge the gap between contemporary readers and the text constructed by historical positivism. Also it seeks to displace literary and historical kyriocentric dynamic of biblical text by de-contextualising the text in different socio-political-religious-historical contexts so as to make visible and audible the subordinated and marginalized “others”. In the process, attempts are made to recover wo/men’s heritage, both wo/men’s religious historical agency and the memory of their victimization, struggle, and accomplishments. Her first major classic work of feminist theology, \textit{In Memory of Her}, probes the history of the origins and attempts to read the silences and gaps in the biblical texts that might have produced repressed memories of women’s voices and presence. She seeks to reclaim the past, and to critically reconstruct the agency and full participation of women within the whole history of early Christianity. Her

\textsuperscript{76} As there are several quotations used in this section that are taken from her book \textit{Wisdom Ways}, I have stated the page number after each quote instead of making them into footnotes.
feminist method of history is not simply a conception of wo/men’s oppression by men but “the story of wo/men’s historical agency and struggles against kyriarchal subordination and oppression.” (p. 144). Her groundbreaking reconstructive approach breaks away from the positivist scientific as she asserts that history is a story of power relations and struggles. It is a conscious historical and complex ideological-political reconstruct. Hence she asserts “Recognizing the absence and marginalization of wo/men in kyriocentric texts, feminist historians have sought to articulate the problem of how to write wo/men back into history and how to capture the memory of women’s historical experience and contribution.” (p. 144)

In her critique of various feminist reconstructive attempts by feminist historians, Schüssler Fiorenza points out that though many did so with an expressed intention to reclaim wo/men’s history, they ended up re-inscribing kyriocentric biblical texts in the process. She says “Kyriocentric biblical texts tell stories and construct social worlds and symbolic universes that mythologize, reverse, absolutize, and idealize kyriarchal differences and, in so doing, obliterate or marginalize the historical presence of the devalued ‘others’.” (Pp. 145-146). It is crucial in feminist biblical interpretation to use “models of historical and socio-cultural reconstruction that can subvert the biblical text’s kyriocentric dynamics and place the struggles of those whom it marginalizes and silences into the center of the historical narrative.” (p. 146). In this reconstruction it requires a critical investigation into the androcentric and kyriocentric language and also “the theological hermeneutics as well as the positivist assumptions of historical, sociological, and theological biblical scholarship contained within their scientific models of reconstruction.”

3) Imaginative Interpretive Methods

The earliest feminist attempts in re-reading the bible have sought to use creative ways and methods to make the biblical stories come alive through role-play, bibliodrama, dance and song. One early method was that of personal identification with the wo/men characters and those in ‘generic’ stories that do not mention their presence but give the impression or assumption that wo/men are present. For some faith became identified with the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew bible and with the long-suffering but ultimately victorious Jesus. Another different technique of story telling was that of asking the question “what if”. “Interviews” as a method, are also used for role-playing the writers or biblical characters. An imaginative interpretive method as in Midrash is also used. It puts wo/men’s voice back into the text and retells the story that renders the spirit of mending and healing the world. The process of imagination also creates an inclusive language when all people are affirmed and valued as gifted by G*d. These methods are experiential and text oriented, which in many ways give some visual narratives of wo/men’s stories.

4) Methods Of Conscientization

Critical feminist interpretive methods of the bible, as suggested by Schüssler Fiorenza, are effective means of engaging in the process of feminist consciousness-raising. It is an ongoing movement of conscientization embraced by committed feminists who seek to subvert the subtle and persuasive power of kyriocentric texts by placing wo/men in the centre of attention. Feminist conscientization has its task, which “seeks to shift attention from the kyriocentric text to wo/men as reading subjects.” (p.152) Taking the subject position is most fundamental as the reader assumes her/his subjectivity in acceptance or rejection of or resistance to the given texts.

A feminist method of conscientization exercises “methods of resistance that develops alternative visions to deconstruct, debunk, and reject the kyriocentric politics of the canonical text.” (p.152) To read the text as critical, and thus “resisting” readers going against the grain
of kyriarchy, a different radical egalitarian imagination is needed. But the method of imaginative identification with biblical wo/men has its limitations, as wo/men characters are constructs of kyriarchal texts and authors. Readers must be conscious that wo/men stories in the biblical texts are shackled by and entrenched within the kyriarchal culture and religion. Hence, this must go hand in hand with hermeneutics of suspicion and critical evaluation before it can re-imagine and re-create them in a feminist key. It will shift its focus on subordinates and dependents by centering leading men and wo/men of high status. For example, focusing on Hagar instead of Sarah has brought to fore the prejudices and power relations that exist between women.

In places where the texts and stories are told in generic way, questions can be raised if the human values apply to men and wo/men. If the text or story does not make sense then it should be marked as kyriocentric. (p. 157) This whole process and movement of feminist consciousness-raising challenges the use of “common sense” and takes a conscious reading of text ‘as a wo/man’ or ‘from a wo/man’s perspective’ in a radical democratic space such as ekklesia of wo/men78. Such readings need to be done from “different socio-political global-cultural, pluralistic religious subject locations.” (p. 157)

In Kwok Pui-lan’s biblical discourse, she brings out the many hermeneutical obstacles and principles in reading the bible in an Asian context as shown in her ten theses. She takes the Asian context seriously by taking into account the diverse, multi-religious and pluralistic situations. She has brought to our attention a very critical insight and a critical principle for

---

78 Ekklesia of wo/men – The radical democratic assembly of free citizens who gather in order to conduct critical debate and determine their own communal, political and spiritual well-being. When found in the Christian Testament (New Testament), the word is translated as ‘church’. Since throughout history, full citizenship and democracy were restricted to elite males, it is necessary to qualify ekklesia with wo/men in order to overcome its kyriocentric determination. (Wisdom Ways, glossary)
liberation as well as feminist biblical interpretation through what she has described as “postcolonial imagination”[79].

Schüssler Fiorenza has developed in her critical feminist theology of liberation a specialised field most extensively in tackling critical feminist biblical interpretation.

A New Paradigm: Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm

In my struggle for social personal freedom leading me to search for biblical interpretations that were liberating, in particular a liberating feminist hermeneutic, I was not only looking for an adequate theory but more importantly a liberating and transformational praxis. I was in search of practical, achievable, experiential liberation, which would of necessity include the transformation of systemic and structural realities in the “real” world of the here and now, that oppressed all wo/men including my self. In my previous search, I had been exposed to many malestream and androcentric albeit “critical” models of knowledge, as well as seemingly liberating paradigms of biblical hermeneutics and interpretation. It was an engaging and at times even fascinating process that was very involved. But through deeper analysis and the praxis of liberation for wo/men in general and in particular women who were engaged in struggle for liberation and for myself personally all these proved to be insufficient to provide the answers to the questions that we had. Many were attractive and progressive sounding but to a large extent they stayed at the level of the mind and in theory. To go back to what I had set out to do in this chapter, the questions remain: What are the problems with even “feminist liberationist” biblical interpretations? Based on my experience in my struggle personally and in relation to groups, what was still lacking or wanting in these various “answers”? We reviewed the various interpretive methods, which feminist interpreters have employed over the years in the history of feminist biblical interpretation. We “tested” these

through practice over time. From the outset in her book chapter five of *Wisdom Ways*, Schüssler Fiorenza remarks that there is no single reading strategy and interpretive method. Feminist interpreters have in fact used a variety of different methods to re-read the bible and text. So there is no blue print formula as to which method is to be used or followed. However since the exegetical-historical methods are often kept or even owned by experts and scholars, usually in the academy, it is not accessible to ordinary human beings many of whom do not even know how to read. She therefore asserts that with a critical, rhetorical feminist interpretation, it is available and usable by everyone, without any training. This is also understood as a feminist process for the reader/doer who as a Subject is engaged in the process and movement of conscientization. Such is also a process and movement for socio-personal and socio-political change and transformation.

Based on my experience and to my mind, Schüssler Fiorenza has thus far, developed the most comprehensive praxiological “method”, for want of a more appropriate word, for women and men to refer to in their quest to live out faith in community committed to personal, socio-personal and socio-structural liberation and transformation. She offers a “methodology” or in her terms a “dance movement with appropriate steps” that provides a feminist theoretical framework and feminist social analysis in reading the bible and any other theological themes or issues affecting wo/men. She is the most holistic, relative to my own social religious location and faith journey. Her profound work found in her latest book in English, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* contains and expresses most succinctly and “comprehensively” my personal beliefs and theological positions on the question of what then is to be done after all has been said and done! Along with her pioneering work in critical feminist liberation theology, she has done groundbreaking work and opened up new paths in this field of critical feminist biblical interpretation (CFBI). In her various books (see bibliography) written extensively and developed on this central theme
she says it is very important that wo/men get the critical tools to interpret the bible. Schussler Fiorenza is of the opinion that the new biblical scholarship is more realistic and inclusive because it brings different perspectives and different experiences and different viewpoints from different social locations to bear upon how the text is read. This generates new questions and opens new horizons to the reading of texts. Reiterating that the bible is written in a patriarchal-kyriocentric framework, biblical text must be read with a hermeneutics of suspicion. She stresses that it is important to address and critically analyse the social, economic political context, and to read and interpret biblical texts in the context of the larger patriarchal/kyriarchal hegemonic context. It is also just as important to critique the interpreters of the texts without forgetting that the critic too comes at all the above with pre-constructed ideas and prejudices. She maintains that feminists must concern themselves with the bible and religion if they are concerned with the liberation of wo/men. For many wo/men the bible is the inspiring authority with great influence in their lives. Biblical teachings/interpretations can be a source of strength and hope as they have been a source of guilt and misery. Hence feminist must address this issue of biblical interpretation that has been a source of great power in the lives of many wo/men80.

CFBI begins with a conscious understanding of the paradigms and models from which we operate. She identifies four paradigms that are used in biblical interpretation, three of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. In short, all the three paradigms begin with the text. Feminist biblical interpretations can be found in the paradigms, but from a pre-critical approach. Women in the bible are ‘constructed’ by the men writers and used as models. The bible has many inscriptions of how women should behave with given standards and models of historical women and men to model after. From these paradigms wo/men are

the objects of the text and the bible continues to be for many wo/men a stone of truth, rather than as bread of wisdom.

The fourth paradigm, that is, the **Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm**, understands the biblical texts as rhetorical-political because the texts are aimed at an audience who can be persuaded. The word ‘emancipation’ is revisited to restore its original meaning over against its negative label. Emancipation can be traced back to the liberation process from slavery and tutelage. Hence it is deemed fitting as an interpretive approach, which aims at “overcoming structures of domination”81 and seeing to/concerned with everyone’s welfare. “It is a new paradigm and yet has been evolving in the past twenty years”, said Schüssler Fiorenza. It has already “a long history in political-radical democratic struggles for emancipation.”82 The paradigm “investigates the ways in which biblical texts exercise influence and power in social and religious life.”83 The interpreter is guided to investigate “how the bible is used to inculcate mindsets and attitudes of submission and dependency as ‘obedience’ to the will of G*d that disposes us to accept and internalise violence and prejudice.”84 This paradigm bears in mind and assumes that texts are persuasive and can yield power and control in specific situations, where they function to legitimate or challenge the status quo. There are four models in this paradigm. I have opted for the fourth model named as **Critical Feminist Liberationist model**.

This paradigm starts with **who** is interpreting the bible, and in what **context**. The Subject of the text is the one interpreting the text. It is imperative and essential that the reader realises that she/he is the Subject of any text. It begins with the Subject’s experience and

---

81 Ibid., p. 44.
82 Ibid., pp. 43 – 44.
84 Ibid., p. 44.
social religious location along with systemic analysis of the structures of domination within the context of the socio-political arena of that experience. To adopt this model one has to make a qualitative leap from the first three paradigms, though Fiorenza says that these paradigms and models are not exclusive of each other but are alternative reading strategies that can be learned. Schüssler Fiorenza said, “Historical critical scholarship emphasizes strongly the authors of the text, for instance, Paul or Timothy, and reads the text only as a descriptive communication of the author but not from the perspective of the audience. A critical rhetorical method… understands the text always in context.” 85 The text then communicates what arises from the context. The social location of the author, the expected audience and reason for communicating what the author intends are important factors when reading the text. This means other than giving attention to Paul the reader must see that the text itself is a communication between people. The question then leads to who are the people Paul has written to. She then quoted an example: “The book on the Corinthian wo/men prophets by Antoinette Clark Wire, for instance, reads Paul’s letter from the perspective of wo/men in Corinth. Usually, scholarship on the Pauline writings understands the people to whom Paul writes in terms of the malestream historiographical model of orthodoxy and heresy. Paul is then of course seen as orthodox whereas his so-called opponents are seen as heretics, who are often labelled as gnostics. Scholarship constructs the arguments of Paul as arguments between Paul and those who are deviant. However, if one reads Paul from the perspective of those in the communities to whom Paul writes, then we can read Paul’s text from the perspective of wo/men who were there and were leading in the communities to

85 Woon Yoke Heng, "An Interview with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ", in In God's Image, Vol. 24 No. 3, September 2005, p. 44.
whom Paul writes. Thus the whole argument becomes a different argument in a feminist historiography.\textsuperscript{86}

She suggests that this big leap to operate from the \textit{Critical Feminist Liberationist Model} can be engaged by hermeneutic mediation, aided by a methodology in a dance step of suspicion-reconstruction-evaluation-imagination, a process by which transformation and change can be brought about. The model contains three main elements: 1) socio-political analysis: experience-systemic analysis; 2) hermeneutical mediation: suspicion-reconstruction –evaluation-imagination; 3) goal: struggle, change and transformation. Each main part flows one into another and yet each can be used without following the order or excluding the other. This is the methodological model of “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” that she has developed over the years, which she presents in her book \textit{Wisdom Ways} in a most systematic way in Chapters One and Six.

The new CFBI paradigm is a fundamental break with/from the dominating kyriarchal/kyriocentric discourse. Here she has also developed most sharply and systematically tools for a systemic analysis of kyriarchy that goes beyond the traditional male biased materialist reading and social analysis of society. Critical feminist biblical interpretation begins with a critically conscious understanding of the experience and social location of the interpreter as well as the various existing paradigms developed within the kyriarchal order. This order is kyriocentric in character within which its citizens are “socialised” to accept the use of power as power to dominate as opposed to the notion of power as power to liberate for justice and for mutual enhancement. Within kyriarchy power as power to dominate is the only way to exercise power. It calls for a radical break with and change of dominating power structures and its transformation on socio-personal and societal structural levels as well. To read the texts as products of a patriarchal/kyriarchal cultural

\textsuperscript{86} Woon Yoke Heng, "An Interview with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ", in \textit{In God's Image}, Vol. 24 No. 3, September 2005, p. 44.
context and to seek for liberation and transformation through the hermeneutics of imagination, will bring us to a different approach to the texts, their understanding and functioning.

The next chapter will be a presentation of the hermeneutical circle, the dance steps, which are developed as a methodology for “Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation”. It is the biblical methodology that promises social personal liberation as well as the transformation of those very structures that have constrained and oppressed wo/men since time immemorial.

CHAPTER THREE
FINDING WISDOM WAYS

A Biblical Methodology: Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation

“Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation”, according to Schüssler Fiorenza can also be expressed in terms of the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation”. I have experienced it to be the most radical, comprehensive and relevant tool of systemic analysis for understanding and analysing the wo/man’s experience of subordination and at the same time also offering direction to the struggle for liberation. It must be emphasized that this exercise is something done personally, individually as well as in relation to others within the community of faith, the ekklesia of wo/men, which is inclusive of men and women committed to socio-personal liberation and social structural transformation. Wo/men and men of faith as a community of the faithful live out what it means to be members of the Jesus movement practicing radical democracy in mutuality. Their vision is of an ekklesia of
wo/men, which is an assembly of freeborn citizens who make their own decisions as opposed to the hierarchical structure in existence.

In working on this biblical methodology there are many important presuppositions that are foundational, which must precede the methodology if it has to be holistic, integral, liberative and transformational rather than technical. The pre-requisites and presuppositions must be clear from the outset. It must show that the subject-interpreter possesses the following:

➢ Beginning and claiming oneself as the Subject self and agent involved in the process of conscientization for liberation and transformation.
➢ Engaging with the bible and doing biblical interpretation as a site of struggle for liberation.
➢ Clarifying one’s vision with commitment to human struggle for total liberation and transformation of life within the free space of the ekklesia of wo/men.
➢ Locating oneself within the open space of ekklesia of wo/men as a site of struggle and commitment to liberation and transformation of self and community.
➢ Having a critical feminist social analytic perspective that will sustain a systemic analysis of the situation.
➢ Nurturing a more holistic understanding in critical feminist biblical interpretation through the perspectives of class, race, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion age, nationality, colonial experiences, heterosexism and sexuality.

87 Based on my varied and long years of experience with many groups engaged in such struggles for women's liberation and structural transformation, the above conditions and considerations help to ensure maximum success in their attempts for change. These pre-requisites/conditions are arrived at after many years of working with various groups of women struggling for personal liberation and structural transformation. It is not exhaustive but open to new insights in the nature of wisdom gained through constant learning and experience.
Keeping in view constantly a wide variety of hermeneutical methods and principles particularly those suggested by Kwok Pui Lan, which are resourceful guides for specifically the first two dance steps.

The methodological model of “A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” is akin to a dance with seven major steps (see diagram on page 62). To reiterate, I have mentioned these seven steps of the model in chapter two which contains three key elements: 1) socio-political analysis: experience-systemic analysis; 2) hermeneutical mediation: suspicion-reconstruction-evaluation-imagination; 3) goal: struggle, change and transformation. All the spiral dance steps have theories of interpretation. The dance can begin at any point and it can be going back and forth in praxis without being orderly from one to seven. It is a dynamic spiral type of moves and turns. The movement is not linear, the steps can be retraced, repeated, never ending.

Working through this hermeneutical spiral dance can be emotionally difficult as it may raise and surface many psychological issues that have been suppressed. It is a methodology that does not work just on the intellectual level. Instead it yields to a strong possibility of challenging the various multiple identity constructs of the Subject interpreter in terms of her/his social and religious location, in terms of gender, race, class, culture, religion, nationality and colonial conditioning and so forth. Thus, the dance acknowledges and accepts the presence of anger and anguish within the dancer, who recognizes the injustice done by the structures of oppression. S/he is aware of the tension and temptation that it would be easier to delete all history of oppression and struggle for liberation. But it is only in connecting with the history of the struggle, can there be possibilities leading to commitment

---

to change and transform situations of injustice, and to imagine a more just future, inspired by the biblical visions of justice and well being.

A Hermeneutics of Experience

It begins usually from the hermeneutics of the experience of the Subject interpreting the text. Questions asked at this step of the dance would include questions such as: What values and mindset have I internalised? What ideological function do these texts have, the kinds of values they reinforce? From my experience, how have the interpretation of these texts dominated and enslaved wo/men? The hermeneutics of experience can call forth all the hermeneutical steps and towards transformative action for change. Schüssler Fiorenza points out the difference between wo/men’s experience and feminist experience. Wo/men’s experience remains in the social-cultural and religious constructs that keep and trap them in terms of their gender position. She then makes a concise analysis beyond such wo/men’s experience into this feminist category of experience in four crucial components:

5. Experience is mediated linguistically and culturally. There is no “pure experience” that can be distilled from its kyriocentric contexts and texts.
6. The personal is political. Personal experience is not private but public; it is socially constructed in and through race, gender, class, heterosexuality, ethnicity, age and religion.
7. Since personal experience is determined socially and religiously, it demands critical analysis and reflection that can explore the social location of experience.
8. Experience is a hermeneutical starting point, not a norm. Only certain experiences, namely the experiences of struggle and liberation for justice and radical equality, can be articulated as feminist norms.

A Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location

A hermeneutics of domination and social location requires a feminist social analysis of the powers and structures of domination that operate in the lives of wo/men. Schüssler Fiorenza names this structural domination as ‘kyriarchy’, which goes beyond the meaning and practices of patriarchy. This feminist social analysis is a complex systemic analysis that identifies categories of wo/man, gender, patriarchy, androcentrism, kyriarchy and kyriocentrism, which function in multiple layers not only in structures of domination but that they are inscribed in the biblical texts. Hence it is a crucial task to work through this step of hermeneutics in order to break through the multiplicative structures that are perceived and assumed as common sense or natural. We need to look at the structural patterns or social choreography inscribed in biblical texts and in our own lives. Critical interpretation for liberation has two reference points: 1) the social-ideological locations of biblical interpreters; 2) the structures of domination inscribed in biblical texts. To breakthrough this hermeneutical step, Schüssler Fiorenza provides biblical interpreters the tools of feminist social analysis, which she has developed in chapter four of her book *Wisdom Ways*. She suggests that various categories of analysis must be examined critically: primary categories and dualistic categories.

In primary categories of analysis, it looks at woman/women and their oppression. To analyse wo/men’s situation and multiple oppression, it is necessary to acquire a complex model of analysis that deals with wo/men’s multiple identities and social location. Both this identity and social location are criss-crossed and structured by different powers of domination. This is a feminist liberationist analytical approach that goes beyond gender analysis. Many
women’s movements have not moved beyond essentialism, on the nature that wo/men have in common. But the wo/man’s multiple identities and social-cultural and religious location are more than just gender. It shows how the intersections of class, race, nationality, colonialism, age, sexuality, etc. have shaped the wo/man’s identity and social location. This systemic analysis also tackles the question of power and relations of power in the structures of domination.

The dualistic categories of analysis are based on the notions of gender, androcentrism and patriarchy. Till the present time, some feminist movements maintain their analysis of patriarchy based on the notion of domination of all men over all women, which is in fact outdated. Some understand it as gender oppression. Various feminist theories that were developed through the social political movement have also influenced such an analysis of woman/gender/patriarchy categories. It is thus necessary to develop a feminist systemic analytical framework that goes beyond a simple and liberal gender analysis of oppression if feminist movement is a social political movement for radical change and transformation. In this feminist social and systemic analysis, many words and terms come under scrutiny. For instance, Patriarchy means all men dominate over all women. A critical reflection of the various feminist theories is explored. Women’s oppression was analysed from a woman’s perspective. It was later changed to a paradigm of gender perspective and analysis. Some approached it from a feminine perspective. But all of them are theories to explain and analyse towards change in the struggles of the social political movement. This includes the movement of feminist biblical interpretation. These feminist theories have influenced and guided the women/gender/patriarchy perspectives in the feminist re-reading of the bible. Traditional or classical theology uses this theory to explain men on top of women, men’s power over women. Colonialism and missionary movement to Asia had also adopted this to reinforce cultural-religious oppression of wo/men.
There are two theories that attempt to explain the difference between woman and man, male and female. They are essentialism and gender theories. Essentialism believes on biology, based on nature. Women and men are essentially different due to their biological differences. It is a naturalized and common sense thinking. Male or female body determines the biological difference. It explains and rationalise on the roles, patterns, models, characteristics of each. It is a theory of femininity and masculinity because it can be explained by biology, a theory of complementarity and nature.

The second is the gender theory. Gender is a social cultural construct. It is a process of socialization that stereotype female/woman in femininity and male/man in masculinity. It is a construction not only by culture and education but fully sanctioned by religion. The construction makes it natural but women are not born as women. We are made as women. Men too are constructed to be male and men.

However, a feminist social analytic perspective insists on the importance of a systemic analysis that goes beyond the above theoretical explanations. Feminist thinking or
Biblical Interpretation as a Site of Struggle for Liberation

- Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change
- Hermeneutics of Experience
- Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location
- Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction
- Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination
- Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation
- Hermeneutics of Suspicion

A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation
feminism is perceived as more dangerous than “gender” theory. It exposes “gender” which creates a double thinking, androgeny as in a dualistic system. It is a dual system of woman and man categories but it combines their characteristics of femininity and masculinity into a relationship of “complementarity”, making it natural. However, feminist experience points to gender analysis or category as insufficient to explain the power differences that exist in power structures and relations. For example, an upper/higher class woman using a lower class woman to clean her house has power over this woman of lower status. As long as gender does not explain the difference in power between upper and lower class women, between women of different race, nationality and colonialism, this analysis is weak and lacking in any strategies for change. In light of the above categories of analysis, a complex systemic analysis of kyriarchy is most urgent and needful. This model of analysis tackles questions of power and its abuse; language which is androcentric and generic in character; including the biblical texts that are androcentric and kyriocentric. Thus far gender and patriarchy analyses as well as models/paradigms used for biblical interpretation have not addressed or are inadequate in dealing with biblical language and texts that are oppressive, heterosexist, kyriarchal and based on mainstream thinking and thought form. The old paradigms and revisionist models have not brought about genuine radical changes and liberation in the lives of women. A complex analysis of kyriarchy exposes the multiplicative structures of sexism, racism, classism, colonialism that are operative within to sustain multi-dimensional domination and oppression.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of super-ordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression. The structure of kyriarchy can be understood in these aspects:

- Kyriarchy is not simply the domination of men over women… it is a complex pyramidal system of domination that work through the violence of economic exploitation and lived subordination.

- Kyriarchy must not be understood as a-historical or monolithic but must be seen as realized differently in different historical contexts.

- Not only the gender system but also the stratification systems of race, class, colonialism, and heterosexism structure and determine a kyriarchal system.

- Kyriarchal societies and cultures need for their functioning a servant class, a servant race, a servant gender, and a servant religion of people.

- In a radical democratic system, power is not exercised through “power over” or through violence and subordination, but through the human capacity for respect, responsibility, self-determination, and self-esteem.

Kyriarchy is supported and reinforced by kyriocentrism as an ideology. It is an ideology of the Greek model of democracy that operates on four levels: 1) Grammatical-linguistic level; 2) Symbolic-cultural level; 3) Ideological-cultural level; 4) Social-institutional level.

The above is a good feminist social analytic framework that deals with a hermeneutics of domination and social location. It is a most necessary step that locates not just the wo/men’s experience but feminist experience and social location; and not just only by description but probing into the root causes of domination by analysis. This empowers and heightens the process of conscientization in CFBI for the Subject and agent as reader-interpreter.

**A Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

To suspect is to doubt or disbelieve in something. Suspicion means caution, something dangerous for our health is happening because we no longer want to believe in everything. Suspicion and evaluation is the critical turning moment between deconstruction and reconstruction. Suspicion is difficult because it makes one insecure and we are told that it is sinful to suspect and disobey/disbelieve. But wo/men need to practise suspicion as a virtue, not a sin as we have been taught to be obedient to the authority, to accept and be submissive. The authority wants wo/men to believe that it is the best for us. It is the same process and spirit when we are told to trust the bible rather than to question it. Suspicion is not just only a step in the dance but it is a virtue for wo/men to survive as well as to live fully and become full self-determined subjects. When we realise and experience we are not subjects we should apply more suspicion. Similarly when people and others are marginalized and treated as objects. We need to see and think differently and critically when persons are not regarded as subjects. Hence when wo/men begin to think, suspect and question, the process of change begins in us.
Suspicion can be applied on 2 levels, which is in terms of language and ideology. In language we have to suspect the male religious knowledge because the founders are men, texts are written by men and interpretations are done by men. Language is andro-kyriocentric, including biblical languages. There are three levels of looking at language\(^91\): 1) Language is used as an expression of reality, we believe what is being said as it relates to reality. 2) Language can also create and reproduce or reinforce reality because when we say GOD is father, it creates in our mind that GOD is a father. It reinforces the idea the God is indeed a father. 3) Language can change reality because we can see reality changing in the classroom or anywhere when we use wo/men to include men. Language is a dangerous tool for consolidation or transformation. Hence wo/men have to be very suspicious of the language being used. Our suspicion can empower us to probe for a deeper analysis of the andocentric and kyriocentric language. Since masculine terms function as generic terms, wo/men always have to ask twice whether we are meant or included. This is the basic starting point of a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is an important move and step in biblical interpretation.

The second level of suspicion dwells on ideology and its function. This proves to be even more difficult because we have internalised the ideology of kyriarchy-kyriocentrism since birth and it becomes dangerous when we take things for granted. For instance it is dangerous to assume that all men are oppressors; poor people cannot think; the poor are better than the rich; women are better than men in being natural nurturers, or are identified with nature and possess natural mother instinct, etc. These are deeply embedded thinking and assumptions which are structured pyramids built inside us. These assumptions are deceptive and we have to question and suspect these ideologies.

Schüssler Fiorenza adopted the tools provided by the black American activist, Patricia Hill Collins\(^92\) to analyse ideologies, that we be guided by asking simply three sets of questions: 1) Who is saying what? That is, what message and who is that person talking? 2) How does that

---

\(^{91}\) These three levels on language were notes that I have taken down during the AWRC Feminist Theology Workshop facilitated by Lieve Troch in August 2004, Malaysia.

message function? How is it used and for whom? E.g. how does it function when we say that Jesus died for our sins? 3) What is the purpose of what is being said? Why is it spoken? What do they want us to believe? Does it have to do with a dream and a vision of liberation or does it have to do with denial of people or oppression of people? For example, when the Church says that women should be servants: we then ask who and what is being said, how does it function, and what is the purpose, what kind of political ideology that exists to subjugate women to service and sacrifice, etc.?

To apply a hermeneutics of suspicion in biblical interpretation, it is necessary then to suspect and question the biblical texts in terms of andro-kyriocentric language and ideology; how kyriocentrism functions and naturalise oppression as “common-sense”. But we should then pursue further the pertinent theological questions and issues of what kind of G*d do we believe in and confess/profess. A deeper analysis then would bring us to recognise and expose the structures of domination, which cultural and religious texts and symbols are made natural and common sense. Beyond this, we must make a theological analysis exposing domination as structural sin. Therefore, as a Subject self and interpreter in one’s socio-political religious location, s/he must investigate “kyriocentric texts and symbol systems and their ideological functions” 93 and “kyriarchal contexts of texts and interpreters”. 94 This being the task, “a hermeneutics of suspicion is best understood as a deconstructive practice of inquiry that denaturalises and demystifies linguistic-cultural practices of domination rather than as working away at the layers upon layers of cultural sediments that hide or repress a ‘deeper truth’”. 95

A Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation

---


94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., p. 176
Critical evaluation completes the spiral step of suspicion. Schüssler Fiorenza explains the necessity of taking a hermeneutics of critical evaluation by providing a double reference point:\(^9^6\):

1) **Cultural questions of ideological assessment**

To take a critical feminist hermeneutics of evaluation we should on one hand consider how we have internalized cultural and religious teachings and values, which also legitimize kyriarchy. On the other hand, as a counter-culture effort we identify values and visions inscribed in the text that may lift up a plausible alternative radical democratic visions and values. To deconstruct a text that reinforces structures of oppression we promote and reconstruct values and visions for liberation and emancipation. Schüssler Fiorenza says particular focus must be given in a feminist critical analysis of a biblical text in the following:\(^9^7\):

- “point of view” which expresses the ideological-rhetorical aims of a text; readers align themselves with the dominant voice, values, and characters of the text (e.g., the Syrophoenician wo/man)
- drawing out and underscoring superior/inferior, we/others, masculine/feminine roles and values inscribed in the text and actualized in the act of reading
- explicitly articulating the “point of view” or ideological strategy of the text in terms of our cultural value-systems and to making the text’s interaction with this system explicit
- determining and circumscribing the rhetorical situation and context in which the text operates today (e.g., anti-Judaism)

2) **Theological questions of biblical authority**

A critical evaluation is motivated by the purpose of what is then the proclamation of the gospel, who and what kind of G*d does one believe in the light of the hermeneutics of suspicion cast on biblical religion and biblical texts. If we do not want to go on to proclaim G*d as a G*d of oppression and violence, this means the language of the sacred text and how texts function with

\(^{96}\) Ibid., p. 178 and p. 200.  
\(^{97}\) Ibid., p. 200.
persuasive power in the contemporary cultural and religious contexts must be seriously assessed. The interpreters may be taught how to deal with the biblical text in the context of the first century. But they do not go further by asking how texts function in their contemporary social, cultural and religious situations. Feminist theology of liberation emphasizes on both context of the biblical text and contemporary interpreters as well as both their social cultural and religious locations. A hermeneutics of evaluation makes us conscious that we should not simply accept and obey all texts of scripture as the “Word of God” but to critically evaluate them as guided by a new and different vision based on feminist justice-based and emancipatory values.

**A Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination**

Imagination is a state and feeling of freedom and space the interpreter as a Subject among other subjects, can claim. This is a space, which is not bound by socially constructed constraints, and it is an imaginary space that breaks free from time with “open” possibilities. It gives a free space to memory and encourages longings and dreams to be materialised and re-experienced. Feelings, emotions and views that were suppressed or repressed can be fully expressed in this open, free, space of personal and corporate imagination. This can also enhance our imaginative abilities in empathy with the feelings and struggles of wo/men. A hermeneutics of creative imagination motivates the subject interpreter to conceive of change in response to the situations. Schüssler Fiorenza recommends that historical imagination is absolutely necessary in order to understand biblical texts. It causes us to suspect the silences, read in between lines and to fill in the gaps so as to make sense out of the story. It causes us to perceive and tell the story differently as well as see history in a new light. Biblical stories can now be retold and spiritual vision reshaped. With creative religious imagination we can employ such creative interpretive methods.
as described in chapter two, making the biblical stories come alive through role-play, bibliodrama, poem, midrash, dance and song. She said, “Retelling biblical stories and re-imagining biblical characters in creative imagination and play is a catalytic process that liberates us from the false images that we have made.”

It is possible in the hermeneutics of creative imagination to see citizenship as an *ekklesia*, a democratic assembly of full citizens of wo/men oriented towards *basileia* - the reign of God.

**A Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction**

Suspicion and critical evaluation must lead to a hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction of that which had been deconstructed based on historical imagination. History is a record and a subjective interpretation of the winners who tell their stories. It is never a record of “what actually happened”. Historians write history to record the victory of the dominating powers and from their point of view and exegetes tend to do the same when they interpret historical texts. They depend on their imagination to interpret history when they examine the people of the past as history makers and agents/participants. Historians tend to want to depict and present their historiography as something derived from objective data and sources going by textual and historical positivism, gathering evidence of how things “really” happened as if every historical account was not, in fact, at its best, merely another interpreted point of view. But in fact, it is a historical construction when they make history a narrative account by remaking and retelling the reality. It is certainly not reality itself. Hence, to deconstruct and reconstruct history we need a critical remembering that will bring us to make a feminist reading of history that is totally new, liberating and different from the malestream perspective of reading and writing history.

---

Historiography has to be “fair” both to the sources and to the silenced or marginalized, the historical losers. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies these perspectives and models in creating historiography and construction of history critically as theological models of early Christian history.

As a counter-reading to history making created by historical winners, she proposed feminist models in this hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. In historical reconstruction, we look at history and tradition. For wo/men’s history is our heritage and strength. But wo/men have been made invisible and silenced. Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to uncover as well as to recover the full participation and leadership role of women in the life and history of the early Christian beginnings. Her first major classic work of feminist liberation theology In Memory of Her probes into the history of the origins and attempts to read the silences and gaps that might have produced repressed memories of women’s voices and presence. She seeks to reclaim the past, and to critically reconstruct the agency and full participation of women within the whole history of early Christianity. Hence, early Christian origins are women’s history as well (albeit in need to be reconstructed…), which is the history of the Discipleship of Equals. She is not interested to prove whether the actual events had happened, as it is not a search for true pristine orthodox beginnings. Catholicism excluded the role and contributions of women in the origins of Christian history and the Orthodox condemned efforts to revive women’s contribution as heresy. In making a historical re-visioning and revisiting, she writes, “My own work elaborated early on that a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins must critically investigate androcentric (or more precisely, kyriocentric) language and theological hermeneutics as well as the positivist assumptions of historical, sociological, and theological biblical scholarship contained within their scientific models of reconstruction.”

A Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change

Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation, (CFBI) in using the methodology of the hermeneutical spiral dance, has, as its ultimate goal, social personal liberation and social structural transformation and action for change. Let us, at this point, recall the whole critical rhetorical process of interpretation. There are several pre-requisites in the dance towards this transformation. To begin with, the biblical interpreters must strive to be Subject selves struggling for socio-personal liberation and socio-structural transformation. It is also a commitment to do justice in society and struggle, through a process of conscientization, with biblical studies as a site of social, political and religious transformation. The ekklesia of wo/men is a constant site of struggle and free open Wisdom space to continue this spiral dance and CFBI based on feminist visionary pragmatism\textsuperscript{100}. Describing this as Wisdom spirituality in her book, Schüssler Fiorenza opts for this as an alternative vision of the world for justice and well being in the praxis of ekklesia and basileia. This praxis is a process of imaginative pragmatism that places importance on one’s struggles on the road because the site of struggles is current, which is within the larger human struggle. Hence it is a visionary praxis, a pragmatic action that the subject interpreter must be alert and be responsive to the everyday life situations of injustices. With this feminist visionary pragmatism in mind, she makes a concise summary\textsuperscript{101} in working through this last hermeneutics suggesting the areas that are in need of liberation and transformation, which have been discussed in the previous steps. These areas are: kyriocentric language and text; kyriocentric symbol systems; kyriarchal structures; common-sense assumptions; languages of hate; biblical

\textsuperscript{100} Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation}, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 205.
authority; biblical texts of terror; prejudices/kyriocentric frameworks/mindsets; ourselves; our society and our religious communities. In response to these areas, a hermeneutics of transformative action for change is committed to transforming biblical texts\textsuperscript{102} as Schüssler Fiorenza has listed in the following:

11. Identifying with historical wo/men rather than with kyriocentric biblical texts
12. Inclusive reading: inserting wo/man or female into androcentric texts
13. Reversal: reversing male and female, rich and poor, etc. characters
14. Placing multiply oppressed wo/men in the center – constructing an alternative perspective to that of kyriocentrism
15. Articulating the perspective of the most marginalized and dehumanized wo/men
16. Reading the wo/men passages as the tip of an iceberg – reconstructing the submerged part of the story
17. Reading kyriocentric text not as descriptive but as a prescriptive projection of male elites
18. Critically analyzing female characters as exchange objects which are the means by which readers are bonded to the elite male protagonist (Emily Cheney)
19. Reading against the grain: mapping kyriarchal relations inscribed in the text and constructing an alternative story-text-image
20. Hearing the silenced and forgotten into speech (Nelle Morton)

To conclude, “A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation” as expressed in the “Dance of Liberation and Social Transformation” is a thorough going Wisdom movement developed as a liberating and transformative methodology for biblical interpretation. It begins with the critical analysis of Self as a product of androcentric/kyriarchal socialisation, through the hermeneutics of experience, of domination and social location after which the conscientized self “becomes” a Self as “reclaimed” Subject able to and ever engaged and engaging in critical praxiological reflection exercising the critical ability to engage in the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., p. 205.
critical evaluation, the hermeneutics of imagination, of remembering and of reconstruction and finally the hermeneutics of transformative action for change. A critical rhetorical emancipatory paradigm for biblical interpretation is finding wisdom ways for a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation. The turns and moves and its repeats are wisdom ways that lead to changing or transforming situations of injustice, imagining a more just future that can transform situations, recognise injustice and name the situations of injustice. Wisdom ways enable us to recognise and trust we are not the first ones or alone in this struggle. We imagine people in the past who have struggled against situations of injustice like we have today. We recognise we are required to struggle continuously for justice and well being of everyone because the new heaven and new earth are yet to be realised.
CHAPTER FOUR

WISDOM WAYS

Practising the Dance and Interpreting Selected Biblical Texts using CFBI Methodology

The critical rhetorical emancipatory paradigm for biblical interpretation is a useful and necessary aid for wo/men seeking socio-personal liberation and wo/men committed to the struggle for social structural transformation towards life in all its fullness and abundance. Wisdom and wisdom ways for a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation can be reaped/experienced through such a method/process of engaging scriptural texts. I have come into contact with liberating wisdom through this “methodology” as a Subject Self and will attempt to work through the steps of the “spiral dance” on three selected texts. They are Mark 5: 21-43 (two texts blended together for a purpose) and 1 Tim 2: 1-15. In this chapter there are three aspects I would like to focus on, develop and process in the reading and critical re-reading of each text. Firstly I will go into a short description of how the texts were interpreted before either by myself or other women. Secondly, we will take a look at how these texts can be critically re-read using the CFBI paradigm through the hermeneutical dance steps. Lastly, we will show/highlight what could be the outcome on the social-personal and social-political levels through such a critical re-reading! This third aspect is in fact the last hermeneutical step on transformative action and change. Let us now take a look at these texts, and I will imagine reading them with a group of friends in the ekklesia of wo/men through the praxis process of conscientization. I will be attempting to interpret and engage the
texts by going through the “steps of the dance of liberation and transformation”. It should be noted that due to the lively dynamics and vibrant interactions/dialogues between different characters and events, overlapping points that interpenetrate each other is bound to occur. This gives a multi-faceted diversity and richness to the interpretation of the texts.

MARK 5: 21-43

THE HAEMORRHAGING WOMAN AND THE DAUGHTER OF JAIRUS

In this pericope Mark narrates 2 stories as if they were one. Although two stories are told, they must be read and interpreted as a single text as they reflect the common experience of both “younger” and “older” women. In fact any critical feminist analytic would hold them together as one, as each story is a tale of the socially constructed oppression of women within the kyriarchal/patriarchal culture of living death. Thus by a feminist systemic analysis of the structures of kyriarchal/patriarchal domination, it will be seen/shown to be in fact, one single story. Thus I will attempt to engage in the text narrative as one by going through the full process and circle.

Reading the Text From Past Experience

Several groups of women have read and interpreted this ONE text in various ways at different occasions and places. Most groups took a more specific focus/emphasis on either one of the stories though touching both in the entire pericope. To name three here: 1) A Sri Lankan group gave more emphasis to the girl child though the bible study covers two stories. 103 It has “the raising of Jairus’ daughter” as the title of it’s study. This reading places Jesus in the centre, performing healing to the two females. This is essentially a cultural interpretation in dialogue with the text and context. 2) A feminist hermeneutical study on Jairus’s daughter. 104 As the third


example 3) I have chosen one that was done at the World Student Christian Federation Women’s Pre-Assembly. It is my biblical-theological reflection of two stories and here too the specific focus was on the girl child.\textsuperscript{52} All three studies went beyond the traditional interpretation that tended to reduce women to being helpless victims or perceived and regarded women through the patriarchal/male gaze. Quite often, even the gender and women’s perspective can ultimately be revisionist in their conclusion. The above three biblical studies did resort to the second and third paradigms mentioned in chapter one. They are also, as are many “feminist” “critical” studies, somewhat remedial and corrective as described in chapter two. Altogether, these can be commended as “good” “feminist” biblical studies and exegesis that applied certain hermeneutical steps, as for example the hermeneutics of experience as well as a reading that took into account context-text-context. These studies did to some extent focus on women in the text. Many times, such readings, however, unconsciously reinforced the victim position of women as it lacked what may be described as critical feminist social analysis and the hermeneutics of suspicion. It ultimately falls short of the full critical process or adoption of all the steps contained within the critical feminist biblical methodology. They are two stories read as one single text but usually give greater focuses on only one story. For my part, for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to interpret both the stories as one single text because in my mind, in the final analysis, it must be read as one narrative account. Here I would like to acknowledge the work of Lieve Troch,\textsuperscript{53} who was facilitator/resource person for AWRC feminist theology workshop in Malaysia, August 2004. During this workshop she led us in a critical feminist reading of this text by leading the workshop participants through the various dance steps. Based on this learnt experience I would now like to read the text by going through the complete process of the hermeneutical circle of critical feminist biblical interpretation.


\textsuperscript{53} Lieve Troch is professor of Feminist Studies in Sciences of Religion at the Ecumenical Postgraduate Institute of the Methodist University in São Paulo Brazil and teaches systematic and intercultural theology at the Catholic Radboud University in Nijmegen the Netherlands.
Practising Interpretation with the Hermeneutical Dance

Hermeneutics Of Experience and Social Location: Beginning with my own as well as women’s experiences of socially constructed oppression, this first step starts with a critique of our social location within our social context. Hence I approach and read the text as a Subject and as a process of critical consciousness-raising. The text will be read as if I am reading it for the first time but this time through critical feminist “eyes” in relation to my own experience of, but also focused on the socially constructed oppression of women, their liberation and the struggle for structural transformation. I begin by telling and reminding myself that there is no one single meaning and interpretation of the text. I am aware that no interpreter is neutral but that every interpretation is biased and serves an ideological political function within the social context of the reader as well as of the text itself. My own struggle to be free from socially constructed oppression and my own desire to be a full human person is a legitimate struggle in itself, a guiding principle in critiquing the text, and does not need the bible to justify it.

When I began to do feminist theology, I recalled how I was born a female and how I was socially constructed within a historical kyriarchal/patriarchal culture of living death. I grew up moulded, “disabled” and bound as a socially constructed female/girl, within the confines of historical colonialism and also Kyriarchal/patriarchal culture and religion. When I was a child until my teenage years, my grandmother repeated time and again her own story of how she was already engaged to my grandfather at the tender age of eight. Today child marriage is still a horrendous reality in many parts of Asia and Africa. Young women from the age of twelve face many physical, emotional and psychological health problems, apart from the stress and trauma of marrying a total stranger and coping with life as a subordinate to the men, with their extended families, of their lives. Many of us know too well that child marriages have existed for centuries. It has long been an issue of grave and great injustice to women. While many women living in this modern age of globalisation are getting married at a later age, there are still more than 51 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 who are married or forced into marriages. The International Centre for
Research on Women (ICRW) recently launched a photo essay giving attention to the stories and experiences of many young girls forced into girl child marriage.\textsuperscript{54} Some reasons have been offered for girls to be married early most of which arise from their unequal gender status: kyriarchal/patriarchal, dominating men control her sexuality; social, economic and political oppression and subsequent poverty drive them into early marriages. This often gives rise to tragic consequences and great risks for the vulnerable girl child. These are deprived of basic human rights to education, good healthcare, equal economic opportunities and ordinary life experiences of growing up as human beings with dignity.

Today, even women who marry “older” are often subjected to a culture of subordination and submission. While the experiences of women are varied and should not be too easily generalised, women as a whole are oppressed through what has been named as gender socialisation. Women are unduly weighted down and stressed by family and societal pressures. Male-female relationships are unequally weighted to the advantage of the men and women’s sexuality is severely limited to and defined by the dominant heterosexist paradigm. Many traditions and laws control women’s lives and their freedom and their right to be. Her sexuality is externally defined and controlled and she does not even own her own body. When she goes through menstruation she is considered as unclean. To date, many Christian women of Indian origin in Malaysia still keep away from the sanctuary or altar and abstain from partaking in the Eucharist when they are having their menstruation. In Bali, Indonesia, I visited an old Hindu temple marked as a tourist. Right in front of the entrance was written: “Menstruating women are forbidden to enter”. At the National Mosque located in Putrajaya, the administrative centre of the Malaysian Government, there is also a notice at the entrance: “Menstruating women are not allowed to enter”. Culture and religion have severe negative impact on the lives of women across race, class, ethnicity, nationality, heterosexuality and age, etc. Apart from such laws that restrict

\textsuperscript{54} International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Too Young to Wed: Child Marriage In Their Own Words, http://www.icrw.org/photoessay/html/shadows_subs/rakiya.htm
and control women’s lives, women face many varied and different socio-psycho-physical-emotional health problems in relation to their menstruation cycle from the start till menopause. There may be all sorts of disorder or complication in this life cycle.

Taking as our starting point, my experience and the experience of the women as subjects in the text, many new and different insights come alive. Both the stories interweave and interpenetrate into each other. The story of the daughter of Jairus begins in Mark 5 verse 21, but is interrupted almost immediately by another incident from verses 25 to 34: the woman with a haemorrhage for twelve years. Then it continues from verse 35 and finally ends only in verse 43. It is a scenario with 2 happenings, one placed within the other. For a start I ask myself at least two questions, which were provided for small groups discussion by Lieve Troch at the feminist theology workshop. Are there new insights and striking things that I never saw before? What are the differences and similarities between the two stories in this text? The answers and insights to these questions provide an amazing array of materials in the first two steps of a hermeneutics of experience and social location, which leads on to an analysis of the situation of domination, and subsequently to the rest of the dance steps within the full circle.

**Hermeneutics of Social Location:** It is very important to look at the various characters at play and their social locations in the context of the text as well. It gives the interpreter an idea why and what each character is all about from his/her socio-historical situation and the social political structures that shape and condition him/her. The story of the haemorrhaging woman who is socially, economically and politically lowly is interwoven with the story of Jairus, a powerful religious elite of his time. A critical reflection will bring out differences and similarities as well as the interconnectedness of the two accounts:

- They are stories of healing and of being cured. One is cured the other “resurrected”.
- Both subjects are female: a woman and a young girl. Then the “mother”. But all three have no names or are nameless.
- The woman with a haemorrhage has been suffering for a significant twelve (12) years while the girl is dying at the tender age of twelve.
- Jesus called the woman “daughter” while the little girl is the “daughter” of Jairus.
Jairus is a man of power who is forced by his own circumstance of his daughter’s “sickness unto death” to acknowledge/recognise the power of Jesus.

Both Jairus and the woman fell at Jesus’ feet.

Both the woman and Jairus have faith.

The crowd is mentioned in both stories. The woman is healed in the crowd while Jesus sends the crowd out of Jairus’ house.

Both of them are “afraid”.

While noting the “similarities” in these two stories, their “differences” or “contrasts” also stand out in the text:

- The woman touches Jesus while Jesus touches the little girl.
- Jesus is named. Though father and mother are mentioned, only the father Jairus, is named.
- The woman is cured on the spot in the crowd while the girl rose up in Jairus’ house.
- Both of them are differently cured, the girl with her father acting as the mediator.
- Jairus a high-ranking official of the Synagogue is named while the names of the women are not mentioned.
- The woman is an “unclean” person: impure and outcast. She sneaks behind Jesus for healing.
- Jairus has a high and better social position so Jesus goes to his house. But the woman struggles amidst the crowd in order to see and get the attention of Jesus.
- The death symbol rings strong: the outcaste woman is “the living dead” while the girl is physically “socially” dead.
- The girl’s mother is almost invisible; her emotions/feelings are not shown or described.
- The social, cultural religious lines about what is “pure” and what constitutes “impurity” is clearly defined.
- Only the woman touches Jesus while everybody touches everyone else in the crowd.
- Jesus commends the woman for her faith whilst Jesus tells Jairus the religious official to have faith and to “believe”. Jairus needs assurance and encouragement to have faith.

On reflecting based on my experience and the plausible experience of the woman and Jairus, the above are some insights especially the significance of certain key words and actions described in the text: “twelve”, “touch”, “daughter”, “crowd”, “fell”, “faith”, “belief” and “afraid”.

These key words and actions are important indicators of the context. Twelve is significant number of fullness as in twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples. For twelve years the little girl lives but she is now dying. For twelve years, which amounts to the lifetime of
Jairus’ daughter, the woman suffered and sought for a cure but it was all for nothing. For
twelve years, the woman with a haemorrhage has been socially, religiously and economically
excluded from the community because she is considered “unclean” by the socially
constructed system of what constitutes “purity” and “impurity”.

Everybody touches each other given the scenario of a crowd rubbing each other or being
squeezed amidst crowdedness so it is accidental touching. But there are different ways of
touching. The woman touched Jesus through an act of conscious intention. Jesus holds the
hand of the little girl, who is pronounced dead. The haemorrhaging woman could only touch
Jesus by his garment. The crowd condemns her presence due to her impurity. “Culturally”,
she pollutes the crowd and environment due to her ailment. She is an outcaste! Without
permission as an “unclean” person she reached out to “touch” Jesus as if her belief was that
coming into contact with the man and the kind of community the man represented would be
healing and bring about healing in her life and condition.

The writer seems to have an important message to convey to the readers by linking and
giving significance to the two “daughters”. What did Jesus say to the woman? Jesus affirmed
her and called her “daughter”, as in daughter of Abraham.

Hermeneutics of Domination: In this section we will do an analysis of the structure of
domination by looking at the socio economic, political system, the laws, traditions, culture
and societal prescriptions imposed on the woman and the little girl. According to the socially
constructed cultural values reinforced by religious teachings and practice, the social cultural
code is a living death sentence for the “impure”. Jesus proclaimed his gospel and taught
counter cultural community values within the context of Roman domination and oppression
over the people in Palestine. The Jewish elite themselves collaborated with the foreign rulers
of the system and of that society. Jesus also rejected the system of religion built on the
distinction between the “pure” and “impure” (Mk 7: 1-23; Leviticus laws).55 He broke this
barrier by coming into close contact with the “polluted” dead girl’s corpse. The social and
religious structures imposed their power and domination on men but especially upon woman.
The laws and system confined and imprisoned her, drawing severely limiting boundaries in
her life and determining how she should live and conduct herself. Her mobility and freedom
to be were denied her. Who created these social religious structures? Who is responsible for
their implementation and enforcement? What are the responsibilities of the community and
society? What symbols and ideology rationalise and nurture such domination and power over
people with the potential of reducing them into weak, needy and marginalized objects in that
situation in Palestine at the time of Jesus?

Unlike the nameless woman with a flow of blood who was on her own, Jairus was a man of
economic, social and religious standing. He was a “beneficiary” of that socially constructed
system of power and authority; he commanded honour and respect as a religious leader. He
spoke for his daughter as head of his family. By virtue of his status and privileged position
he presents and represents the religious order, which are in conflict with Jesus’ and the
“Jesus movement’s” proclamation, teachings, words and actions. But he is now desperate
and seeks out Jesus to heal his daughter as a last resort. What are the power relations
between the woman and Jairus, the woman and Jesus as well as Jairus and Jesus? How are
they manifested? Jairus is a respected member, an authority of that social order that is
responsible for marginalising and condemning the woman as an outcaste in religion,
community and society. He is the one upholding and maintaining the rules and laws of
religion that oppressed the haemorrhaging woman. He reinforces and perpetuates the
suffering and oppression of the woman. Jairus is the symbol of the woman’s marginalization

55 Hisako Kinukawa, Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective (New York: Orbis Books,
because he represents the group of power elites who instituted the system of religion and maintained the law and order in and outside of the temple benefiting in one way or another from such.

The socio-religious power structures exclude, control and shut out her entire life. She is now caught under the full weight of the laws of social purity. Worse still she is standing in the centre and right under the scrutiny of the very public, a large hostile crowd that considers her as a condemned person. It is an unspoken yet vivid sentence of weighty guilt passed on her who is now exposed, “came in fear and trembling and fell down” (verse 33). Earlier she did not have to fall before Jesus unlike Jairus. But now why does she tremble and fall to Jesus’ feet? The law finds her guilty for daring to be in the presence of the whole big crowd whom she pollutes by her presence. Now the whole crowd is polluted. Now she has to declare that she is unclean and explain herself. These emotive experiences of “fear”, “trembling” and “fell” describe well her state as she steps forward to tell the “whole truth” to Jesus when Jesus identifies her for touching his garment. She tells the “whole truth” (verse 33) about her twelve years of suffering. Amazingly Jesus responds to her “go in peace” and “be healed” of her “disease” (verse 34)! What “disease”? Is it her illness or biological problem a “disease” that ostracises her? Or is it the disease of the system that is the cause of her problem for twelve full years, one full cycle of life! She rejects and disobeys that system and presses herself into the crowd. Shockingly Jesus affirms and confirms her act of faith in rejecting the socially constructed system that rejects and condemns her, “your faith has made you well” (verse 34)!

**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** Questions and points are raised here to show how this text is normally interpreted within a traditional interpretation. Usually Jairus is highlighted due to his position of power. Jesus is identified with Jairus and focused on the journey to his house. Jesus is the central focus who performed miracles and healed the woman even as he was on his way to heal the little girl. Both the females are portrayed as passive though they are given due attention because of the focus of the narrative. Traditional reading has it that Jesus healed the woman because of her faith in him. The text absorbs and submerges the reader into its world and sees the women as sick objects in need of healing through Jesus. It is read in favour of Jairus and it is Christ-centred and focussed.

Through this critical exercise in the hermeneutics of suspicion, more questions come into play. The text has an ironical situation. The woman is pro-active. She interrupts the healing of Jairus’ daughter and delays not only Jesus on his way to “heal” the dying girl but also by telling Jesus the whole truth causes Jairus deep anxiety. In the midst of the urgent plea by Jairus to heal his dying daughter, how can Jesus be taking his time talking to the woman and even recognising the woman’s faith by calling her “daughter”? Jairus’ daughter’s healing has to be delayed so that Jesus can address the matter arising before him and Jairus. And it was such that the problem this woman faced had a direct bearing on the religion that Jairus was the president of. When the whole truth was told it must have seemed apparent to Jairus what was the main cause of the woman’s sickness as well as his daughter’s “sickness unto death” (verse 23). It is not a coincidence that the healing of the woman occurred at the same time that his daughter’s death was announced. Jairus found himself, as it were, at the crossroads of his life. What hope was there anymore? What belief to hold on to anymore? For Jairus, it was a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation. To believe would mean going against all that he upheld as president of the synagogue but not to believe would leave him without hope for his daughter’s recovery! Although it is not explicitly expressed, it was surely to Jairus’s credit that he believed! Just when the woman became well through the telling of the whole truth, it was reported that the little girl had died and there was no need to trouble Jesus anymore. The different power and quality that Jesus/the Jesus movement stood for is borne witness to as Jesus tells him to keep faith and continues the journey towards his house. Although Jairus felt that all was lost, Jesus tells him to keep faith and to believe
anyway. What an ironic moment! Jairus, the religious leader, is fearful and doubtful so that Jesus had to say “do not fear, only believe” (verse 36). Why is Jairus disbelieving? Why is he afraid? Earlier, Jairus had not seemed to be afraid regarding his daughter’s healing. He seemed now to be afraid after the woman told Jesus her whole truth and became healed.

Jesus is portrayed by Mark to be amazingly “gracious” towards Jairus and his religiosity that rationalises the system of domination of which he is a high official and beneficiary. The question and suspicion must be raised and taken up later whether Mark has inadvertently if not intentionally submitted the Jesus movement and its counter cultural values relative to Roman domination and Jewish elitist collaboration. Jairus has a religion that oppresses women including his own daughter. He represents and is a custodian of that religion, the same religion that operated in collaboration with the Roman kyriarchal domination of Palestine, that is the cause of his daughters impending death, the same religion that discriminated the haemorrhaging woman, condemned her and could not heal her. Jairus is desperate and needs Jesus to perform a miracle but at the healing of the woman, which was accompanied by a thorough and trenchant critique of all that he believed and stood for, Jesus tells him not to be afraid but believe yet. In such a situation for Jairus, to believe would be the cause of his own undoing! Yet to disbelieve would be disastrous for his daughter. Jairus’ belief has to come at the end of the story, a real challenge and testing of faith where Jairus is allowed to do privately as he was a public figure and one in a position of authority but of a system of beliefs that spelt “death” for his daughter. While the woman in isolation and is hidden seems to appear hastily from nowhere, she is now allowed in the open public crowd. She is revolting against the religion of Jairus that oppresses her. In front of the crowd and Jairus she challenges the laws and the religion by telling Jesus the whole truth. Jairus becomes afraid, shocked by such a revelation! The woman sees Jesus moving away with Jairus a high-ranking ruler of the Synagogue, the one presiding the institution that determined her fate! Jairus is a symbol of domination and power in Jesus’ time in Palestine. She made a choice for liberation and for life. She believed in another “power” that liberated and was liberating than that of Jairus, a power that dominated and held people captive and caused “sickness unto death”. Even the medical/healthcare system discriminated against her as it caused her much suffering “under many physicians” (verse 26) costing her all her life saving till she had nothing left but only her self-determination to live against all odds! That is one crucial part of the “whole truth”!

_Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation/Proclamation:_ This step is especially critically alert to kyriarchal/androcentric elements and attempts on the part of the gospel writers, in this case specifically of Mark, to rationalise, mystify and/or justify Roman kyriarchal power to dominate and Jewish elitist collaboration with it.

Whereas the older traditional ways of interpretation began with the text as the word of G*d to be accepted and received without question and critical response, the hermeneutics of critical evaluation and proclamation seeks to expose any explicit as well as implicit attempts to rationalise and justify the use of power as the power to dominate, to enslave and to contain. Traditional methods of interpretation takes as its starting point Scripture as the word of G*d demanding reverence, respect, consent and obedient submission. Traditional paradigms of interpretation imposed itself upon readers directing the reader as an object as well making the women objects in the text. The reader submits and waits for the text to speak to him/her. It alienates the reader from his/her social context and location without taking seriously a hermeneutics of experience and his/her own domination and social location into account. Hence it is void of or lacking in critical social analysis for liberation and justice.

In the “old” method of scripture reading and interpretation, to suspect or question the text shows a lack of faith. Hence suspicion is forbidden and absent in the traditional reading. It prevents the reader from knowing or suspecting if the text is androcentric. It uncritically re-inscribes its kyriarchal character and the politics of domination by reducing the woman and
girl to mere victims and objects, waiting for Jesus to perform miracles of healing upon them. It also portrays Jesus wrongly as super hero and miracle man in the story.

The androcentric text does not allow the mother to speak. Though the text is totally silent about the girl’s mother, we can imagine that she must have been heartbroken and feeling helpless as she watched her child in a state of “sickness unto death”. Perhaps she played a crucial role in pressuring Jairus to seek out Jesus for their daughter’s healing! Under those restrictive social, cultural and religious norms, she must, herself have experienced that system of domination in her own life and felt the full weight of reaching “womanhood” with all its socially constructed restrictions, responsibilities and expectations, at the tender age of twelve. And now that same religion and society must be reminding her as a mother what her own child might be going through and having to put up with!!

The writer of the gospel of Mark is not only covering/hiding the mother’s feelings through socially choreographed selective inattention but also perceived as saving face for Jairus by showing Jesus going with Jairus and doing the healing privately. Mark subscribes to, reinforces and maintains kyriarchy by identifying Jesus with Jairus even though Jesus challenges Jairus and the system of domination. But Mark still narrates Jesus as going with Jairus and holding the hand of a corpse, which is against the law of purity and pollution. Perhaps that may have been the reason it had to be done privately and away from the crowd! Is Jairus the symbol and controller of the purity and pollution system not afraid because Jesus will have to face a dead corpse that pollutes? And this dead corpse is his beloved daughter. How is he going to justify himself or answer in allegiance to his lawful religion? He is certainly afraid on a second count apart from showing his fear upon the woman’s healing. But still he has to believe as Jesus tells him. The question that begs to be raised is whether it is Mark’s creative genius in telling the story as it is told or it is merely a reflection of the re-inscription of kyriarchy/patriarchy resulting from early Christian collaboration with the powers that be.

Today the “getting up and walking about” (verse 42) symbolises for the girl child her right to be fully human, to be independent, to be safe. Jesus and the movement or social order he represented with its grand vision of liberation and promise of life in all its abundance and fullness provided for her the space to be and “empowered” her to rise up, stand tall and walk about freely. Today, a girl child waking up to her right to be and to be herself in community with the promise of life in it abundance is a milestone that has been reached for some but remains a vision for many.

Jesus as he is portrayed and his proclamation that the kin-dom of G*d/kin-dom of humanity has arrived, and the movement of people who gathered around such a vision reconstructing a social order with its potential for liberation and structural transformation, where power is used for the well being of wo/men rather than for their domination is a vision around which the ekklesia of wo/men can be gathered.

**Hermeneutics of Imagination:** For this next step of the hermeneutics of creative imagination, we will engage in attempts to rewrite the text and make it liberating and transforming. Imagination can recapitulate what happened but transform the situation of domination and oppression into one of liberation. In the group work during our workshop some guide questions were given and participants were encouraged to creatively imagine a future transformed scenario: When the woman and Jairus meet later what might they say to each other? And imagine the daughter of Jairus when she is 25 years old and is fully aware of what happened to her, she writes to her father. What might she say to her father when she talks about her story? How might she share her story with other Jewish girls and friends around her? Imagine if she got married ten years later and met the haemorrhaging woman, what might be the conversation between them? It must have been deeply embedded into the
lives of both the women. As an example, I will do only one exercise: Imagining Jairus writing a letter to the woman ten years later.

**A Letter to the Woman: Subject of her own Self-Validation, Self-Esteem and Self-Determination**

Dear Miriam,

Today my family and I celebrate the tenth anniversary of my daughter’s healing by the Prophet Jesus of the Jesus movement/community committed to the liberation of persons and transformation of society. I remember vividly what happened ten years ago especially your determined action and the cutting words of truth you told Jesus. I am putting on record my confession to you on this tenth anniversary of the event. I wish as well to celebrate with you the freedom to be that you have struggled for and obtained for yourself through your act of faith. I was totally astounded by what you said and made to realise how our system of religion imprisoned the lives of women and caused them to experience a life of living death. Our system is a terrible social disease and our power structures that discriminated and made you an outcaste of the society are evil and sinful. I am ashamed to acknowledge that I am product of this system and religion and was for a time its custodian too. Since that encounter I have been constantly burdened by the thought of how I have used my power and authority to marginalize so many people around me. I have sinned against you and G*d. I appeal to G*d to continue to use me as an agent to change such structures of power, to be an agent for the liberation of many who have been held captive and in bondage because of our religious system of domination. This includes my daughter and my wife, who have been subjected to its many laws and rules. Today, my daughter has become a freeborn person who has reclaimed herself as a subject and no longer allows the system to control her sexuality and life.

May you continue to enjoy the fullness of life and continue to be a gift of G*d to every human person as you have been to me.

May Sophia our G*d of wisdom be with us all. Warmest greetings from Jairus.

**Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction:** To remember is to recover what was lost: the historical involvement, participation and contribution of the marginalized in general and of women in particular. It is an attempt to reconstruct such a history by bringing back into it the active agency of women. Applying this to the text: The woman finally spoke as a subject, named her experience of oppression, critiqued, analysed and came to the conclusion that the socially constructed kyriarchal/patriarchal order was the root cause of her ailment and that which ostracised her so that she could not be healed! She tells Jesus the “whole truth” (verse 33). The Markan writer sounds vague and ambiguous about the “whole truth”. It is important to activate and give voice to the woman her precise story of truth revealed to Jesus in the presence of Jairus and the crowd. I think this “whole truth” goes way back to the point of her birth where her problems as a woman in a socially constructed order that oppressed her was experientially rooted. Her conditioned worsened until her own body bore the marks of the years of suffering under the yoke of that system. After seeking for a cure for twelve years (the figure which symbolises a complete cycle) which ended in vain within that socio-political set up, she decided to go for broke and make a clean break from the kyriarchal master/slave social system that kept her in bondage and could not provide her any healing! Her decision/option for liberation is a decision to become a self-conscious intentional subject who takes control of her own destiny and her life into her own hands. She has nothing more to lose having spent all her life savings for treatment. By her faith and action to move out of the confines and boundary she is no longer bound by those laws oppressing her. She has broken the rules that marginalize her. When is she healed? She is healed the moment she left her house and braved the crowd to seek for Jesus. She took a stance, albeit in fear and trembling, breaks out of the system of kyriarchy, the power and domination that prevents her
even from thinking that she is capable of doing such a thing. Jesus, the agent and agency of
the counter cultural order perceived rightly that her faith had made her well. Therefore Jairus
was afraid. By a leap of faith she goes forth to look for Jesus and his new community whom
she believes will give her the space and lend her the solidarity she was in need of affirming
her wholeness. She overcame living death and landed on the threshold of life the community
whose vision was one of life in its fullness and abundance!!

Meanwhile the little girl had died. According to the account Jesus says in a voice borne of
deep belief and conviction: “Talitha, koumi, Little girl! Get up!” (Verse 41) The girl awakes,
stands up and begins to walk about. But what is going to happen to the girl? Will her life be
normal again, like before as though nothing had happened? Will the parents who have a
foretaste of Jesus’ new order of life follow the Jewish tradition of marrying her off as a girl
child or in a few years later? Except for her action of walking about, the text is silent about
what will happen to her thereafter.

Why is a twelve-year-old girl pronounced dead in this story? We know that within the Jewish
culture and social customs, a girl of her age attains puberty and is immediately ready for
marriage. But strangely she is on the verge of losing her life. She is facing two things: a
socially constructed transition towards womanhood; and “she is likely to pass from the
authority of her father to that of her husband”.56 Living under a kyriarchal/patriarchal culture,
she is subjected to the religious law of purity and impurity when she goes through the
menstrual cycle. She is “vulnerable to subjugation, abuse and violence because she is woman.
Reaching womanhood is perhaps even considered death.”57 We do not know exactly how the
young woman’s life will turn out to be. Perhaps she was dying due to the fact that there was
already marriage arrangement being made for her, a contract to marry her off to a Jewish
man once she attains puberty. So while the girl is ready to be a mature female, the woman
suffers from her femaleness.58 Jesus and what the Jesus movement offered was the
possibility of greater wholeness of being – wholeness (shalom) in which they would
experience social, religious, and spiritual well-being. Jesus and the proclamation of the Jesus
movement, their social teachings, values and social practice offered the possibilities of life in
its fullness and abundance. The text is somehow silent and the story ends rather abruptly.

I will now move on to the last spiral step on transformative action for change, the third and
final aspect.

Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change

The dance of transformative action for change aims at changing or transforming situations of
injustice towards liberation, justice and the praxis of radical democracy for the well being of
all but especially for those wo/men who struggle at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of
discrimination and domination! In the case of the text at hand, what action for change is
necessary? How can one change the text or use the text for change? What are the areas that
need liberation and transformation?

It may well be a case of divine wisdom’s providence that at this very point of time of my
writing, the group of wo/men with whom I belong and have been actively engaged with in

56 Teresa Okure, “The Will to Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40-56,” in To be Fully Human... EATWOT Women’s

57 Leonila V. Bermisa, “Talitha cum” (Mark 5:41) ‘Inday, bangon’, in In God's Image,
Vol. 24, No. 4, December

58 Hisako Kinukawa, Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective (New York: Orbis Books,
Maryknoll, 1994), p. 34.
the past few years over issues of the oppression of women in the world and in society at large but also closer to home at the very centres of our faith and religion, specifically within our very own church institutions were recently faced with a living/life issue of kyriarchal/patriarchal domination. Every year for the past few years we had taken the opportunity to make use of the worship mass closest to the commemoration of International Woman’s Day to promote awareness about the domination and subsequent oppression of women in society, church and at home and the need for communities of faith to bear positive witness to the cause of women’s struggle for liberation, justice and the transformation of society. This year our group was given notice that the Archbishop seemed somewhat reluctant to grant us this avenue and opportunity for witness and celebration. Our annual masses (services) had been met with varying degrees of positive enthusiasm to downright reaction from many quarters. A priest was heard to have mislabelled our contribution as International Male bashing day. With reference to our text about the haemorrhaging woman who came before Jesus and Jairus with much fear and trembling, in the face of the dominating religious male power in our own day and age, transformative action for change takes on a very concrete confrontation with the powers that be. Unlike Jairus whose “weakness” was his own daughter experiencing a “sickness unto death” (verses 23 and 35) because of his belief/religious conviction, our celibate priests are not as vulnerable! The difference with the text at hand is that our women will not be approaching the Archbishop with fear and trembling. Rather the powers that be will be taken to task for their misogynist stance. Although Mark’s account was written well over a thousand years and more and Jairus a president had seen the light of day our twentieth century Archbishop has taken a stance that is pre-Jairus!! A meeting has been planned to address this matter arising and positive transformative action for change is expected to result from it.

1 TIMOTHY 2: 1-15

Reading the Text from Past Experience

I have neither come across any women’s bible study nor heard any sermon based on the text of I Tim 2: 1-15. There were two occasions when the second part of this text was used by a pastor and a priest to justify the case against the ordination of women. For most women and women’s groups, this and many other texts of such vein have, by and large, either been left unaddressed or have been insufficiently dealt with. Yet in their silence, in their state of apparent neglect, these unspoken cultural “common sense” injunctions, now raised to the level of religious moral household codes and the faith community’s sanctioned modes of behaviour during worship, given the authoritative stamp and approval of the Divine, having found a place in Holy Scriptures, have wreaked untold havoc in the lives of women.

Both the pastor and the priest were clearly using the Doctrinal-Revelatory Paradigm to interpret the text in a manner that served their own authoritarian interests. Over the last two to
three decades, much of the biblical scholarship done on such texts, have been rather apologetic. Biblical scholars, including women and feminist theologians, have made commendable attempts to correct or remedy and redeem the text to save Paul or rationalise that it is time-bound and culture-conditioned.

**Practising the Hermeneutics of Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation through the Dance of Liberation and Transformation**

*Hermeneutics Of Experience:* Beginning from my own and other women’s experience/s, this first step also touches on our social location within our social context. Such an approach involves my reading the text as a Subject through the process of critical consciousness-raising. On two different occasions in two different Church denominations, separated by a long lapse of twenty-six (26) years, this text was quoted as the official, traditional, Word of God based reason against the ordination of women, both done during a church debate. The first encounter and experience shook me to the core of my being when I had just begun church work one year after my theological training. This occurred in November 1979 in my mother church, the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia, during the Bi-Annual Church Synod. An item on the Agenda was a debate regarding the ordination of women as a vote was to be taken in this Synod. During the debate, the pastor who was assigned to present his findings from his research paper on the matter at hand, stated that there were no theological or cultural grounds that barred women from being ordained. In the ensuing hour, the debate was opened for discussion and debate. The most senior pastor spoke up. I had noticed earlier, that he was jotting down some notes. He stood up and held a piece of paper in his hand with several texts written from which he quoted and “preached” against women’s ordination. I was then more shocked and displaced than feeling angry or offended. This senior pastor quoted a few texts, among which I remember vividly at least three – he started with Genesis 2 on how Eve was created from Adam’s rib; then ran to Pauline theology using 1 Cor. 12: 33b – 35 that women should keep silent and not be permitted to speak; finally, he used 1 Tim 2: 11–15 as reason from G*d’s Word that women were not permitted to teach or have authority over men.
The second occasion happened recently in early September 2005 in the Anglican Church, Diocese of West Malaysia. To date, this Church has been most resistant to the ordination of women in the whole of Malaysia. A deaconess and a priest at the Cathedral were elected to speak “for and against” the idea. It was shocking and stunning for me to hear that the same text from 1Tim 2 was again used as the biblical reason, since this was the Word of G*d, to bar women from ordination! 26 years ago and 26 years later, but in fact for more than a thousand years already, the text has been resorted to justify, manipulate, limit and control women’s participation and leadership in the church. The priest relied heavily on Paul’s writings and quoted many of the household code texts, among them 1 Tim 2: 11-14. His interpretation was typically male biased, misogynist and androcentric, resorting to the Doctrinal-Revelatory Paradigm with an expanded pseudo intellectual exegetical exposition of the text.

When I heard the reading of the text at the forum, it triggered a whole range of mixed feelings - anger, anguish, offence, insult and injustice, etc. The priest was nothing more than a divinely sanctioned agent of violence against women and had been battering her psyche for centuries with such interpretations of the texts. Women were being reduced to subservient objects and beaten into a state of obedient submission by a man of the cloth!!! On the other hand men were held up and glorified as divinely sanctioned subjects, bestowed power and authority from above. 1 Tim 2: 9 – 15 is a household code text prescribed for women.

**Hermeneutics of Social Location and Domination:** For this next step, we will be engaged with the hermeneutics of social location and domination of the author as well as the community involved and addressed. This will help us to locate the author and the community within their socio historical context and also their location within the social political set up which can either limit or enhance the space for the exercise of their freedom. In doing the hermeneutics of domination, we look at the system, its laws and traditions, its culture and prescriptions imposed upon the women and men. An analysis of the structures of domination will be done here.

1 Tim 2 is a text that reflects as much as it “defines” the order regarding church worship, its procedures, petitions and prayers; how men and women should conduct themselves, and what women can/should do to increase/effect their chances for salvation. The text seems to
have a clear order and prescription of conduct for different groups of people based on gender in these verses:

1 - 4: Supplications, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for all men, for kings and all in high positions. God our Saviour desires all men to be saved and have knowledge of the truth.

5 - 6: Relationship between God and men; Jesus Christ is the mediator between them, a ransom for all, the testimony.

7: Paul is an appointed preacher, apostle and teacher of Gentiles. That’s the truth, not lie.

8: Men should pray in every place and lift up holy hands with no anger or quarrel.

9 - 10: Women should adorn modestly, sensibly in seemly apparel, no braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, fitting as they profess religion.

11-12: Woman learns in silence with all submission; no woman permitted to teach or have authority over men; keep silent.

13-14: Adam first, then Eve. Adam not deceived. Woman deceived and transgressor.

15: Woman will be saved through childbearing, if she continues in faith, love, holiness and modesty.

The order of worship and the manner in which men and women are to conduct themselves are both hierarchical and kyriarchal in character. The instructions for prayer intercession are also reflective of kyriarchal/patriarchal patterns of power relations and androcentric/kyriocentric bias in their character, procedure, form and language. It is clearly a pyramidal kyriarchal order drawn by the author of Timothy. Prayers are made for all “men” with specific mention first for the king and high officials. This reflects an implicit acceptance of the kyriarchal hierarchical order as something sanctioned by G*d. These are then followed by instructions and commands to men and women, each group with different “privileges” and responsibilities. It stands out like a sore thumb that more specific prescriptive instructions are issued to the women, it seems with the sole intention to nurture, reinforce and ensure a spirit of submission and obedience.

Who is the author, what is he/she saying/trying to say and what could be the purpose and effect of all that is being said? Why? To whom is he/she giving these prescriptions? What is the social context and political social location of the author? What is the socio-religious and political context of the early Christian community or church? Joanna Dewey reveals many important insights from her research on the socio-historical situation and context of the author and the
community that the “Epistle” was addressed to. She informs us that I Timothy is one of the three Pastorals written probably in 125 C.E. already a few decades after Paul’s death. Yet the author has used Paul’s name and authority to write his Pastoral Epistles to Timothy with the political intention as if it was Paul addressing the second-century churches. Not only were they not real letters written, the form and style of that script was not even that of an “epistle”. It appeared instead to be a kind of handbook or manual for church worship. The author was more likely a man as he took a very androcentric view about women and set out to order women’s conduct in a most crudely dominating manner. By so doing the dye was cast for the creation and development of a hierarchical structure within the household of faith. Dewey thus concludes “since a major concern of the writings was to limit the role of women in the church, the author was probably a man,” a dominating one at that!

The author thus turned the church into a power over “hierarchical household” set up by imposing such ideals and commands to be observed and practised. Such prescriptions however may be reflective of something else happening on the ground! J. Dewey asserts that such “prescriptive material is often historical evidence that the opposite is happening”, meaning it was likely that the various groups of Christians did not hold the same beliefs or act in ways recommended by the author. Thus he seemed very determined to impose these rules and laws for those men and women. To ensure and to lend weight to his intention, Paul’s name and authority as preacher, apostle and teacher was resorted to. If these rules were passed they would become permanent orders for men but especially for the women as well. They would be written into the power structures of the day and set the pattern for the future. This was thus one definite effort at creating, nurturing and maintaining a system of kyriarchal domination in the life of the


60 Ibid., p. 353.
61 Ibid., p. 353.
63 Ibid., p. 354.
community of faith. The household church thus took on the form of a kyriarchally-based order in the pattern of the kyriarchal Roman imperial order. His writings show that he was bent on separating “the congregation into groups according to age, gender, and free or slave status, prescribing different behaviors for each: The leaders (older freemen) should be upstanding citizens and heads of households; the members should be obedient, submissive and silent.”

The culture of kyriarchal power over politics and the use of power for domination as acceptable social practice was created, nurtured and maintained in the community of faith through a process of conscious intentional political manipulation of religious meaning, creating an ideology that rationalised and justified the system of control and using a theology of obedience and submission in the name of G*d. The author began with a generally acceptable gesture of goodwill and a statement of the obvious that it was important and necessary to give thanks and make prayer intercessions for all “men”, for the royalty and high officials in order to maintain peace and order in life. Various types of prayers in worship for different people in hierarchy were emphasized to ensure peace and order.

He then resorted to the ideology of gender inequality to separate the congregation into different categories based on the socially constructed top down power over hierarchical positioning of men and women. It was also the dominant ideas/values and culture of the Greco-Roman world. All men must pray lifting up holy hands. All men should do so without getting angry or quarrelsome (effectively doing away with the responsibility and power to object and resist). While one verse out of the eight verses in the text was prescribed for men, the rest were injunctions for women. All women should not be improperly dressed with frills and fashions but they must be modest (a reflection of men’s insecurity that they would lose their possession to some other men). All women must not teach and have authority over men and they must all keep silent and be submissive. Therefore it was of utmost importance that all women regardless of age, status and social standing behaved submissively and in a subservient manner in relation to men.

---

64 Ibid., p. 353.
They have all been classified as women who adorn themselves and misbehave; women who could not keep silent or refrain from teaching. The author imposed this patriarchal thinking onto the church where all men have power over all women. In fact he desired to establish a kyriarchal order in the church using the existing model of kyriarchy in the Roman Empire. Schüssler Fiorenza says that the “Ideology of kyriocentrism is inscribed in Christian Scriptures in and through the so-called (household) codes of submission.” She said these so-called household codes in the New Testament “admonish wives to be subordinate, slaves to be submissive, and children to be obedient - texts are found in the post-Pauline literature such as Colossians, Ephesians, I Timothy and I Peter.”

In this ideology the politics of kyriarchal submission is linked to the teaching of wo/men’s wickedness and hence their need for salvation through “good deeds” (verse 10) and “childbearing” (verse 15). To institute and reinforce his politics of religious meaning, ideology of gender inequality and kyriocentrism, the author consciously and intentionally peddled a theology of submission and obedience for wo/men. Not only did he impose upon women’s bodies and the manner of their looks, he went further into their sexuality by linking any sexual expression and activity to reproduction and motherhood and subsequently to family and home management as if these were G*d’s will for all women! This would effectively shut them up from any life of responsibility in the larger society. The injunction to obedience and submission prescribed on women to keep them quiet would discourage dissent and forbidding them to teach and participate in church life would in the long run stunt any possibilities for meaningful participation and leadership in the church institution! Women were to learn in silence and submission in order to regain their salvation as they had brought sin into the world through Eve who was deceived. More than this, salvation could only be attained and guaranteed if women were willing to perform their role of childbearing and motherhood. In her systemic analysis, Schüssler Fiorenza exposed the

---


politics of the pseudo-Pauline Pastoral Epistles asserting that they “explicitly link the kyriarchal theology of submission with the teaching on wo/man’s sinfulness. They prescribe the silence of wo/men and prohibit wo/men’s authority over men by claiming that not Adam but ‘the woman’ was deceived and became a transgressor (I Tim 2: 11-15).”

**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** Under this section we will make a critical assessment of the manner this text has been traditionally interpreted. We will read the text again to look at the language and what might have been hidden and unspoken behind the text. As pointed out, in the two debates on the question of women’s ordination, the pastor and the priest made use of these texts as the authoritative and unquestionable “Word of God” revealed for all time to justify their position that women should not and could not be ordained! They also quoted and relied heavily on “Paul” as their authority. This raises many questions and doubts regarding what might have been the true situation behind the text or the “pre-text” and social context of the time in early second century. What could have been the reason for the need to command people over how they should pray, what to pray about and who should be in the priority list of those prayers? Why were there religious rules for men to improve themselves, to pray everywhere, if they were already praying and why had they to be told not to show anger or to quarrel unless they were doing exactly that? Were the men in fact angry and quarrelsome? And what might they have been angry about and quarrelsome over? As for the women: why was there a need for a set of moral and religious prescriptions for women if they were already following the author’s ideals? Were there women who were improperly dressed as implied by the author and did all women talk and teach? If women were not already actively speaking and teaching why did the author have to order them to keep quiet and forbid them to teach?

In the eyes of the author there was disorder and misbehaviour. Women were blamed for this disorder. The author’s prescriptions may well have been a reflection of his own hang-ups as a person who had a need to be in control. He was probably unable and unwilling to cope with a

---

community practicing radical democracy in the spirit of liberating wisdom. Thus he himself might well have been the problem to the community rather than as the epistle implies. He did not like what he saw but it was not for him to set himself up as the standard! He wanted to structure everything according to his personal preferences and thus imposed a set of moral standards for people within the community of faith as if they were unable to think and decide for themselves. Thus he asserts, “I desire” (verse 8) men and women should do according to what they were told, particularly women. He specifically instructed women to be subservient to the men and not to teach and assume authority over men, as this would offend the men in power. Why was there a need to prove that “Paul” was a preacher, apostle and teacher; and that he was speaking the truth (not lying) if there was no dispute or distrust about the author’s credentials? Perhaps he had many opponents and was in competition with other apostles or Christian groups during his time. He resorted to the misogynist political use of the culture of gender inequality to counter and silence the voices of women leaders and as a consequence set the trend for the future subjugation of women in the community of faith.

J. Dewey is convinced that “the author’s injunction is evidence that women were publicly praying and teaching.” It was also quite likely that there was a group of elitist educated men who with the author desired to latch on to the political culture of the Greco-Roman world and expected women to be submissive to them (were they in cahoots with the Roman rulers who needed to quell the rising tide and popularity of the Jesus movement and their practice of radical democracy?). Dewey also suggests that the fact that these prescriptions were being “imposed” upon the church worship suggests that they must in fact not have been the order and pattern of worship currently practised by those groups. It reflects that there must have been a very varied and different form and style of worship that the early Christian groups were comfortable with. This must have been different from the author’s personal agenda to have a uniform and set order

---


69 Ibid., pp. 353 - 358.
for all those communities. Thus the need for his impositions that led to and resulted in quite dire consequences for the community of faith in general and for women in particular!!!

Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation/Proclamation: “While a hermeneutics of trust and consent, which is advocated by the doctrinal paradigm of interpretation, reads the bible for guidance and edification and obediently accepts its teachings on submission, a critical hermeneutics of evaluation seeks both to make conscious the cultural-religious internalizations and legitimizations of kyriarchy and to explore the values and visions that are inscribed as counter-cultural alternatives in biblical texts.”

In the light of the aforementioned 1 Tim 2:1-15 can at best, only be accepted as one among many other “time-conditioned ethical injunctions.” The reason for this is obvious. 1 Tim 2:1-15 is a clear example of the re-inscription of and legitimization of kyriarchal values of submission and the politics of domination by reducing wo/men to mere subservient victims and objects. In assessing the text critically we need to ask again these questions: Whose interest would ultimately be enhanced through the imposition of such “laws” and modes of behaviour? Why did the author insist on imposing such injunctions and what political function would it serve in the larger society and to whose interest? What consequences would follow if the community of faith did submit to it? What about the language of the text? What is the function of language in the text? In what ways does it function to maintain and reproduce reality under kyriarchal Roman domination and that status quo? The language is plainly and clearly kyriarchal/hierarchical and androcentric. It reinforces the superior position of men over women and establishes gender inequality as the norm. Dewey says the translation of “men” or “anthropos” is a generic term inclusive of both males and females. The two Greek words with different meaning for “men” are

---


used “anthropos” in verses 1-7 and “aner” referring only to males in verses 8 to 15. She adds that though the New Revised Standard Version now used inclusive language, most of the older versions still remained generic and androcentric in their language.

It is a highly androcentric-kyriarchal text promoting an ideology and theology that served the interest of the authorities of the state under Roman domination. The bible, canonised as the “Word of God”, thus legitimised colonising injustice and lent its support to the oppression of wo/men.

This is obviously a difficult emotional roadblock to breakthrough as all believers have been taught/brainwashed to regard the bible as the sacred Word of G*d. To challenge or even worse, to reject this, evokes a terrible sense of emotional guilt and unbearable psychological, spiritually enslaving weight from the deepest recesses of our beings as wo/men, who have been for centuries socialised and demonised by such biblical religious beliefs and values of obedience and willing submission. At the same time such a liberating exercise frees us to realise that the bible is not written by G*d as such but by elite, “educated” freeborn albeit infantile and insecure men intent upon controlling and dominating others for their own benefit and unholy self interest.

The author of Timothy was most likely an elitist, educated, freeborn citizen who submitted to the dominant and dominating Roman Kyriachal/Imperial culture, order and system. In her systemic analysis and critical evaluation of the so-called household code texts, Schüssler Fiorenza informed us in an interview that she is convinced by Susann Moller Okin, a feminist political philosopher who questioned Aristotle’s misogynistic opinion that women have a deficient nature which sprang from their biological make-up. She said Susann Loller Okin “argued that the argument of Aristotle was not developed, because he had a faulty biological understanding, but because he was one of the philosophers who argued against the democratic understanding that would have required that women would be full citizens. Hence, Aristotle and other philosophers gave the rationale why women could not be full citizens, why slaves could not be full citizens, and

---

so the argument of subordination, women’s second-class citizenship was developed over and against the democratic political idea.”74 Furthermore in the interview, Schüessler Fiorenza has an important piece of information regarding the politics and ideology/theology of the prescriptions of household codes text. She said “At the same time in New Testament studies, scholars came to see that these household codes were not based on Stoic but on Aristotelian philosophy, and feminist political science scholars showed the Aristotelian argument was a political argument rather than an argument based on biological nature.”75 The household codes are “Neo-Aristotelian injunctions. They take over Aristotle’s political philosophy, which has influenced not only the understanding of woman and the pyramid of domination in the New Testament, but also of Thomas of Aquinas and medieval and modern Catholic theology. Until then, the theory was that because Aristotle and his successors had a wrong biological understanding, they said women were deficient men and slaves deficient human beings. Aristotle stressed that a woman had to be subordinated and was not able to rule over men because of her nature. That is why Thomas of Aquinas said women could not be ordained because they could not be in positions of power and ruling.”76

_Hermeneutics of Imagination:_ Engaging in creative imagination involves rewriting the text in order to make it liberating and transformational. Imagination begins with the recapitulation of what happened but transforms the situation of oppression towards one of liberation thus liberating the text in the process. For this exercise in creative imagination, a Pastoral Epistle is written to the author of Paul’s letter to Timothy in response. Following this a recommendation will be made to the AWRC for transformative action.

**Letter to whoever used the name of Paul for the most devious purposes/Author of the**

**Letter of Paul to Timothy from the ekklesia of wo/men**

74 Ibid., p. 46.

75 Ibid., p. 46.

76 Ibid., p. 46.
We, the community members of the discipleship of equals, the ekklesia of wo/men, are writing this in response to the Pastoral Epistle you sent. We met and re-read your text as a community of faith and feel strongly that we have liberating wisdom to share with you as the Sophia-Wisdom of G*d guides us. We invite you to read our text as a response to the one you sent out to us with all the prescriptions for women to adhere to in the church order of worship and life.

First of all we want you to know the painful struggles we have gone through as a community upon reading your prescriptions in I Timothy 2. To say the least, we are insulted and humiliated each time your texts have been used over the centuries and abused by clergymen and males in positions of power to this day, to put down, dominate and control women. Your prescriptions have contributed to reinforce and perpetuate the demonic reality of women’s oppression. As a result of your prescriptions, religion, sacred scriptures, the bible and worst of all the name of G*d has been used to do the work of the Evil One!

The model of political hierarchical power that you imposed upon us is none other than the Roman system of domination. This is contrary to the teachings and practice of the Jesus movement and our community of the discipleship of equals. You also imposed upon us, using the name of Paul, an ideology and theology of submission to the dominating imperial dehumanising values and culture of the Greco-Roman world order. This violent system of domination is unjust and oppressive to all men in general and to us women in particular. It is sinful in its multi-layered structures that discriminate, marginalize and exclude people. You have set up structures of war and division instead of building and establishing peace among us as the ekklesia of wo/men. You have brought upon us untold suffering when church fathers and kyriarchal minded people of power and positions in the churches used your text as the eternal unchanging Word of G*d to further restrict and prevent the work of the Spirit through the participation and leadership of women in the community of faith.

The church of the people, the ekklesia of wo/men is the discipleship of equals that is based and founded on the vision, teachings and values of the “basileia” this kin-dom of G*d as proclaimed by Jesus and practised by the Jesus community. We are of one mind and intent to
practice inclusive participatory radical democracy as a way of life. It is entirely different from and even “opposed to” your kyriarchal top-heavy Roman Imperial model and political style to say the least. Since we have struggled hard for our liberation and the transformation of the structures that have kept us oppressed we are no longer able nor are we willing to subject ourselves to your dominating power over political option.

We are deeply concerned that your prescriptions and injunctions have turned the church into a hierarchical household along authoritarian lines in the character of Roman kyriarchy. To be faithful to the calling of G*d we who have opted to be in the community of the discipleship of equals are resolved to resist all attempts on your part to establish and to impose kyriarchal structures and kyriocentric ideas and values and the theology of submission that comes along with it for the next two thousand years and forever. In G*d’s grace and love, peace with justice we are working and journeying towards the liberation of all persons and the transformation of social constructs that prevent them from living life in its fullness and abundance. We therefore urge you to read our response to your text carefully and seriously. We wish to invite you for a dialogue in the ekklesia of wo/men from the AWRC for Culture and Theology. Signed by the ekklesia of wo/men.

**Proposed Action Plan to the Ekklesia of Wo/men in AWRC Network**

Following this letter to clergymen and those who we know have used such household code texts in churches through various means of communications (sermon, bible study, debate on ordination, etc) including especially those who have used the texts as the proclaimed “Word of God”, a recommendation/plan of action will be forwarded to the AWRC for Culture and Theology to follow up this matter:

6. To publish the above letter in our AWRC newsletter *Womenet* in order to make known to AWRC members and women in our network our position regarding the text, draw response from them for discussion and further action.
7. Make available this letter and this feminist interpretation of I Timothy text in AWRC journal, *In God’s Image*, to stimulate discussion as well as to call and engage readers for dialogue and action.

8. AWRC to organise a one-day feminist dialogue. AWRC invitation will be issued to the clergy to whom the letter is addressed and to all interested in an open dialogue on this and such household code texts. During this session a critical feminist biblical interpretation of I Timothy 2 will be shared, followed by dialogue. A list of feminist theologians will be invited to participate and dialogue in a series of panels. The focus will be on household code texts. A plan of action for transformation and change will be drawn up at the end of the dialogue.

9. This dialogue will include facilitators and resource persons. They are: AWRC Coordinating Team Members and *In God’s Image* Editorial Advisory Committee. Special invitation will be extended to a number of feminist theologians.

10. This dialogue will be hosted by two local groups of wo/men in ekklesia with whom I belong. They are the Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology and Women’s Voice.

This recommendation for plan of action will be a part of the hermeneutics of transformative action and change.

**Hermeneutics of Re-Membering and Reconstruction:** To remember is to recover the loss - the voice, the active agency and contribution of women who were marginalized and written off the history of early Christian origins. In places where women are mentioned or even highlighted, they are often painted in very negative light and played down by the androcentric politics of history writing and meaning making. Remembering then is also an attempt to reconstruct such a history by bringing wo/men back to the centre, to highlight their agency in active and prominent leadership as discipleship of equals in the early Christian community. It is restoring early Christian history to women and writing women back into this history that is part of wo/men’s heritage.
Women were definitely prominent leaders, teachers, and prophets. They also played other important leadership roles and positions in the churches as confirmed by other New Testament passages (e.g. I Corinthians 7 and 11; and Romans 16). There is however a great possibility, as it has in fact happened in church history, that texts like those found in 1 Tim. 2:1-15 can give rise to the subjugation of women’s voices and eventually result in wiping off this memory of women participation, contribution, and leadership in the life and development of early Christian communities of faith. In verses 2:11-12, “the author’s injunction is evidence that women were publicly praying and teaching.”77 Verses 2:13-15 “presents a theological argument justifying the author’s instructions, one of the very few theological discussions about anything in the Pastorals. The fact that the author spends so much time to enjoin silence on Christian women suggests that the actual and accepted practice of women was active and vocal and that the author was attempting to change this behaviour.”78

The process of remembering and reconstruction is not aimed at writing wo/men’s history in early Christianity. It is a feminist reconstruction of Christian beginnings. In Schüssler Fiorenza’s own words, “but I wanted to write a feminist history of early Christianity. That means I wanted to rewrite the history of the early church in light of the fact that wo/men were central agents and subjects in early Christian communities. Since traditional history was written only in terms of male actors, I felt the historical record needed to be corrected.”79

**Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change**

The dance of transformation for change begins with naming the situations and structures of injustice/oppression and leads to the struggle for socio-personal liberation and the

---


transformation of the structures of injustice/oppression. In the case of the text at hand, what action for change is necessary? How can one change the text or use the text for change? What are the areas that need liberation and transformation?

Recalling the areas cited by Schüssler Fiorenza that require changes and action, how can the interpretive text be used as a site in the process of conscientization towards change and transformation? In dealing with I Timothy 2, the areas that can be identified where actions/changes can be taken are: In terms of kyriocentric language and text we look at the overall language of the text and how it reproduces/re-inscribes the reality of power domination, language of gender inequality and ideology employed to divide men and women into superior and inferior positions; and the use of theological language and religious meaning to keep women in a position of submission to the power over dominating system of kyriarchy/patriarchy. In this way, the system and structures of power within the Roman kyriarchal order are maintained. The text reflects the kyriocentric mindset of the author and perhaps the elite group of freeborn educated men in power who submitted to and thus supported and endorsed kyriocentric ideas and values. Furthermore biblical authority and the authority of “Paul” were made use of to support their ideology and theology of submission. These areas as elaborated can be used as points in the struggle for liberation with the subject self who is struggling with the bible, based on her/his negative experiences in biblical religion and her/his religious community.

On a social personal and community level, there is another group, Malaysian Women in Ministry and Theology (MWMT), which I belong to, among whom are Anglican women and deaconesses who are still struggling with the issue of ordination. It is a live and current issue, as the vote for women’s ordination was not passed. While there is a point in struggling for “gender equality” at one level, there is yet the other consideration to be taken into account. This is with reference to being ordained into a position of privilege and power within the larger dominating kyriarchal order. There is a need to deepen our discussion among this group as well as within the 80 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, p. 205.
Catholic Women’s Voice in the re-reading and “reformulation/reconstruction” of this text (and other so-called household code texts). Through a critical feminist reading of this text, it is my hope that the MWMT will see the more radical and fundamental issues at stake in their struggle for women’s ordination. A critical feminist biblical interpretation in the manner of the dance of liberation and transformation will help remedy and correct inequalities without the danger of falling into revisionist positions that re-inscribe Kyriarchal ideas, values and practices!

CONCLUSION

THE JOURNEY IS HOME

Towards A Praxis for Liberation and Transformation

My socially constructed journey began the day I was born…without my consent nor was my permission sought for… so I did not, could not feel at home… and so I began as an alien selfless self, homeless… and a homeless self alienated self was I...

But I journeyed on or was forced to journey on nonetheless… alienated as I was from myself, from other people around me, and from all of creation as well… even the past and so the future…truth be told, I did not feel at home even within the present moment…

The social scripts that rationalised, justified and yes even mystified the socially constructed reality around me, especially those religious sounding ones, that was forced upon me, telling me who I was, given that particular historical moment in time within the space that had its peculiar set of socially constructed global, regional, national structures… and so I was… by religious affiliation, a Christian/protestant, by nationality a Sabahan, a Malaysian under the colonial power and domination of Great Britain, by race, a Chinese, by dialect a Hakka, according to sex/gender categories a female a woman… these social constructs defined what my limits were and who I could be, was supposed to be… this socially constructed reality even offered me a range of configured possibilities regarding who or what I might choose to be… in my state of

81 The phrase was inspired and made famous by Nelle Morton in her book *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1985.
socialised ignorance I did make choices and so I became and so I was, for quite a while even… alienated… self from self… self from other… and self from creation… and self from the past, the future and the present too… but soon enough this socially constructed culture of living death did not and could not contain the spirit and the being that I was and was made to be…!!!

And thus was begun another journey… this time a little more conscientised, a little more of a “conscious intentional” journey of struggle, the struggle to be… which would involve a struggle to be liberated from all forms of socially constructed oppression that tried to contain me and prevent me for LIFE in its splendour, abundance and fullness… it was a journey of self discovery, which soon was realised to be a struggle for self recovery or the reclaiming of self, the re-naming of self, the overcoming of self alienation, of becoming Subject, of owning self, exercising faith that one was/is made in the Image of G*d, albeit still defined within and by the socially constructed “religious” reality for a while yet within the larger context of a global historical construct within which religion and religious scripting also played a great part and was hand in glove with the powers that be who kept persons, women, and people, wo/men in captivity within the kyriarchal/patriarchal order… for generations already and for a while yet…

And so the journey took me beyond the self seeking for itself to join the larger Journey with other women/wo/men, the marginalised selves, creation seeking for the same liberation from…also seeking for liberation towards self-authentication, self validation, overcoming alienation, breaking free from the yoke of socially constructed kyriarchal/patriarchal captivity…“women making the option for self” to be self as self made in G*d’s image!

And over time and through many struggle experiences, the journey began to be informed by wisdom/Wisdom who led us from the need to seek liberation from global historical social construction, to the need for the transformation of those structures in the manner, form and vision of people from the Jesus movement, fellow travellers of that same journey. And so the Journey took on new dimensions and opened up new vistas of possibilities… from an object that was held in captivity through being misnamed, we became Subjects empowered to engage in naming and exercising liberating power, empowered to struggle for structural transformation… thus the
journey developed into the Journey of the ekklesia of wo/men this time aided by the Spirit of wisdom/Wisdom through the Dance of Liberation and Transformation, the Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation in general and Critical Feminist Biblical Interpretation in particular… Home at last… the journey is the home… the JOURNEY IS HOME…. the basileia is here and yet to be…

It is my conviction that CFBI to date offers the most complete approach for women in their struggle for liberation to connect with liberating wisdom within the Scriptures that can free them from that which they have been influenced/mesmerized and in many cases dominated by.

It is my hope that AWRC can be an agency and a regional/global vehicle to promote and spread this Dance of Liberation and Transformation for all wo/men through its publications and regional programmes.

It is my longing that all wo/men seeking socio-personal liberation and engaged in the struggle to transform socially constructed structures that dominate and hold them in captivity, will, with and through their ekklesia of wo/men, get to experience life in all its fullness and abundance.

May all who dance the Dance of Liberation be blessed by the spirit of Wisdom/Sophia and as we continue in the journey, may we find peace in the knowledge that the JOURNEY IS HOME!!!

BIBLIOGRAPHY


xlvi
