

MAGNIFICAT – A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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The patriarchal mind views women as objects of entertainment and this inevitably makes them newsworthy. Yet they continue to be marginalized in politics and in decision making. Their role in public life has been confined to being newsmakers, crowd pullers or publicity ploys. The insincerity of politicians in preventing women from reaching the helm of different levels of administration becomes obvious whenever the Women Reservation Bill comes up in the parliament. Clearly Swami Vivekananda's observation that women participation in politics is a vital step towards total empowerment of women has been either ignored or forgotten.

Capitalistic countries evince enormous interests in sponsoring and popularizing beauty contests rather than welfare programmes in the developing (always meaning undeveloping) countries. It is needless to say they view these countries as vast markets for promoting their commercial ventures rather than as places needed to be developed. The people there are considered more as consumers than as human beings.

The publicity that draws the attention of the whole world towards the physique of a handful of girls and the money and the glamour that follows it has ravaged the psyche of countless girls. The idea has become such an obsession that every other girl wants to become a "Miss Something" or "Miss Somewhere". Inevitably

they become unwitting advertisers of a mania that has seized us. Wherever they go, they carry with them the message of consumerism and women enslavement. Naturally, "Women lose their human worth and become slaves of the transnational capital".¹ It is unfortunate that the coincidence between the Indian women's winning spree in these beauty pageants and the opening up of the country's economy has gone unnoticed except by critics who see a link between the increasing emphasis on beauty in the Third World and the international cosmetic industry's quest for new markets.

In this context, what may be the response of a feminist theologian to the above half human status? Our Blessed mother Mary may be seen as a role model. How did Mary place herself and respond to her situation which was in no way better than ours? Before answering these questions we need to situate the socio-economic, political and cultural condition of women during the days of Mary.

Mary as a Jewish Woman

It was a time when the world was under the sway of Greek culture and Roman law. Both influenced the Jewish tradition immensely. While Greek culture considered women as inferior beings, Roman law denied several rights to them. These attitudes were reinforced by the Bible written by men. It is only in this backdrop that we can understand the life of women in Mary's time. Patriarchy was very strong in the Semitic tradition and was expressed everyday in the male Jewish sexist prayer of thanks to Yahweh for not making one a woman. Flavius Joseph observes: "The woman was, in all respects, of less value than the man. In the religious realm the woman was considered equal to the slave in her religious obligations. She was not obliged to say the shema in the morning and evening."²

¹ Cf. J. Rosario, *All the Best Current Challenges to Mission*, Dindigul, 2000, p. 47

² J. Paredes, *Mary and the Kingdom of God*, London, 1988, p. 196.

It was circumcision that marked formal entry into adult Israelite community and defined membership in it. Women since uncircumcised, had no official part in worship, no obligation of pilgrimages and no debt to Sabbath rules.

The genealogy was taken into account only through men. Menstruating women were considered impure for seven days and whoever touched them would also be unclean until the evening (Lev 15:19). Girls were betrothed to men at a very young age. Man assumed the power to divorce his wife for any reason. "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house..." (Deut 24:1). Women had no access to learn law and theology. They were allowed neither to speak in public nor to decide on social matters. They did not enjoy any property rights either.

Mary, too, underwent all these discriminations and encountered a society that belittled women. Yet, amidst these unjust structures she had the inner resources to sing the Magnificat, the hymn of liberation. It is a hymn by a woman for women. "By placing the Magnificat in the lips of Mary, Luke is making her the spokeswoman of a theme of reversal that will be a vital part of the Gospel message."³

The Magnificat – A Woman's Perspective

"He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has put down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1:53). Tissa Balasuriya considers the Magnificat as a poignant expression of the fundamental principles of Jesus and Mary: "The Magnificat of Mary expresses heartily and powerfully the integral liberation for which Jesus and Mary stood."⁴ The Magnificat speaks of a fourfold revolution (cultural, political, social and economic) that is brought about by God.

³ R.E. Brown and others, *Mary in the New Testament*, Bangalore, 1981, p. 143.

⁴ T. Balasuriya, *Mary in the Early Church*, p. 184.

Cultural Revolution

"He has scattered the proud" (Lk 1:51). Tissa Balasuriya sees a close nexus between degradation of human values and the debasement of culture: "Much of our cultural values, our educational system and media of communication is debased by a certain manipulation making people proud, greedy or vain."⁵

Knowledge, power and wealth have made men and nations insolent and decadent causing an ideal ambience for superpowers, superior races, upper castes and male chauvinism to thrive. This has naturally been followed by total oppression in every sphere.

When Mary reiterates that God will scatter the proud she is referring to a spiritual and cultural revolution too. As the proud show no concern for others, the spirit of God can never dwell in them. "God is indignant with the selfish, greedy oppressors who engender impoverishment and humiliation of others."⁶

Mary's warning to the proud hearted that they would be scattered is an invitation for us to create an alternative culture. Here human person and human dignity will receive primary stress. But this can be realized only when we unite to combat every form of discrimination and hegemony.

Political Revolution

"He has put down the powerful from their thrones" (Lk 1:52). Mary's family encountered every form of political oppression under the Roman empire. Her flight to Egypt to save her son from Herod would have reminded her of her ancestors' immense sufferings and the arduous Exodus back to their native land. When she proclaims that the mighty would be put down from their thrones, she unambiguously meant the establishment of the political authority of Jesus. This would be the victory of the unprivileged and the marginalised and the defeat of the powermongers. Here Mary stands as a model to empower women politically thereby empowering all the oppressed.

⁵ T. Balasuriya, *Mary in the Early Church*, p. 184.

⁶ L. Boff, *The Maternal Face of God*, San Francisco, 1987, p. 198.

Social Revolution

“He raised the lowly” (Lk 1:52). The history of salvation includes several personalities who had been raised from the abyss of misery to the pinnacles of glory. In Mary’s assertion that “the lowly will be raised”, she denounces the hierarchy in society which presupposes an upper class crushing and feeding on a lower class. She insists that any society that denies human dignity and equality cannot flourish. This should awaken in us the truth that the continued suppression of the marginalised even in this millennium cannot last long. Dr. Ambedkar, sensitive and sharp as he was, did not fail to understand that in all castes, classes are placed one over another, like pots, with women at the bottom.

The equality that Jesus and Mary emphasized was a counter culture to the Jewish and Roman societies of those days which were as pernicious and unjust as our society is today. So Mary can be the inspiration and catalyst for the social struggle of our times for she was the pioneer who desired for a society without class distinctions.

Rene Coste finds a conscious pattern in the Magnificat, i.e., the voluntary choice of Christ to be born in an enslaved community amidst poverty and misery, his identification with the poor and the Samaritans, his condemnation of the ruling class, his crucifixion as a rebel and his ultimate resurrection. “The liberating exaltation of the poor which is celebrated in the Magnificat began with God’s voluntary assumption of extreme poverty by taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Phil 2:7). It has found its crowning glory in the victory of the risen Christ over death” (Phil 2:9-11).

Economic Revolution

“He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:53). The unshared wealth had divided the world into two disproportionate groups, the rich and the poor. A handful of people enjoy all the wealth and resources of the world

⁷ R. Coste, *The Magnificat: The Revolution of God*, Manila, 1988, p. 107.

while the innumerable millions go hungry and scavenge for their basic needs. Consumerism has sapped all vital feelings and countries are mere markets and human beings, consumers. Inability to purchase deprives people of the right to exist. The promotion of monoculturalism and uniformity presupposes the negation of individuality and diversity. Caught in this vicious paradigm the Asian communities, especially the Indian Community, face a threat to their living. Freedom and creativity are no longer considered as virtues but traits of lawlessness and terrorism.

The discrimination against women in the labour market is worse. Reduced job opportunities, less pay, inferior job status, diminished chances for promotion and sexual harassment – all these disadvantages discourage women from competing or seeking equal status with men.

“In the competitive world fuelled by globalisation, women of the margins of the society are further denied their rights and responsibilities. Women lose their human worth. They become slaves of the trans-nationalised capital.”⁸

It is in this background the magnificat gains its meaning and relevance. Mary stands between the Exodus event and the proclamation of the kingdom God by Jesus. The Magnificat cannot be isolated from the liberative work of Yahweh and the redemptive work of Jesus. Mary must have narrated to Jesus the Exodus and the famous jubilee text, thereby initiating Jesus into the cause for humanity because she was aware of the great task that was before her son and herself “She is the initial human agent in the unfolding of a divine revolution in history. She is the one through whom God has acted. Luke introduces Mary as a prophetess of the messianic subversion of all values.”⁹ Mary is presented as the liberating woman as prolonging the lineage of the heroic women of the Old Testament like Deborah (Josh 4:5) and Judith (Jdt 13:20; 15:9).

⁸ J. Rosorio, *All the Best Current Challenges to Mission*, 47

⁹ Reuther R. Mary, *The Feminine Face of the Church*, London, 1979, p. 27.

Women and Revolution

Only a new cultural consciousness can precipitate a total revolution and establish equality in all spheres. This new cultural consciousness is otherwise called alternative consciousness or prophetic consciousness. Mao called this "Cultural Revolution", which should precede any change in any field, including politics.

Women today have to jump into politics and not be content with peripheral benefits. They ought to wage an incessant war till they achieve their legitimate share (50%) in the decision making bodies (the parliament and other legislative bodies) and at home, at the work places and at the places of worship.

The table fellowship of Jesus will be the ideal model for establishing equality among the people and between men and women. The social revolution proclaimed by Mary and Jesus can be realised only when it is preceded by the equal status of women. Equality in spirit and practice involves equitable share of opportunities and responsibilities: equal pay, right to property and, as a matter of fact, preferential consideration to offset the earlier imbalances and inequities. The Church, too, has to shed its rigidity and give women their due status and power and get them involved in decision making instead of making them mere appendages to the male authority.

This proposition (equal status for women in the Church) need not shake our sensibilities. Indeed, women found an important place in the life and mission of Christ. Women accompanied St. Paul in his missions. So instead of relegating them to inconsequential jobs such as secretaries and wardens they should be assigned to the responsibilities of challenge and creativity. This will be akin to the wind, the feminine energy, Shakthi, blowing over the land, driving away the dead and the decayed and liberating and nurturing the vital sources of life. It will gain momentum and strength and develop into a force that can transform the tears and laments of women into songs of joy and hope.

Leonardo Boff could recognise this rejuvenating power in the Magnificat and proclaim it to be the herald of the reign of God: "The context of the Hymn of the Virgin is the same as that of the liberating message of the Messiah and Mary sings her song in the

same spirit as Jesus proclaims his message of liberation. The Magnificat is a prelude to the proclamation of the reign of God, which, of course, is the core and centre of the glad tidings of Mary's son Jesus, the crowning of the whole Old Testament message to the poor, the unjustly treated and the downtrodden. Blessed are those poor, therefore, for theirs is the inauguration of the reign of God."¹⁰

The Magnificat is the ultimate proof of Mary's realisation that it was not the disorder but the order that was menacing. It is a sharp reminder that the prevalent social and economic system has to be demolished and made impossible forever. Read in this context, the Magnificat issues a clear call for a change, a socio-economic and cultural revolution.

¹⁰ Cf. Boff, L. *The Maternal Face of God*, 193.