

INDIAN FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

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Christy¹ was waiting to meet me in the library where I go regularly for my work. There were fresh bruises on her face and arms. She stared at me for a while and I realized that her eyes were moist with tears. I held her hands tight and asked, "What's wrong?" Pointing to her fresh bruises and scars she asked, "Tell me, is this God's will for me?" After a few minutes of silence, she started pouring out her story. "My husband is a member of the parish council of a certain well known parish. He is involved in all the activities of the parish. But at home he is different. He has been abusive and harsh towards me for the past ten years. I know he has a temper and so I have tried for years to do everything to make things lighter for him so that he does not beat me. But whatever I do does not seem to satisfy him. He thrashes me thoroughly. He tells me after each beating that if I tell anyone, I will have to pay for it heavily. Last night he came home around 11.30 p.m. He was upset that his dinner was not kept hot and that I did not keep waiting for him. So, he hit me on my face and I started bleeding in the nose. But he rolled over on the bed and fell asleep as if nothing wrong happened. I could not tolerate it anymore. I was very upset and heart-broken the whole night. So as soon as the bell rang for morning mass, I went to the church to meet the parish priest after the mass. He listened to me patiently and when I finished speaking

¹ In order to keep her identity confidential, a fictitious name is used.

he told me, "I know this is difficult for you to understand now. But keep in mind that Christ has suffered and died for your sins on the cross. So for the sake of Christ, bear this suffering. In the letter to the Romans St. Paul says, 'Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us' (5:34) and so try to adjust to his moods. You are expected by the Bible and Church to obey whatever your husband says and do what pleases him." Shocked at what the parish priest said Christy came to meet me.

This is just one of the many incidents that take place today wherein Scripture is being used to perpetuate women's oppression. History reveals that almost all the major religions of the world have contributed to the perpetuation of the subjugation of women through their religious dogmas, Scriptures, rituals, ideology and patriarchal/ hierarchical structures.

There are several biblical texts that engender a whole gamut of sexual violence against women: sexual denunciation (Dan.13), coercion (Gen. 12:10; II Sam.11), rape (Gen. 34; II Sam.13), sexual murder (Judg.19), etc. The power of men over women is symbolized in the image of the daughter of Zion, the unfaithful wife, and the whore whose nakedness is uncovered publicly (Ezek. 16:8). A theology of sacrifice and discipleship, which refers to the New Testament, a theology of the suffering of Christ who was 'obedient to death' (Phil 2:8), is commended for imitation by those suffering sexual violence.² The frequent portraying of women by the Scripture and Tradition – across all religions – as not possessing full human subjectivity, but only derivatively so, as possession of husband or father, has to be recognized as a contributory cause of domestic violence.³ Holiness is still related to endurance of hardship and suffering, and seldom to the celebration of life in its fullness. Above all, the spiritual experiences of women had often been sidelined and rejected in the past. Although there are sporadic

² Hedwig Meyers-WILMES, "Excessive Violence Against Women in the Name of Religion" *Concilium*, 1997/4, 55-63, 56. Cf also Pauline HENSMAN, "The Patriarchal Element in Theology," *In God's Image* (1986).

³ Mary GREY, "The Role of Women in Overcoming Violence," *Concilium*, 1997/4, 64-70, 65.

efforts in this area, Christian women, particularly in India, have not come out forcefully to interpret Scripture from their daily lives, struggles and perspectives. Even today they believe that Tradition and Scripture are beyond their reach and are sacrosanct. There is fear and reverence towards them. Hence, whatever Tradition and Scripture command is divine sanction and therefore without questioning, they obey. This paper attempts to make biblical interpretation possible for any ordinary Indian Christian woman.

1. Exploring the Implications

Although the Christian churches in India overflow with women's presence for any celebration and for any services, their participation is still questionable, and more so with regard to the interpretation of the Bible. Although numerous books on women's issues and concerns have been published, the sphere of feminist hermeneutics is yet an unrecognized subject, not sufficiently spoken about or discussed. The voices of women in this area are not heard loud enough as compared to other areas. To pursue this in India we require a few summary observations:

Firstly, Biblical theology and Biblical hermeneutics are domains controlled by male scholarship. Even today the situation continues.

Secondly, these fields have remained exclusive prerogative of those who are educated in seminaries and theological faculties.

Thirdly, even those women who have begun to interpret the Bible are those who enjoy the maximum benefits of society, especially of the Church, and who belong to the upper strata of the society.

Fourthly and finally, the privilege of having a Bible, and then reading, re-reading, reflecting and interpreting it in their context, is something that is very difficult for the marginalized women especially, the Dalits and the Tribals.⁴

⁴ The thrice-oppressed victims of centuries of social, political, economic, cultural and religious pressures in many parts of the country have been traditionally discriminated against in the matter of access to education as they are the ones who mainly forced to be involved in cultivation, construction, scavenging and garbage picking etc.

Besides all these heart rending realities, while interviewing two groups of women belonging to the marginalized sector⁵ as well as the privileged class,⁶ to a certain extent one thing became very clear – that most of the women are unaware, first of all, of the possibility of interpreting the Scripture according to their perspectives. Secondly, they question the very use of it and begin to wonder whether it will bring about transformation in our sex-biased society. However, it is high time that the Indian Christian women begin to realize that the formulations of Scripture, tradition, dogmas and the like are deliberative elements that are latent within the Scriptures, dogmas and traditions in order that they can be unleashed through a process of decoding and deconstruction. This will raise women from being just observers to being participants, from being victims to becoming agents of social change.

2. Exploring the Term

Hermeneutics is described as the philosophical art of interpretation. One interprets texts by deciphering the complex and ambiguous layers that exist in texts to discover the hidden meanings. 'Feminist hermeneutics (to interpret) is best defined as theory, art, and praxis of interpretation in the interest of wo/men (women and men).'

'As a hermeneutic, feminism interprets existence. Though not monolithic in point of view, it focuses on gender and sex.'

⁵ In the case of Dalit women there were Catholics, fifteen in a group who are not regular church-goers. Ten of them do not have a copy of the Bible at home.

⁶ In the case of the privileged, there were twenty women belonging to different denominations and who were regular attendants of the church's celebrations and regular readers of the Bible except two.

⁷ Letty M. RUSSEL & J. SHANNON, eds. *Dictionary of Feminist Theology* (MowBray: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 99. For further clarification of Hermeneutics refer P.J. ACHTEMIER, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969). & Cratto SEVERINO, "Biblical Hermeneutics in the Theology of Oppressed," *Vidyajyoti* 46(1982), 54-68.

⁸ See M. GOULD and R. Kern- DANIELS, "Towards a Sociological Theory of Gender and Sex," *American Sociologist* 12(1977) 182-9. For a helpful exposition of these and other terms, see G. LERNER, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University, 1986) 231-43. R. Radford RUETHER, "Sexism as Ideology and Social System: Can Christianity be Liberated from Patriarchy?" in *With Both Eyes Open: Seeing Beyond Gender*, ed. P. Altenbornd JOHNSON and J. KALVEN (New York: Pilgrim, 1988) 148-64.

Feminism has brought to public notice the way that societies have used gender and sex to advocate male domination and female subordination and how patriarchy has institutionalized male dominance over women at home, in the Church and society at large. Feminism has also brought gender to the foreground of discussion. It not only describes but also convicts. It opposes the paradigm of domination and subordination in all forms, most particularly male over female, but also master over slave and humankind over the earth.⁹

It has also exposed the androcentric bias of Scripture and scholarship. It aims to empower women to become subjects of interpretation and to engage in the critical construction of religious meanings. By reclaiming the authority of women as religious and theological subjects of interpretation, feminist hermeneutics attempts to reconceptualize the act of interpretation as a moment in the struggle for women's liberation.¹⁰ It engages two seemingly contradictory insights. On the one hand, the Bible is written in Kyriocentric¹¹ (centered on the Lord/ Master) language, has its origin in the Patri-kyriarchal (lord /master/ father rule) cultures of antiquity, and has functioned throughout its history to inculcate misogynist mindsets and oppressive values. On the other hand, the Bible has functioned in the past and still functions today to inspire and authorize women in their struggles against dehumanizing oppression. Consequently, it focuses on the daily struggles of women at the bottom of Patri-kyriarchal pyramid of domination and exploitation, because their struggles reveal the fulcrum of oppression and dehumanization threatening all women.

3. Feminist Hermeneutics - a Bird's Eye View

The feminist study of the Bible has been one of the most important new arenas in contemporary biblical research. Although

⁹ For a substantive statement of feminist theology, see R. Radford RUETHER, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); also A.E. CARR, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). Monica MELANCHTHON, "Indian Women and the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in *Feminist Theology: Perspective & Praxis*, ed., Prasanna KUMARI (Chennai: Gurukul, 1998).

¹⁰ Cf. RUSSEL & J. SHANNON, 1996, 99.

¹¹ *Kyriarchy* is a term used by Schussler Fiorenza to denote the Church's structure.

symbolically and substantively Betty Friedan's book on *The Feminine Mystique* reopened the question of female and male,¹² the feminist approach to the Bible is traced back to the women's movement in the United States in the 19th century, and especially to *the Woman's Bible*. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a small group of women who brought out this fascinating work (1895-1898) challenged both the androcentric (*male-centred*) and misogynist (*anti-women*) bias in the Bible and in its approach and interpretation in the history of the Church. The methodology and hermeneutics that they follow in *the Woman's Bible* is one of exegetical-topical approach.

With the awakening of the feminist consciousness women scholars began to engage in biblical studies from the women's perspective. Analyzing the biblical texts, they discovered that women's human and spiritual experiences have been sidelined and have not been adequately incorporated into biblical faith. They pointed out the truth that women are not only marginalized but also portrayed from the perspective of male authors and in the context of their socio-cultural realities. They criticized the androcentric scholarship that treats *man* as normative human being, and the patriarchal hermeneutics that is responsible for women's invisibility and subjugation in religion. They also questioned the biblical tools such as commentaries, concordances and dictionaries – tools regarded as objective because they are scientific, but they are also undoubtedly susceptible to being biased by sexism.

Over the last thirty years, feminist biblical interpretation has developed into two interdependent areas of research: *inclusive language* and *inclusive interpretation*. As opposed to 'sexist' or exclusive language that takes the humanity of male human being as normative for all, inclusive language conveys the notion of wholeness. Likewise the use of inclusive terms helps us realize that neither male nor female alone can articulate the depth of God, of the humans and of the world, but *both together*. Mary Daly's famous adage "if God is male, then the male is God" expresses the blunt

¹² See Betty FRIEDAN, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

fact that Christianity has elevated men superior to women, and used religion to degrade and domesticate women.¹³

Feminist biblical scholars have not yet evolved a single methodology with regard to biblical hermeneutics. However, all feminist hermeneutics remain united on a common target group - women and a common goal i.e., liberation and empowerment of women. However their approaches vary depending on specific context and concern of the interpreter. They employ all prevailing methods of interpretation namely, historical-critical method, literary criticism, sociological approach, cultural anthropology, liberationist approach etc.¹⁴ For example, Phyllis Bird, using the historical-critical method, calls for "a new reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion, not a new chapter on women,"¹⁵ thus bringing to light the hidden history of women. Using the tools of socio-scientific analysis combined with the new archeology, Carol Meyers seeks "to discover the place of women in the biblical world apart from the place of women in the biblical text."¹⁶ Citing an episode within her Jewish heritage as pertinent to her study, Athalya Brenner probes the familiar thesis that, as a class, women in Scripture are a second sex, always subordinate and sometimes maligned.¹⁷ Her approach covers social roles and literary paradigms.

Large groups of feminists share some central convictions, which were formulated as the underlying principle for a feminist hermeneutics. It includes within it two closely related principles namely, (1) the principle of equality¹⁸ and (2) the principle of

¹³ Cf. Mary DALY, *The Church And the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 19.

¹⁴ Cf. Phyllis TRIBLE, "Five Loaves And Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics And Biblical Theology" *Theological Studies* Vol. 50 (June 1989), 286.

¹⁵ Cf. Phyllis BIRD, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cults," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. P. D. Miller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 397-419.

¹⁶ Carol MEYERS, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 23.

¹⁷ Cf. Athalya BRENNER, *The Israelite Women* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

¹⁸ This principle treats women and men as equal and full human beings; hence they deserve human treatment in all areas of life.

mutuality.¹⁹ These principles function not only as interpretative principles but also as normative ethical principles in a feminist theory of justice.

However the impact of the Bible on women both as individuals and as groups has resulted in a variety of approaches to the project of feminist hermeneutics. One finds among the western feminist theologians different attitudes towards the Bible. Some feminists denounce Scripture as hopelessly misogynous, a woman-hating document beyond redemption. Some reprehensibly use patriarchal data to support anti-Jewish sentiments. Some despair about the ever-present male power that the Bible and commentaries promote. However, the views differ from person to person. Carolyn Osiek groups them under five categories:

1. Rejectionist: refusal to acknowledge the Bible and tradition as normative and authoritative

2. Loyalist: acceptance but with a critical mind of Biblical tradition as the Word of God.

3. Revisionist: attempt to separate the biblical message from its patriarchal framework

4. Sublimationist: search for the 'otherness' of the feminine in the biblical and extra-biblical symbolism and imagery

5. Liberationist: radical reinterpretation of biblical eschatology: the reign of God is proclaimed in today's world as well as in the hope of realization in God's future.

Among the five, the fifth one is the most recent one, pioneered by Letty Russell and others, and now being developed by Rosemary Radford Ruether. It takes its starting point from the broader perspective of liberation theology. While there are differences between Letty Russell and Rosemary Ruether, in practice together they argue that the entire canon of Scripture must be read in the light of "God liberating" all those oppressed by injustice. They hold that biblical texts, when read in this light, reveal God's rejection of socio-historical ordering of men over

¹⁹ This view considers human persons as embodied subjects, essentially relational as well as autonomous.

women and support the contemporary women's movement toward social and political equality with men. Ruether and Russell reject previous readings of biblical texts that find justification for patriarchy within them, as distortions of the so-called objective biblical scholarship. They argue that no one reads the scriptures value free and that only in presenting one's agenda openly can the social reformation, that they promise, occur. In fact it is the 'prophetic liberating tradition' of the scriptures that becomes the 'norm to criticize the Bible'. Out of this liberationist critical reading a 'useable tradition emerges.'²⁰ While speaking about tradition that the Church upholds today, Letty Russell says, " Tradition is not a block of content to be carefully guarded by authorized hierarchies, but a dynamic action of God's love which is to be passed on to others of all sexes and races."²¹

This trend in scriptural interpretation gave rise to the Reconstructionist approach that is being pioneered by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. It is primarily about reconstructing the situation of the early church, which produced the gospels, so as to understand both the theology and historical reality contained therein. As Katherine Sakenfield rightly observes the goal of Fiorenza's work is 'to recover the non-patriarchal early Christian ethos as basis for Christian theology.'²² She also insists on the re-evaluation and re-assessment of the authority of the texts and its impact on the lives of women. Thus the Western women biblical scholars have come out with certain models that pertain to their own First World situation.

4. Methodology for Hermeneutics in the Indian Context

While proposing feminist hermeneutics for the Indian context, Pushpa Joseph highlights the reconstructionist model of

²⁰ As cited in Pushpa JOSEPH's unpublished doctoral thesis on *Indian Feminist Hermeneutics: A Contextual Application Of the Reconstructionist Method Proposed By Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza*, (Chennai: University of Madras, 2002), 140. Also Cf. Richard LEONARD S.J, *Beloved Daughters: 100 years of Papal Teaching on Women*, (Melbourne, Australia: David Lovell Publications, 1995), 80.

²¹ Letty RUSSELL, *Liberation Theology in a Feminist Perspective*, (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1978).

²² As quoted in Richard LEONARD, 1995, 98.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and her seven steps to make up the hermeneutical model. They are hermeneutics of experience, hermeneutics of social location, hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of critical evaluation, hermeneutics of imagination, hermeneutics of re-membering and reconstruction and hermeneutics of transformation.²³

However, a feminist hermeneutical process in India needs to operate not only within a different theoretical framework from that of the post-structuralist theories but also should employ a different understanding of texts, in so far as it focuses on the rhetorical dimensions and elements that are generated by the materiality of texts, the historicity of readers, and the politics of communication in the past and present socio-historical hermeneutical contexts. Such a process entails five rhetorical strategies of analysis. Having gone through the context and the dehumanizing situation of women in India in detail, where historical experiences, cultural conditionings and theological compulsions have made women submissive to male superiors (bowing to *male supremacy*), herebelow I develop a model called *Transformatory model*. The aim of feminist hermeneutics is not merely to understand the biblical texts and the traditions but also to transform the situation of women themselves both in the Church and in the society. In India, patriarchy/ hierarchy has survived as the norm of life; it continues to influence the frame of reference for people's beliefs and life. It has kept on shaping the people's mentality, attitude, relationships, dealings and even ordinary functioning of the society/Church. This is why patriarchy is the heuristic key-concept for feminist critical analyses of biblical texts thus bringing about change in the existing social, political, cultural and religious structures. In order to achieve this they have five steps one leading to the other namely, hermeneutics of consciousness raising, hermeneutics of critiquing, hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of participation and hermeneutics of change. Such a hermeneutics is of the view that biblical interpretation as a cultural-religious practice of resistance and transformation utilizing not only historical, literary and ideologico-critical evaluative methods that not merely focus on the rhetoric of the biblical text in its diverse historical contexts but also employ methods of storytelling, bible-drama, poetry, painting,

²³ Pushpa JOSEPH, *Application of Reconstructionist Model*, 2002, 176.

dance, music, folklore, street theatre, role-play and ritual for creating a different religious imagination.

i) Hermeneutics of Consciousness Raising

Women need to keep in mind certain common elements before they begin to interpret the scripture. First of all feminist hermeneutics in India must grapple with the contemporary situation of Indian women.

Although the experience of women is the starting point of feminist hermeneutics, this is possible only through awareness: awareness of being treated like an object, awareness of being alienated in decision-making both in the Church and in societal affairs, awareness of being deprived of scriptural knowledge, awareness of being sidelined spiritually etc. While talking to a group of women in a particular parish I realized that what women lack very much is awareness: awareness of their true selves in a concrete situation and awareness of God's plan for them. First of all they are not aware that they are not free beings in the male dominant Church and society. And they seem to believe that God, the Creator, has ordained their situation in the world. Secondly, they seem to surrender to the oppressive situation believing that if one dares to go against it, she will have to suffer. Therefore hermeneutics of consciousness raising enables the Indian Christian women as individuals and as a group to raise their level of consciousness and thus make them aware of their true situation and the situation of their sisters, and their role in the plan of God. Consciousness raising demands a movement from silence to speech on the part of the Christian women in the hierarchical Church.

ii) Hermeneutics of Critiquing

"Is it possible to critique the scriptural text?" asked Veronica, a regular church-goer and a regular reader of the Bible. Sandra Schneiders aptly comments that 'the Bible has been an important source and legitimizer for excluding and alienating women from the mission of the church.'²⁴ The hermeneutics of critiquing

²⁴ Cf. Sandra M. SCHNEIDERS, *The Revelatory Text* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 180-2.

enables women to critique the tradition, dogmas and the scripture in order to identify both the oppressive and liberative elements latent in them. It concentrates on highlighting the neglected texts and reinterprets the familiar ones. What is more revealing is that Scripture itself legitimizes the discriminatory and dehumanizing attitudes towards women.

A feminist hermeneutist insists on a systematic analysis that will both disentangle the ideological and theological functions of the biblical texts that legitimate kyriarchy and also set free the potential within the biblical texts to foster justice and liberation in the radical democratic space of the Church (*Ecclesia*). Such a systematic analysis identifies the contemporary situations inscribed in the biblical texts.²⁵

iii) Hermeneutics of Suspicion

A critical interpretation for liberation reflects not only on the experiences of women with a particular text and interpretation, but also on the manner in which our social, cultural and religious location has shaped our experience with a particular biblical text.²⁶ In order to authenticate and legitimize their roles as initiated, approved and appreciated by Jesus,²⁷ women begin to question the distorted ways in which women's presence and roles are constructed. Since all the biblical texts are written by men most of them articulated the masculine language, which favours men folk, this interpretation disentangles the ideological functions of the kyriocentric texts and commentaries. Hence a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' does not take the kyriocentric text and its claim to divine authority at face value. It investigates the ideological functions of the text with the interest of domination.²⁸

"Kyriocentric language does not cover up truth but constructs reality in a particular way and mystifies its own constructions by

²⁵ Pushpa JOSEPH, 2002, 179 -180.

²⁶ Cf, Elisabeth Schussler FIORENZA, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 102-124.

²⁷ Rekha CHENNATTU, "Women In the Mission of the Church: An Interpretation of John 4" *VidyaJyoti* 65 (2001) 760.

²⁸ Pushpa JOSEPH, 2002, 180-1.

naturalizing them. It does not cover up reality but ideologically and rhetorically it constructs reality in the interest of domination."²⁹ While doing hermeneutics of suspicion one should however, keep in mind not to peel away layers of debris in order to recover a pre-given ontological reality that is understood in essentialist terms.³⁰ Rather this method should be used for the analysis of kyriocentric stories from the point of view of the narrative, the ideological-rhetorical aim of the narrative and the manner in which it represents women characters. It should be applied to contemporary commentaries and interpretations of the text and to its history of interpretation. Finally a hermeneutics of suspicion should also be applied to our common sense assumptions, prejudices and value systems.³¹

iv) Hermeneutics of Participation

While making a hermeneutical study on the Samaritan woman in the gospel according to John, Rekha Chennattu rightly observes:

The Samaritan woman is remarkable for her openness, conviction, initiative and decisive action. She is not afraid of confronting a Jewish man, even though Jews looked down upon Samaritans. She is not depicted as a passive receiver, accepting unquestioningly all that Jesus said. Her theological background, personal interests and spontaneous appropriation of the role of an apostle to bear witness to Jesus in the city are outstanding and significant. The Samaritan woman takes the initiative in the mission of proclaiming Jesus without looking for approval from anyone and without seeking the permission of anyone.³²

She further adds "the Samaritan woman actively engaged in theological discussion, freely witnessed to her faith in public, efficiently proclaimed the Gospel (good news of salvation) using the Samaritan categories (inculturated proclamation), and

²⁹ Schussler FIORENZA, *Wisdom Ways*, 2001, 176.

³⁰ Cf. Schussler FIORENZA, *Wisdom Ways*, 2001, 175.

³¹ Ibid. 176.

³² Rekha CHENNATTU, 2001, 770-1.

courageously assumed the role of the "originator" or the leader of the Samaritan mission in Sychar."³³ Similarly when speaking about the women's role in the fourth gospel Sandra Schneider says that women have played significant roles and participated actively in the ministries of the Church in the Johannine community.³⁴

While I was talking to a group of Christian women, they expressed that they had never imagined that they could interpret scripture so intelligibly. What emerged prominently was that the decentralization of biblical scholarship led them to believe in themselves and produce in turn an experience of affirmation. This will in turn lead to communities, claiming the discipleship of equals through the texts. Hence, Christian women are to be initiated through the interpretative study of various biblical texts wherein women's role as leaders and animators of the community are urged to come forward to participate in the mission of proclaiming Christ without looking for approval or permission from the official Church. They also need to become aware of their participation in male-appropriated roles and go beyond in order that they may be able to exhibit their creativity, originality and ability in the mission of Christ. However, it is high time that women moved from alienation to communion and from being mere spectators to participants.

v) Hermeneutics of Change

The whole feminist agenda focuses on creating an alternative society counter to the patriarchal society of domination and submission,³⁵ a language which meaningfully addresses the diverse situations in which women find themselves and have a space of their own. However, its primary inspiration is the empowerment of women. Hermeneutics of Change for women focuses 'on the one hand on a shift from an androcentric perception

³³ Ibid. 771.

³⁴ Cf. Sandra SCHNEIDERS, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," in *The Gospel of John as Literature*, ed. M. W. G. STIBBE, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993)

³⁵ By this I do not intend to mean that women's experience should become normative for humanity nor *Matriarchy* should be replaced *Patriarchy*.

of the world to a feminist perception and on the other hand on a shift from an apologetic focus on biblical authority to a feminist articulation of contemporary women's experience and struggle against patriarchal oppression in biblical religion.³⁶

While writing about African women, the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye mentions: 'African women live by a spirituality of resistance which enables them to transform death into life and to open the way to a reconstruction of a compassionate world.'³⁷

A process of transformation, visualized as changing texts, traditions and everyday life, is accountable to the women who are at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid, in Indian terms, the "Dalit of the Dalits'. With its commitment to transformation, biblical interpretation and biblical theology evolve from the mire of individualized and privatized rhetoric to a public and political discourse. In order to realize the goal of transformation it is important to articulate and create new visions.³⁸

Conclusion

While giving expression to the emancipatory paradigm, Schussler Fiorenza writes that "it openly confesses that it seeks to engage in biblical interpretation for the sake of conscientisation ... Religious biblical identity that is shaped by Scripture must in ever-new readings be deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of a global praxis for the liberation of all women. Cultural identity that is shaped by biblical discourses must also be critically interrogated and transformed. Hence, it is necessary to reconceptualize the traditional spiritual practice of discerning the spirits as a critical ethical-political practice."³⁹ It is not just a desire for the integration and recognition of women, but 'a cry for faithfulness to the new

³⁶ Elisabeth Schussler FIORENZA, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 2-3.

³⁷ Mercy Amba ODUYOYE, "A Spirituality of Reconstruction and Resistance," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John MANANZAN & others, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 162.

³⁸ Pushpa JOSEPH, 2002, 185.

³⁹ Schussler FIORENZA, *Wisdom Ways*, 2001, 166.

community promised in Christ'.⁴⁰ The entire task of theology or hermeneutics is liberative in a specific sense. It is liberative because, it is an activity of redefining, rediscovering and reclaiming the past and lost history and experience of women, which is truly a liberatory work. So when women engage in an activity of reclaiming it is certainly recovering the underside of history, which is nothing but seeking what has been marginalized and trivialized.

⁴⁰ A. GNANADASAN, "A Church in Solidarity with Women: Utopia or Symbol of Faithfulness," *Concilium* 1996/1, 74-80: 78.