

Boundary Crossers and Risk Takers: Ruth and Justa in the Struggle for Life

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It is estimated that over 30,000 young Burmese women have crossed the borders into Thailand and China to find work. Many end up in the sex trade in the border towns and big cities like Chiangmai, Bangkok, Hunan and Kunming.¹ These young women are in search of work to support their families back home. Their labors are essential for the survival of their families.

Geographical boundary crossings are not the only types of boundaries Burmese women have to cross. For the sake of life in its fullness, self identity and community, they have been crossing religious, cultural and economic boundaries. Girls growing up in traditional Burmese Buddhist homes or in ethnic minority communities are inculturated from childhood to be submissive and subservient to the men and elders. A well-known educator and writer, Mi Mi Khaing, notes:

Although the women of Burma figure actively and have the same rights as men in the fields of business, property and professions of the modern world, we always keep alive in us the religious feeling that we are below “mankind.” It is not so much a feeling that women are a lower race as that the man has the nobility of manhood in him. We call it *hpon*, the glory, the holiness of a man, and we respect this not with subservience but with the same feelings we respect monks and parents.²

The proverbs of Burma also delineate women’s place in the hierarchy and acquiesce to a culture of violence against women:

The son as lord, the husband as god.

The voice of women never reaches beyond the gate.

As the topknot follows the head,
The wife follows the husband.

The sun rises with the crowing of the rooster
But never at the clucking of the hen.

The buffalo and the woman,
The more you beat them the better they work.

¹ According to Kachin Women’s Association Thailand, women are transported as far as north-eastern China for the purpose of being sold as wives to Chinese men or as sex workers in Chinese border towns. Half of the women involved have disappeared altogether. See Report of Kachin Women’s Association Thailand, *Driven Away: Trafficking of Kachin Women on the China-Burma Border*, Chiangmai, Thailand (no year cited but interviews were conducted in 2004), see http://www.womenofburma.org/Report/Driven_Away.pdf accessed in 2009.

² Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese Family* (London: Green and Company, 1946), 39.

In Burmese society, then, the lives of women are circumscribed within the bounds of house and compound. Public spaces where decision-making is done are not open to them.

To these Burmese young women, what is the word from the Bible? Can we find any liberating good news that will empower them for their struggle for dignity and selfhood? I would like the Burmese women to listen to the voices of two women from the Bible, speaking from societies very similar to their own.

Introducing Ruth and Justa³

Ruth and Justa are two foreign women, one a Moabite and the other a Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician, whose lives are entwined in the message of the Bible. Both cross boundaries and take risks for the sake of life. One seeks life, specifically, security in marriage for herself and for her mother-in-law and the other healing for her suffering daughter. Their strivings are not for themselves as such, but for a much-loved person. In both cases the objects of their concern are women. Both stories emphasize feminine bonding and solidarity.

Both women appear in the biblical narratives without any male protector, which was uncommon in a patriarchal society. Usually, women were under the protection of father, husband or a male relative. But these women are alone, totally dependent on themselves to find solutions to their problems. Both women must face male protagonists to demand answers to their difficulties. The power to grant their wishes lies in male hands. They are both submissive before the male playing out the accepted and traditional position and status of women. Yet, their actions and words belie this subordination. Their daring and assertiveness go beyond the boundary of socially and culturally acceptable feminine behavior and win them their desires.

Apart from these similarities, there are differences. The story of Ruth is found in the book bearing her name, only one of two books bearing women's names in the Bible, the other being the book of Esther. Ruth lived in the period when judges ruled Israel (12th – 11th BCE). As the Deuteronomic historian is quick to point out: "In those days there were no kings in Israel" (Jud.19:1; 21:25a). She is identified as a Moabite several times as if to emphasize her foreign status (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). The family background of Ruth is known: wife of Mahlon, daughter-in-law of Elimelech and Naomi, and sister-in-law of Chilion and Orpah (Ruth 1: 3-5). Two near kinsmen are mentioned – one is Boaz and the other is unnamed (Ruth 2:1, 20; 3:9, 12; 4:1).

No such information is forthcoming about Justa. The only relative who is mentioned is her sick daughter. Justa's story is part of the narratives concerning Jesus, the rabbi and

³ The third- and fourth century Pseudo-Clementine homilies identify her as "Justa." See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 100. I will use this name for this foreign woman to give her a face and an identity. As Carol L. Meyers ("Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible" in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1998, 252) notes, in the Hebrew Bible, of the 1,426 names mentioned only 111.9% of the total are women's names, which signals the male-centered concern of biblical literature.

prophet from Galilee (1st CE) about whom the people are buzzing. The encounter with Jesus takes place in the region of Tyre and is recorded in two versions, Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28. In this paper, I will concentrate on the Matthean version. Whereas Ruth is described as meeting twice with Boaz, the male protagonist, Justa faces Jesus only once.

Ruth the Moabite and Boaz the Worthy

Ruth is a woman of Moab, married to a Judean, Mahlon, whose family had left their hometown of Bethlehem in Judah because of famine. Mahlon's father, Elimelech had died, leaving behind his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Like Mahlon, Chilion had married a Moabite woman, Orpah. So even as a young girl, Ruth had chosen the nontraditional path of marriage to a foreigner. Even if mixed marriages are not banned, they are frowned upon in most societies. Ruth and Orpah, married to refugees from Judah, must have faced prejudice and discrimination. Their childless marriages must have been seen as a curse. Unfortunately, the two men die, leaving the three widows in their grief and struggle.

When news came that the famine in Judah had ended, Naomi decided to leave for home. Her advice to her daughters-in-law was to go back to their families and people and find security in marriage (Ruth 1:8, 9). Orpah followed Naomi's advice and left for her home. Ruth decided to throw in her lot and her future with Naomi:

Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die I will die - there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you.

Ruth 1:16-17 (NRSV)

This is a radical commitment made by one woman to another. This text is sometimes recited as part of the marriage ceremony but where the wedding vow is, "Till death us do part," Ruth's commitment to Naomi goes even beyond the grave. Ruth pledges herself to another woman of different ethnicity, religion, age and relationship and status, a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law, no less!

And Ruth is willing to leave her country to cross boundaries into a strange land.⁴ The geographical boundary crossing entails new allegiances to a new land, a new people and a new God. The new country for Ruth is enemy country. Moab had denied passage to the Israelites on their journey to Canaan, and had hired Balaam to curse them (Num. 22-24). Moabite women had seduced Israelite men to apostasy (Num 25:1-2). Moab could never be part of the covenant community (Deut. 23:3-6). As a Moabite, Ruth could face not only the usual distrust and suspicion of foreigners but aggressive hostility. In a strange

⁴ Ruth is compared with Abraham who was also called to leave his family and land behind to go to a far country (Gen. 12:1-3). But unlike Abraham, no God calls Ruth nor is she promised any blessings.

country, as an immigrant, Ruth faces the question of identity and the challenge of assimilation.⁵

Ruth has also chosen Naomi's god as her new god. In ancient times, when gods were identified with the land which they controlled, it was customary to pay allegiance to the god in whose land one found oneself. The general, Naaman, took back some Israelite soil on which to worship Israel's god (2 Kgs. 5:17). Ozick says of Ruth, "Ruth leaves Moab because she intends to leave childish ideas behind. She is drawn to Israel because Israel is the inheritance of the One Universal Creator."⁶ The Midrash and Talmud also place great importance on the story of Ruth's conversion.⁷ She is recognized as a righteous proselyte and depicted here as the faithful convert who has crossed the boundary into another's faith.

However, apart from her words of allegiance to Naomi, there are no other indications that she forsook her god, the God of Moab. Japanese feminist scholar, Hisako Kinukawa, says:

Ruth is challenging us through her openness to other faiths and her courage to cross the borders. She should be remembered not because she gave birth to David's grandfather, but for risking her own religious identity to support another woman's life. Her multi-religious, inclusive spirituality that loved her mother-in-law in such a way to change her faith identity should not be overlooked as we read the story.⁸

Asian feminists who live in pluralistic societies where family members may be of different faiths explore possibilities of multifaith spirituality and sharing.⁹

The two women had less than enthusiastic welcome when they arrived in Bethlehem. The women had wondered, "Is this Naomi?" But the relatives on whom they could have counted for welcome and hospitality are silent and unresponsive. Naomi herself seems to be in the midst of despair and hopelessness, in spite of the companionship of Ruth. She had replied to the women of Bethlehem, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara. The hand of the Lord has dealt bitterly against me. I went away full. Now I return empty. It is God who dealt calamity upon me" (1:20, 21). It must be Ruth, the foreigner, who now shoulders the burden of finding food for the two women.

Ruth finds herself gleaning, following after the reapers. As a widow and foreigner she is entitled to pick up the sheaves dropped by the reapers (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22).

⁵ See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 101, which describes problems of immigration and assimilation in comparison with the Ruth story.

⁶ Cynthia Ozick, "Ruth," *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 227.

⁷ Leila Leah Bronner, "A Thematic Approach to Ruth in Rabbinic Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed., Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 148.

⁸ Hisako Kinukawa, "'... and your God my God': How We Can Nurture Openness to Other Faiths Ruth 1:1-19 read from a feminist perspective of a multi-faith community," in *Scripture, Community and Mission*, ed. Philip Wickeri (Hong Kong: CCA, 2002), 193-204.

⁹ Hope S. Antone, *Religious Education in Context of Plurality and Pluralism* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2003), 72.

Israelite law provides a measure of security for foreigners, widows and orphans. And by chance Ruth happens to glean in the field of Boaz who is described as a near kinsman of Elimelech, her father-in-law. Not only that, Boaz is described as a man of wealth, a pillar of society and so a very worthy man indeed. This very well-to-do relative has heard of the exploits of Ruth, praises her and says a blessing, "May the Lord bless you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings (*kanap*) you have come for refuge!" (2:12).

Earlier, Ruth in Moab had pledged allegiance to Naomi, Naomi's God and Naomi's people (Ruth 1:15-17). The words of approbation uttered by Boaz, affirms Ruth's commitment to Naomi and to the God of Israel.

Although Ruth has taken on the traditional male role of bread winner, as a female, widowed, foreign and alone, she faces the dangers of sexual harassment and rape. Aware of these dangers, Boaz suggests that she should only glean in his fields and keep close to his young women. He has ordered his young men not to bother her (Ruth 2:8, 9). Naomi herself reiterates this advice to stick close to Boaz's young women (Ruth 2: 22). It was not safe to be a woman in a man's world.

Ruth and Boaz at the Threshing Floor

The crucial confrontation between Ruth and Boaz takes place at the threshing floor at the end of harvest (Ruth 3). Although Boaz had been kind and had shown favor to Ruth in the fields, the grain gathered could not solve the problem of security and a permanent home for the two widows. A plan was needed to secure their future.

Naomi now puts forward an audacious plan. Boaz would be sleeping at the threshing floor that night. Ruth was to make herself attractive, observe where Boaz lay down after an evening of eating and drinking, uncover his feet and lie down beside him. This was a sexually provocative act as the term "feet" is a euphemism for a man's private parts (Ex. 4:25; Isa. 7:20) and to uncover the feet has connotations of revealing nakedness for sexual purposes (Deut. 27:20; Isa 47:1-3). The threshing floor itself is associated with sexual licentiousness (Hos. 9:1b). Thus, it would seem as if Naomi is asking Ruth to go beyond the boundaries of accepted female behavior and to act out the stereotype of the strange woman who leads on Israelite men (cf. Gen. 39:17-18; Num. 25:1).

Ruth's reply, "All that you say I will do," is a consequence of her loyalty and commitment to Naomi. As Tribble states, "Loyalty to self and to mother-in-law signifies for Ruth a movement from dissent to perseverance to consent."¹⁰ This answer has been problematic for Asian feminists. The submission of Ruth to her mother-in-law is clearly not liberating. Kuo Siu May points out that as "kind and considerate to her daughter-in-law as Naomi is made out to be, she made all the arrangements (for Ruth's marriage to the middle-aged Boaz) without her leave. Her (Ruth's) submission, at best, is negative in nature."¹¹ Probably

¹⁰ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 182.

¹¹ Kuo Siu May, *Venturing into the Bible* (Nanjing: University Press, 1989), 420. For further discussion see Anna May Say Pa, "Reading Ruth 3:1-5 from an Asian Women's Perspective," *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, ed., Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 55-58.

for Naomi and Ruth in their circumstance, from among the available options, marriage to Boaz would probably seem like the best one.

Ruth does everything that Naomi tells her to do. She observes the place where Boaz is lying and when he is asleep, uncovers his legs and lies down beside him. By her action, Ruth moves into what is essentially male territory. She initiates the meeting and will propose to Boaz. For Kwok, Ruth's act challenges Boaz to move beyond boundaries. "Washed, perfumed, and dressed in her finest clothes, Ruth wakes Boaz, literally and figuratively, challenging Boaz to leave behind his pious public respectability."¹²

At midnight Boaz wakes up, startled and is amazed to find someone by his side. To his question, "Who are you," the reply is "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your skirt (*kanap*) over me for you are next-of-kin." Ruth picks up on Boaz's word at their first meeting that she should find security under God's wing (*kanap*). For Sakenfeld, "Now, Ruth in effect invites Boaz to make good on the prayer he made earlier on her behalf, by providing some measure of the 'full reward' of refuge under God's wings through his own action, by marrying her."¹³ Ruth claims Boaz as next-of-kin or redeemer and urges him to take on this responsibility and provide economic security through marriage.

Boaz's response to Ruth's initiative is heartening. He invokes God's blessing on her because "this last instance of your loyalty (*hesed*) is better than the first" (3:10). In the earlier meeting between the two, although not using the term *hesed*, Boaz had commended Ruth's actions (2:11) on behalf of Naomi. These acts of *hesed* had involved accompanying Naomi and providing for her by gleaning. This first *hesed* is now surpassed by "this last instance of your *hesed*" which meant coming to the threshing floor and proposing marriage. "Boaz is praising Ruth for acts done in relationship, essential acts of support and caring that only she was in a position to accomplish, acts that frequently go beyond the basic call of duty."¹⁴

In this encounter, Ruth has taken great risks. She has crossed into space reserved for male initiative. Yet, as a woman and a foreigner, her future is in the hands of a male. She comes as suppliant unsure of the consequences though aware of the dangers. Boaz's words, "do not be afraid," remind us forcibly of this. Ruth had opened herself up to the possibility of rejection, physical violence, even rape. She could have been easily rebuffed by Boaz, exploited her vulnerability or shamed her before the community for her brazenness.

Boaz's actions reveal his decency and daring. His agreement to marry Ruth risks ridicule, censure and perhaps even ostracism. The marriage of the leading citizen to the foreign widow describes an event "in which the marginalized person has dared to insist upon full participation, in which the one in the center has reached out beyond societal norms to include the marginalized."¹⁵

¹² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 106.

¹³ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 58-59.

¹⁴ Sakenfeld, 61. See also Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Sakenfeld, 10.

Ruth the Moabite is called “a woman of worth” (Ruth 3:11) by Boaz. She has done what “nice women” are advised not to do. After the birth of her son which ensures her place in the house and lineage of Boaz, the women of the community praise her to Naomi, “for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is more than seven sons has borne him” (4:15).

Justa and Jesus

Centuries later, another foreign woman faces a Jewish male. Like Ruth, she is a suppliant pleading for healing for a sick daughter. The power to grant her wish lies in the hands of the male. This woman, like Ruth, takes risks in her boundary crossing.

As related in Matthew, the story begins with a journey, this time undertaken by the male Jesus and his disciples. After a confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes on the issue of clean and unclean, Jesus leaves Galilee and goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon, into Gentile territory. According to O’Day, “In the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon are more than place names; they were Israel’s dangerous and threatening enemies (e.g. , Isa. 23; Ez. 26-28; Joel 3:4). The significance of the names Tyre and Sidon would not be lost on Matthew or his readers.”¹⁶

Who was this Jesus whose name has become known among the poor, sick and suffering? He was from the line of Boaz and Ruth through David and according to tradition, born in the town of Bethlehem where Ruth had first gleaned in the fields of Boaz. So one of the linkages between our two stories is the genealogy of Jesus (Mt. 1:5). His father had been the carpenter Joseph and he himself had been one till he became an itinerant preacher and miracle worker. People were still unsure of who he was, even his own disciples. His views were controversial as evidenced by his clashes with religious authorities.

Now he removes himself from his usual places of wandering and crosses into strange territory. This is unusual and in Matthew it seems to be the only instance when Jesus steps outside the boundaries of Israel. Mark suggests that Jesus is in search of peace and quiet, “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there” (Mark 7:24). Matthew gives no reason. The next thing that happens is very surprising and unexpected. A woman appears on the scene and asks for Jesus’ help.

Who is this woman and why is her action surprising? She is a foreigner, described by Mark as Syro-Phoenician and by Matthew as Canaanite. Whichever she is, she comes from a people designated as ancient enemies of Israel. The encounter between Jesus and this woman has parallels with Jesus’ meeting at the well with the Samaritan woman where in answer to his request for a drink of water she replies, “You a Jewish man asks water of a Samaritan woman?” Here the reverse occurs: a foreign woman asks help of a Jewish man. For Gerd Theissen, in this meeting two very different socio-economic worlds collide. Tyre was a wealthy coastal city dependent on agricultural imports from rural Galilee which served as its breadbasket (cf. Acts 12:20). “The economically stronger Tyrians probably often took bread out of the mouths of the Jewish rural population, when they used their superior financial means to buy up the grain supply in the countryside.”¹⁷ In the opinion

¹⁶ Gail O’Day, “Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman,” in *Listening*, 24 (1989), 29.

¹⁷ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Traditions*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 79.

of Theissen, Justa may even be an upper class well-to-do woman. The Jews also probably looked down on the Gentiles as pagans and unclean. It is then surprising she should approach Jesus, a foreigner and a Jewish rabbi from Galilee. Her boundary crossing is therefore of race and class.

We note two other things about this woman. She comes to Jesus without any visible male companion; there is no father, husband, relative or protector to speak on her behalf. In patriarchal societies, women do not approach strange men in public. Even in Mark where she disturbs Jesus' rest and invades his privacy in a home, her behavior is out of line. The Matthean version gives more prominence to her gender boundary crossing behavior. She is shouting out after Jesus in public. This is unacceptable female behavior. Women's sphere was the home and women were trained from childhood to be quiet, passive and submissive. This screaming woman breaks all bounds of feminine behavior.

Her extreme action, acceptable in a male but unconscionable in a female, is on behalf of a daughter who is demon-possessed. The bond and solidarity between mother and daughter is strong. We have noted the bonding between Naomi and Ruth, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, even beyond death. This bonding and love of daughter is biological, "Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone", and gender in the sharing of common experiences and struggles. A daughter in Asian societies is not as valued as a son. The birth of a son is an occasion for celebration, whereas the birth of a daughter is often met with disappointment and regret. A daughter means financial outlay in terms of a dowry and a giving away to another family in marriage. How much more of a burden would a demon-possessed daughter be? As Sharon Ringe notes:

She did not hesitate to approach Jesus, and even actively to importune him. And she valued her daughter, this one fundamentally like her who was still with her, who was suffering, and whose life was precious enough to demand healing and transformation, liberation from the alien forces that appeared to have taken her over. For the sake of her daughter, the woman broke custom, went after what she needed, and stood up to this visiting rabbi and miracle worker of whom so many stories had doubtless been told.¹⁸

In Matthew, the woman shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon" (Mt. 15:22) and later, "Lord, help me," (v. 25). She knows enough about Jewish religion to call Jesus "Lord" and "Son of David." The language that she uses is similar to words of entreaty in the lament psalms.¹⁹ Even though women's sphere is the home, women are astute enough to know what is going on. As Naomi knew that Boaz would be at the threshing floor that fateful night, Justa knew who Jesus was and how to approach him.

Justa comes as a suppliant before the one who has the power to heal her daughter. Mark describes her begging and pleading posture, "and she came and bowed down at his feet" (Mark 7:25b) and in Matthew, "she came and knelt before him" (Matt 15:25). According

¹⁸ Sharon Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 71.

¹⁹ See O'Day, 294-298 where she develops the intertextuality in relation to psalms of lament.

to the customs of the time, “falling at the feet of another is a gesture of a client seeking a favor from a patron or a broker.”²⁰

In Matthew, through dialogue the persistence and desperation of Justa comes through loudly. In fact, she is the one who initiates the dialogue and is met by silence and rebuffs from Jesus. The first time, after Jesus refuses to acknowledge her request, the disciples join in to urge Jesus, “Send her away for she keeps shouting after us,” (Matt 15:23b). Silence and driving away are the responses of men to a woman’s plea. She is an embarrassment, an intrusion and a shameful spectacle. Surely, a rabbi in a strange town would not want to call attention to himself in this way!

Jesus’ answer is a rebuff, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This saying is not found in Mark. Matthew restricts the mission of Jesus to Israel, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 10:5-6). Ethnic and religious boundaries define Jesus’ mission. Jesus as a man of his times and culture displays exclusivism which would not have surprised Justa. But she will not give up easily.

Her next action, of kneeling before him and pleading, “Lord, help me,” brings her face to face with Jesus. But Jesus’ answer is harsh, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). No matter how commentators seek to soften it or make it appear less derogatory, the use of the term “dogs” is an insult. There is no getting round this problem. To say that the Greek word is a diminutive, meaning “puppies,” still does not give a satisfactory answer for as Burkill says, “As in English, so in other languages, to call a woman ‘a little bitch’ is no less abusive than to call her ‘bitch’ without qualification.”²¹ I would agree with Ringe that this is an incident in Jesus’ life when even he was caught with his compassion down.²²

However, Justa picks up on the imagery of bread and dogs and uses it to argue against Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (15:27). The master’s table has ample food that it may feed not only the children but even the dogs. Her reply is obsequious, humble and submissive but it reflects her intellect and boldness. She challenges the master to go beyond the admissible, to cross boundaries and take risks as she has done.

And amazingly, Jesus responds with a “Yes.” “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish.” Jesus is moved by the strong faith of the woman and is shifted from his original position. For Kinukawa the woman frees Jesus to be fully himself. By crossing boundaries Jesus allows himself to be “defiled” and to redefine the community of faith in a new and radical way.²³ According to Ringe, the woman’s gift to Jesus was not submission her sharp insight which enabled him to see things in a different way.²⁴

²⁰ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 225.

²¹ T.A. Burhill, “The Story of the Syrophenician Woman,” *Novum Testamentum*, 9 (1967), 173.

²² Ringe, 69.

²³ Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 61.

²⁴ Ringe, 71.

Ruths and Justas of Today

The structures and boundaries against which Ruth and Justa struggle are no less present now as in their times. Although progress has been made for women's opportunities and rights, women still face obstacles in their quest for self-fulfillment and equality. Thus the voices and stories of Ruth and Justa resonate with women as they demand their rightful place in the center not at the margins.

For Wainwright, Justa, by her action and words, acquires honor beyond the cultural limitations placed on her by her gender. As such, she provides a significant model not only for first-century Matthean community women but also for women today. Her preparedness to continue to stand against the system of injustice and to use its language and its structures against it to bring about transformation can prove symbolic for women today, especially as we encounter the same wall of resistance that she knew.²⁵

Schussler Fiorenza agrees that the struggle of Justa is symbolic for women today and has contemporary significance. She points out that feminist biblical interpretation meets resistance when it attempts to enter the "house" of biblical interpretation as an "insider." Often attempts to enter the discourses of the discipline on equal terms gets no response (but he did not respond to her word) – or are urged to be sent away as the male disciples urged Jesus to do so at the loudness of the woman.²⁶

In Asia today, women are challenged to overcome barriers and boundaries that still attempt to limit their status and role. In Theravada Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, cultural and religious boundaries limit women in their quest for full ordination in the Sangha (community of the ordained). Although the Lord Buddha himself ordained women, the order of the *bhikkhuni* died out. At this present moment, women in Sri Lanka have been ordained through the Mahayana line of bhikkhunis. Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a renowned Thai Buddhist scholar, was ordained in Sri Lanka with the name of Venerable Dhammananda. However, such ordinations are not recognized by all Sanghas. Likewise, sisters in certain Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, the Church of the Province of Myanmar (Anglican) and the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar cannot participate fully in all ministries. Because of their gender, they are barred from ordination as priests and pastors.

Another area where women face barriers in their attempt at entry is in the political arena. Women in positions of leadership such as Angela Merkel of Germany and Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines are few. This turf is a well-guarded male power that seeks to bar the full participation of women. As Burma is under military rule, women are certainly not in any positions of power in government. Indeed women's political leadership is seen as a threat to the peace and security of the country. Whenever such a topic arises, the proverb quoted is, "A woman in control will destroy the country." This plainly is a reference to

²⁵ Elaine M. Wainwright, "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21-28 in an Australian Feminist Key," *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, Vol. 2, ed., Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 149.

²⁶ Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said...*, 13.

the last queen of Burma, Queen Supayalat, whose ascendancy over her husband, King Thibaw, is blamed for Burma falling into the hands of the British. This proverb is often cited today to keep women in their place.

Ruth and Justa were not only foreigners but devotees of other gods. In courage they crossed religious and cultural boundaries to attain their respective objectives. Asian feminists see this not as conversion in the traditional understanding but as a meeting and sharing of faiths. Kinukawa has already noted this in her interpretation of Ruth's words to Naomi. Rose Wu sees the encounter between Jew and Canaanite as a model for dialogue between partners of different faiths which could be enriching for both. She also sees here a new understanding of mission, a mission that is inclusive, that is open to sex workers, sexual minorities, AIDS sufferers and the disabled.²⁷ Hope Antone agrees that Jesus opened himself up to an honest exchange with the woman as a dialogue partner and ended up learning from the woman.²⁸

However, Justa's story as usually interpreted today, is disturbing for peoples of colonized nations who had been made to accept imperialism and colonialism as divinely ordained, were taught that their faiths were false and so were called "pagans," "heathens" or "unbelievers." Justa instead should be seen as an equal with the right to be treated as a human being.²⁹ Living in community with peoples of different faiths and cultures, building peace and solidarity against violence, there is need for understanding, respect, tolerance and acceptance.

Ruth and Justa would agree that women today need to go beyond what they did. Although both were courageous and daring, they still remained under structures of patriarchy. For Ruth, her security was in marriage and birthing a son. Justa does not challenge the patriarchal structures but buy into it by her submissiveness. As Schussler Fiorenza notes, "This is indeed a sacred text that advocates and reinscribes patriarchal power-relations, anti-Jewish prejudices, and women's feminine identity and submissive behavior."³⁰

Ruth and Justa both encourage women to critically evaluate their stories and go beyond the patriarchal framework. One such feminist is Wainwright who quotes Audre Lord, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," suggests that we need not only old stories but also new stories that will construct "woman" differently. "It is here that Justa challenges me as a feminist reader to leap beyond the confines of her story to claim new discourses, new images, to dialogue with new sources of power, sources that emerge from communities of emancipatory praxis seeking to move beyond patriarchy."³¹

²⁷ Rose Wu, *A Dissenting Church* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2003), 143.

²⁸ Antone, 67.

²⁹ For further discussion see R.S. Sugirtharajah, "The Syrophenician Woman," in *Expository Times* 98 (1986), 13-15 and Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 71-81, Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 140-155 and Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28," *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Africa, Asia, and Latin America*, ed., Phyllis Bird (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 69-81.

³⁰ Schussler Fiorenza, 162

³¹ Wainwright, 150.

What about the women of my country? What is the re-reading and re-telling of Ruth's and Justa's stories that I wish to share with them? Burmese women must claim their dignity and *hpon*. They must no longer submit passively to religious and cultural expectations of the "good wife," "good daughter," who sacrifices herself for others. They must go beyond accepted feminine behavior by discovering new paths.

The Ruths and Justas of today in dialogue with each other and with women today, claim boundary crossing as appropriate behavior for reaching out beyond what has been given. This might involve challenges and risks beyond what they encountered but as women move beyond approved feminine space into new frontiers of being and action they must use female ingenuity, insight and courage.

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