Hagar and the Levite's Concubine: Reclaiming Biblical Women Through Employing a Womanist Lens

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Abstract

In this study, two separate biblical narratives, Genesis 16 and Judges 19, are interpreted from a womanist perspective. The study builds on the principles of feminism and black theology by prioritizing the voices, experiences, and traditions of women of colour. This allows us to re-read these texts to emphasize the role and significance of women in them, in contrast to a tradition of patriarchal readings which overlook and sometimes distort these characters. The writers of the texts were themselves writing from a presumed patriarchal culture, and I do not intend to justify the mistreatment of these women. However, I believe that these stories, read carefully, can still be liberatory texts in their implicit condemnation of the mistreatment of these women.

In Genesis 16, we are told of the hardships and sufferings Hagar endured due to her gender, race, and forced position within society; however, throughout my thesis, I have demonstrated how God raised her status from that of a slave girl to the mother of nations. Previous interpretations tended to victimise or demonise Hagar's character; however, I propose that although the narrator does not explicitly condemn the actions, s/he appears to be implicitly disapproving of Abraham and Sarah and instead shows that God is looking after Hagar. I do not dismiss the mistreatment that she endured, but I demonstrate how it led to a positive outcome since that was God's plan for her, not the mistreatment.

Judges 19 ends with a worse outcome for the woman involved than Genesis 16, but I use it as evidence that patriarchy is still problematic. Judges 19 recounts the story of the concubine, which speaks volumes about the fate of women in a patriarchal society, in which misogynistic values prevail. The narrative presents an unnamed woman who has been betrayed, abused, raped, murdered, and dismembered and, as a result, the story ends with the terrible consequences of civil war. According to the narrator, if this particular incident is described as having truly horrendous consequences, then it appears that the narrator believes that it is a truly horrendous incident. This implies moral disapproval from the narrator. In this dissertation, a womanist viewpoint is used to interpret both passages to demonstrate how rereading them from a womanist perspective offers a stronger understanding of difficult passages in the Bible.

Introduction

This dissertation will undertake womanist readings of Genesis16 and Judges 19 to help liberate the voices of women of colour in the Bible. The stories of Hagar and the concubine will be reclaimed from patriarchal interpretations – which have marginalised the role of female characters in Scripture – to highlight the God who opposes oppression. Hagar embodied the oppressed as a slave who was exploited and whose body was used by her masters to have a child. Genesis 16 tells the story of a young woman who was abused by her jealous mistress and forced to flee into the wilderness while pregnant. The second narrative I discuss is that concerning the Levite's concubine. Her own husband threw her into the hands of the mob, where she was gang-raped until the next morning and dismembered into twelve pieces. These passages are horrific in nature, which raises the question of how the text can be interpreted ethically. Should we reject them completely, or should we seek an alternative interpretation? I propose the latter. I have chosen some of the Hebrew Bible's most problematic narratives and will present them through the lens of a redemptive, womanist narrative. Through this thesis, I demonstrate that we should not simply give up on these passages, but rather I side with Esau McCaulley (2020, p. 21) when he says, 'I propose instead that we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us.' Even though the text presents challenges, a careful reading which does not downplay or distort the roles of women – both within the text and as interpreters – offers a more liberating interpretation than traditional patriarchal interpretations.

This study draws womanist conclusions from two biblical narratives. Focusing on the intersectionality of gender, class, and race, womanists read these texts in a sympathetic light. The stories of Hagar and the Concubine resonate with women of colour because the situations of the two biblical characters correspond to their own history. Both Hagar and the Concubine are recognised as slaves. Sharon D. Welch explains that 'Hagar becomes the first female in the Bible

to liberate herself from oppressive power structures' (1997, p. 39). Moreover, Phyllis Trible describes Judges 19 as ‘the betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman' (1987, p. 65). Womanists are drawn to these narratives because both female characters were abused and exploited by an entitled man, which resonates with women of colour.

In Williams' exposition, the womanist approach to the Bible results in rereading. It means rereading and considering the text in an entirely new light. In this way, readers can better understand the story from the perspective of the vulnerable character and make connections with historical events to better understand why the characters acted the way they did (Williams, 2013). Rereading is only the first stage of biblical interpretation. The second is to use what has been understood from the Bible to form a contextual theology relevant to women of colour. Womanist theology empowers and overcomes negative stereotypes to liberate women of colour by showing that God is on the side of the oppressed. It is for this reason that I have specifically chosen to analyse Genesis 16 and Judges 19. At first glance, they seem extreme in their representation of oppression and injustice; however, we see this form of injustice echoing in our society today.

As a woman of colour myself, I know I can personally engage with womanist thinking because it recognises women of colour who feel overlooked by the feminist movement. I have struggled with being in a society where I have felt like the lesser of the two sexes and part of a minority ethnic group. Womanism is at its heart pro-woman; still, it supports both sexes and understands the communal value of all people of colour. I felt drawn to womanist theology as it is a religious framework which focuses on women of colour's interpretations of the Bible. It gives women of colour a platform on which to express their interpretation of the biblical text. Through this approach, women of colour can integrate themselves into biblical stories and empower minority women in a theological framework.

Chapter one introduces womanist theology by outlining how womanism has situated itself since the 1980s as an interpretative approach. I will briefly outline the development of both feminism

and black theology as those were the two existing movements womanism was inspired by. I will analyse Alice Walker's definition of womanism. Following on from this, I will investigate womanist theology through the work of Katie Cannon and Renita Weems. This will be the foundation of the womanist biblical interpretations of the two narratives in chapters two and three.

The second chapter examines the story of Hagar (Genesis 16). I will provide a contextual overview of her character and why her experiences make her significant to womanists. Womanist theologians reflect on religious, cultural, and intellectual experiences of black women. As Hagar is an enslaved Egyptian woman, she becomes a figure of special interest to womanist scholars. Her narrative of hardship provides similarities to the experiences of women of color. As Genesis 16 presents a God who gives power to the oppressed, a womanist reading of it liberates women of colour. This is a God who saw the slave girl Hagar and made her the mother of nations. This demonstrates that God sides with the mistreated.

Chapter three will study Judges 19. I will analyse the concubine as a nameless woman. The chapter will illustrate how a womanist reading offers new insight to Judges 19. The story emphasises the power dynamics men have over women. The concubine is seen as a powerless victim, whereas the Levite and the other men in the narrative are perceived as powerful. Womanists acknowledge the horrific nature of this narrative and do not seek to in any way justify the mistreatment of the concubine by presenting a redemptive reading. However, knowing that there is a God who will not allow the mistreatment of an innocent girl to go unpunished ultimately allows women of colour to experience liberation in a patriarchal society.

Through this dissertation, womanist interpretations of Genesis 16 and Judges 19 will be accomplished to liberate the voices of women of colour in the Bible. To highlight the God who opposes oppression, the stories of Hagar and the concubine will be reclaimed from patriarchal interpretations that marginalise the role of females in Scripture.

CHAPTER ONE

Methodological framework

In this dissertation, I propose a womanist reading of Genesis 16 and Judges 19 to help liberate oppressed women, showing them that there is a God in the margins who is on their side. The text is liberating and empowering to those who read it because it shows God throughout the Bible as someone who speaks from the margins. In some cases, that means racial margins, such as for Hagar who was Egyptian, and in other cases, it is social margins, such as for the concubine in Judges 19. The message God sends from the margins today is liberating for women of colour. The stories of Hagar and the concubine will be reclaimed from patriarchal interpretations – which have marginalised the role of females in Scripture – in order to highlight the God who opposes oppression. In a modern context this is a much more positive interpretation of the Bible, since the Bible is a message of liberation from all sorts of oppression, including racial oppression. Therefore, it is a liberating message for those who are oppressed today specifically on racial grounds.

This dissertation attempts to make use of an approach from Sternberg. Sternberg's book is primarily about the narrative of the Bible, and he offers a deep and insightful overview of it. There are chapters devoted to the omniscient and reliable narrator, 'The bible always tells the truth in that its narrator is absolutely and straightforwardly reliable' (Sternberg, 1985, P. 51). As a result, I agree with everything the narrator says or does, and this reading will favour the narrator's perspective. This is because as Sternberg argues God is on the side of the narrator. 'We shall trace the same functional principal at work in spheres otherwise so different as character portrayal, … The narrators recourse to the third person to indicate these referents and Israel herself from God's side of the fence'(Sternberg, 1985, p. 123). When the narrator talks about things in the third person the narrator is trying to get the reader to look at things from God's perspective. In his series of

discussions, Sternberg displays how the narrator is interconnected to God, and the Bible refuses to separate them (Sternberg, 1985). The only way to obtain a true narrative is to merge the narrator with God. It's important that the narrator and God are on the same side because the only way we can reach God is through the narrator; God does not speak directly to us, we only have the narrator speaking on God's behalf. As a result, my work utilises this understanding of the narrator.

In this chapter, I will discuss how womanism has positioned itself as an interpretative approach since the 1980s. For contextual relevance, I will outline both feminism and black theology as those were the two existing movements womanism drew inspiration from. Building on the feminist movement's achievements, women of colour pushed for recognition of their specific needs in terms of race and class. Black theology's focus on liberation and struggle against racism was not fully inclusive of African American women. Neither theory offered a comprehensive analysis of the extent of marginalization and oppression faced by women of colour. In an environment where women of colour were both subjected to sexism and racism, neither of these movements were enough on their own. Ultimately, womanism drew from both movements and served the needs of women of colour.

Feminism

bell hooks begins her book on the topic by stating, ‘Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression’ (Hooks, 2000, p.1). According to Jennifer L. Koosed, feminism believes that women and men are equal, and the movement seeks equal treatment and equal opportunity for all (2017, p.4). It is difficult, however, to define feminism in a way that has a wide consensus, since people have different viewpoints on what constitutes sexist oppression, where the problem began, and how the problem should be addressed. Hazel T. Biana argues that ‘in a postfeminist era, it is vital that a theory bears a polysemy or multiple meanings’(Biana, 2020,

p.19). Due to its roots in women's experiences, it must include as many definitions as there are women's experiences. As a result, feminism is an umbrella term encompassing multiple perspectives on gender equality for women and men.

Koosed argues that the Bible has always been a source of interest for women (Koosed, 2017). In the Bible, women read, interpreted, prophesied, and interpreted Scripture - from Eve to Huldah, from Anna to Phoebe (Koosed, 2017). Interpretation of Scripture has also followed this pattern. 'Even alongside the most misogynistic passages of the "church fathers" or the Talmudic rabbis, there are other stories about women that indicate that they were reading and interpreting themselves, despite any barriers they might have faced' (Koosed, 2017, p. 11). However, a woman picking up the Bible and reading it does not necessarily constitute a feminist act. Certainly, not all women subscribed to the beliefs later known as feminist.[1]

Feminist interpretation of the Bible arose in the 1960s, but feminists have long built their work upon important predecessors. As Gerda Lerner observes in the introduction to her essay, 'whatever route women took to self-authorization and whether they were religiously inspired or not, they were confronted by the core texts of the Bible, which were used for centuries by patriarchal authorities to define the proper roles for women in society and to justify the subordination of women: Genesis, the Fall, and St. Paul' (1993, p.138). According to some feminists, the Bible has hindered the advancement of women's rights. And yet, women have always been drawn to the biblical teachings and have discussed them. The Bible contains sexist and misogynist sentiments, which women have too often accepted, but they have also found a way to read around them in order to find inspiration and strength. In many cases, the Bible is viewed by women as a source of great empowerment. Moreover, Lerner argues, 'long before organized groups of women challenged male authority, the feminist Bible critics did just that' (1993, p.139). The first feminists

[1] The word "feminism" was first applied to the Movement for Women's Rights in 1895.

used the Bible to critique sexist culture in both their interpretations of the Bible and by interpreting the Bible itself. ‘They claimed a certain authority grounded in the Bible which was, ironically, denied to them by the Bible (and its male interpreters)’ (Koosed, 2017, p.11).

As a womanist, I have chosen to redeem the biblical text rather than reject it. Some feminist biblical scholars reject the biblical text because they consider it irredeemable and too patriarchal to be used. In contrast, many womanist scholars do not wish to take such a position. Since many of them come from more religious communities, it is very important for them to continue to recognise the value of religious aspects of things even when others fail to do so. There are many feminists who believe they can do without the Bible due to its underlying misogyny. They believe that if a feminist studies the Bible they are implicated in sexism. Therefore, according to them, such an oppressive text should be readily omitted from feminist studies, as it rejects the possibility of female empowerment within the biblical text. Pamela J. Milne argues that we are unlikely to find in the Bible a sacred text that does not support patriarchal interpretations based on the concept that women are "others" or those that reject patriarchal interpretations based on their otherness: ‘If we want an authoritative sacred Scripture that does not make it possible to believe that women are secondary and inferior humans, it appears that we need to make new wine to fill our new wineskins’ (Milne, 1989, p. 34). In Milne's view, we need a new approach to reading the Bible that places women at its centre. Womanism has achieved precisely this. The Bible’s patriarchy has been criticized solely because it lacks any evidence of women's cultural agency. While womanism acknowledges that the text is patriarchal, it deliberately reads against it, which means that the patriarchy is intrinsically linked to the reader and does not arise from the text itself.

Womanists tend to say that from their own experience and perspective, it would be a major issue to cut the Bible out of their lives. To portray the biblical text as irredeemable is a distortion of the text, and we can observe, as members of minority and oppressed communities, how the Bible is

on the side of the minorities. Additionally, there is unconscious racism and assumption in the feminist failure to recognize this aspect of the biblical text, as they only see the patriarchal side of it. The feminist movement fails to comprehend why womanists find empowerment in biblical stories about marginalised women being protected by God. Womanists not only assert that the Bible can be redeemed to include their struggles, but that it ought to be redeemed as well. This is also why womanist reading is essential to biblical studies and why feminist interpretation alone is insufficient.

In summary feminism advocates equal rights and opportunities for all genders, while womanism recognises the innate abilities and contributions of women who are marginalised by virtue of their race, class, and gender. Womanism also recognises the unique challenges that come from the intersectionality of oppressions. As a result of racism, women of colour in the feminist movement felt forced to choose between combatting sexism or racism. A true feminist movement would have provided a platform for all identities as it had not met the standard, womanism was formed (Breines, 2006). My choice of the womanist lens instead of feminism is based on the principle that womanism gives a forefront to women of colour and shows oppressed women that they can be liberated.

Black Theology

Black theology is a theological perspective which started amongst African American scholars and seminarians within American churches in the late 1960s. Within a decade it had spread to other parts of the world. Black theology was founded on the notion that African Americans are oppressed by wider society. Hill argues that 'Black theology is primarily a theology of and for black people. . .. The purpose of black theology is to analyse the nature of the Christian faith in such a way that black people can say Yes to blackness, and No to whiteness and mean it' (1973,

p. 249). This theology developed to liberate black people from oppression. It emphasizes the allegiance of God to oppressed people; a majority of whom have, simply by virtue of their race, been marginalised by society. Black theology embraced biblical liberating principles, particularly God's decisive intervention on behalf of oppressed people in Exodus. As God demands in this biblical narrative, Pharaoh was required to let his people go (Exodus 13:17). This was used to show a God who takes the side of the oppressed.

James H. Cone was a leading theologian who re-established the study of theology by arguing that black liberation was at the core of biblical studies. He wrote some of the most important texts in black theology, such as *Black Theology and Black Power* (1997a), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (2010), and *God of the Oppressed* (1997b). In all these works, Cone identifies God with black people's suffering: 'Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people – their life of suffering and humiliation' (1997a, p. 119). Cone turned to theology to amplify the voices of black struggle and centre blackness within theology. In suggesting that God was black, in essence, Cone was saying God is associated with the marginalised and the oppressed and that God is indistinguishable from them. Cone explains that he views God as black 'not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants' (1997b, p. 136). Cone speaks of a God who sides with the oppressed and treats their pain as his own.

This is the God that is drawn out in womanist theology. A God that liberates the marginalised and never abandons the suffering. Cone's early works, however, left some women frustrated because they felt he did not take into account the ways in which gender, patriarchy, and sexism affected women of colour. According to a prevalent criticism, 'Cone was blind to the sexism within his

own theology' (Buhring, 2008, p. 61). For black women, it seemed necessary to depart from black liberation theology in order to take their experiences seriously. In order to raise those concerns about the lack of recognition for black women in black theology, these women turned to womanist theology. One of the founders of womanist theology was Jacqueline Grant, who was a student of James Cone. 'Grant holds the distinction of writing the first systematic womanist treatment of Christology, paying particular attention to the way black and white women think about and experience Christ' (Burrow, 1999, p. 93). As Grant explains, the Bible should be read and re-interpreted by black women in the context of their own experiences (Grant, 1989). According to Grant womanist theology offers a broad and most comprehensive view of liberation theology by simultaneous addressing issues of race, sex, and class while developing from a particular context of the suffering and experiences of women of colour (Lincoln, 1990). Black liberation theology was lacking everything that womanist theology provided.

Cone realised the sexism in his writings soon after his first few publications and changed his perspective. Specifically, he said the problem with *Black Theology and Black Power* was the book's complete obliviousness to the problem of sexism, especially within the black church community (Cone, 2003). Cone felt embarrassed that he had adopted a patriarchal perspective and used sexist language in his work. He further stated that, 'with black women playing such a dominant role in the African-American liberation struggle, past and present, how could I have been so blind?'(Cone, 2003, p. 193). However, this still was not enough, womanists focused on interpreting the Bible so that it reflected the realities of their lives. Forming a womanist theology by combining feminism and black theology.

Esau McCaulley argues that black biblical interpretation originates from enslaved people. Scripture's major themes were discussed in light of the hopes and dreams of black people. He describes black theology as 'this unabashedly located reading' (McCaulley (2020, p. 17). This is

because certain texts were interpreted in light of the doctrine of God (who is on the side of the marginalised and who favours the oppressed), and His understanding of the nature of salvation (McCaulley, 2020, p. 19). What I will discuss in this thesis is perfectly explained by this statement. My readings are based on the assumption that God is on the side of oppressed women and that women are equally worthy of salvation.

Black theology also links Christianity with the civil rights movement (Cone, 2010, p. 1). It predominantly interacts with African Americans in order to make Christianity relatable for them. Christianity is seen as a form of liberation in this world and not just in the hereafter. Cone specifies that in asking for freedom and justice, black theologians turn to the Bible as the main source of authority for their claim (Cone, 1984). It is important to understand that black theologians believe that God always stood by the defenseless, poor, and unwanted. Cone claims that 'God elected to be the helper and savior to people oppressed and powerless' (1997a, p. 85). This is echoed in the book of Psalms: 'If God is going to see righteousness established in the land, he himself must be particularly active as "the helper of the fatherless"' (Psalm 10:14) as well as 'deliver the needy when he crieth; and the poor that hath no helper' (Psalm 72:12). These biblical verses illustrate that God's kindness is for the marginalised and oppressed within society because they are defenceless. It is an example of the reading of Christian Scripture from the standpoint of the oppressed. From Genesis to Revelation, the people who wrote the word of God were oppressed by the Egyptians, Syrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans (Walker, 2009). Walker explains that their understanding of what God was saying was very different from their oppressors' interpretation. This is what prophetic theology of the African Americans is trying to portray.

There is no doubt that the Bible plays a central role within Black theology. According to

McCaulley, ‘As their context spoke to the Bible, the Bible, as a Word spoke back’ (2020, p. 19). In that process, Black Christians learned more about their struggles and how they fit into the world at large. The beginning of what McCaulley called the Black ecclesial instinct or methodology became clear to him as he began to read and reflect on the Bible; ‘Dialogue, rooted in core theological principle, between the black experience and the Bible has been the model and needs to be carried forward into our day’ (2020, p. 20). A prominent feature of black theology was the renewed interest in the biblical text. It brought a new sense of seriousness and concern to it.

There is, however, the suspicion that when people use a non-traditional reading of the Bible they are picking and choosing text that suits their purposes. Nevertheless, McCaulley argues that ‘canon within the canon’ did not begin with black theology but had always been practiced (2020, p. 17). Traditional readings also have their ‘canon within a canon’ because they selected the passages that they favoured at the time. During the era of slavery, slaveholders would often pick the text that says slaves should obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22). Thus, Black theology is not doing anything new in terms of creating a ‘canon within a canon’. Similarly, womanists and feminists reading the Bible in a positive light can be tempted to pick out all the helpful passages, such as when Deborah goes into battle in Judges 4:14, thereby omitting the misogynistic passages. Black theologians assert that they are not the only ones who take a “biased” view of the Bible. Every theology that preceded it shared the same “bias” in that ‘[e]verybody has been reading the Bible from their locations, but we are honest about it’ (McCaulley, 2020, p.20). Black theologians, feminists and womanists are merely making their own contribution to those that have gone before as to which texts should be central in the endeavour of biblical interpretation.

According to McCaulley, there is a tension between evangelicals and progressives. ‘Talking of reading critically is a slightly dangerous thing because Black traditional voices are often weaponized in evangelical spaces against Black progressive voices’ (McCaulley, 2020, p.18). The progressives represent the social demands that are relevant to many black theologies, such as justice and liberation. However, evangelical religious beliefs and practices are more in line with what many black religious communities and churches feel affinity with. Thus, McCaulley discusses the tension between orthodoxy and progressiveness. McCaulley is in the middle of orthodoxy and progressivism much like the way womanism is trapped between the progressive feminist ideals and the orthodox Christianity which is still so essential. This is also one of the reasons that womanism exists. It was due to the inadequacies of feminism. Feminism had a lot of progressive elements, but religious interpretations were often heavily patriarchal. Womanism was created as a middle ground. Some feminists have been so “progressive” that they have stated that they want to get rid of the Bible because it is irredeemably misogynistic. Much traditional biblical study has been deeply misogynistic. Indeed, McCaulley feels caught between progressive Christian studies and traditional biblical studies. Womanists feel caught between feminism and traditional religious, but patriarchal, interpretation. McCaulley and I share the same approach, which involves identifying problems within traditional interpretations and reaching out to progressive solutions without abandoning the Bible.

Womanism

Black women are empowered to identify themselves as primary sources of liberation through the womanist movement, rather than white or misogynistic subjectivities (Beal, 2008). Womanism enables black women to overcome white supremacy due to its positive message of liberation. The term ‘Womanism’ was coined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* (1983). The womanist movement was developed to respond to the needs of women who were

racially underrepresented by feminism and inadequately represented by the Black Liberation Movement. Women of colour are evidently disadvantaged on a social, economic, and political level. Black women suffer double jeopardy as they are oppressed due to their sex and race (Beal, 2008). Many women of colour believe their needs are being disregarded. However, a womanist does not choose between the fights against sexism and racism but acknowledges both as essential. For many women, neither feminism nor the black liberation movement alone can address their struggles. Feminism lacks the lived experience to understand what women of colour undergo, Black theology does not recognize that African American women struggle with more than just race. Additionally, women of colour feel oppressed due to their sex. The womanist movement addresses the needs of black women that other movements primarily ignore. It is a socio-political framework that centralises race, sex, gender, class, and sexuality as the key markers of women's lived experiences (Brown, 2019). The womanist movement encompasses a wide range of issues ranging from political rights to educational opportunities. In the womanist agenda, these problems are rationalized and the most relevant problems for black women are identified. In the womanist perspective, addressing racism, ethnocentrism, and poverty are as important as addressing gender issues, such as sexism (Henley *et al.,* 1998). Most women of colour face at least one of these issues in their day-to-day lives, which occur because women are being discriminated against and oppressed by the wider society.

Walker is a well-known African American writer whose works include a wide range of themes, which consider various experiences of women of colour. In her writing, Walker emphasises the importance of reviewing African Americans' history, starting with the horrific time of slavery and the fight for civil rights, to overcoming restrictions and limitations enforced by the white community. Walker soon became conscious of the requirement for a movement which would differ from feminism, as it would cater to the demands of women of colour and provide them with a space in which to develop their policies. The feminist movement was substantially

beneficial for middle class white women. While black women were also able to take advantage of it, their different needs were not recognised in the same way. The feminist movement forced women of colour to choose between fighting racism and fighting sexism. It was therefore vital that Walker articulated a womanist perspective. The purpose of this approach was to emphasize the brave, fearless, undaunted manner in which black women behave. The movement endorses black women's relations with 'feminism and with history', plus the 'culture and tradition of the African American community' (Smith, 2015, p.19).

'Since 1983, when Alice Walker'sIn Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose introduced the womanist idea to the general public feminists of all colors, as well as women of colour and others, who question or reject feminism, have been debating the uniqueness and viability of womanism as a freestanding concept' (Phillips, 2006, p. xix). Since Alice Walker defined womanists in a very poetic way, numerous people who were looking for an alternative to feminism were drawn to the concept (Phillips, 2006, p. xix). Walker developed a four-part definition to target 'inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy', and to destroy 'oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion' (Cannon, 2021, p.23).

1. 'From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grew up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious' (Walker, 2011, p. xii).

Walker describes womanists as fearless women who would be passionately driven. They would

want to recognise potential and not overlook detail while being perceptive and assertive in making their position heard in a patriarchal society. Walker's (2011, p. xii) use of the term 'grown up' portrays how women of colour are at the bottom of the pyramid. For instance, women of colour are trapped lower down in a workplace due to the 'glass ceiling' which is a 'barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs' (Cotter *et al.*, 2001, p. 656). However, by 'acting grown up' (Walker, 2011, p.xii) they want to be given the opportunity to participate in the discussions held by the upper-class white men who are usually in higher positions. In any case, Walker clarifies that a womanist is 'in charge' (2011, p. xii) and will fight for her equality.

2. 'Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a Universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada, and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It would not be the first time."' (Walker, 2011, p. xii).

By "emotional flexibility" one of the things Walker is referring to is moods affected by hormones. Even though menstruation is a natural occurrence, it has been turned into a slur – something a woman cannot control has become a source of shame. Despite that, Walker allows womanists to reverse the stigma attached to periods and embrace their womanhood, by writing 'appreciates and prefers women's culture' (2011, p.xii). Normalising tears ensures women that their hormones

cannot hold them back from doing the same things men can. Not only that, but she highlights toxic masculinity. Societal norms permit women to express their emotions while expecting men to conceal their feelings. Men cannot cry, but women can, and when they do, they contribute to stereotypes about female behaviour. Walker is arguing that tears are natural, but they have become a gendered issue.

3. ‘Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless’ (Walker, 2011, p. xii).

Music and dance are creative ways of expressing how one feels through methods other than dialogue. Loving the moon and the spirit shows that they are in touch with themselves and being spiritual increases peace and well-being. There is also a connection between the moon and the menstrual cycle (Walker, 2014). They accept the 'struggle' by acknowledging that they are at the bottom of the social pyramid. Nevertheless, they are delighted by the opportunity they are given to prove themselves and work their way to the top. 'Loves the folk' illustrates that she is proud of her people and her culture. Moreover, as long as a womanist loves herself, she does not see herself being a minority or a woman of colour as a disadvantage. Ultimately, I believe that Walker uses revolutionary language to show that even if women are at the bottom of the pyramid, they can dance their way to the top.

4. ‘Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’ (Walker, 2011, p.xii).

She clearly elevates womanism and distinguishes it by associating it with the strong colour of purple. Feminism, meanwhile, is compared to the weaker colour of lavender. Since lavender is a paler colour, it correlates with the view that feminism is associated more with white women than with women of colour. Montelaro illustrates this concept by arguing that ‘this contrast of hues in Walker’s definition is consonant with her political intention to demonstrate the crucial

difference between the terms ‘womanist’ and ‘feminist’: according to the semantic analogue she constructs, an exclusively white, bourgeois feminism literally pales in comparison to the more wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich and undiluted colour purple’ (Montelaro, 1996, p. 14). According to Montelaro, Walker wanted to ensure that the difference between the terms “womanist” and “feminist” was recognised and she demonstrated how feminism integrated into womanism (Montelaro, 1996). Walker envisions womanism as a movement that supports the black race, a theory that reflects African women's experiences, African culture, and spiritual life (Collier, 2013). ‘Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented’ (Walker, 2011, p. 407). Here, Walker illustrates that womanists are yearning for a world where people of every race can live together happily whilst preserving their cultural distinctiveness. Collins argues that by including black men in the womanist movement, black women are able to discuss gender oppression without attacking the men (1996).

Womanism was created to recognise black women who felt overlooked by the feminist movement. These individuals struggled with being regarded as the lesser of the two sexes and a minority ethnic group, even though they were the global majority. Primarily white women and African American men were visible at the front of the feminist and civil rights movements. Black women were left to decide which fight held greater importance for them: the fight against sexism, or the fight against racism. Walker may not be the sole progenitor of the womanist movement in contemporary black women's literature, but her influential definition of womanist is often cited as a foundation for their ideas.

Womanist Theology

Womanist approaches to theology intend to establish a variety of theological frameworks in which women of colour are the main subject. Many different questions are underpinning this

approach. For instance, how do African American women refer to God? Is God present in the lives of black women? Michael Joseph Brown explained that biblical interpretations are used by African American women to prioritise their concerns, voices, and traditions. They read biblical texts from that standpoint (Brown, 2004). Womanism is an extension of theology much like liberation theologies, which encourages discovery in faith by understanding both culture and politics. Womanist theology is referred to as a 'vision in its intimacy' (Phillips, 2006, p. 118). Black American Christian women were the first to utilise this approach. However, womanism is not exclusively an African American phenomenon, rather it arose from this particular subset of society. Womanism is a lens that anyone can use. That being said, a British approach might have cultural differences, though it would be no less womanism. There is no requirement to have an African American perspective in order to be a womanist; it is just that early influential examples happen to originate from an African American tradition.

Womanist theologies retain a firm commitment to examining African American women's social, cultural, and religious experiences. Coleman argues that womanist theologies are fundamentally based on the religious realities of black women's lives (Coleman, 2008, p. 11). Womanist theology aims to improve black people's quality of life and ensures liberation and justice. Womanist theologians analyse society's oppressive aspects and allow black women to have the quality of life which they believe God desired for them.

Womanist theology has become important in the journey for empowerment for black female religious scholars. Through a womanist approach, black women have gained a renewed sense of hope. As Yolanda Y. Smith rightly states, 'womanist theology attempts to help Black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith' (Smith, 2008, p. 201). It represents a theoretical framework which examines the religious practices and traditions

as well as original Scripture and different biblical interpretations with the vision to empower black women.

Womanist theology focuses on black women's interpretations of the Bible. It gives black women a platform on which to express their interpretation of biblical text. Indeed, womanist theology presents anti-oppressive approaches for the reading of biblical texts. The perspective was formed for individuals to be able to discuss the traditionally buried voices and stories in the Bible. For instance, Maxine Howell's approach tries to apply strategies from four perspectives: the oppressed characters being read in the biblical stories, the disadvantaged women retelling those stories, the marginalised audience responding to the stories, and 'a centered spirituality that transcends sensory experience and reveals God's liberating presence and activity in these women's lives' (Howell, 2009, p. 87). Through this approach, women of colour can see themselves in biblical stories, which thereby empowers minority women in a theological domain. Both narratives that I analyse in this thesis concern oppressed women and how their stories are retold. This thesis thus makes use of Howell's strategies.

In Howell's view, re-reading the Bible through a womanist lens is necessary for attaining a liberating standpoint for two primary reasons: firstly, the traditional content of the Bible buries the vitality of women, and secondly, the methods used in interpreting the Bible 'can be rooted in positivist approaches that reflect the Eurocentric masculinist epistemology, which dominates our institutions and social processes' (Howell, 2009, p. 88). Therefore, it is necessary to have different voices examining the Bible because, throughout history, biblical interpretation has been heavily influenced by male scholars, even though the Protestant movements have encouraged Bible study for men and women. Women of colour never had the power to have an impact in the realm of biblical interpretation. It was thus essential to put forward the womanist theological

approach. This approach privileges the voices, experiences, and traditions of women of colour. In terms of biblical interpretation, womanist scholars use women of colours' perspectives to privilege their voices. Biblical texts are read through this hermeneutical framework. Although womanism at its core is pro-woman, it supports both sexes and understands the communal value of all people of colour.

In the 1980s, three critically significant texts were published, which influenced the development of womanist thought (Mitchem, 2014, p.68). Katie Cannon (born 1950), Renita Weems (born 1954), and Jacqueline Grant (born 1948) wrote in accordance with their scholarly expertise and the grounded influence of their faith. Cannon was recognised by many as being the leading voice in womanist theology. She strived to discard the white and androcentric view of theology and ethics and instead encouraged the insight of women of colour in understanding religion. She pushed to widen the primary structure of religious and ethical thought. She recognised that the Bible's prophetic tradition could be used as a tool to empower black women. It allows them to create a set of morals on their own terms and challange the negative labels imposed by the larger society on women of colour. This is precisely what my thesis seeks to accomplish. Russell (1985, p.40) stated that 'Black women serve as contemporary prophets, calling other women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive theologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality'. Those are the strategies Cannon sought to implement. Likewise, Grant 'took on the dual tasks of refining the unique mode of womanist theology while simultaneously applying the ideas to the construction of a Christology' (Mitchem, 2014, p. 71). The distinction that Grant sets up in the actual title of the book, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* presents a clever theological contrast that differentiates white and black women's theological thinking (Grant, 1989). Grant instigates this work by outlining the framework of feminist theology which she firmly believes is deep-rooted in the experiences of white women. Both works are immersed in social criticism, and since then, social

criticism has developed into an imperative factor for womanist theology. These passionate women dared to speak from black women's perspectives.

Out of these, only Weems is directly related to my topic. Renita Weems' writings added something different to the womanist conversation. In the mid-1980s, when Weems first started writing, there was limited womanist biblical interpretation available. Her book *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (1988), is a theological reflection aimed towards the needs of black women. In the foreword, Weems stated that 'if like myself, you are an African American woman, you are all the more hungry to hear a voice you recognise. How many times have I gone into bookstores - feminist, African American, and Christian bookstores - desperately seeking a book written unapologetically with me, an African American woman in mind' (Weems, 1988, p. ix). Weems boldly attempts to explore beneath the surface of the biblical text. As a biblical scholar, she utilised contemporary feminist literature in accordance with womanist scholarship in the interest of voicing black women's needs. Weems focused on nine different biblical stories which featured women, beginning with the story of Hagar. 'For Black women, the story of Hagar in the Old Testament Book of Genesis is a haunting one' (Weems, 1988, p. ix). She associated black women's oppression and mistreatment with the slave Hagar. Weems looked deeper into the analysis by 'presenting American capitalism's effect on black women as another form of rape and enslavement' (Mitchem, 2014, p. 70). Every biblical story she examined embraced a feature of women's lives, and it was through this that the concerns of contemporary women were linked with women in biblical stories. This developed into a basis for theological reflection.

The writings of womanist theology have helped carry womanism forward in recent years. A womanist perspective focuses on historical and contemporary issues, as well as the traditions and experiences of African American women as an interpretive lens for reading biblical texts. The

term "womanist" affirms that women of colour have a relationship with both feminism and religion. Hence womanist literature represents the continuing academic work of womanist scholars in different divisions, in particular ethics, theology, sociology, and biblical studies (Walker, 2011, p.xi). Biblical study is the discipline in which womanist theology is certainly welcome (Coleman, 2008). Womanist biblical scholars bring many concerns to the way the Bible has been translated and interpreted. As the theologian Delores Williams argues, womanist theologians put forward the experiences of African American women into the discussions of ethics and religious studies (Williams, 2013, p. 67). Moreover, they include the cultural experiences and religious consciousness of women of colour in the debate about biblical studies. Therefore, the struggles women of colour face against racial and gender oppression is what leads them to read the Bible through a specific lens. Not only that, but against the experiences of classism, 'all comprise constitutive elements in their conceptual and interpretive horizon and hermeneutics, for experiences of oppression, like all human experience, affect the way in which women and men code and decode sacred and secular reality' (Martin, 1990, p. 42). Along with introducing gender, class and race issues to biblical interpretation, womanist theologians have voiced their concerns regarding linguistic sexism. Clarice J. Martin further argues that 'Womanist biblical interpretation, then, has a "quadruocentric" interest where gender, race, class, and language issues are all at the forefront of translation' (Martin, 1990, p. 42). She defines the term 'translation' as conveying the original meaning as correctly as possible and defines interpretation as 'the practice of bringing together the ancient canonical texts with new, changing situations' issues, and not only threefold where language, gender and class concerns prevail' (Martin, 1990, p. 42). This is often seen in white feminist biblical translation and interpretation.

Womanist scholars are inspired by their position as women of colour who are victims of gender, race and class oppression. Their unique status gives them the ability to engage with biblical

characters that have been subjugated and marginalised by the dominant in society. According to Howell, a re-reading of the text from a womanist perspective is necessary because the traditional understanding of the Bible hides the 'vitality of women, black people and the poor in the fulfilment of the gospel' (Howell, 2009, p.86). She argues that the methods used in reading Scripture are found in Eurocentric masculinist epistemology which dominates our social process (Collins, 1996). These readings suffocate the liberating message of the Bible. It is therefore essential to have a womanist interpretation available as it provides a voice for the minority. The next two chapters aim to do exactly this as they showcase the benefits of interpreting biblical passages through the womanist lens.

CHAPTER TWO

Genesis XVI-XXI

In this chapter, I will be rereading Genesis 16, emphasising the role and significance of marginalised women, specifically Hagar. I will provide a contextual overview of her character and why her experiences make her significant to womanist writers such as myself. She is introduced as a concubine which is a relevant detail for womanist scholars. African American women and other women of colour view Hagar as one of their own due to her concubine status, which forces her towards oppression, oppression made easier due to her foreign status. The purpose of this chapter is to reclaim the text from a womanist perspective to show marginalised women that there is a God in the margins who is on their side I will examine the exploitative relationship Hagar had with both Abraham and Sarah. Initially, she was just a maid but later became the mother of Abraham's firstborn. Throughout her life, the cruelty Hagar experienced is one of the forms of oppression that womanists believe women of colour experience in a contemporary patriarchal society. In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on how Hagar goes from holding one of the lowest statuses in society, an Egyptian slave and handmaid, to becoming one of the few people in the Bible to communicate with God. Hagar begins her

narrative as one who is mistreated, but achieving a theophany elevated her status. She became one of the first women in the Bible to speak to the divine and goes further by giving God a name (Kichline, 2009, p. 29). As I write this section, I am not ignoring her mistreatment, but rather focusing on her achievements to demonstrate that Hagar is more than just a victim. In the second section I will argue that due to the patriarchal standards of the Bible women are primarily assessed through childbearing, and this needs to be acknowledged as part of the patriarchal world in which the Bible originated. In that worldview if a woman is given the motherhood of an entire nation she is regarded highly. As this section demonstrates, even though Hagar suffered greatly and was forced into pregnancy, God did not abandon her. In fact, He reworded her suffering by granting her the title of mother of nations. Finally, the last section will show that to reclaim female characters from the Bible they certainly do not have to be perfect. By reading as a womanist, I am not trying to show that all female characters or all powerless female characters are perfect. This would be a misrepresentation of the text and in some ways a sort of oppression because this creates an ideal of what women are like which everyday women cannot live up to and so it can be harmful. Hagar is depicted as a fully rounded character and therefore she is allowed to be as selfish and flawed as the male characters in the Bible. While she has flaws, God still liberates her, which proves to women that God does not only protect perfect, flawless women, rather he protects all women.

Hagar's Theophany

When Hagar's story begins in Genesis 16, Sarah and Abraham had been struggling with infertility for a long time. At the time Abraham was over seventy-five years old (Genesis 12:4) and still had no progeny. However, then Sarah came up with a solution; she allows Abraham to take her slave Hagar. 'She had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar' (Genesis 16:1). As an enslaved Egyptian woman, Hagar is a figure of special interest to womanist theologians, since

she is a woman of colour and one of the first women to endure abuse in the Bible. Phyllis Trible coined the phrase ‘text of terror’ in 1984 to describe passages from the Hebrew Bible such as Genesis 16 that depict women as the victims of abuses (Trible, 2002). The general approach to reading the Bible that Trible adopts is to interpret stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims as a way to recover a lost history, recalling the terror that the present embodies and praying that it will never happen again (Trible, 2002). In agreement with Trible, I think it is essential to recognise the awful mistreatment that many women, including Hagar, faced in the Bible. The rereading of this text would be misleading if the cruelty was ignored. Hagar is regarded as a symbol of imposed inferiority and oppression at the beginning of the story which many womanists feel that they can identify with (Peecook, 2002). In their own lives, many womanists have experienced oppression and felt secondary as a result of their race and gender, thus they feel more able to relate to Hagar and tell her story with more authenticity than other interpreters (Brenner-Idan, 1999). Johnson and Jorden argue that ‘even today, most of Hagar's situation is congruent with many African American women's predicament of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, motherhood, single-parenting, ethnicity and meetings with God’ (Williams, 2006, p. 145). Hagar experienced cruelty and oppression in many of the same way women of colour do in a contemporary patriarchal society. It cannot be ignored that Hagar’s life was told through a very distorted lens of the writers. Certainly, the text itself is patriarchal, and that is a fact we must deal with since it is the Bible that we have. I would argue that it is often the interpreters who distort even the patriarchy in the text and make it even more extreme. As womanists we can resolve this issue by putting forth a better interpretation. In terms of the patriarchal nature of the text itself, that is what it is, and that is something we must grapple with when using these texts as religious texts. The Bible, though patriarchal, still holds meaning.

As a womanist, I would like to present this text in a more sympathetic and relatable light. Today,

when the headlines remind us how much sexist and racist abuse still exists and continues to grow, the story of Hagar becomes even more relevant. Genesis 16 illustrates that such has always been the case: people with privilege and power refuse to acknowledge the humanity of others. Genesis 12 records Abraham and Sarah leaving Egypt with their maid Hagar. Due to the lack of information on her origins or how she came to be a slave, we can only presume that either she was a born slave, or she became one through poverty. Being so meant giving up control over herself and her life.

Abraham and Sarah receive God's promise: 'I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her' (Genesis 17:16), thus showing clearly that God promised Sarah that she would have children of her own. If she had only waited and kept her faith in God, she would have eventually had a child of her own. Yet in Genesis 16 Sarah and Abraham wait no longer to have an heir. Sarah pleads Abraham to sleep with Hagar with the hope that she will bear a son. 'Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.' (Genesis 16:2). The childless Sarah gave her servant Hagar to her husband Abraham as a concubine for her to have Abraham's child through her maid. At the time this was common practice (Oduyoye and Kanyoro, 2005, p. 94). In fact, it was believed to be the duty of the wife to offer a servant to her husband as another wife as long as any child born to the maid became the child of the original wife (Rad, 1991). In a moment of faithlessness, Abraham agrees, and Hagar becomes pregnant. Interpreters tend to overlook this, and as a womanist interpreter I wish to emphasise that the decision was not made by Sarah alone, and she should not be held solely responsible for it. Sarah did not force Abraham to participate in this plan; he cooperated willingly. In other words, it is equally his lack of faith as it is Sarah's. As a result of this moment Hagar suffered greatly. Aside from being unable to consent, her child will not even belong to her. As R. Amanda W.

Benckhuysen states that Abraham and Sarah's misuse and treat Hagar like an unfeeling instrument (Benckhuysen, 2007, p.146). No consideration is given to her feelings and emotions, she is merely a means for providing them with an heir.

'Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' (Genesis 16:5) As Sarah's plan unravels and Hagar becomes pregnant with Abraham's child, her status elevates from slave to sexual partner and now birth mother. Hagar becoming pregnant does not satisfy Sarah, it angers her that Hagar – who has been treated as a surrogate in the past – becomes haughty, casting glances at Sarah. Hagar begins to treat Sarah with contempt. H. Gunkel analyses this verse by writing, 'the slave woman, shown too much honor, grows arrogant. And the narrator makes plain that he strongly disapproves of such action on the part of the slave, emphasising the words: she despised her mistress. This must never be, for the slave must honor his master' (Gunkel, 1900, p. 324). Despite the fact that Hagar will give birth to Abraham's baby, she is still considered a slave by the text. This belittles her terribly and as later shown in the text God does not disapprove of her actions. In Genesis 16:5 perhaps Hagar wondered what she and Abraham now need Sarah for as they were having a baby together. It may be that she resented the idea that Sarah would be the one to raise her child. Nevertheless, the dynamic changes and Sarah starts to feel differently about her original plan. Black theologian Williams points out that Hagar should never have become arrogant to Sarah as she is still her handmaid (Williams, 2013). Williams argues that at the time the rules were very strict, 'law prescribed stringent punishment for slave surrogates who tried to put themselves on an equal biases with the barren wife'(Williams, 2013, p. 16). This means that despite becoming pregnant Hagar should never have acted differently towards her mistress. The difference of womanist theology is just the greater attention to woman's issues. As I will be discussing later in the chapter Hagar was only human. Considering that Hagar began to resent Sarah after she allowed Abraham

into her slave (Genesis 16:2), it is understandable that with the pregnancy, she felt powerful and, out of anger and bitterness, she turned against Sarah.

Sarah clearly points out to Abraham that she holds him responsible for the feud. She then urges Abraham to make it clear that she holds power over Hagar, and Abraham agrees. 'Do with her what you will' (Genesis 16:6). For Hagar there could not have been crueller words uttered. Sarah unleashes all her anger at Hagar because she is faced with the reality that she cannot attain what the Egyptian slave (someone culturally, socially, and economically inferior) has. Consequently, Sarah treats Hagar harshly, so harshly that she runs into the wilderness by herself, perhaps afraid for her life. It should not be taken lightly that Hagar is pregnant and frail when she leaves. What must she be going through to walk into the wilderness not knowing where she is going? For her the unknown was better than Sarah's wrath.

By focusing on Hagar, I challenge the patriarchal interpretation, emphasising the importance of her. According to my womanist reading, Hagar represents an oppressed woman who has the courage to seek freedom. Her running away from her masters makes her courageous as she no longer felt that she had to live under the enslavement of Sarah and Abraham. Black theologians, however, argue that Hagar was not acting courageously, rather she was being reckless and endangering her unborn child. (Junior, 2019) As womanism focuses on the experiences of women of colour it recognises the desperation Hagar felt to liberate herself from her abuser. Hagar had been horribly mistreated by her mistress. Even though she did not want to do what was asked of her, due to her status as a slave, she had no choice. The abuse and pain eventually became too much for her to bear, so she fled out of desperation. In those days, it was difficult for a woman, let alone a handmaiden with nothing, to run away. Her situation quickly deteriorated as she found herself defenceless and without shelter or food, not to mention pregnant. Her brave actions, despite her feeling scared and lonely, show that she acted with courage. This is what a womanist sees that a black theologian does not necessarily see.

Due to all the injustice Hagar endured, she became an important component in the story of Abraham. The more insignificant Sarah made Hagar feel, the more God uplifted Hagar's status theologically. This is seen later in the narrative. Sarah severely mistreats Hagar for carrying her husband's child. Sarah's idea was to evade God's plan and provide Abraham with a child through her own means, even though it meant that her husband would lie with her maid. Drey describes Hagar as a "šifḥah" because she was a gift to Sarah from the pharaoh, and he goes on to say, 'the sexual service of the šifḥah is controlled by the mistresses' (Drey, 2002, p. 185) That would suggest that Sarai forced an ungodly union between them. From the moment Hagar conceived, Sarah treated her horribly. 'And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face' (Genesis 16:6). Hagar ran away from this situation, looking to find peace and relief. 'The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert' (Genesis 16:7). Despite everything, God did not let Hagar and her child be abandoned. God then sent an angel to find Hagar, who was found in desperation and agony in the wilderness by a fountain.

The angel spoke to Hagar: 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' (Genesis, 16:8). The angel of God calls Hagar by her name. It was this divine act of addressing her by name which showed that God acknowledged her position. She was only ever seen as a slave by Sarah and Abraham and now God had chosen to speak to her and give her promises which theologically raised her status and ultimately initiated her journey of raising to power. However, it does not give her any power in the practical sense because she is still Sarah's slave except now, she has the favour of God and is empowered through the promises God makes to her. It is also important to note that the questions the angel asks are not just about her present circumstance. The angel also reflects on her past and her future. Hagar answers by clarifying where she has come from while failing to identify her destination. When Hagar focuses on the past, she admits that she has no vision for the future. On

hearing this, the angel asks her to 'return and submit' (Genesis 16:9). According to a womanist reading of this command, it is extremely insensitive and oppressive considering that the slave woman has just run away from her oppressor but is now being asked to return to a place that treats her savagely. However, the verse that follows exhibits God's plan for Hagar's future. The angel added, 'I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.' (Genesis, 16:10). Hence Hagar did not return powerless. Her return was accompanied by strong promises to have a great future which was distinguished by the fact that it was straight from God.

Hagar is one of few people in the Bible whom God speaks to directly. In contrast with Abraham's general promises in Genesis 12 and Genesis 15, the promise God made to Hagar was very specific. ‘And the angel of the LORD said to her, Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction.' (Genesis, 16:11). This is the first birth promise where the future child is named in the Bible. However, in such statements, future pregnancies are usually implied, not a current pregnancy (Tracy, 2002). Elizabeth Tracy argues that after this verse in commentaries scholars often switch focus from Hagar to her son Ishmael, but the name Ishmael means 'God hears'. This shifts the focus back to Hagar as God 'heard your affiliations'. In Genesis 16:12 her son, Ishmael, is described as a 'wild ass of a man', The indicator being that he'll live a free life worthy of his mother (Tracy, 2002). The verse indicates that Ishmael will be free, he will not be tamed by anyone and as opposed to his mother, he will never live in captivity. The discourse that began with the command to 'return and submit' concludes with the discovery of the identity of her son Ishmael, Ishmael's name is a testament to Hagar's experience of cruelty as well as a prophecy regarding Hagar and her son, which is anything but meek (Tracy, 2002).

At the beginning of this narrative, Hagar was a socially marginalised woman. She was referred to as a slave girl, a handmaid, and a concubine, whose life was controlled by others. Despite that, now she is seen as an important figure in the theological framework. Hagar being addressed by

God is her way of asserting her relationship with God, which is what makes her special. This is something that even Sarah does not have.

As shown above, a woman of colour's ability to identify with Hagar makes her role in the biblical narrative considerably more vital to womanists. It is important for womanists today not to let the memory of Hagar diminish. As Emily Peecook argues, 'Identification with Hagar's adaptation of surrogate roles, her involvement in status wars, and her survival strategies in the face of adversity allow black women to enter their own personal wilderness experiences with confidence in God's love for them' (Peecook, 2002, p. 12) Hagar has become a symbol of how to handle the injustice of slavery and discrimination and still preserve hope and work towards equality. By using strategies to counteract prejudice, women of colour strive to be like Hagar and exemplify her qualities of nurturance, assurance, perseverance, and faithfulness.

Therefore, it is imperative to reclaim this narrative so that women of color are able to celebrate Hagar's achievements and embrace her positive characteristics. It is only through a womanist interpretation that we can understand a biblical woman of colour in such a powerful way; black theology could never provide us with such insights into a woman of color. In spite of James Cone's repentance for omitting women of colour in his early texts, predominantly black theology is dominated by sexist male theologians (Paris, 1993). Paris states that valuing the voices and experiences of women is still 'viewed as an alien force both within the black churches as a whole and among black male clergy in particular.' (Paris, 1993, p. 117). As such, black theologians cannot be trusted to express Hagar's theophany in its entirety. Due to the focus on women's experiences that womanist theology offers, it is able to articulate Hagar's accomplishments to the fullest extent.

Mother of a Nation

Despite the Bible's sympathy for Sarah and sensitivity towards Hagar, a womanist critique recognises the limitations within their story. These women are both victims of patriarchal societies that emphasise the importance of sons, as well as a narrative structure centred on childbearing. Both Sarah and Hagar are made to feel marginal because even though they are both women who want to be mothers they both cannot attain the received idea of motherhood. The circumstances that victimised Sarah and Hagar prevent them from giving birth to a child and raising it as their own; Hagar is only allowed to give birth (Genesis 16:4).[2] Sarah can only raise a child that is not hers (Genesis 11:30). Unfortunately, this leads them both to becoming victims of one another. 'It is a vicious circle in which women are played off against each other in the quest for status' (Russell, 1985, p. 77). Sarah and Hagar are depicted as desiring motherhood within the patriarchal confines of the text. The worth of a woman is shown in her ability to have children. The negative aspect of patriarchy in the Bible is that women are only assessed for their childbearing ability. However, in that worldview, a woman who is granted the motherhood of a nation is regarded highly.

Hagar was the mother of Abraham's first-born son Ishmael. Womanist Rosalyn F. T. Murphy argues that 'while she may remain the handmaid of Sarai and the second wife of Abram, God promises that she will also be the mother of a nation, as He foretells the gender of her unborn child, and names him' (Murphy, 2012, p. 89). After returning to Abraham and Sarah, Hagar gave birth to a son.

'Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.' (Genesis 16:15). In the text, we see that on the one hand, God has given the name to Hagar, but that on the other, Abraham gives the name to the child. We must assume that Hagar told Abraham about

[2] It is not explicitly stated that she wants to be a mother, but it seems implied. Her ability to conceive makes her think of herself as better than Sarah.

either the full experience that she had where the name Ishmael was revealed to her or at the very least, she told him the name that she wanted her child to have. Interestingly, the patriarch Abraham is shown to be obeying his concubine despite the fact that he has used her as a mistress. His obedience to her at the time shows her influence on him. The very fact that he did listen to her desire for the name of her child makes us wonder whether the story is assuming that she told him the entire revelation experience and Abraham believed her and that is why he took her at her word and gave this divinely ordained name to the child. This gap between the two verses is usually ignored in many patriarchal readings, simply because it is not explicit. We as womanist interpreters want to point out that this should not be ignored, the only explanation is that Abraham was under Hagar's influence at that point. This shows that after her meeting with God she was no longer the victim but in fact had started to gain power.

As for Abraham, he does indeed name his son Ishmael. For Hagar, the name certainly holds meaning as it signifies that God has heard her plea and that she is no longer alone with her suffering. It could also be seen as a message to Abraham and Sarah: by trying to bring about God's promise on their own, they have discovered He was always listening, and would keep his promises to Abraham. Essentially, this is an implicit criticism of Abraham and Sarah, as they opposed divine command with human initiative. 'What the deity has prevented, Sarah can accomplish through the maid whose name she never utters and to whom she never speaks' (Trible, 2002, p. 11). It is Trible's contention that Sarah was at fault for relying on human actions by offering Hagar to her husband instead of trusting in divine guidance, and that she exacerbated the situation by treating Hagar harshly and responding to her with defensive anger instead of appreciation. All they had to do was wait longer and trust that God would listen to them instead of bringing about the promise on their own. While Sarah is frowned upon for attempting to fulfil the promise for herself, God is not taking his disapproval out on Hagar. This shows that God's disapproval is entirely directed

towards Abraham and Sarah. Furthermore, in accepting the name, Abraham shows he has accepted God's rebuke.

The standard patriarchal reading is that Ishmael is the disinherited son because he is not the son that was promised; it is commonly believed that the 'promised son was not Ishmael, as Abraham had mistakenly assumed, but Isaac' (Williamson, 2001, p. 74). A patriarchal reading would perceive Hagar and her son Ishmael in a negative light due to them not belonging, as Hagar is a slave and Ishmael is her son (Byron and Lovelace, 2016). Pigott observed that people 'often have negative misconceptions about Hagar and Ishmael' (Pigott, 2018, p. 514). Yet when we study Genesis 16 and 21 without prejudices, it becomes obvious that neither Hagar nor Ishmael are negatively depicted. Pigott's analysis further demonstrates that Genesis portrays both Hagar and her son as empathetic characters (Pigott, 2018). Through a womanist reading of the text, we can see that Abraham and Sarah are in trouble for not having faith in God's promise, but Hagar and Ishmael are looked after. In other words, through the name of Ishmael, God is sending a message to Abraham and Sarah, telling them He is always listening and has not stopped listening just as He did not stop listening to Hagar.

God does not discard Hagar, rather he promises that her son will start and thus become a great nation: 'And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.' (Genesis 17:20). The promise directly empowers Hagar, making her the mother of that great nation. There is no doubt that the authors of the Bible sympathised with Hagar, and as a womanist, I believe they would want her deserved recognition since if God did not want her to be celebrated, her lineage would have come to an end with Ishmael. We are not simply given an empty promise by God, because as later passages show, this promise about the Ishmaelites is

fulfilled.[3] Hagar did become a matriarch of a nation and, considering the standards of the time, this was a significant event.

Susan M. Pigott perfectly represents this idea through the term 'the M/Other patriarch' which depicts Hagar as an equal to patriarchs and the mother of nations (Pigott, 2018, p. 513). It is through a womanist lens that one could read Hagar, concubine of Abraham and mother of Ishmael, as a matriarch. Hagar is referred to as "Mother Patriarch" because God promises to increase her descendants (Genesis 16:10) – a promise in the Bible only given to patriarchs. She is referred to as "Other Patriarch" because, in many ways, her story resembles Abraham's. There are parallels in the narratives of the patriarch Abraham and the matriarch Hagar. They both faced the prospect of losing a son, and in each case a divine intervention took place to save the child's life (Genesis 21:19 and Genesis 22:11). Pigott, however, argues that the differences are also important: 'Unlike Abraham, Hagar had no intention of killing her son. Rather, she despaired over the possibility of his death (21:16)' (Pigott, 2018, p.523). Meanwhile, Abraham did not show any emotion when taking Isaac to the mountain (Genesis 22:3). Hagar was emotionally distressed over her son (Genesis: 21:16). In contrast with Abraham, Hagar promptly took care of Ishmael's needs by getting him water from the well (Genesis: 21:19). There is no mention of Abraham comforting Isaac after offering the ram as a sacrifice in his place (Genesis 22:13). As these are successive chapters in the Bible, Hagar's care for her son is fresh in readers' minds before they see Abraham abandon Isaac. Therefore, Pigott argues, 'Hagar was a much better mother to Ishmael than Abraham was a father to Isaac' (Pigott, 2018, p. 524). The way in which Pigott has revealed the resemblance between Hagar and Abraham sets her up to be his equivalent and by doing so elevates her status. 'Hagar is, therefore, the "Mother Patriarch" and "Other Patriarch." She should be accorded her place as the progenitor of a nation and, indeed, should be viewed as a patriarch in her own right' (Pigott, 2018, p. 514).

[3] Genesis 25:13–15 and i Chronicles 1:29–31.

Rosalyn F. T. Murphy, who is a renowned womanist scholar, would also agree as she argues that 'Hagar is clearly established as the matriarch of the Ishmaelites but select aspects of the narrative also highlight the experience as being exclusive to the personhood and fate of Hagar, rather than her son' (Murphy, 2012, p. 86). Dozeman goes further to explain that all other textual references in the Bible announce the birth of the child before conception (Dozeman, 1998). When a child is announced before conception, the focus is on the child; however, an announcement to Hagar after conception brings the focus to her. All the textual references that concern the birth of a child who was announced before conception refer to women as mere vessels to which these promised children are born. In Hagar's narrative, the announcement was made to her instead of the father of the child, and the angel talks to her about the child that she is carrying at the time. By taking Hagar in the condition she is in and dealing with her situation, he is not treating her as a means to an end that will result in the promised child. The issue that Murphy points out is that the narratives generally focus on the lives and works of these children, while their mothers are reduced to mere supporting characters. However, I would argue that Hagar is an exception to this. Throughout the story, she is clearly the main character and not Ishmael. This is evident because nowhere in the text do the authors refer to her as "Hagar, mother of Ishmael". In fact, Ishmael is always referred to as the son of Hagar.

The Imperfect Woman

In order to reclaim female characters in the Bible, they do not have to be perfect. It would be false representation to claim that every female character in the Bible was perfect. Hagar was one of them. However, her imperfection does not diminish her importance. In actual fact, I will argue to the contrary: because she is just as flawed as anyone else, everyday women can identify with her easily. Throughout a womanist reading of the text, I do not seek to establish that all female

characters are perfect, or that all the powerless female characters are perfect. This portrayal of her character would be misrepresentative and oppressive since it creates an ideal of what women should be like, and few are capable of reaching this standard. Womanists argue that Hagar resonates with female biblical readers in a positive way because women do not need a perfect role model, they can be as flawed as men. Among the flawed male figures in the Bible, one of the most loved is David (1 Samuel 16). It is not uncommon for men to model themselves after David, despite the fact that he was a flawed character. It is not that people see themselves in him despite him failing all the time. They see themselves in David, for despite his flaws, God continues to be with him since he strives to improve. I argue that female readers also need as realistic characters as men. Characters who are perfect are difficult to relate to. Also, expecting perfect behaviour from characters can be quite dehumanising. Literary context does not expect men to be perfect, so it is unfair to expect the same of women. Abraham, who is seen as “father of the faith”, was far from perfect. He asked his wife Sarah to say she was his sister and allowed her to be taken by the Pharaoh only to protect himself (12:14-16). Showing his flaws not only humanises him but also shows the readers that having flaws does not necessarily make you unrighteous. In the following section, I will look at Hagar, who is both realistic in her imperfections and in her relationships with others.

In this story, we deal with not only one, but two flawed female characters. A key aspect of the story of Sarah and Hagar is that as women, their welfare is threatened by forces that prevent them from thriving. These forces cause them to suffer in their own ways. The culture in which Hagar and Sarah lived valued women for their fertility (Darr, 1991). Sarah's infertility is presented to be a threat to her status, and it became a reason for her vulnerability. In chapter one, I identified Weems’ significance for womanist theology. Weems argues, 'Sarah lived for decades believing that God withheld children from her receiving constant reproach from her neighbours who wondered which sins were responsible for her infertility' (Weems, 1991, p. 154). On the other

hand, Hagar was a slave woman and therefore it seemed very unlikely for her to ever have a child out of her free will. In both cases, their dilemma is parallel. Since neither woman was going to become a mother, the mistress/slave relationship remained intact for them. But, after Hagar conceived, there was a shift in that relationship, she became aware of Sarah's apparent infertility compared to her own fertile state. It became known that Hagar, not Sarah, would bear the first born of Abraham. According to Hagar, that made her superior to Sarah.

Philip R. Drey states that 'for the first time in the story, the biblical writer allows Hagar to react to the situation' (Drey, 2002, p. 189). As soon as Hagar realises she is pregnant, her attitude toward Sarah shifts dramatically. Instead of treating Sarah with respect, she begins to treat her differently. 'Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!"' (Genesis 16:5). Exactly the opposite of what Sarai had hoped for happened (Trible, 2002). It says, she's pregnant (Genesis 16:5), and even though this resulted in what Sarah wanted, it prompts Hagar to discover something her mistress had never anticipated. Instead of finding an heir for her household, Sarah brought anguish, dispute, and competition into it. Hagar's exact attitude or actions towards Sarah are not expressed in the text (Onwukwe, 2020). However, Baker states that it is likely she realised her improved position after the birth of her son who would also be Abraham's first biological son which in itself holds a lot of importance (Hiers, 1993). Sarah did not anticipate that Hagar would grow contemptuous towards her. However, it is understandable that Hagar would be less than excited about the idea of giving up her child to Sarah and remaining a servant. After all, she was now seen as the superior one because a women's fertility played an important role in their culture, being viewed as a sign of their worth (Philip, 2006). As a result, Hagar's ability to bear a child so quickly for Abraham, when Sarah was childless for decades, could have been a source of pride for Hagar, or possibly a source of contempt for her. Whatever Hagar's reasons may have been, Sarah was not oblivious to this contempt. Given the

circumstances in which Hagar finds herself as a foreign slave girl from Egypt who was made into a concubine for Abraham and Sarah, it is not surprising that she doesn't exhibit perfect behaviour. When we see her lashing out at her mistress out of contempt it is easy to see why she felt the way she did. This enables us to connect with her on a human level. I acknowledge that the contempt Hagar feels is not a positive thing about her character, but it does not stop us from celebrating her, not in her contempt or flaws but despite her obvious flaws. As a womanist, I am glad to see fully rounded female characters in the Bible. Hagar's reaction of bitterness and arrogance is a very human response, and to see that God still protects her later in the text is hopeful for female readers who may also have had cause to experience bitterness and anger.

It is clear in the narrative that emotions of disgust and contempt hold a significant function in Sarah and Hagar's narrative. When considering the humanisation of Hagar in this story, we must consider the nature and purpose of emotions such as pain and hatred which she is victim to. ‘Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so, she fled from her’ (Genesis 16:6). Despite the fact that Scripture does not specify how exactly Sarah treated Hagar, one can imagine that she unleashed all her anger and revenge by treating her harshly. As a result, Hagar fled, possibly even in fear for her life. Hayyim Angel suggests that ‘she tormented her and worked her harder than necessary. Perhaps she also struck and cursed her until she could no longer tolerate it and fled’ (Angel, 2013, p. 212). It becomes evident later in the passage when an angel reveals to Hagar that God has heard her persecution and suffering (Genesis 16:11). These characteristics are what make her relatable. Genesis 16:6 illustrates how Sarah deliberately inflicted pain on Hagar; Ahmed argues that 'pain is bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 13) The character of Hagar in the story feels a lot of pain which is a very human emotion, and this makes her more realistic to her readers. Womanists argue that it is important to have literature which demonstrates the reality of all women

and especially those who have been subjected to abuse (Alexander-Floyd and Simien, 2006). When Hagar becomes the target of Sarah's torture in Genesis 16:6 it allows African American women or other women of colour who have been supressed in an ethnocentric patriarchal society to relate to Hagar's character.

As a result of being in a patriarchal society, it can be argued that biblical narrative fated for Sarah and Hagar to turn against one another. According to Trible, the biblical story follows a certain structure. The opening sentence begins with Sarah and ends with Hagar. 'Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar' (Genesis 16:1). During the introduction, the two females are portrayed as opposing each other around the male figure Abraham. It is important to highlight their supposed inferiority to Abraham who is the patriarch and head of the family. Yet, Sarah is mentioned first, which shows her power over Hagar, her concubine. Claassens argues that their lack of dialogue maintains a distance between them as if their relationship were solely a mistress and slave one (Claassens, 2013). Essentially, within a patriarchal world in which women are already subordinate, Sarah has no qualms about exploiting another woman. By oppressing Hagar, Sarah is still maintaining the patriarchy, despite her gender. She is in a position of power and control, which is more important to her than female solidarity. As Hagar is at the end of the verse it shows her inferiority to both Sarah and Abraham as she is a 'subject of the action; powerlessness marks Hagar, the object' (Trible, 2002, p. 10). Sarah only views Hagar as an instrument to fulfil her needs. Ostriker describes the dynamic between Hagar and Sarah as a rivalry, but Reaves disagrees (Lorenz, 2013). She claims that the term rivalry implies a degree of equality (Reaves, 2018). The rivalry is seen later in the Bible in Genesis 29, between Leah and Rachel. However, Reaves argue that the narrative of Sarah and Hagar is not of rivalry but threats and survival are at the heart of this story (Reaves, 2018).

Abraham was the male figure in the family and therefore held most of the power. Sarah was second in power as she was his wife, and Hagar was a slave girl with no power (Loomer, 1976). Even though Hagar believes that she has become superior due to her pregnancy in Genesis 16:4, Sarah still maintains full control over her husband. He obeyed Sarah when she commanded him to 'go in unto my maid' (Genesis 16:2), 'and he went into Hagar' (Genesis 16:4). From this, Trible concludes that 'no mighty patriarch is Abram, but rather the silent, acquiescent, and minor figure in a drama between two women' (Trible, 2002, p. 11). Abraham agreed with what Sarah said and obeyed when Sarah commanded but I want to argue that this is under-emphasised in biblical narrative and the blame that is attached with Sarah using and abusing Hagar in this way should equally be attached with Abraham. In fact, in Genesis 16:6 not only does Abraham sit back and obey Sarah, but he is the one who allows her to mistreat Hagar. Contrary to Trible's point, I believe Abraham was not an obedient powerless figure, in fact the patriarchal society made sure that no action was taken without his approval. Although Abraham was imperfect, we are focusing mainly on the women in this section and do not assume that Abraham was blameless. As a womanist, I do not intend to justify Sarah's actions. Instead, I argue that the scholarly consensus has largely blamed Sarah and given Abraham a free pass. This is unfair since he obeyed Sarah or gave her permission to abuse Hagar, so he should be held equally responsible.

Howell argues that stories about women are suppressed by traditional interpretations. He argues that traditional interpretations of narratives typically focus on the men without giving attention to the women. This is something that we see with Genesis 16. It is also a criticism that is put forward by many feminists however through this chapter I have presented a rereading of the narrative in which the Hagar's experiences have been predominantly illustrated.

To conclude, as a womanist I believe that the Bible is not thoroughly patriarchal beyond redemption. This is because we can find fully rounded female characters in it. Characters such as

Sarah and Hagar who have many obvious flaws, yet womanist interpretation would not want to put them in competition with each other. Instead, it recognises that neither of them are perfect, but both are acting the way they are because of the circumstances they are forced into. We want to throw out the patriarchal interpretations of the Bible as useless in favour of the womanist interpretation that recognises the fully rounded women in the Bible and celebrates them. The fact that Hagar is imperfect, given the situation she is in, enables us to connect with her. In my analysis, I have shown the best way to approach Hagar is through a womanist reading since feminists cannot relate to her Egyptian heritage or her feeling inferior to Sarah as well as women of colour can.

In this chapter, I reinterpreted Hagar's story through a womanist lens. Hagar, the oppressed character in the Genesis story, has been identified by women of colour throughout history. It is especially common among black women to identify with Hagar since they believe she suffered hardship and discrimination because of her presumed skin colour, her gender, and her forced social position in society (Peecook, 2002). The wilderness experiences Hagar endured made her an accessible figure among women of colour. According to Williams, such experiences can often be described as a 'near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way' (Williams, 2013, p. 108). Hagar entered the desert twice; willingly the first time when she ran from Sarah's abuse, and secondly, after exile from Abraham's house, when she fled with her young child to seek solace. God appeared to her both times. She was instructed by Him to return to Sarah's mistreatment, and then, after her exile, God showed Hagar where she could find water. Hagar was promised each time by God that her son would be the father of a great nation and a 'wild ass of a man' (Genesis 16:12), making her the mother of nations. Having separated this chapter into three parts, I was able to convey each of these key points separately.

Firstly, I illustrated the importance behind God visiting a runaway slave, who was pregnant, abused, and had reached breaking point. God's visit in itself was an empowering gift for Hagar

and a symbol for other women who feel abused, lowly, disempowered, marginalised and discarded. In meeting Hagar, God chose to exalt her. In inviting her to tell her story, God empowers her by listening to her. Through this she is offered dignity and justice when no one else, not even God's own people, will give it to her. However, this visit became even more powerful when God named Hagar's son Ishmael which meant "God hears". Having received the name Ishmael for her unborn son, she does the unimaginable. She names God El Roi which means "God who sees." As we can see from the original wording, Ishmael and El-Roi have a rich interplay. The God Who Hears (Ishmael) is also the God Who Sees (El-Roi). After finally having been heard by God, Hagar is as if she can now see clearly. Although her external circumstances seemed unchanged, inside she felt empowered after her theophany. When Hagar entered a relationship with God, her view of her circumstances was reshaped. Despite being a slave, she became an heir to God's promise.

Secondly, I portrayed how God's promise towards Hagar led to her becoming a powerful figure. As first promised by God to Hagar, Ishmael would be a great source of descendants for her. As a result of the patriarchal society of the time, a women's worth was often equated with the number of children, or even grandchildren she had. In that world view giving a woman the motherhood of an entire nation meant that she would be regarded highly. As womanists we may not like the idea that Hagar is judged by her childbearing trait, and we do not agree with these standards anymore, but we have to agree that within those standards she was positioned highly.

Thirdly I argued that There is nothing wrong with looking up to a character that is not perfect, and Hagar's flaws made her more relatable to womanist readers who wanted to see themselves in the text. Men are held up as admirable figures even when they are far from being perfect. The same should be possible of female characters in the biblical text.

In this chapter, we can see that Hagar's narrative has been reclaimed. This is because God never abandoned Hagar, not even during her suffering, during her abuse by Sarah, or when she was alone

in the wilderness. The God in the margins always had a plan for Hagar. In Sternberg's view, 'the biblical narrator is an ideological persuader', which womanists recognise throughout the text (Sternberg, 1985). The theophany God bestows on Hagar, freeing her of slavery, is God's way of persuading us that he is on her side.

CHAPTER THREE
Judges XIX

Through a womanist lens, this chapter reclaims the story of the concubine in Judges 19 as an alternative to what has been promoted by patriarchal interpreters. Her life was told through a distorted lens of patriarchal interpreters who did not accurately represent the essence of the concubine's story. Judges 19 has also been misunderstood by feminist writers as promoting an attitude that is oppressive toward women and insensitive toward abuse. I will not justify the concubine's horrifying experiences, but suggest rather, this is not the whole of the truth. Throughout this chapter, it will become apparent that the narrator valued the concubine highly and opposed her mistreatment, which is depicted as resulting in a war against the tribe of Benjamin. Throughout Judges 19, God appears to speak from the margins to liberate women. While He does not intervene himself, this does not mean he leaves the mistreatment of an innocent girl unpunished. He exacted vengeance in the form a civil war.

There are three sections to this chapter. The first section will discuss the concubine's return to her parents' house at the beginning of the narrative. There are two different interpretations as to why she ran away. According to the Hebrew version, she is said to have "prostituted" herself, implying sexual unfaithfulness. In contrast, the Greek version uses the word “to be angry”. Meyers suggests that the term "prostitution" can have a different interpretation – rather than referring to an act of sexual infidelity with another person, the term refers to the fact that the woman has left her husband (Meyers, 2000). In those days, the very act of leaving her husband and returning home was considered culturally unacceptable. Many scholars do not believe that a prostituted woman could return to her father’s house and if she did, she would be stoned.[4] The fact that the concubine was

[4] See Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 274; Ken Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995): 90; and Victor H. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19,” *biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (Spring 1992): 7. Exum adds that a Levite would not pursue an adulterous wife. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 179.

welcomed back into her father's house and that her husband eventually pursued her to reconcile with her suggests that the concubine left the Levite out of anger. I believe that it was due to this reason that such harsh language is used towards the concubine in the text and not because she had prostituted herself. Following on from this, I will discuss the namelessness of the concubine. A major focus of the second section is the rape of the concubine. I will begin by examining why the men in the narrative are so quick to push the concubine out to her death. Was it because sexual violence against women was considered less shameful at the time? Building on this I compare Judges 19 with the resembling Genesis 19 story. I shall reveal if one text is dependent on the other and what that means. The third section will discuss the consequences of the rape and mistreatment of the concubine and how injustice to one woman led to a civil war.

The Concubine

Judges 19 begins with a Levite from the country of Ephraim and his concubine from Bethlehem (Judges 19:1). His concubine became angry with him, and she left him to return to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah and was there for four months (Judges 19:2). The word used in the Hebrew Bible is זָנָה (zānâ) which translates to 'prostitute' or 'fornicate' to describe the concubine's behaviour and the reason for her departure. On the other hand, the Septuagint Greek version employs the word orgizō, which means 'to be angry' (followed by RSV and NRSV). This may imply that she became angry or distressed and therefore left the Levite to return to her father.

There is a debate on which is the original. Susan Ackerman stated that the concubine mentioned in Judges 19 is part of a 'mistress-type relationship'(Ackerman, 1998, p. 136). It certainly shapes how the text is read based on the perception of whether the concubine is at fault or not. However, it begs the question: should it shape how we read the text? Womanists believe it should not influence the reading of the text. Even if she abandoned her husband, she is not a deserving victim

of rape. The most common interpretation of this verse illustrates the concubine's unfaithfulness, yet it can be argued that patriarchal interpretations encourage misogyny by victim-blaming her because of her presentation as a prostitute. The fact that she was unfaithful to her husband would not justify her being raped and killed.

I believe that orgizo is the likelier older reading, with the Masoretic Text changing it to zonah. Chuck Pitts has offered a helpful interpretation as he argues that it is unclear as to why the Masoretic Text refers to sexual infidelity, though numerous interpreters have indicated that there could be a metaphorical meaning for "prostitution" or "sexual sin", similar to Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 and Hosea 4-14 who use the notion of adultery as a metaphor for Israel and the relationship Judah had with God. In this sense, it can be argued that leaving the Levite was unfaithful, since it was understood that he “owned” her (Lapsley, 2005). Considering that neither the Levite nor the Concubine’s father ever discussed her act of unfaithfulness, it can be said that the metaphorical interpretation is justified. Susan Ackerman claims that this woman has no autonomy or authority to act on her own since she is a secondary wife (Ackerman, 1998). Therefore, accusing the concubine of fornication is a distortion of the original narrative. By changing the translation to ‘fornicate’, the Hebrew Bible portrays her in a darker light than the original author intended. It demonizes her for the readers and allows for them to justify her being raped at the end. The womanist interpretation questions why the Hebrew Bible uses a different word. Perhaps the patriarchal interpreters wish to denigrate her so that her fate is not so shocking for readers.

Namelessness

A name is what individualises a person; the lack of one dehumanises her. The understanding of the significance of namelessness reaches far back into history (Feldman, 1959). More recently, Adele Reinhartz published a study which explained the four roles proper names play in the Bible

(Reinhartz, 1998). Firstly, a name has the ability to convey significance all by itself. Secondly, a name serves as a peg on which different characteristics of the person might be hung. Thirdly, a person's name is used to unite characters identifying the attributes out of which they are constructed; therefore, names work as a convenient way of referring to a specific person. Fourthly, a name distinguishes one person from another.

As mentioned, the Bible has a lot of speaking named characters as well as a lot of anonymous and nonspeaking characters. As readers, we tend to focus on the former and generally overlook the latter. Female biblical characters are especially fascinating to analyse since the role some women played during biblical times effectively rendered them anonymous. Rather than providing names, the Bible regularly highlights a woman's status. For instance, if she was a widow (1 Kings 17:7-24), servant (2 Sam. 17:17), prostitute, worker, or a wise woman (2 Samuel 20). The Bible also notes her relationships, including being a mother (13:2), spouse (Genesis 6:18), daughter (Genesis 19), or a widow (1 Kings 17:7-16).

In Judges 19, the Levite, a male protagonist, is also nameless, a fact that is rarely commented on. However, there is a lot of comment on the concubine's namelessness and how this is indicative of how society regarded women at this time, with a view that women were not important enough to be mentioned. While not naming women is quite normal, not naming men is rare in biblical text. Therefore, as interpreters, we ought to attach significance to the narrator’s refusal to name the Levite. If we see that not naming the concubine was a mark of disrespect, then presumably it was the same for the Levite, which raises the question: is the narrator of the belief that the Levite is not entitled to a name because of his horrific behaviour later in the story? In so doing, the narrator shows sympathy for the concubine and desired the Levite's name be forgotten. Then again, even without a name, he is still called the Levite, which is a title that carries power and status. Accordingly, he appears superior, while the female character is referred to as the

concubine, one of the lowest statuses a woman could have in biblical times.

Many named women in the Bible are the subject of debateIt is also the nameless women who hold a significant position in biblical literature, but who are often overlooked because of their unnamed status. Herbert Lockyer raises interesting questions: Why are the women accompanying well-known men, during astonishing events, not named? What is the underlying reason behind their anonymity (Lockyer, 1988)? For example, in the Bible, the names of Noah's sons are given, but we do not have the names of his wife or daughters-in-law (Koplowitz-Breier, 2020). His wife is mentioned five times in Genesis, but merely in the context of being present in the group of people.[5] This is shocking because she must have been a strong and talented woman to have been unexpectedly removed from her home and asked to set up housekeeping in an ark filled with animals. The woman who kept everything in control in the ark for a year is only recognised today as “Noah's wife” and not by her own name. Further, Scripture presents a detailed portrayal of Lot, but the names of his wife and two daughters are never mentioned (Reinhartz and Reinhartz, 1998). Even though the three daughters of Job have been named, silence prevails concerning his wife's name. There is no reasonable answer to the Bible’s silence concerning the identity of its nameless women. Robin Gallaher The scriptural stage places anonymous women as optional characters that provide plot momentum and expansion, and further explore the narrative themes and "stars," the named characters. (Branch, 2022). Branch is not entirely incorrect, although there are times when anonymous women become crucial characters in their Bible stories. Defining all nameless women as optional or secondary is unfair. After all, there cannot be a story about the Levite’s concubine without the concubine. Her existence is the focus of the story, so she cannot be an optional character. The Bible contains many examples of women who are nameless but otherwise fundamental to the story, including the nameless woman of Thebez who is also mentioned in the Book of Judges. She dropped a millstone down from a wall in order to kill king Abimelech (Judges

[5] Genesis 6:18, Genesis7:7, Genesis7:13, Genesis8:16, Genesis 8:18

9:53). It is undeniable that she is not an optional character despite being nameless because she turned the tide of the battle. In patriarchal interpretations, the namelessness of women has been taken by interpreters to imply their lesser importance, but in reality, it simply seems to be part of how the Bible tells a story, without implying anything about the centrality or importance of the character. Patriarchy also explains why there are rarely any men who are nameless in the Bible, and most women are typically anonymous. Despite acknowledging that the Bible is still patriarchal by not naming the women as fundamental characters of their narratives, by stating that women are always secondary, Branch imposes a patriarchal interpretation on the text that goes further than the reality.

As we have seen, nameless women make up an important part of sacred Scripture. Just like the concubine, the unknown women in the Bible have left their influence upon biblical interpretation. Their stories have not been given enough regard because the women have not been given names. Their stories are told from the perspective of the male character. As was shown in the previous chapter, Hagar's story is told from mostly Abraham's and Sarah's perspective. Likewise, the story of the concubine is written through the Levite's perspective. The concubine was used to protect the Levite, but this was never acknowledged, and the narrative does not give her the appreciation she deserves. Surely it was not a mistake by the biblical authors to neglect the identity of those women whose experiences are recorded. Lena Tiemeyer explains in an interview why these women were left nameless. She says that the Hebrew Bible is undoubtedly sexist; however, it is important to remember that these are writings that were written in the ancient world by and for men (Tiemeyer, 2018). Therefore, the concubine is identified in her relationship with a man. Though it could also be that they wanted to silence these women. Herbert Lockyer argues that The historians may have felt that these unnamed women were not deserving of naming because many of them were far from righteous(Lockyer, 1988). He suggests that perhaps the men in the family are mentioned by name because of their achievements whereas women are not named, since they

accomplished nothing worthy of recognition, so their names are not used (Lockyer, 1988). Womanists are opposed to this sort of interpretation. According to Lockyer and many other biblical interpretations, the concubine is unnamed since she has done nothing worthy of merit. They seem to overlook the fact that there is a story in the Bible about her that proves her significance. Another example of where an anonymous woman accomplishes great merit is illustrated in Exodus 2:1-10, when an unnamed Egyptian princess, the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, becomes the foster mother of a Hebrew slave-child. The princess names the infant Moses, saying, 'I drew him out of the water' (Exodus 2:1-10). 'Moses presumably, this comes from the Egyptian word *munyos* or the Hebrew verb *mashob*, both of which mean "to draw out"' (Meier, 1999, p. 16). This illustrates that the princess acknowledged the baby's birthplace and had some knowledge of Hebrew herself. She is portrayed as an autonomous thinker who overturns her father's command to kill all Hebrew male infants. In this way, she becomes the child's savvy, unnamed mother and the child's quick-thinking, unnamed sister, who, about eighty years later, liberates God's people from slavery. Exodus' major theme of liberation is set by this group of unnamed characters(Bruckner, 2012). In my view as a womanist, there is no reason for a woman to have her name removed. How can Lockyer be trusted to interpret the text correctly when we know that he cannot give merit to a woman that deserves it?

On the other hand, creating a nameless character can also be interpreted positively. Paynter claims that anonymity has its own rhetorical purpose and goes on to examine the Don Hudson argument (Paynter, 2020). His argument is that her anonymity provides a literary parallel to the chaos and dehumanization that she is experiencing, by showing how it may have applied to anyone. (Hudson, 1994). Due to the concubine's anonymity, women are able to identify with her since she is considered universal by virtue of her anonymity. Consequently, her narrative becomes more relatable, resulting in a deeper understanding of her story. Women may identify with the

protagonist, and since the narrator seems to be sympathizing with her and defending her, readers may conclude that the narrator is defending women in their fight against patriarchy.

The Rape

The Levite decided that after five days of staying at his father-in-law's house he would return home to Ephraim with his concubine. It appeared unwise for the Levite to embark on his journey as darkness approached (Judges19:9,11,15,16). The Levite and the concubine left Bethlehem at the end of the day and chose to stay in Gibeah rather than in Jerusalem, and with this decision the Levite unknowingly placed them both in great danger. Suddenly an Ephraimite approached and generously offered to take them in for the night. Upon settling in, the men from Gibeah surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted at the owner of the house, 'Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him' (Judges 19:22). The Ephraimite, ever the hospitable host, attempts to defend the Levite's honour by proposing that the men take not only his own virgin daughter but also the concubine. When they did not listen, the Levite gave the men his concubine. It is astounding that at the time, the host seemed to believe that offering his virgin daughter to the mob was part of his duties as a host. In exchange for the protection of a male guest, the host was prepared to sacrifice the life of his daughter. According to Stone, the host chose to do so because, at least in the eyes of other men, it appears that sexual assault on women was perceived as less shameful than that on men. Women were subordinated in this way because they were viewed as less honourable than men, thus homosexual rape was viewed as particularly severe. (Stone, 1995). It is tragic that a man would offer his own daughter before putting a stranger's life in danger. The mistreatment of women in that particular period reflected the misogynistic culture of the time. This is the part in the narrative where the narrator begins drawing parallels between Judges 19 and Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

For women of colour who recognise themselves in the concubine, it is very interesting that Genesis 19 – the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – almost perfectly resembles Judges 19. In a similar fashion to that of the men of Sodom, the men at Gibeah beat violently on the door of the house (Genesis 19:9) and demanded to know the Levite sexually (Genesis 19:5). Deirdre Brouer argues that 'knowing another sexually refers to the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28), just as Adam knew Eve (Gen 4:1). However, 'the men of Gibeah seek to reverse the creation mandate into fruitlessness and death', seeing as these men were entertaining the idea of rape and potential death. The overarching theme of both passages is the moral depravity of men. The homeowners both rebuked the men for their unspeakable behaviour and made it clear that the protection of his male guests was a priority. In both passages the hosts refused to give up their visitors, offering their virgin daughters instead, giving no regard to the importance of the women's lives. Lot's willingness to allow his virgin daughters to be sexually assaulted is astounding. The Levite did the same by allowing his concubine to be raped instead of him. Almost everything the Ephraimite says and does at this point is identical to that of Lot in Genesis 19. The story in Judges emphasises the problems in the Genesis narrative. I find it odd that the host is unaware that his offer of the concubine who is also his guest is inhospitable. Stuart Lasine argues that 'he follows Lot's example so precisely that it is almost as though he were following a script' (Lasine, 1984, p. 39). According to the script, two women (the two daughters of Lot) were offered to the mob. Since he only has one virgin daughter, it seems as though by including the guest's concubine he is acting out the role of Lot. What concerns womanist interpretators is the wrongdoing that was punished in Genesis and Judges 19. The answer is quite clear, it was the vulnerable women. The wife who looks back is punished, but Lot who offered his own young daughters to violent men escapes persecution. Similarly, in Judges 19, the concubine was thrown out in order to protect the Levite. Alice Bach goes further and says, 'the biblical narrator does not raise a literary eyebrow at either the Levite in Judges 19 or Lot in Genesis 19 for using women's bodies as shields to defend

themselves against sexual violence' (Bach, 1999, p. 146). I would disagree. "Evil"[6] and an "outrage"[7] are the words used by the narrator to describe the Ephraimite's intent to rape (Judges 20:6,13). In these words, we see the narrator views rape as an abominable, godless act, which violates God's order and threatens life.

Despite their obvious similarities, there are also many differences between the two texts. It is important to acknowledge that in one instance, the crime is only threatened, but in the other, it is heinously committed. Reading these passages as if one text is earlier than the other would raise the question, is the narrator trying to soften a harsh text? In the case of Genesis, God directly intervened and destroyed the two cities, in the case of Judges, the Levite challenged the other tribes of Israel to respond to the crime. Commentators are unable to decide whether the Gibeah outrage is a consequence of the Sodom story or the reverse. Even those who acknowledge the connection between Judges 19 and Genesis 19 are unaware of the significance and purpose of that connection (Lasine, 1984). Harding states that, 'the weight of current scholarly opinion favours the dependence of Judges 19 on Genesis 19' (Harding, 2016). I am also supportive of the view that Genesis 19 was written first, followed by Judges 19. I assume the narrator is saying that society as a whole has deteriorated to the extent that the innocent is no longer protected. It is also argued that Judges 19 'is a secularized version of the story of Lot at Sodom (in Genesis 19), only here there is no rescue' (Delany, 1993, p. 98).

'So, the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go' (Judges 19:25). Though the corrupt men of Gibeah were clearly guilty, so were the Levite and the Ephraimite. They were clearly supposed to have been willing to sacrifice themselves to protect

[6] Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1.
[7] Judges 19:23–24; 20:6, 10. Cf. Gen 34:7; Deuteronomy 22:21; 2 Samuel 13:12–13.

their daughter and wife. This is because women in biblical times solely relied on their husband or fathers' protection. Due to this, it can be said that almost all the characters in this story are guilty, with the exception of the woman. The translation has a strange change; the husband is no longer referred to as a husband, but rather as a master. From Judges 19:03 onwards the word "husband" is used to describe the relationship between the Levite and his concubine. However, as the text shows, this changes after the concubine had been raped. 'The woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was' (Judges19:26). From the moment when the concubine was given to the mob, and through the remainder of the story, the biblical text uses the word "master" (adon) instead of "husband" (ish). Thus, the question arises as to whether she is a lesser wife or a sexual slave to the Levite. In most texts, according to Meike Bal, the term concubine refers to a wife of lower status. This is also supported by the fact that the Levite went to retrieve her from her father's house, demonstrating an emotional attachment. Her status as a wife can be seen from the statement that her rape was considered serious enough to warrant a war, thereby showing that it was an offence against her husband. (Bal, 1988,). Changes in the language also signify that the text calls the Levite 'husband' when he behaves as a husband, like going to make peace with the concubine, but 'master' when he behaves like a master, like treating the concubine as unimportant and like she is of lower status. This choice of wording by the narrator further indicates that the narrator disapproves of the Levites' actions. Rather than because of what the concubine does, the language changes as a consequence of what the Levite does, and therefore the change in language reflects his character.

Though Bal emphasized the Levite's affection for his concubine earlier in the story, I believe her analysis lacks appropriate criticism for when the Levite threw out the concubine to be raped and left her for dead. In what way can we consider such a cruel act and still maintain the notion of a husband-and-wife relationship? A deeper understanding of what it was like for concubines at this time can be found in Gale Yee's analysis (Yee, 2007). She explains that 'a concubine was a woman

whose continued presence within the family was not dependent upon economic arrangements' (Yee, 2007, p. 51). Traditionally, concubines were considered second wives and were used to produce more offspring or, in the case of men who already had children, for sexual pleasure. Yee also offers the idea of the economic value of his concubine. In biblical times when a man and his wife could not bear children, 'a concubine may be used to obtain an heir because she does not threaten the economic basis of the marriage'(Yee, 2007, p.51). This was evident in the previous chapter with Hagar and the child she bore for her mistress.

The Levite had thrown his concubine out to a rabid mob in order to save himself and, perhaps, his host's daughter. If the Levite had been her husband, or had the slightest concern for the concubine, what would he have been doing all night, while she was being raped and abused?

As evidenced by the text (Judges 19:27), the Levite seemed to have slept well and was eagerly anticipating their continued journey. The fact that the Levite could have slept in such a situation is more inappropriate than Jonah sleeping on the heathen ship through the violent storm whilst the other sailors were afraid for their lives (Jonah 1:5). It is clear from the Levite's behaviour that he had no regard for his partner. He did not even wonder if she was alive. The narrator presents the events in a straightforward manner to precisely show how the Levite responded. It is clear from the description of the concubine's death and the Levite's apparent reaction to her death that there is a juxtaposition between serious events and ludicrous behaviour in Judges 19.

According to the narrator, 'when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold' (Judges 19:27). Towards dawn, the woman arrived at the house in which her master was a guest and collapsed at the entrance, where she remained until morning. When the Levite opened the door of the house that day to resume his journey, he saw his concubine, lying there with her hands on the threshold of the house. A contrast

is immediately sparked by this unfortunate circumstance of the concubine and the awakening of 'her master' in the morning. Opening the doors, he gets out to continue his journey (Judges 19.27). It is strange that in those circumstances he could just leave the house for the purpose of going on his way. It is evident from the narrative's tone that the Levite is acting as though nothing had happened the night before.

'Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home' (Judges 19:28). Whether she was dead or just near death is not specifically stated in the Hebrew text. In Sternberg's view, God is omniscient and can see everything, so if something is not in the Bible, God didn't intend for the readers to know about it (Sternberg, 1985). However, from what is known, it appears that when her master found her on the threshold of the house and that her hand was still there, Jones-Warsaw suggests the concubine had been dead for some time and her rigor mortis had well and truly begun by that moment (Brenner-Idan, 1999, p. 24). Upon discovering her, her master said, "Get up, and let's go! " But she didn't answer. Her inability to respond could also be an indication that she is dead. In addition, it clearly states that the Levite had to put her on the donkey himself, it was the same donkey she previously rode without assistance, displaying her inability to move.

It is wrong for the Levite to put his concubine on the donkey. The description reads exactly like the transport of a slaughtered animal (Judges 19:28). In the past, her identity was not mentioned in the narrative, and as a result she was rendered trivial, but now the Levite has removed her humanity by bringing her down to the level of a slaughtered animal. The story of Judges 19 is included in Sherwood's 'series of animalizing stories,' as we cannot deny that the concubine's body is treated as if it were an animal (Sherwood and Fisk, 2017, p. 271). Carol Adams has also referred to this biblical narrative as 'sexual butchering' (Adams, 2018, p. 53). From using the concubine as a human shield to be brutally raped to treating her corpse as if it were an animal, the Levite most

certainly sexualised and animalised the concubine. In her ground-breaking work, Adams compares women to meat by saying that 'in talking about animals' fate, we are talking about traditional female fate. We oppress animals by associating them with women's lesser status' (Adams, 2018, p. 54). Throughout Adams' work, she conveys the idea that white women and people of colour were labelled inferior as a result of misogyny and white supremacy. This pushed against the species boundary. In biblical narrative white women and people of colour were associated with animals more than with the white male.[8] This is evident throughout Judges 19. When the men of Gibeah asked to have sexual relations with the Levite, the Levites immediately offered the women in the house, thus implying that women were worthless, and the precious men needed to stay safe inside. Adams argues that it is as if they were human yet not human, occupying a space between species, but beneath it. Adams believes that the rights of women to self-determination are undermined by men who assume women's sole purpose is to please men. It is this exact behaviour that is seen in the Levite's treatment of his concubine when he allows her to be raped until she is nearly dead only to protect himself.

The Consequences that Follow

The concubine, as I have previously argued, lacked any identity of her own; from the beginning of the narrative, she was defined only by her relationship with a man. Her humanity was also taken from her by the Levite after her death. Following on from this, I will now discuss the concubine's dismemberment and the consequences that followed. 'When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel' (Judges 19:29.) According to Paynter, 'the woman's dismembered body is sent around the towns of Israel as a military muster, in a similar fashion to the muster by Saul in 1 Samuel 11:7 – except that Saul uses a pair of oxen, not a bruised and

[8] One example is found in Exodus 20:17: Including a wife on a man's list of belongings proves that she is his property or on the same level as items and animals on the list.

bleeding wife' (Paynter, 2020, p. 6). In comparison with Saul's account, it is evident that the event was truly horrifying. While Saul sent an animal, the Levite cut up and sent his own wife.

In the text, the chopping up of the concubine is portrayed very bluntly. There has been a great deal of patriarchal interpretation that assumes the text's blunt presentation of the event means that the narrator has no issue with it. It is my belief that this view is flawed. In the narrator's blunt presentation, the narrator presents in its full horror this Levite chopping up the body of his wife. The narrator does not specify whether the concubine is dead or alive. It is intentionally hidden from the reader what the Levite concluded as he saw her before him. Nevertheless, from this text the reader is likely to conclude that the concubine was dead. Polzin argues that the narration is deliberately vague about whether the concubine was dead when she was cut into pieces, and that this ambiguity is 'perhaps the most outrageous thing in the piece' (Polzin,1980, p. 200). Polzin describes the narrative as 'intent upon emphasizing... the inability of the reader to piece together crucial aspects of the events in which these characters are enmeshed' (Polzin, 1980, p. 202). I disagree with Polzin's argument. Rather than sharing the Levite's confused perspective, the reader is meant to observe and judge his oblivious behaviour. There is an assumption in the narrative that the reader can piece together the crucial aspects of what happened.

Through this the narrator shows that in a world in which there is no king of Israel every man does whatever his conscience dictates, demonstrating an absurd world of confusion. The concubine's story is framed by this understanding, because the very first verse in Judges 19 contains the words 'In those days, when there was no king in Israel,' (Judges 19:1) As a result, they were thrown into chaos. Evans argues that if Judges' main purpose is to describe Israel living in a way that is not what God intended, then the embodiment of that unacceptable behaviour is mistreatment of women. 'Judges describe unacceptable behaviour and unacceptable cultural attitudes' (Evans, 2017, p. 67). In addition, she argues that since the book of Judges expresses the leadership abilities

and initiatives taken by women, such as Achsah, Deborah, Jael, and Manoah's wife, one cannot assume that the book is advocating violence against women (Evans, 2017).

To return to the verse itself, in Judges 19:29 the narrator uses the word מַאֲכֶלֶת "knife" (maʾăkelet) that appears in the Bible only in the context of sacrifice (VanGemeren, 1999).[9] There are many different definitions of biblical sacrifice, however for the purpose of this thesis, I am going to focus on two major definitions presented by Michael Bryson (Bryson, 2003). In the first part of his analysis, he examines Girard's definition, followed by Gray's. Rene Girard's theory of sacrifice is that sacrifice is 'society… seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim… the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members' (Girard, 1979, p.1). According to this theory a civil war should have been prevented by dismembering the concubines. However, the Levite's act of sending the dismembered body of his wife all over Israel was followed by a war and the near decimation of an entire tribe. By this definition, the death and dismemberment of the concubine could only be regarded as a poor and unsuccessful sacrifice. However, if we consider George Gray's (1971) understanding of sacrifice being 'viewed as a gift marking a plea to enter into a contractual relationship with God promising submission in return for his favour and assistance', then the concubine's death can be considered as a sacrifice in two ways: it assists in creating an arrangement between the Levites and the leaders of non-Benjamite tribes. Also, by offering sacrifices, the tribes unite around a desire for vengeance against the men of Gibeah (Bryson, 2003). Brouer presents the interesting argument that the broken and divided nature of her body makes her antithetical to the mandate of creation to 'multiply and become fruitful' (Genesis 1:28). 'She is multiplied in order to bring about war and divided in order to unite the Israelites as "one man"' (Judges 20:1, 4–8, 11) (Brouer, 2014, p. 26). The Israelites, however, join forces in order to destroy the tribe of Benjamin, illustrating a society of chaos and disorder (Judges 20–21). It is the dismemberment of the concubine's body into twelve pieces that inspires the first

[9] See Lev 1:1–17; 6:8–13; 8:18–21; 16:24. There is only one other mention of the knife in the Bible which is in Genesis 22:10, when Abraham took the knife to sacrifice Isaac.

unified action by the Israelite tribe that is not in response to an external threat (Moster, 2015, p.729). It appears therefore that the tribes of Israel have come together as one. Yet they have only come together to exact revenge on one of their own. ‘A body is formed over the dismembered body of the concubine, but it is a body that begins immediately to eat itself’ (Bryson, 2003, p. 10).

In order to bring attention to Gibeah's sins, the concubine was dismembered and sent to all parts of Israel. The civil war is believed to have been caused by one of two transgressions. The dismal failure of Israel to care for its most vulnerable citizens ultimately contributed to the nation's demise. The second was the collapse of hospitality which was a central value at the time. The question I am asking is, what does the biblical text consider to be the sin or the wrongdoing and is the narrator referring to the concubine being raped as the major issue or rather to the abuse of the hospitality? From our perspective, this may seem strange to question whether bodily integrity, or the right not to be raped, is more important than the respect shown to a guest. However, abuse of hospitality was considered a major sin by the society of the time. Pohl explains how being the people of God, the ancient Israelites had a responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers in their midst, since they were themselves strangers. ‘Israel’s covenant identity includes being a stranger, an alien, a tenant in God’s land—both dependent on God for welcome and provision and answerable to God for its own treatment of aliens and strangers’ (Pohl, 1999, p.16). Their obligation to be hospitable to strangers was rooted in their own position as foreigners in Egypt: ‘The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.’ (Leviticus 19:34). The similar point is made in Deuteronomy 10:19 and Exodus 23:9. Pohl goes on to explain that ‘Israel’s neighbours in the Near East were also typically bound to provide hospitality to the strangers at their door. . .. Such hospitality was recognized as a sacred duty. . .. What was distinctive to Israelite society was the explicit legislation regarding the protection of and provision for the resident alien’ (Pohl, 1999, p.28). This shows how important hospitality was in those times

and disrespecting a guest was considered a major sin. It is recorded in Judges 19 that the host extends hospitality to the guests, but the men of Gibeah do not wish to do the same. Instead, they propose to rape him. No greater example of inhospitality or mistreatment of strangers can be found in the Bible.

However, I believe that the narrator viewed the rape of the concubine as a more serious transgression than the abuse of the guests. Comparing this narrative to Genesis 19, we find that both stories depict a breach of hospitality. The difference, however, is that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were already "known" to be wicked and were already destined to be destroyed (Genesis 18:20). In essence, the breach of hospitality was just another sign of their wickedness. In Judge 19, a rape of an innocent does take place, which, in turn, leads to a civil war that otherwise would not have occurred. Therefore, the rape, not the abuse of hospitality, is driving the narrative and constituting the serious crime.

More evidence for the rape being considered the worse crime is the way the narrator dwells on the concubine in particular. Once the concubine has been given to the men to do with her as they please, the perspective follows her. The perspective does not follow the Levite since readers are not told what is happening with him inside the house at the time of the rape. In the narrative, there is no mention of what he was feeling. It is entirely focused on her side of the story. In contrast, if it was the breach of hospitality that was the bigger transgression, then we would have followed the Levite because he was the one who was threatened. According to the narrator, the rape was the greater sin, and I would also assert that the Levite would agree. After the concubine had been raped and left for dead, the Levite took her home and dismembered her. As revenge for the actions committed against her, he sends parts of her throughout Israel. In his eyes, the rape was the greater sin, but only as a sin against himself. Paynter claims that 'it is clear that the intentions of the 'sons of Belial' who surround the house are to humiliate and shame the men' (Paynter, 2020, p. 64). Her

raped status brought dishonour to the Levite as she was his wife. By allowing his concubine to be assaulted, the Levite showed a lack of control that would be humiliating to him in a society of honour and shame. ‘The way in which the Levite’s concubine was treated as an object, and any offence is presumed to be against him rather than against her’ (Evans, 2017, p. 64). He only considers the rape important for his own selfish reasons. In the story, he presents himself as detached and indifferent to the situation, yet if he was upset about his concubine being raped, he would have run out of the door the next morning to check on her and would have handled her with sympathy. Instead, he was portrayed as heartless. A weak man might have pushed someone else out to save himself and then been horrified to discover what had happened, but the Levite was not only weak; he was selfish. The Levite's major concern appeared to be the breach of his honour rather than the actual rape, which demonstrates the patriarchy within the text, specifically within the Levite's character. Despite this, the narrator viewed the treatment of the concubine as wrong because in response to it he allowed Benjamin's tribe to be nearly wiped out by the other tribes. The silence of the narrator has been interpreted as his sanction of the civil war provoked by the death of the concubine. Even though there is no way to conceal the tragic murder of the concubine, the narrator insists that he is not justifying her treatment but rather, he is outraged and therefore willing to depict the crime as an outrage large enough to become a cause of war.

Despite Him not having intervened in the horrible events the concubine endured, the text expresses God's outrage through the narrator. In response to the men's actions in Gibeah, a civil war took place to exact revenge. A terrible event that happened to the concubine forces everyone to unite and come together. According to Judges 20:1, ‘then all the Israelites came out, from Dan to Beer-sheba, including the land of Gilead’ (Judges 20:1) having seen how the concubine had suffered. As stated by Moster, ‘this is the only instance in the Hebrew Bible when Israel is said to gather from Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south’ (Moster, 2015, p. 729). This is why there is a lot of emphasis on unity, in Judges 20:8 when the people ‘got up as one’ and again in Judges 20:11

when the Israelites gather against the city ‘united as one’. This illustrates how much value was placed on one concubine's sufferings. An injustice to one woman caused a civil war to break out at the end of Judges, leading to countless deaths. Israel's outraged tribes demanded justice and asked that the raping and murdering mob be brought to trial. When the leaders of Gibeah and the Benjamin tribe did not comply, the other tribes of Israel sought revenge (Judges 20: 12-17). As a result, women and children of the tribe of Benjamin were killed in the war. After the Benjamin tribe was almost eradicated, it was decided that it should be allowed to survive. A town called Jabesh Gilead refused to participate in the punishment of the Tribe of Benjamin, therefore all the men from that town were killed so that their daughters could be married to the men of Benjamin that survived. All of this stemmed from the rape of a woman (Schneider, 2000, p. 268).

Conclusion

The story in Judges 19 tells of the betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman by her husband. Therefore, in this chapter, I have reclaimed her story as a text from a God who condemns the mistreatment of women. I began by exploring the importance of names and how the absence of one is significant. It can be an example of the patriarchal nature of the Bible to not name women who are fundamental characters in their narratives. In contrast, it was quite normal not to name women at that time. This was due to how society viewed women at the time, with the idea that women were not worthy enough to be named. I recognise, however, as a womanist, that the Levite was also nameless. Since not naming men in the Bible was unusual, I have attached significance to the narrator's decision not to name him. Because of his horrific behaviour later in the story, the narrator believed that the Levite should not be referred to by a name. The narrator desired that the Levite's name be forgotten since he is not worth remembering. This suggests that the narrator never truly abandoned the concubine. Through the narrator's refusal

to name the Levite, he ensured the male protagonists had equal standing with the concubine, and ultimately liberated her.

In my second section, I briefly explain how the Levite and his concubine ended up staying with the Ephraimite after leaving her father's house. I then question the host and the Levite's eagerness to use innocent women as human shields to protect the Levite. The reason for this was that homosexual rape was seen as an attack on male honour. This was a period of misogynistic culture when women were mistreated.

I then discussed the actual rape of the concubine which I presented bluntly to show its horror in its entirety, an approach which, I argue, is also adopted by the narrator to not downplay the horror of the situation. However, it is interesting to note how the narrator changes the wording for the Levite after the concubine is raped. He goes from being referred to as her husband to being her master. In the use of such wording, the narrator again implies that he disapproves of the Levite's actions. The changes in language are not reflective of the concubine's actions but rather reflect the Levite's character: from behaving as a devoted husband in wishing to speak to her heart, he crumbles under Pressure and instead exploits her vulnerability to him in order to protect himself. As the Levite awoke from his peaceful sleep and approached the concubine, her lack of response revealed that she was dead. She was then transported on the back of a donkey in a manner similar to that of a slaughtered animal. In addition to being nameless and possessing no identity, the Levite’s treatment of her as a dead animal stripped her of her humanity. Also, I summarised Adam's argument that women were inferior to men and pushed the species boundary. We see this in Judge 19, where the Levite gave away his concubine so quickly to get raped, implying that women were worthless, and men should be protected. The rights of women were undermined by men who thought the sole purpose of women was to please them.

I have employed Howell's perspective in this chapter to look at a marginalised character in the Bible and to show how marginalised listeners respond to the story (Howell, 2009). Despite the fact that this is one of the worse narratives in the Bible, where a woman is raped and then brutally murdered, my rereading of the passage has demonstrated to marginalised women that God did not let what happened to her escape punishment. In response to the murder of one woman, there was years' worth of war between tribes.

In my last section, I discussed the concubine's dismemberment by her husband. The narrator illustrates the account bluntly as a means of portraying the horror of the Levite dismembering his wife. Throughout this narrative, the narrator demonstrates that in a world without a king, everyone is free to do as they please. This ultimately leads to chaos. While God did not intervene in the horrific events the concubine endured, the text expresses God's outrage through the narrator. As a result of the men's actions in Gibeah, a civil war took place in order for revenge to be exacted.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the biblical narrator displays his outrage against the rape and murder of an innocent women in a way that is redemptive and liberating for other women. Evan's argues 'the way in which the stories of the concubine's rape and the search for Benjaminite wives are told clearly indicates the writers' view that what happened was not acceptable' (Evans, 2017, p. 66). Within Judges 19, there are indications that the narrator displays outrage against the rape of the concubine by sharing her suffering, expressing compassion for her, and conveying the evil and devastation of rape. This led to a civil war that otherwise would not have occurred.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the contemporary relevance of biblical interpretation by exploring how a womanist reading adds to our understanding of biblical passages. There is a need for more diverse voices in biblical studies, and the issue occurs when we live by interpretations of the Bible which are not inclusive of everyone. Many traditional interpretations allow different groups of people, including women of colour, to feel oppressed. I used the womanist lens because it comes from an approach which privileges the voices and experiences of women of colour. The womanist perspective reads biblical narratives from a standpoint that liberates all women's voices since harassment and violence are not limited to women of colour.

In this study, I have demonstrated how womanism brings a fresh element to biblical interpretation. By drawing womanist conclusions from two separate biblical narratives, Genesis 16 and Judges 19 can now be seen as telling the stories of two female victims of a patriarchal society who both faced horrific mistreatment which was implicitly condemned by the narrator. Sternberg points out that, 'the narrator avoids all commentary that would invest him with the lineaments of an individual person or persona or with the title of a creator' (Sternberg, 1985, P. 123). While the narrator does not explicitly condemn the horrible events, his implicit condemnation remains clear. The narrator claims to be detached while constantly persuading the reader that he is on the side of the marginalised character. Other perspectives criticise these texts and argue that these narratives should be rejected because they portray horrific events without clear condemnation. However, that does not appear to be the strategy that the narrator uses. Although the narrator appears to have a detached omniscient perspective, he is working in the margins.

The first chapter outlined the origin of womanism. Since the 1980s it has developed into an integrative approach, explicitly clarifying that the womanist biblical study within the discipline of biblical interpretation is commonly associated with feminism and black theology. However, it is distinct and separate from both of these areas. Womanist theology builds on both feminism and black theology principles by acknowledging that different types of discrimination overlap each other. Womanist theology therefore provides an interpretative approach that resonates with women of colour. This study has shown that women of colour have attempted to dismantle classism, racism, and sexism through womanism. These are interconnected forms of oppression that infiltrate the lives of black women.

The second chapter focused on Genesis 16. Hagar is an engaging figure in the Bible; therefore, her story yields a huge opportunity for hermeneuticalction. Genesis 16 is of interest to womanists because it depicts oppression in forms of race, class, and gender. Hagar was an Egyptian maid who had conflicts with her Hebrew mistress Sarah. From the beginning, she was presented as powerless in comparison to Sarah. Hagar was also oppressed by Abraham. Abraham, for womanists, is a figure of patriarchy, as well as Sarah, a symbol of oppression. Despite all of this, in my thesis I have utilised the womanist interpretations to present Hagar in a very different light. There is more to her than just being a slave girl; rather, she is someone to whom God speaks directly. She even had the privilege of giving God a name which was rare for even superior men.

The third chapter concentrated on Judges 19, the story of betrayal, abuse, rape, murder, and an unnamed woman's dismemberment. The narrative depicts the horrors of male entitlement and power over a helpless woman. The new interpretation I have proposed demonstrates a God who speaks from the margins. Despite God's non-intervention in the horrific events the concubine endured, the text expresses God's outrage through the narrator. To exact revenge on the men for their actions in Gibeah, a civil war took place. Unlike the texts dealing with Hagar, this one was much more difficult to present in a redemptive light. It is a horrendous text. The only positive to be drawn from this narrative is that justice or vengeance was served, which is hardly comforting to the concubine in the end. Despite how horrific the text is, unfortunately, it is an accurate reflection of many women's realities. Domestic abuse and rape still occur against women. The Bible does not sugar coat women's reality. Sometimes this is what women endure, and that is what we see in the Bible. As a result, the Bible is an accurate reflection of women's lives since it does not pretend that women's lives are better than they really are.

Reading biblical text through a womanist lens is important because it focuses on the victims and marginalised women from an insider's perspective. By showing that the narrator and implicitly God are on the side of the marginalised, the Bible can begin to speak for justice in the world.

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