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Marking, Re-making and Re-marking of History

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I am extremely happy to be here on this occasion when you have gathered to celebrate theological education for women in Sri Lanka. I understand that though women had joined the theological college almost 35 years ago, it was only 25 years ago that the first woman ordinand, Rev. Mihiri, started her theological education in the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa. As the President of the Association of Theologically Trained Women of India (ATTWI) which brings together all the women who gain their theological degrees/diplomas from the seminaries or colleges affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College, I am extremely happy to congratulate the TCL for taking this initiative and accord my greetings to the theologically trained women in Sri Lanka.

A cursive look at the history of theological education anywhere in the world shows that women were not always part of the theological programme from the very beginning but they were added on later. Letty Russell, a well-known feminist theologian recalls her own experience of how difficult it was for the male professors to acknowledge that women were really serious about their theological education. When she narrates her own story, Letty says that even though the space for women in theological education was created half-heartedly, it was difficult for the male theological teachers to accept that women fared better than men in their studies. Of course the women were not considered for the prize even though they stood out in their academic performance.

I recall the time when I did my theological studies at the United Theological College, Bangalore between 1983-87 where I was the only woman student in a class of 21. After three and half years of study and training at UTC, I am proud to say that I bagged the much coveted C. F. Andrews Deenabandhu General Proficiency award that is given for best performance in academics as well as for one's contribution to the theological community. More confident with all the prizes in the kitty and a first class in my B.D., I applied to the church for employment. I was told that I could be an honorary women's worker in the church. This meant that I had to prove my commitment to ministry only through honorary service because I was a woman - the wrong Sex!

It is a personal journey that a woman makes while participating in the struggles against patriarchy (in the family, home, church and society) that she develops enough courage, faith and energy to wrestle against systems of oppression. At the same time, she gains the required resilience, faith and energy to rise above all challenges to prove that she is also

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created in the same image of God, called to serve God and God's people. In the process of that journey, a woman has a rigorous and critical role to discern what is life affirming, non-hierarchical, egalitarian and just models of relationship and leadership. It is not automatic that a woman gains gender perspective because she is a woman. We learn to name patriarchy only when our eyes are opened to it. No one is a born feminist; but you could become one, by the grace of God!

Now who is a feminist? A man or a woman can be counted a feminist or womanist

- if he/she becomes aware of the dynamics of how patriarchy as a system works in all realms of life - in culture, tradition, religion, in everyday life;
- when he/she realises that the discrimination, alienation, deprivation and denial of these opportunities, are systematically carried out by privileging one sex (male) and denying the other, is against the purpose of God in creating women and men in the image of God;
- when he/she participates in this struggle to name and identify how patriarchy has robbed women of their God-given potential, worth and identity; and
- when he/she joins with others to pass on this perspective as an ideology and faith stance, practices it in daily life and remains firmly and consistently committed to gender equality and justice.

Just in case you were under the impression that feminism is "of the women, for the women, by the women", please erase this from your mind. It is not a battle line drawn between women and the men. Rather it is a movement that seeks the commitment and participation of women **and** men to realise that this system of power and oppression (patriarchy) denies both men and women their potential to be equal beings. Patriarchy makes men believe they are super/superior human beings; it also makes the women believe that they are created inferior, impure, weak and little lesser than men. Feminism aims at challenging and changing this inequality and injustice inviting women and men to recognise that they are equal beings created in the image of God. Feminism can be understood as a faith movement, as people's movement for justice and peace. You and I are invited to be part of this community of struggle, committed to the principle of abundant life, love, peace and justice for all, regardless.

I am sure many who are gathered here would want to be connected with such a description of faith task as the mandate of Christian commitment to justice, but may not feel so happy with the label of feminism. Especially in Asia, we have often looked at the term feminism as that which is linked to "unruly women, fighting women, loud-mouthed women, and peace-breakers" that have no positive values about life and relationship. It is important to unlearn and unpack this intensive negative meaning that the word feminism has acquired in history. I believe that we can reclaim the word 'feminism' as a possible overarching faith principle and as a tool for analysis and critique; it can also be a perspective to imagine the possible ways of engaging critically with history so as to bring about a change, and also as the lens to create a larger vision of equality and justice, regardless of one's class, caste, colour, religion, ethnic identity, sex or sexuality.

Before I engage with the topic of biblical hermeneutics in Asian context, I would like to place this topic within the framework of present day context, perhaps even in the context of

this celebration of theological education for women in Lanka. I have framed my presentation under three sub-headings, namely *marking*, *re-making* and *re-marking* history.

1. **Marking History:** To *re-narrate* the significance of opening the doors of theological education for women that led to the first women ordinands to be students in the TCL. What were/are the challenges for women and men within a theological college? Was there a change in the way theological education took place, in terms of content, perspective, curriculum and pedagogy with the induction of women as students in theological education? Were women expected to fit into the ready-made moulds and paradigms of education? Was it a mere inclusion of women in theological education or was the feminist perspective used as a corrective to the teaching, learning and doing of theology in context? In other words, how was history of theological education “marked” by including women as students in theological education?
2. **Remaking History:** If only the inclusion of women in theological education in Sri Lanka (or any where in the world) is accompanied with the spirit of true partnership, and if the feminist perspective was used as a corrective to the theologies, ideologies and to faith constructions, it would pave the way for a meaningful remaking of history. We need to reflect on the possible changes or transformation that can happen when women and men work together as equal partners in the mission of God. How do we loosen the scales of patriarchy that shroud our eyes and prevent us from seeing the purpose of God for the world? How can the church be led to sharpen its faith to be a prophetic church by confessing its complicity with patriarchy, renouncing patriarchy as evil and join in and with movements that are engaged in similar struggles? How can the Bible be read with new eyes to help us shed the patriarchal scales that we have grown up with and got accustomed to?
3. **Re-Marking History:** We are invited and motivated by the Spirit of God to *re-mark* history as that which will be and could be a more gender-just history, that will not see women or women’s participation in theological education as threatening, as something that would deprive men of their positions and powers but as collective effort for the formation of a community committed to build justice and peace in society. How can Feminist Hermeneutics help us to look *Again? Beyond? Anew?*

I began by saying how difficult it was for women to be accepted as capable of reading, understanding, interpreting the word of God in a patriarchal world. History tells us how women, their bodies and their speech was discounted, discredited and devalued thus making them subhuman. Women’s bodies are often looked upon as polluting and incapable of reflecting the image of God. We have a clear case in the person of Mary Magdalene. Even though the gospels clearly state that she was the first witness to the risen Lord Jesus, we do not find her name in the list of witnesses that is recorded in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, verses 3-8. She is not only denied of her status of being the first witness to the risen Lord, and her status as the apostle to the apostles, thus obeying the command “Go and Tell”, but her name does not figure even as one among the five hundred odd brothers and sisters who encountered the risen Christ!

I have often put this question, “What do you think about Mary Magdalene’s name missing from the list of witnesses” to my students who do a 3-credit course in Feminist Hermeneutics in United Theological College, where I teach and also to a group of women with whom I did the exercise of re-reading the Bible with new eyes. It is very interesting to repeat some of the spontaneous reflections of women and men. The most common responses I have received from the men are:

- Oh, that is because Paul was a woman hater (legitimizing patriarchy, an act of silencing is accepted as a way of exercising power over others).
- The patriarchal context did not allow him to put THE MESSAGE into the mouth of the woman (justifying the act of discrediting the woman’s voice).
- After all, what is important is Jesus rose from the dead. Does it matter to whom he appeared first? (Would they have said this if the first witness was man and the name was changed?)
- Oh, we did not realise that Mary Magdalene’s name is missing. Ok, let us move on... It is a trivial matter!!

The women’s responses interestingly include another dimension, in addition to all the above responses. They have said:

- We do not look for reward and therefore we are not disappointed when it does not come.
- It is enough that God knows what we do and how we contribute. Our reward is in heaven.
- Women being discounted or discredited is not something new. Women’s bodies are counted as unworthy, impure and inferior by men, but Jesus counted women worthy. That is enough for us!

These responses of women and men to a reading of a passage from the Bible are not new. Neither is it an accident that women and men read *their experiences* of privilege and denial, being counted and not counted, awarded and discredited into the text so that the meaning that they arrive at is often coloured by their daily experiences. Patriarchal readings of the text intensify the patriarchal meanings and seldom allow the liberative meaning to emerge from the text. It imprisons the meaning within the text. That is why Letty Russell clearly puts it this way: “The Word of God has to be liberated from the Bible in order that it becomes the liberating Word of God”.

It is true that the message of resurrection of Christ was believed to be the pivot of the whole gospel and therefore it had to be put in the mouth of the male, Peter, who was considered a prime disciple. But we cannot ignore the question: Why should a woman’s voice be robbed of its power, right and importance because of her sex? Why should her sex discredit her voice? Even today, we find quite a legitimising attitude in the fact that two female witnesses are counted equal to one male witness under the Sharia law. Even today, the woman feels that her voice and speech are devalued and discredited when she is robbed of her right to utter the words of institution and celebrate the Holy Communion because her voice has no power, no right (no right to ordination). Even today, in some local congregations in the Lutheran church that I belong to (IELC), women are not counted as voting members in the church, thus making their silence as the norm. It is not that women choose to be *silent* but it is the powerful act of *silencing* the women that stands at the root of patriarchy.

This woman Mary Magdalene, who is robbed of her identity as the *first witness* to the risen Lord, proves her discipleship in a very concrete, sustained way, as we see in the gospels. She is there as a disciple throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, ever so emphatically at the foot of the cross. In John 19:25-27 we read about three women, who are *named*. I am emphasising this “named” because very often, they are not; if they are remembered, it is often as someone’s wife, mother, sister, daughter and so on. It is said that out of 600 odd women in the Bible, hardly 200 of them are named!!

In John 19:25-27, we see that these three women are standing in the most vulnerable and risky place, *near the cross*, making it known loud and clear that they were associated with the man who was crucified, shamed, beaten and scourged. It is very interesting that there is no mention of John standing there along with the three women. However, we do find the presence of the beloved disciple standing there along with three women. They witnessed with their *bodies* that they were disciples of the crucified man. *Marturia*, which in Greek means to witness, takes its related word in English ‘martyrdom’ seriously because the three women were not only witnesses but even ready to be martyred for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ.

When one takes a look at the customs and rituals of that time, we see that women were not allowed anywhere near the place of public trial, especially crucifixion. Only the closest of associates were allowed and usually these associates were men. Once again, we see that nothing could hold the women back from proving their discipleship with their bodies that they were true and faithful disciples in every sense. Standing near the cross therefore is not to be understood as introduction to the verse that we read about Jesus saying to his mother: “Behold your Son” and to the Beloved Disciple, “Behold your Mother”. Mary Magdalene stands out as a disciple above all, for whom the Master and Lord Jesus was indeed the messiah. Discipleship was proved with her body. The woman whose name is missing from the list of witnesses to the risen Lord Jesus was a faithful disciple to the very end, even at the cost of her own life.

The third point for us to focus on to understand the character of Mary Magdalene in this process of our re-reading the Bible is to re-look at the denied and rejected status of Mary of Magdala who is identified as the ‘Beloved Disciple’ who is referred to in the Gospel of John. It is interesting to read just how many scholars point out to the idea that the Beloved Disciple referred to in the fourth Gospel (commonly called as Gospel according St. John) could only be Mary Magdalene and ascribe the authorship of the Fourth Gospel to her, as one who played a crucial role in forming the Johanine community. Some of the common biblical references cited to support the idea that Mary Magdalene could be the Beloved Disciple are as follows:

- John 1:35-40 – There is reference to “another disciple” who heard John the Baptist and followed Jesus along with Andrew who is not named.
- John 13:23-26 – There is another utterance about the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, a deliberate silence about the name of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

- John 18:15-16 – Raymond Brown is of the opinion that the disciple who gets to talk to the gate keeper on behalf of Simon Peter to allow him to enter the courtyard during the trial of Jesus could be Mary Magdalene. The questions we need to ask are: “Why is the beloved disciple not named? What was the need to keep the name of this Beloved Disciple a secret? Perhaps there was a need to protect the identity of the beloved disciple if it was Mary Magdalene because there would have been resistance to a woman emerging as the leader, and as a source of wisdom and energy?”
- John 19:25-27 – It seems the redactor tried to change the sex of the beloved disciple to a male in another passage, referring to him as Son, but this is inconsistent with the fact that no male disciple was identified anywhere near the cross other than the three women.
- John 20:1-11 – Again, there is a lot of confusion about the identity of the “other disciple” whom Jesus loved who ran with Peter to the tomb. The “other disciple ran faster and went ahead of Peter...The disciples went home. But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping...” Who is the unnamed beloved disciple?
- John 21:7 – In one of the post resurrection narratives where the disciples are out fishing and Jesus is seen on the shore calling out to the disciples to come and have some breakfast, it is the beloved disciple who recognises Jesus first and draws the attention of fellow disciples.
- John 21:20-24 – Once again, there is the reference to the beloved disciple who was leaning on Jesus during the time of the last supper whom Peter asks to find out from Jesus who was going to betray Jesus. Reference is made to this disciple to whom Jesus responds during the time of the last supper that it is Judas Iscariot.

In the above reference, there is once again a hint of rivalry when Peter wants to know what will happen to the Beloved Disciple. The response of Jesus is, “What does it matter to you?” In crude words: ‘None of your Business, Peter!’ There is a hint to the tradition of Peter and that of the Beloved Disciple even in this periscope. Raymond Brown, after intensive research, refers to a schism in the early history of the Johannine community which divided because of Christological disagreements.

I am referring to all these arguments to underline the point that Mary Magdalene indeed was a woman of great faith, a disciple of Jesus to the very end, a leader of the community who could not be crushed even if the structures at that time tried its best to crush it. Why is it then that the image we have been given is that of a “woman from whom seven devils were chased out, a prostitute, a sinful woman” etc.? It is very clear from the gospels that much of this is because of the church’s reading into the text, a character of woman’s sinfulness connected with her body and sexuality instead of facing the truth of a woman whose discipleship was unquestionable and undeterred, come what may. It was easier for the church (fathers) to denounce and deny women and their leadership using the whip of “sex, sexuality and sin” and relegate them to a secondary place if not make them absolutely invisible. As those engaged in the task of applying ‘feminist hermeneutics’, our gender lenses immediately tell us that those women who were banned as evil, sinful, wicked, need to be looked at again, beyond and anew.

In one of the churches in India, where women's ordination was accepted and two women were ordained, the practice was discontinued by the Bishop who disagreed with the idea of women's ordination. The excuse he gave was: "Oh, women go mad if they are ordained as ministers." (The women of course had their own stories to share about how they were driven to desperation.)

In the Assembly of the Association of Theologically Trained Women of India (ATTWI) in 1997, several women were congratulated after they were ordained as ministers in their respective churches. It seemed as if we celebrated too early because during the coffee break session, some women from the same batch of ordinands shared how they were first asked to sign a document, giving their consent to three demands: (1) that they will not ask for any hike in their salaries; (2) that they will not stand in any elections; and (3) that they will not ask for separate pastorates but be ready to serve their husbands as assistant pastors.

It is a clear example which shows that women's potential to be true witnesses to the gospel is shrouded in patriarchy and that we have a long way to go to liberate the church, its theologies, administration from the clutches of patriarchy. This onerous task has to be claimed by women and men as their primary task because until every human being is liberated no one is liberated. Our liberation is linked to the life and action of one another.

It is true that a woman who has gained wisdom and knowledge is looked upon as a potential danger to society. Theologically trained women are often considered as liberated and therefore are overlooked as right choices for marriage partners because they are assumed to be potential breakers of the cycle of patriarchy. There is clear evidence for this among the theologically trained women of India as well as Sri Lanka.

This phenomenon is also familiar in the history of Christianity. If the church could not contend with talented women, they either elevated them as "too holy to be touched calling them saints and virgins" or the other extreme of being dangerous women who are potential whores. Women, body, sin, sex and sexuality were so interconnected in Christian history that women could not emerge as victors from these dangerous links.

Linking Questions from Our Past and Present

Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics approach teaches us to go beyond the text and ask questions that will challenge the structures of patriarchy. In Asian context, we are extremely conscious of the power and authority we ascribe to another depending upon one's caste, class, colour, language, sex and race. We offer authority and power on a platter to those above in the structures of class-caste-gender hierarchy and assume a situation of helplessness, powerlessness and continue the system of slavery and oppression. How can we find the courage to listen to our own voices, and speech and believe that we have the power to utter that speech, without being told: You do not have it right!

In a theological school context, the content, method, syllabi, pedagogy of theological education still follow a patriarchal mould. Women's Studies and feminist perspectives and theology are considered optional, sometimes even unnecessary or too fashionable for our

context. How can the importance of the feminist voice be recovered and emphasised in theological education in Sri Lankan context?

Asian Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics is a critical method of re-engaging with the questions of power and privilege over people, over traditional meanings and interpretations that have blinded us, of establishing one's authority in the church. It provides a creative space for us to re-negotiate and re-claim the space of women.

By including women in theological education 35 years ago, and also celebrating 25 years of the first woman ordinand coming for theological studies in the TCL, we can say that the theological education in Lanka was *marked* forever. It has to be an experience like that of Jacob who was permanently "marked" by the one with whom he wrestled, so that he was put out of joint for ever (Genesis 32). He was no more the same – a truly Peniel experience! *Re-making* of history can happen only if the implication of inclusion of women in theological education is looked upon, not as a cosmetic change of including women. The feminist perspective should also be used as a corrective to dominant theologies and traditions so that what we learn together will be a holistic theology, leading to the formation of community of equals. *Re-marking* of history is the vision and hope with which we work so that the transformation we envisage will become a reality in the church and society of Sri Lanka.