

**POWER, IDEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION/S:  
WOMANIST AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE  
BOOK OF ESTHER AS RESOURCES FOR GENDER-SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

**Sarojini Nadar**

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## ABSTRACT

This study argues that literary and womanist perspectives on the book of Esther can be used as resources for gender-social transformation in the South African Indian Pentecostal community. It maintains that Biblical scholarship cannot be confined only to the academy, while the Bible is used in the community to oppress women. When culture and interpretation both collude in the oppression of women, putting their lives at risk, it is imperative, this study argues, for those working in the field of liberation hermeneutics to not restrict their work to the academy. Hence, this study seeks to find ways to read the Bible in ways that liberate rather than oppress.

The dissertation is divided into two sections. An examination of the ways in which ideology, plot, narrative time and characterization elucidate the theme of power in the narrative of Esther, form the first section of the dissertation. Each chapter of the first section focuses on the literary details of the text, but always with a hermeneutic of transformation in mind. In the second section, an analysis of how these critical interpretations contribute to the process of gender-social transformation is undertaken. This is done through a process of an analysis of a series of Bible studies conducted by the author with South African Indian Pentecostal women from the Durban area. Issues of representation and the scholar's role in the process of the transformation and conscientization of the community are also examined in this second section.

The conclusion is a reflection of the implications of this study both to the academy and to the community. It reiterates that the collaboration between scholars and the community is a vital one, and the challenge that remains is for more organic intellectuals to use the opportunities which they have been given through their privileged access to education, to empower those in the community who have afforded them the opportunity.

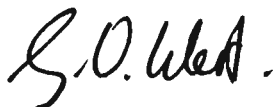
As required by university regulations, I hereby state unambiguously that this study, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work.

Sarojini Nadar

12 September 2003

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Nadar', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

As candidate supervisor I hereby approve this thesis for submission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G.O. West', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Prof. Gerald Oakley West

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**This work is in memory of the woman who was as close to me as my mother, who encouraged me, who taught me, who loved me, who waited in anticipation for the day I would finish this work and yet sadly went to her eternal rest before this day.**

**To “Auntie” Ambra Pillay – “It has been fulfilled!”**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
DECLARATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>1</b>
Aims of the Dissertation	9
Theoretical Framework	14
Womanism	14
Womanist Hermeneutics	18
Literary Criticism: Beyond New Criticism	20
Conclusion	24
<b>CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVE VOICE AND COMPETING IDEOLOGIES</b>	<b>28</b>
Narrative Voices	30
Gender, Ideologies, Power	34
Ethnicity, Ideologies, Power	38
Class, Ideologies, Power	47
Conclusion	48
<b>CHAPTER 3: PLOTTING THE NARRATIVE OF ESTHER</b>	<b>52</b>
Plot vs. Story	52
Reading for the end	54
Multiple beginnings...Multiple endings	55
The Motif of Power	60
Codes of Power	61

The Motif of Power as a Vehicle for Resolving Complications	65
Gender Complications	65
Ethnic Complications	68
Conclusion	71
 <b>CHAPTER 4: NARRATED TIME AND TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE</b>	 73
Story Time vs. Narrative Time	75
Order	78
Duration	83
Frequency	86
Time as a Focus in the Narrative	90
Conclusion	93
 <b>CHAPTER 5: CHARACTERIZING CHARACTERS</b>	 95
Revelation of Character Through Direct Definition and Indirect Presentation	96
The Act of Reading Characters as a Womanist	104
Characterizing Vashti	107
Reading as a (non) formalist: Vashti and her story are important	110
Reading Deconstructively: Vashti is not defeated!	111
Reading as a Womanist: Vashti possesses strength and courage	112
Reading as a New Historicist: Vashti is Honorable	114
Characterizing Esther	117
Reading as a Post-Structuralist: Debunking False Dichotomies	120
Reading With a Hermeneutics of Revision: Mirror on the Wall?	122
Reading through Depatriarchalizing Eyes: Re-interpreting Esther's Role as Trickster	128
Reading from the Perspective of Character Development: Esther is Wise	130
Reading Postcolonially: Esther becomes a Persecutor	134
Characterizing Mordecai	137
Characterizing Haman	147

Characterizing Ahaseurus	155
Ahaseurus and Vashti	156
Ahaseurus and Haman	160
Ahaseurus and Esther	161
Conclusion	163

## **CHAPTER 6: LEGITIMATING A HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION** 164

A Womanist is an Activist	166
An Alien in the Academy: Dealing With “Fraudulent Power”	170
Reading as a “flesh and blood reader” – Excerpts from my Life	172
A South African Indian Pentecostal Reader	175 ✓
A Defiant Cultural Pentecostal Reader	176
A Concerned South African Woman Reader	178
A Survivor of Rape Reader	180
The “Flesh and Blood” Reader – Further Reflections	182
Conclusion	184

## **CHAPTER 7: FACILITATING A COMMUNITY-BASED HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION – PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS** 185

The Contextual Bible Study Method	185
What is the Aim of the Bible Study?	186
Who are the Participants in the Bible Study?	189
Who is the Facilitator and what is the Facilitator’s Role in the Bible Study?	194
Locating the Pentecostal Community, Locating the Biblical Scholar	204
Introduction to the Full Gospel Church	210
A Brief History of Bethesdaland, the Indian Full Gospel Church	211
Women Within the Church	213
Spirituality for Life	219

Dispelling the Dichotomy of the Spiritual and the Physical	220
Interpretations of Scripture: How the Spirit Reads/ How to Read the Spirit	223
Conclusion	230

## **CHAPTER 8: REFLECTIONS ON FACILITATING A COMMUNITY-BASED HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION** 322

Re/presentation: The Task of the Intellectual?	233
Forging a Theoretical Basis for Analyzing the Bible Studies	245
Bible Study Process	250
Bible Study Methodology	254
Analysis of the Bible Studies	261
Reflections on the extent of transformation in the groups	310
Group P: At the half-way mark on the journey from the hegemonic to the ideological	311
Group E: Varying Degrees of the Ideological	314
Group M: Responses to Competing Ideologies	315
Conclusion	317

## **CHAPTER 9: REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY FROM A HERMENEUTIC OF LIBERATION TO A HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION** 319

Concluding Summary	319
The Road Ahead: Implications of this Study	325

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY** 331

### **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1	I
Appendix 2	III

# **POWER, IDEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION/S: WOMANIST AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE BOOK OF ESTHER AS RESOURCES FOR GENDER- SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

## **SECTION 1**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY**

The title of this dissertation suggests that there are two dimensions to this work. The first implies that it is rooted in the academy; the latter indicates that it is not confined to it. Up until very recently, scholarship that attempted to dialogue outside the academy would have been considered “unsophisticated,” or at the very least “uncritical.” Recently, however, with the advent of postmodernist methodologies such a notion has become “tolerable” to scholars, yet this kind of scholarship is still met with resistance. Given the postmodern era in which Biblical scholars currently find themselves, this resistance to dialogical readings certainly seems a paradox, especially because of postmodernism’s insistence on “the impossibility of arriving at objective certitude” with regard to meaning. (Keegan 1995:1).<sup>1</sup>

Nobody epitomizes this paradox more clearly than Stanley Fish. Fish, was, one could argue, the founder of postmodernist reader-response criticism. His book, *Is there a Text in the Class, The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980) very succinctly argued for the importance of the reader in the process of interpretation. Fifteen years later in another book,

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Castelli, Elizabeth et al. (1995), for varied explications of postmodern methodologies in Biblical criticism.

*Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, he advises literary scholars thus: “if you want to make a point beyond the academy, get out of it!” (Fish 1995:2). The paradox lies in the fact that as willing as Fish is to credit a large portion of the interpretive process to the reader, and as willing as he is to allow for multiplicities of meaning that arise out of this accreditation, he remains resistant to scholars using the theory that he has propounded to benefit those outside of the academy. He even suggests that scholars can theorize about oppression in all its forms, but judges as a mistaken belief that these theoretical readings can actually transform society. In other words, it seems that the kind of reader response criticism that Fish advocates only involves “professional” readers – that is only those within the academy.

In this dissertation I hope to seriously challenge Fish’s argument concerning scholastic non-engagement with issues of oppression in society, specifically gender, race and class. South African Biblical scholarship is now beginning to deal with these issues, but most of the debates still take place on a theoretical level.<sup>2</sup> Very few have recognized and appropriated into their work that these issues also touch the lives of South Africans outside of the academy (particularly women) living under the triple oppression of race, gender and class in a very direct and pervasive way. Therefore for South African Biblical scholars to theorize about oppression only in the Biblical text or the Biblical text’s history seems self-indulgent, especially given the fact that the majority of South Africans (again particularly women) who read or listen to the Bible view it as a source of inspiration in their daily lives, not as a document under scientific scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Snyman (2003:799-820) where he is still questioning whether the foregrounding of race in academic discourse amounts to essentialism.

I submit, therefore, that it is irresponsible for the Biblical scholar to ignore such readers since there is overwhelming evidence of the pivotal role the Bible plays in most communities of faith, particularly the working class, (though not only the working class). In other words, I am arguing that the Biblical scholar who claims to be committed to liberation has to take into account the communities of faith who interpret the Bible and the way in which their interpretations either liberate or oppress them. Mosala (1989:2) has acknowledged that Black theology as a theology of liberation in South Africa has failed to:

become a useful weapon in the hands of the oppressed and exploited Black people themselves. It has remained the monopoly of educated Black Christians and has often been unable to interest the white theologians against whose theology it was supposedly developed. Further it has been unable to develop organic links with the popular struggles of especially the black working-class people the most exploited segment of the community.

Mosala penned these arguments at a crucial time in apartheid South African history, even before the release of Nelson Mandela. Whether his arguments

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<sup>3</sup> The faith element plays an important role here. As Okure (1993: 77) points out, African women's "primary consciousness in doing theology is not method, but life and life concerns—their own and those of their own peoples." Masenya (1997: 16) makes the point that "this element of faith may not be left out because for the average African-South African Christian Bible reader, the Bible is regarded as the Word of God capable of transforming life and addressing different life situations, not simply a scholarly book to be critiqued." See also Kanyoro (1999:1-8), Plaatjie (1997:2), Okure (1989:47-59) and Oduyoye (1995:33-51) who argue similar points as well. For an insightful survey of how feminist and African women deal with the issue of authority of the Bible and the authority of women's experience, see Masenya (1999:229-240).

still hold true for Black theology currently remains to be seen, as the relevancy of Black theology as a liberation discourse in post-apartheid South Africa is still hotly debated. My use of Mosala's concerns about Black theology here is to apply it to the current period of academic Biblical criticism. While it is a truism that Biblical scholars have discovered many new reading methodologies that have promoted readings of the Bible that liberate rather than oppress,<sup>4</sup> the problem is that most of these methods that claim to read the Bible for liberation have actually liberated only a few people – those in the academy who have been looking for alternative methodologies. Apart from a few scholars (mostly African, Asian and Latin American) most of the Biblical scholars who practice liberation hermeneutics have been unable to develop organic links with faith communities in whose name liberation hermeneutics is practiced. The Bible, in these communities of faith, is both central and normative for the way in which people live their lives. As Nielsen (1997:3) argues: "the Biblical texts belong to our own culture as legitimizing texts, and function in the church as a basis for true preaching." In other words, in many contemporary churches, the Bible is considered foundational literature, upon which the church (and hence those who belong to it) bases many of its practices.

The fundamental difference between the interpretive strategies of faith communities and the interpretive strategies of the academy is that faith communities begin with a belief in the authority of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Black liberation scholars in South Africa have attempted to take seriously the way

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<sup>4</sup> The advent of feminist, womanist, African women's theologies, Mujerista and a host of other women liberation methodologies, along with ideological criticism, post-colonial criticism and such significant discourses, testifies to this shift.

<sup>5</sup> The issue of authority might be directly linked with the fact that people of faith read with other people of faith, not just as an individual, or as a scholarly activity. For example Fowl (1998:6) argues: "The authority of Scripture, then, is not so much an invariant property of the Biblical texts, as a way of ordering textual relationships. To call Scripture authoritative also establishes a particular relationship between that text and those people and communities who treat it as authoritative. In the absence of a community or communities of people who are struggling to order their lives in accord with that Scripture, claims about the authority of Scripture begin to look rather abstract and vague."

in which faith communities view the Bible as Word of God, by taking as its starting exegetical point the Bible as the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> Mosala (1989:18) has been the most candid in his critique of this exegetical starting point of liberation hermeneutics. He argues that:

The insistence on the Bible as the Word of God must be seen for what it is: an ideological maneuver whereby ruling-class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions.

I agree with Mosala that most of the Biblical text is written from a perspective other than that of the oppressed. Feminist and womanist scholars have been pointing this out for a long time with regard to the patriarchal character of the Biblical text. Emily Dickinson's (1882) words ring true even today: "the Bible is an antique volume written by faded men." However, even though some scholars have totally abandoned the Bible for not having anything positive to say about women,<sup>7</sup> there are still scholars, committed to the emancipation of women, who struggle with the text in order to find liberating messages for women. More importantly women in faith communities also struggle with the Biblical text to find a God who liberates rather than oppresses. In Mosala's defense, he does not argue that we throw out the Biblical text altogether. What he is adverse to is interpretations that collude with the ideology behind the final form of the Biblical text, by appealing to the text in its final form. He critiques

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Boesak (1984) and Tutu (1984).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Daly (1978) is one such example.

Boesak's (1984) interpretation of the Cain and Abel story precisely for this – that it is unable to see that “the story as it stands is a ruling-class author's attempt to validate this landlessness of the village peasants on the grounds – hardly convincing – that their harvest was not an acceptable offering to God.” Boesak (1984:151) reads the story as proof that God does not side with the oppressor (Cain). I agree with Mosala that Biblical texts first need to be interrogated for their oppressive nature before their liberative potential can be unearthed. As he argues, “One cannot successfully perform this task by denying the oppressive structures that frame what liberating themes the texts encode” (Mosala 1989:40). However, my challenge to Mosala's arguments is on two counts. The first is his argument that because the Bible is so heavily ideologically laden with oppressive structures that the amount of “de-ideologizing” that the scholar has to do before it becomes a tool for liberation is too much. I would argue that surely, even though this task might be great, that it is not too great to take on if our commitment is to “de-ideologize” for liberation. If Mosala bemoans the fact that liberation hermeneutics have been ineffective in developing organic links with the community, then indeed a way to do this is to undertake the “enormous” task of de-ideologizing texts. My second challenge to Mosala's (1989:34) argument is based on his insistence that, in the case of Boesak's example above, “a correct theological appropriation of Genesis 4 should begin with a historical-critical exegesis of the text.” He then uses Mansueto's (1983:2) argument that “existential or religious commitment to social revolution will not substitute for scientific analysis of the valence of a tradition in the class struggle” to underscore his point. Contrary to Mosala's argument, I would suggest that a historical-critical exegesis is not the only way to de-ideologize (or even depatriarchalize) the Biblical text.

I would go further to suggest that given that our goal is liberation, not just in the academy but for our communities as well, that postmodernist-literary methods are more helpful than historical-critical ones. This is precisely because faith communities as I asserted above begin with the assumption that the Bible is the Word of God. For scholars wanting to effect liberation in our communities to refute this fact will be irresponsible. This is not to suggest that scholars must themselves believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Rather it is an attempt to take seriously the way in which the community views the Bible as authoritative. Mosala (1989:16-17) seems to think that this is a difficult, if not impossible task:

What, then, do we mean by the Bible as the "Word of God?" The ideological import of such a theological question is immense, because presumably the Word of God cannot (by definition) be the object of criticism. Furthermore, the Word of God cannot be critiqued in the light of black experience or any other experience. The only appropriate response is obedience.

Mosala's argument seems to suggest that if scholars are willing to accept that the Bible is the "Word of God," then critique is not possible, because of the authority which one attaches to the Biblical text. His argument however, only holds true if the single methodology that we apply to the text is the historical-critical one. In other words, by constantly trying to prove what lies behind the text, or the motives that lie behind the text, the scholar might alienate the community that reads the "text as text."

I suggest that literary methods, particularly those belonging to the postmodernist paradigm, could help bridge the gap between academic scholarship and faith communities' ways of reading, in a way that

historical-critical exegesis cannot (especially those belonging to the positivist-scientist paradigm which endorses the belief that there is only one “correct” interpretation). Postmodernist methods acknowledge the contextual nature of interpretation, irrespective of whether the Bible is taken as authoritative or not. In this sense postmodernist Biblical scholars have an important role to play. Schüssler Fiorenza (1989:315) recognizes this important function of the Biblical scholar when she asserts:

If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization...then the responsibility of the Biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions of the writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of Biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary socio-political contexts.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument points us to what I think is a crucial turning point for Biblical scholars – the need to develop organic links with the community as an ethical responsibility.<sup>8</sup> This further means that Biblical scholars have to be accountable for the kinds of critical work they do. It means that Biblical scholars, although having important things to say about the Biblical text do not have the last word. They can no longer hide behind “objective certitude.” In other words, we have to acknowledge as Patte (1999:46) declares: “that interpretations, including those by so-called authorities and by ourselves, are at best partial.”

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<sup>8</sup> See the collection of essays in the 1997 *Semeia* volume on the Bible and the ethics of reading.

### *Aims of the dissertation*

In simple terms my aim in this dissertation is to read the book of Esther in a way that will enable gender-social transformation and liberation for women in my community of faith. The way in which this endeavor will be undertaken is two-fold. In the first section I will undertake a literary reading of the book of Esther. I will focus on literary categories of analysis, but within a womanist framework. In the second section I will evaluate my interpretations for gender-social transformation, through the process of Bible studies, with South African Indian Christian women.<sup>9</sup> This is a very general picture of the way in which I will fulfill the aim of my dissertation outlined above. Although I will focus on the process more in the second section, the aim itself deserves more expansion and explication here.

It is apparent from the arguments made already, that Biblical scholarship cannot take place only in the halls of the academy, especially in a context like South Africa, where the Bible remains a significant social text and where issues of sexism, racism and other forms of oppression need to be engaged, and dealt with. Reading the Biblical text in a literary postmodernist way overcomes the limitations of both historical criticism (with its emphasis on the world of the author), and New Criticism (with its emphasis on the text) especially for scholars wanting to generate meaningful knowledge for living as a Christian in the South African context. The importance of the real or physical reader (what Segovia [1995:3] terms “flesh and blood readers”) in the process of interpretation is affirmed in postmodernist discourse. When one’s focus is the “real” and “flesh and blood reader” then that “real reader’s” context becomes a

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<sup>9</sup> I will detail the backgrounds and the locations of all the women chosen for this study in the second section.

significant part of the interpretive process right at the very outset. An “admission of contextuality,” on the part of the Biblical scholar, however, is certainly not enough. Being a scholar who is committed to liberation and to the community, means embracing and advocating context. “Commitment to rather than cognizance of context is the real issue” (West 1999b: 51)<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately it is at this point that even postmodernist methods fall short of providing adequate theoretical tools for engaging the South African context. Although postmodernist methods advocate the *cognizance* of context in interpretation, they have yet to allow for a *commitment* to context, as is indicated by Fish’s passionate plea cited earlier on. Even the most persuasive scholars, who argue for recognition of context, don’t necessarily engage with the context on a real level. Therefore in this dissertation other theoretical models beyond postmodernism will be sought.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the Nigerian scholar Denis Ekpo quoted in Quayson (2000:87) argues that Africans do not need postmodernism as a solution to the problem of contextuality:

For cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified, human reason in the past nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the postmodern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason, of man [sic], of history, etc., on the one hand, and of a return to, or a rehabilitation of, obscurity, the unknown, the non-transparent, the paralogical on the other hand, cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears to be for the European man [sic]. In fact it cannot even be seen as a problem at all...Nothing therefore stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition a little sarcastically as nothing but the

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<sup>10</sup> Weems (1996:258) makes a similar point: “To acknowledge one’s social location means more than to itemize one’s vital statistics. It means also to scrutinize and talk openly about how one’s scholarship interfaces with one’s larger social and political hopes for the world.”

<sup>11</sup> This does not imply a “throwing out of the baby with the bathwater.” Postmodernism certainly has much to offer scholars working within liberation paradigms.

hypocritical self-flattering cry of the bored and spoilt children of hypercapitalism.

What Ekpo is essentially arguing is that African interpretation always encompassed what scholars are now calling the “postmodern condition.” I would argue that most readers of the Bible, who read from a faith perspective, have also always encompassed the “postmodern condition” for the simple reason that their interpretations have always been based on life experience. For example, Cone (1990:31) argues that “it matters little to the oppressed who authored Scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors.” In other words, the reader in a faith community<sup>12</sup> reads the Biblical text through the lenses of her/his life experiences. I would further suggest that this is not only true for those readers who read from the standpoint of faith, but those who read from a scholarly and critical<sup>13</sup> perspective as well.<sup>14</sup>

I argue in this dissertation, therefore, that the reader is positioned at the entry point of the hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle as Putt (1996:205) asserts, is a term that suggests that the process of interpretation

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<sup>12</sup> The term “ordinary” used to designate the groups of people in a faith community with whom the scholar works closely has been used extensively by scholars such as West, Dube, Ukpong etc. Scholars such as Maluleke (2000) have been critical of this term. I will deal with the use of this term more carefully and fully in chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>13</sup> I do not mean to suggest that those who read from a faith perspective do not read critically. Rather, the distinction is made to differentiate between the scholar and practitioner of Biblical studies as opposed to those who read the Bible for inspirational or faith purposes. See West (1999:118) who sees the term critical as meaning that scholars are different in that they ask “structured and systematic sets of questions about the Bible.” Contra Masoga (2001:45) who shares a different view of criticality. I will pick up Masoga’s argument in more detail in chapter 7. The point that I wish to make here is that neither of these phrases, that is those that read critically and those that read from a perspective of faith are meant to denote a mutual exclusivity. They are more terms of function than definition, in the way I use them at present. I will nuance their uses in chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>14</sup> It has been pointed out by several scholars (Tracy 1987:79), for a long time, and most recently by Patte (1995), West (1999) and Dube (2001) that even the most rigorous of scholars are never “innocent” in their readings, that they each bring to their own readings their own biases based on their life experiences.

always takes place within specific contexts. One does not proceed from the “foundation of non-hermeneutical objectivity to knowledge.” Rather, one always starts “wherever one is with whatever perspectives one has been given by history and language.”<sup>15</sup> The circular movement does not imply ultimate understanding but clearer understanding. It is the reader, therefore, who decides how to generate meaningful knowledge from the text.

Proceeding with the assumption that the role of the reader is of central importance in the process of interpretation, it is necessary at this point to state my own location.<sup>16</sup> I am a fourth generation South African Indian Christian woman, born into a lower middle class home, reared in a lower socio-economic Pentecostal church. As the last born, I am also the only one from seven children in my family who completed school and has a university education as well. Currently, I am married and I have a five-year-old son. Both my spouse’s university education and my own allow us to lead a moderately middle-class lifestyle. This is the current context out of which I write. But, West argues, it is not enough to declare my location and carry on “with business as usual” (West 1999a: 44). I admit that the hermeneutical choices I make in the interpretations that follow are determined by my personal and ideological position.

The most defining part of my ‘herstory,’ and one which I have to confess has shaped both my academic and my intellectual thinking significantly (particularly my gender activism), is the fact that I was raped at the age of 10, by a 40 year old man from my church, who frequented our home because he was ostensibly helping fatherless children and a widow. I have broken the silence surrounding my ordeal for the first time, seventeen years

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<sup>15</sup> Segundo (1976:7-38) first argued the importance of the hermeneutical circle in the praxis of liberation theology.

<sup>16</sup> This short description of my own location is only an introduction. I delve more into my location (self and communal) later in chapter 6.

after the rape occurred. It is also in this context that I write this dissertation, as I am currently dealing with the process that goes with making this confession 17 years after its occurrence. Being a survivor of child rape is just one of the many factors that influence the way in which I read the Biblical text. The community with which I have read the Biblical text, and with which I continue to read the Biblical text, also influences the way in which I read. Related to reading in a community are a host of other factors that influence one's reading strategies. I will pick this up later on in the dissertation. What is important to note now is that reading as a Biblical scholar does not imply a discounting of other "non-academic" readings.<sup>17</sup> Rather they shape and form my reading as an academic.

It is precisely because I read as a South African Indian Christian woman that the central concerns in the narrative of Esther, namely, gender, ethnicity and class are significant for me since I and the community I read the text with have at some point or the other experienced, the "triple oppression," of gender, ethnicity and class, both in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to read the text of Esther in ways that will enable and encourage transformation for us. Reading the Biblical text for transformation is not a self-evident methodology. There are currently several debates surrounding the value of reading the Biblical text in such a way. Notably, many scholars have developed their thinking in this regard. One such scholar is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who since her early works such as *In Memory of Her* (1983) has substantially moved from the academic and what she calls "gender studies" approach (1998:79) to a "critical feminist interpretation for liberation approach."<sup>18</sup> I situate myself, as a womanist scholar, in this

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<sup>17</sup> See West (1999a: 53) who points out that African Biblical scholarship has always been partially constituted by "ordinary" [my inverted commas] readers.

<sup>18</sup> See Sabin's (1999:7) intensive criticism of the shift in Schüssler Fiorenza's approach, where she suggests that Schüssler Fiorenza has "moved from crediting the text with some intrinsic

paradigm of scholars who tread the shaky spaces between the theoretical and activist plane<sup>19</sup>. As such this dissertation aims to develop not just a theoretical hermeneutic, but an activist one too, hence my choice of the following theoretical framework.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

I draw on a number of theories in this dissertation – postcolonial criticism, deconstruction, ideological criticism etc. Each of these theories will become clearer as the dissertation unfolds. The entire dissertation, however, will be motivated and framed by two major theoretical frameworks, namely womanist and literary analysis. Both these modes of analysis need further clarification here.

### ***Womanism***

Alice Walker, defines womanism as follows:

A black feminist of color...From the black Womanish...Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. A woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility....and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health (Walker 1983: xi-xii).

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worth that should be respected, to seeing it only as a set of politically charged words which she is free to remould and manipulate as he pleases.”

<sup>19</sup> The divide in the feminist movement in South Africa between the theoretical and the activist plane came to a head at a much-written about conference in the early 90's in South Africa. See Horn (1991) and Serote (1992).

Walker's definition of womanism is obviously different from feminism on at least two counts (and there are probably more). For one, womanism focuses on race in a way that feminism does not. The second is also womanism's commitment to the "entire people" rather than just women. Alice Walker is an African American woman, and womanism is therefore a principle founded and grounded by the experiences of African American women. I am appropriating this term for my own use (as opposed to feminism), since as stated before, I am a South African Indian woman, and issues of color and class are a significant part of our lives. Further, my ancestors, like those of African women, stand in the history of discrimination. The term womanist takes these important issues into account. I recognize that this is an African American term, but while women in South Africa struggle to come up with a term that fits our contexts I am content with using the term "womanist."<sup>20</sup>

This does not imply that I reject feminist categories of interpretation. On the contrary I find them both useful and necessary. In fact as Alice Walker points out "womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender" (Walker 1983: xi-xii). However, there are also significant differences between the concepts. Because of my own ideological location, the concerns which I find central to a reading of Esther involve not just gender, but class and ethnicity as well. As such the category of womanism seems more appropriate than feminism since in womanist discourse the nexus of race, class and gender, which feminism has often chosen to downplay, is acknowledged and affirmed. Some feminist scholars in South Africa

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<sup>20</sup> I deal with my choice to read as a womanist and its implications in terms of African women's hermeneutics in more detail in chapter 9. For now, I point out that Masenya, a South African Black woman Biblical scholar (1997: 15-16) proposes a *bosadi* (womanhood) hermeneutics. My only reluctance to use that term is that it is Northern-Sotho in its outlook, and I have no claim on the cultural nuances that accompany it. However, the *bosadi* perspective does contain many similarities to the womanist perspective, especially in its attention to the issues of race and class.

critique womanist discourse because it privileges race over gender issues. For example, Lewis (1994:162/3) argues that womanism

Tends to naturalize stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity, and urges women in their conventional supportive roles to assist in male-centered struggles against white oppression...womanist claims, therefore, are in many ways symptomatic of the very iniquities that feminism contests.

Lewis, although elsewhere advocating the nexus of race, class and gender, here misrepresents womanism on two counts. First, she downplays the fact that womanism is a liberation discourse that encompasses both sexes. As the definition above points out, a womanist is one who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker 1983:xi-xii).<sup>21</sup> Secondly, and more importantly for the issues of this dissertation, Lewis, like many feminist scholars, seems to again downplay the fact that race is a pivotal force in a Black woman’s life.<sup>22</sup> She cannot ignore it or make it secondary to gender concerns. Therefore, the deep connectedness of race, class and gender are constantly affirmed in womanist discourse.

If one is going to place emphasis on the location of the real reader in the process of interpretation, then one cannot assume in gender discourse that all women are “sisters under the skin.” As Mohanty (1988: 77) reminds the

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<sup>21</sup> This is also a key feature of African women’s hermeneutics. See for example Okure (1993:76-85).

<sup>22</sup> In this dissertation my work is primarily with South African Indian women. I do, however, subscribe to a political and theological consciousness that considers myself Black. As Maluleke and I (2002:5-6) argue, “In terms of this understanding, ‘blackness (or African-ness for that matter), is a condition – a material, spiritual and cultural condition,’ that encompasses an approach to and attitude of life in South Africa as an existential condition brought about by historical marginalization and victimization. Our own biographies have been scarred by the effects of Apartheid White supremacist practices.” We also go on to further point out, that “while ruthlessly oppressed and suppressed, South African Indians as a group still occupied a more privileged place in comparison to Africans in the apartheid scheme of things.” This is the context in which I use the term Black.

first world feminists “beyond sisterhood there is racism, colonialism and imperialism.” Our contexts define our identities, and as Childers (1990:27) argues race and class have to be specified,

even if it means continuously using extra adjectives as in poor Latinos, black middle-class women, white working-class women, it is worth it so that people don't feel excluded or robbed of an ability to identify with the category 'women' because they feel appropriated rather than addressed by feminism.

These broad ideas that shape womanism in general shape a womanist interpretation of a Biblical text as well. Therefore, since I am reading the text of Esther as a South African Indian woman, the subject of gender is not my only concern, but that of ethnicity and class as well, especially since those categories of oppression have also applied in my own life.

Although there are similarities, between the oppressions that women experience it would be a hegemonic move to universalize that oppression. Palkar (1991:20-21) argues that

Western feminists tend to universalize patriarchy and thereby homogenize women, especially the Third World women...but the problems and the subjectivities may differ according to their national, historical or local contexts. The ideological construction of women in India, say, is not the same as that of a woman in Argentina though both of them are supposed to belong to the Third World.

The point that Palkar is making points precisely to the point that I want to make about specificity in this dissertation. The women that I read with are

South African Indian women. Although many of these women are oppressed or have been oppressed their oppressions and experiences do not necessarily coincide with those of their other African sisters. In fact their experience and articulation of the patriarchy they have been subject to, although bearing many similarities, might also be very different. I state this overtly to avoid what Mohanty (1988:63) calls the “third world difference – that stable, a-historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Womanist Hermeneutics*

Womanism, although differing from feminism in many key respects, is also like feminism in many other ways. Like in feminist discourse, I will proceed with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” with respect to the patriarchal character of the text. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1993a:11) explains, a hermeneutic of suspicion

invites readers to investigate Biblical texts and traditions as one would ‘search’ the place and location where a crime had been committed. It approaches the canonical text as a ‘cover-up’ for patriarchal murder and oppression. It seeks to identify the crime by carefully tracing its clues and imprints in the text in order to prevent further hurt and violations.

Such an approach is adopted by other feminist scholars such as Exum (1995:70) who views women in Biblical literature as male constructs.

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<sup>23</sup> See also Bohler-Muller (2002:86) who argues for the position of what some feminist theorists call ‘gender essentialism’. She maintains that: “the current postmodern skepticism in respect of meta- or grand-narratives has resulted in a tendency in feminist theory to shy away from gender essentialism and the belief that there is one all-encompassing story (or meta-narrative) which applies to all women’s experiences and lives...Efforts to avoid gender essentialism result in cultural essentialism.”

That is to say they are the creations of androcentric narrators; they reflect androcentric ideas about women; and they serve androcentric interests.

Exum's argument although legitimate, is not the last word. I will argue that it is possible to find liberating elements within the text, despite the fact that it was originally written to serve androcentric interests, if one is able to alter one's way of reading the text through various methods such as deconstruction, recovery of the female voices in the text etc. In other words, with a "hermeneutic of suspicion," (and not all feminists stop at this point) one stops at the point that one is able to expose the patriarchal elements in the text as biased and androcentric. An option after a "hermeneutic of suspicion" can be a "hermeneutic of revision" which seeks to search the text for

values and visions that can nurture those who live in subjection and authorize their struggles for liberation and transformation...Like the woman of the Gospels seeking diligently for the lost coin, so a hermeneutic of re-vision investigates Biblical texts for submerged meanings, lost voices and authorizing visions (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993a:11).

Bach (1999:iv) sees both these feminist strategies of the past as having a limited future. I agree with Bach, and it is in her disagreement with the unholistic value of these methodologies, that the thrust of my thesis lies. If both these reading strategies are locked within the "ivory tower of the academy," without affecting the lives of the thousands of women who live under oppressions of various kinds, then the reading becomes futile. What I propose in this dissertation is a "hermeneutic of collaboration" and a "hermeneutic of transformation." In other words, the collaboration of the reading strategies of women in my faith community and the reading

strategies of the academy will enable us to develop a hermeneutic of transformation. Having established the hermeneutic with which we will approach the Biblical text we now move onto the methodology that will enable this hermeneutic of transformation.

### ***Literary Criticism: Beyond New Criticism***

“To study the Bible as literature is to recognize, not prove, that it is indeed literature” (Trible 1978:8). The Bible, in addition to being regarded as a religious text, has also long been regarded as literature, and hence as Trible has argued over twenty years ago does not need to be proven as literature. However, the way in which the Bible is analyzed as literature is of crucial importance. In my employment of the literary method I stand in both agreement and distinction from what has come to be known as “New Criticism.” I agree with the stance that New Criticism takes against the historical method that sees texts only as “representations of the sensibilities of their authors,” (Clines and Exum 1993:15).<sup>24</sup> I even agree with the fact that New Criticism emphasizes the “literariness of literary texts and tries to identify the characteristics of literary writing” (Clines and Exum 1993:15). In fact this is an extremely important aspect of literary criticism and one that I will employ frequently throughout this dissertation. But, in the same way that the Biblical scholar cannot be satisfied utilizing only historical criticism with its focus on authorial intention, s/he also cannot be satisfied utilizing only New Criticism with its focus on the text as an independent and stable entity. This is because although both methods are important for establishing a socio-historical and literary context, they also make the Bible inaccessible to communities of faith, because the important role that the reader (and her personal experiences) plays in the process of interpretation is ignored. In other words, what I am arguing is that unless criticism can be

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to discount the value of the historical method. As Trible (1984:6) says: “Such considerations as historical background, sociological setting, compositional history, authorial intention, and linguistic and archeological data are essential in the total exegetical enterprise, but in literary analysis they are supporting rather than primary concerns.”

grounded in the concrete contexts of the readers, the criticism has little value, especially in a context such as ours.

This is where once again the value of using feminist and womanist criticism can be reiterated since as Clines and Exum (1993:17) point out:

Feminist criticism can be seen as a paradigm for the new literary criticisms. For its focus is not upon texts in themselves, but upon texts in relation to another intellectual political issue.

Hence, although this dissertation will be framed by a literary perspective that utilizes traditional literary categories of interpretation, it remains womanist in its commitment to contextual interpretation, and in its commitment to activism and gender-social transformation.

This commitment to gender-social transformation is directly linked with my choice to read as a womanist and is therefore intricately tied with the choices that I make in my literary undertaking. For example, firstly, although three versions of the narrative of Esther exist,<sup>25</sup> the version that I focus on is the MT for my own analysis, and the English translation (New Revised Standard Version) for the Bible studies, as the women from the faith communities do not read the Bible in Hebrew. Secondly, the genre that I propose for the text of Esther is a political novella.<sup>26</sup> I call attention to the fact that the book of Esther is not traditionally considered to be a political

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<sup>25</sup> The first is the Masoretic Text, which is the Hebrew version regarded as canonical and shared by Jews and Protestants. The second version is the Greek version found in the LXX also known as the B text, and it contains six passages (107 verses) that are not found in the MT. A final version known as the Alpha text, sometimes also called the A text which is a shorter Greek version, also exists. Each of the versions holds canonical value for the particular faith communities that use them. The MT in English translation is the version that my community of faith reads; therefore my reading and analysis will be restricted to the MT, even though I will dialogue with the other two versions on occasion.

<sup>26</sup> Later in chapter 2 I will demonstrate how the book of Esther could also be considered a satirical political novella.

novella. Rather, I make this proposal based on an understanding of the genre of the political novel and the way in which power is demonstrated in gender and race discourses in the book of Esther. Saghal (quoted in Rai 1996:189) says the following of a political novel:

if politics were the ‘use of power’ and the ‘abuse of power,’ a political novel would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it.

Positing the book of Esther in the genre of political novella helps us appreciate the deep awareness of both ethnic and gender politics (both in the public and the domestic sphere) contained in the book. It also makes apparent that gender discourse is not readily separable from ethnic and racial discourse both in Esther’s context and our own. In the case of the book of Esther, the ethnic discourse finds itself situated within the larger context of a post-colonial discourse, while within our own context the racial discourse is set within the context of a post apartheid discourse, but also a deeper-rooted postcolonial discourse as well. So situating the book of Esther as a political novella also means that we have to take cognizance of its postcolonial features as well. Postcolonialism like postmodernism is not an easy discourse to define. However, Quayson (2000:93) provides a working definition of the concept, asserting that postcolonial criticism

involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies, as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of Empire. Postcolonialism often involves the discussion of experiences of various kinds such as those of slavery, migration, suppression, and resistance, race, gender, place, and the

responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics.

If postcolonialist criticism requires, as Quayson tells us, that we enter into dialogue with and that we respond to the discourses of imperial Europe, then I would argue that a significant discourse of Europe, and the West in general has been that of the Bible, and therefore the discourses surrounding the Bible in this context require dialogue and response. Using the tools of postcolonial criticism therefore is valuable not only to our own context given our history with the European Empire, but for the text's context as well and its confrontation with the Persian Empire.<sup>27</sup>

The value of combining postcolonial and feminist/womanist perspectives in a study such as this is highlighted by Ashcroft et al (1989: 166-167):

While the postcolonial discourse of the political novel foregrounds a nation's cultural and historical past, liberating itself from Eurocentric perspectives and confronting its present social and political realities, feminist discourse de-centers patriarchal power structures, *writing in* a woman's body, perspectives, struggle and value. Both discourses reject manipulative power structures and speak for a renewal of human relationships based on reason, equality and love.

Beal (1997:13) points out that in the book of Esther there are many convergences between the two discourses, specifically "between the projections of the other woman and the other Jew as well as between the two subjects who project these two others and mark them for oblivion." Beal (1997: 13) goes on to argue that in Esther, "sexual politics is ethnic

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<sup>27</sup> See my use of Sugirtharajah (2001:251-258) in chapter 2, where he highlights the applicability of postcolonial critique to Biblical texts.

politics is national politics. Representations of the other in terms of gender are inextricably linked to constructions of the other in terms of ethnicity.” Both the discourses are ultimately linked to issues of power, and therefore as Ashcroft et al (1989: 166-167) argue, the value of combining the discourses lies in the fact that they both seek to reject manipulative power structures. Any reading that seeks to expose or reject manipulative power structures is one that is invaluable for the purposes of gender-social transformation, and therefore to the ends of this dissertation as well. Reading the book of Esther as a political novella helps open up the discourses on both gender and race in a way that reading it as a historical novella/romance or a wisdom tale, as some have suggested, does not.<sup>28</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Having described the book of Esther as belonging to the political novella genre, I now turn my attention to the details of how I will read the text as a political novella and the implications of that reading for the community Bible studies which I propose. Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on the literary details of a text, but always with a hermeneutic of transformation in mind.

In chapter 2 I deal with the issue of narrative voice and ideologies. “To deconstruct a discourse is to show how a text undermines the philosophy which it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies” (Culler 1993: 86 in Clines 1998). This is exactly what this chapter does. It shows how the philosophy on which the text of Esther is based, namely gender and ethnic dominance, is undermined. This is demonstrated through an uncovering of the covert narrative voice of the text, by using womanist and postcolonialist critiques.

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<sup>28</sup> For a full discussion on the various proposals put forward on genre see Fox (1991:141-152).

Chapter 3 deals with the plot of Esther. I argue here that the book does not contain a “structural plot,” that is analogous to exposition, complication, resolution. The argument again stems from my sensitivity to gender and ethnic issues. For example, relegating Vashti’s powerful story to the mere status of an introduction dis-empowers and downplays the important role that Vashti plays within the narrative. In fact, I argue along with Beal (1997) that Vashti is never truly erased from the story. I also problematize the resolution of the story, which is ambivalent with regard to the power struggle with regard to gender and ethnicity. Reading the plot in this way implies reading against both the grain of the story and against the method of structuralism which usually provides narrative grids upon which to place the story.

The significance of narrative time and temporal experience is explored in chapter 4. I show that the significance of narrative time is three-fold. Firstly, it indicates the way in which time is used in a narrative. For example, when a person speaks, how often a person speaks, and the number of times a person speaks are analogous to the categories used in the interpretation of narrative time, namely order, frequency, duration, respectively. An examination of narrative time is very significant to a study concentrating on the use of power in terms of gender and ethnic issues, since it is informative to see how often or whether at all the marginalized in the narrative speak.

Secondly, the time in which the narrative is set is important for establishing the nature of the power relations operative at the time. For example, locating the story of Esther within a narrative setting of exile is significant to a postcolonial analysis of power. It is also important in that it posits the status of women at the time. The third level is the readers’ time, and it deals with the positing of the reader within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in relation to an ancient text.

I have deliberately entitled chapter 5 ambiguously (Characterizing Characters) since I suggest that the ultimate interpretation of a character is not a static product of the author but an indication of the reader's abilities to reconstruct a character based not only on the textual clues but also on the reader's own ideology. I envisage that this will be the largest chapter, since an in-depth character analysis of each major character will be undertaken. Another reason for an extended chapter and focus on character is that character is the most accessible way into the text for readers in faith communities.<sup>29</sup> Particular attention will be given to how the voices of the characters carry the ideological voice of the narrative, and how a self-conscious ideological reading against the grain can uncover the ideology of the characters. I will use Scott's (1990) theory of public and hidden transcripts extensively to analyze the roles of the characters as well as the roles of the readers.

In chapter 6 I switch from analyzing the text of Esther to analyzing and highlighting why it is so important for Biblical scholars not just to locate themselves within the community, but also to work actively to transform it. By drawing on autobiographical criticism I reveal much of my personal story as a motivating factor in my interpretations. I also show some of the critical tools that can be used in facilitating a hermeneutic of transformation, and argue for the inter-connectedness of the scholar as an activist and the scholar as an academic. I submit that it is not possible to be a womanist and not an activist.

If chapter 6 dealt with why community engagement is important, chapter 7 reflects on how such an engagement should be achieved. I first reflect and engage with some of the limitations of current methodologies, and then

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<sup>29</sup> See for example Cheney (1996:11-28) where she considers how female Biblical characters influence modern women, who view them either as role models or bad examples.

situate myself within those debates. I then give a detailed descriptive analysis of the community with which I work, again locating myself firmly within the community. By locating myself within the faith community, I not only provide a description of the community, but an analysis of the community's relationship to the Biblical text as well.

In the final chapter before my overall conclusion, I critically reflect on the actual responses of the Bible studies facilitated by myself in the community. First I problematize the notion of representation by bringing West (1999), Haddad (2000) and Spivak (1989) into dialogue with each other. Then, following West (1999) and Petersen (1995) I use the Comaroff's (1991) concepts of the continuums of the hegemonic and the ideological, the conscious and the unconscious, and agentive power and non-agentive power, as grids through which to filter my analysis of the Bible studies. I conclude chapter 8 with a reflection of how helpful these Bible studies have been in the process of gender-social transformation, by assessing the helpfulness of the critical tools which I provided as resources for reading.

In what follows, then, I begin my literary analysis of the text of Esther, working within a womanist framework. My examination of the ways in which ideology, plot, narrative time and characterization operate in the narrative of Esther, form the first section of the dissertation. My analysis of how these critical interpretations contribute to the process of gender-social transformation makes up the second section of this study. My overall conclusion will deal with the implications of this study both to the academy and to the community.

## CHAPTER 2

### NARRATIVE VOICE AND COMPETING IDEOLOGIES

*Ideology is a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed (Michele Barrett).*

*To say that all readings of a text are ideological is to insist that the act of reading is fundamentally ethical (Emmanuel Levinas).<sup>1</sup>*

Both Barrett's and Levinas's<sup>2</sup> assertions concerning ideology are significant for my dissertation on at least two levels. The first is that Barrett's definition of ideology focuses directly on both the production and the reception of meaning. Second, Levinas' combination of ideology with ethics is fundamental to my thesis given that the end goal of the reading which I am proposing is gender-social transformation. Both definitions identify ideology not only within the text's production but within the text's reception as well – that is that the process of reading is as much an ideological endeavour as the process of writing is.

These are the primary reasons that I have chosen to begin my dissertation with this chapter. It feeds into all the subsequent chapters both directly and indirectly, by virtue of the fact that the ideological implications of the text and the way in which the reader reads the text impacts on all aspects of a literary reading of a text. By combining narrative voice and ideology I am suggesting

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations by Barrett and Levinas are from *The Postmodern Bible* (1995: 272,275), edited by Castelli et al.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Introduction.

that the ideology implicit in a text is chiefly transmitted through the narrative voice of the text. Morris (1993:29) asserts that:

The construction of narrative point of view is one of the most powerful means by which readers are imperceptibly brought to share the values of a text. The term 'interpellation' is sometimes used to designate the process by which texts, as it were, hollow out a linguistic space for the reader to occupy. By assuming that place we also assume the viewpoint and attitudes that go with it.

I suggest, however, that not all readers passively occupy this linguistic space created by the text. In other words, my point is that readers (such as women readers in Africa) do not simply receive and accept the ideology of a text. They interact with the text based on their own ideological positioning. Methodologically, however, this has been difficult to prove, since if one is going to prove that the reader's ideological position affects the way in which the text is interpreted, then exactly what the reader's ideological positioning is, will have to be foregrounded.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the emergence of the postmodern in ideological criticism, the trend has been to discover the ideological intent of the author or of the text. So, ideological criticism entails according to Yee (1995:150)

an extrinsic analysis that uncovers the circumstances under which the text was produced and an intrinsic analysis that investigates the text's reproduction of ideology in the text's rhetoric.

If we follow Yee's descriptions of ideological criticism then it is clear that in ideological criticism there has been little focus on the way in which a reader

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, if one argues that a reader's ideology "interacts" with the ideology of the text, then it becomes less clear that a text has a clear ideology at all.

influences and shapes ideology. Notwithstanding the difficulty of proving the reader's role in shaping ideology, and contrary to the kind of understanding of the function of ideology in Biblical texts presented above, Fowl (1998:63) has argued that texts do not have ideologies – only readers do! He demonstrates his argument through an examination of several vastly differing interpretations of the Abraham story, from Paul to Philo, and consequently shows that it could not have been the ideology in the text that accounted for their interpretations but the various readers' own sets of social, political, material and theological interests. Obviously, noting that readers in faith communities and scholars alike bring their own ideological interests to bear on their interpretations of Biblical texts is not a new idea. I am not, however, entirely convinced of Fowl's argument that texts do not contain inherent ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Yee locates ideology within the realm of the text's production (that is the world of the author that produced the text) and the rhetorical nature of the text as it is continually 'reproduced.' Fowl, on the other hand, does not want to locate ideology within the text at all, particularly in its final form.<sup>5</sup> He lays ideology squarely at the feet of the reader. I prefer to locate myself in the middle ground between these two arguments. Hence, I suggest that the ideological agenda of a text is carefully appropriated and negotiated according to the reader's own ideological location. I will partly show this later on in this chapter, but more fully later on in the dissertation, in my interaction with women readers in faith communities. My first focus though is on the ideology of the narrative voice.

### *Narrative Voices*

Before defining the narrative voice in the text of Esther, I think it is important to define what I mean by the term narrative. To define narrative in the simplest

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, even though I disagree with Mosala on certain points of his arguments concerning the impact of the ideology of the Biblical text, in this case I am more inclined to agree with Mosala (1986:175-199) that the Bible definitely has an ideology and most of its ideology is inherently oppressive, in line with the ruling class.

terms is to say that a narrative tells a story. It is not *the* story, it only *tells* the story. There are therefore a number of more important questions that we should be asking of narrative than simply, what is the story? In this dissertation I intend to ask and answer some of these questions. Examples of these questions are: Who is telling the story? What is the perspective of the person who is telling the story? How does the perspective of the person who is telling the story affect the way in which the reader understands the story? What is the story about? How is the story told? When and where is it told? For whom is the story told? Who are the characters in the story and what are their roles? How is the story retold in contemporary society? How does the reader affect the way in which the story is interpreted?<sup>6</sup>

Most of these questions will be addressed in the various chapters of this dissertation. In this chapter, however, the most important questions are who is telling the story, what is the perspective of the person telling the story and how does the perspective of the way in which the story is told affect the way in which the reader understands the story?

The most obvious answer to the question who is telling the story seems to be the author. However, even though the author has written the story, the person telling the story is not necessarily the author. In literary criticism the person who tells the story is referred to as a narrator. Fewell and Gunn (1993:53) tell us that “the narrator is a character who tells the story while other characters enact it.” This definition, by setting up the narrator as a character in the story, distinguishes clearly between the narrator and the author. The voice or the point of view of the narrator is not necessarily the voice or the point of view of

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<sup>5</sup> Although Fowl (1998:32-40) is reluctantly willing to locate some of the ideology in the text's production, he is quick to question its underlying assumptions: “Why should something like the author's intention count as the meaning of a text?”

<sup>6</sup> Although I am not dealing with the question of how the reader's ideology affects the interpretation of the text specifically in this chapter, this does not indicate that my own ideology does not affect the way in which I analyze the text in this first section. I have laid my own ideological position bare in the Introduction.

the author (even though in some cases it could be). For example an author who embodies an enlightened point of view, can set up a racist narrator to tell a story. The narrator will, therefore, narrate from a racist point of view. This can be done either directly or indirectly. The narrator can intrude in the narrative at all points and provide her/his point of view, or the narrator can demonstrate her/his point of view by allowing the characters in the narrative to expand the point of view established.

There are many viewpoints from which the narrator can observe and relate events. I will try to uncover this as I attempt to uncover the narrative voice of the text. I use the term narrative voice in the same way that Chatman (1978:47) uses the term “conceptual point of view.” He says, that a “conceptual point of view implies the perspective of attitudes, conceptions, and worldview of the narrator.” Hence, I use the term narrative voice to indicate the voice or the point of view that emerges from the text.

It is important again to draw clear distinctions between the voice of the author and the voice of the narrator. In line with postmodernist methods of interrogating texts, I do not want to focus on the identity of the author, since that would take me out of the scope of literary-narrative analysis into modes of historical criticism such as form and redaction criticisms. But, if we cannot focus on the author, how do we determine what the narrative voice in the text is saying? Is it helpful to determine the gender, the class, or the ethnic dimensions of the narrative voice rather than the author’s voice? I would suggest that it is important since it is the narrative voice that carries forth the message of the narrative even though it is possible that the voice of the author and the narrator can overlap at certain points.

For my own reading, it is important to establish the gender, ethnic and class dimensions of the voice, since as stated in my introduction, I believe that these directly affect the way in which we read the text. The narrative voice in any

narrative is an authoritative one, but particularly so in Biblical narrative, because as Smith (1997:115) argues “the commentator is starting from a standpoint that says that the text is somehow normative for the behaviour of a worshipping community.”<sup>7</sup> So, in looking for the gender, ethnic or class dimensions of the narrative voice we are not necessarily looking for the voice of the author, but rather the authoritative voice of the text. Meyers (1993:90) in suggesting ways of identifying the female voice in a text suggests that “the text’s authority rather than its authorship should be gendered.” In other words the voice that comes through in the narrative text is of importance to our examination, not the voice of the actual author.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned before, the narrative voice can be carried forth in various ways. In some texts it is carried forth directly through the voices of the characters themselves. Ruth is an example of such a book, where 55 of the 85 verses in the book are dialogic in nature. The book of Esther is not as dialogic in nature as the book of Ruth, though we can deduce important features of the narrative voice from some of the dialogue, or in the case of the women in the first four chapters – non-dialogue. Since, I will be dealing with characters and characterisation in subsequent chapters, in this chapter I will aim to primarily focus on the general tone and feel of the voice of the text, rather than focus on how we hear the narrative voice through a detailed analysis of specific characters. A detailed analysis of the characters will be done in the chapter on characterisation. My main area of interest is where the narrative voice lies with regard to issues of gender, ethnicity and class, and how women readers (particularly Indian women) in Africa deal with this.

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<sup>7</sup> This points to the question of authority which I will be dealing with in the section on Bible studies. See also Masenya’s argument referred to in the introduction concerning the Bible as the “Word of God” among African women.

<sup>8</sup> Tambling (1991:47) points us to Michel Foucault’s plea to move from questions of “who is the real author?” “have we proof of his [sic] authenticity and originality?” and “what has he revealed of his utmost profound self in his language?” to “what are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

### ***Gender, Ideologies, Power***

The text of Esther, like most other Biblical narratives, seems like it was written by and for men only. The text opens with a lavish drinking party consisting of males only. At this drinking party the king requests that Vashti his wife and queen be brought to be displayed before all the men at the party for she was “lovely to look at” (1:11). Immediately, a woman is set up as sex object. The king is subject and the queen becomes object. Beal (1997:19) argues that: “within the sexual political order, beauty and pleasure are associated with objectification – to be one of the objects by which the subject secures power publicly.” However, when the woman disobeys she in effect rejects her status as object and becomes subject. In a patriarchal setting this is considered unacceptable and the mistake has to be rectified immediately. So, all the male advisors gather at the king’s request to figure out what to do with this woman who has acted outside of her prescribed gender role. The law that Vashti has transgressed is clearly not as ordinary subject of the king. Rather her disobedience is seen in the light of her being a gendered subject of the king. This is made clear in the decision that the king and his advisors take in dealing with Vashti. They decide to punish her not so that all subjects will learn to obey the king’s wishes, but that all *women* will learn to obey their husbands. In other words it is not the power balance between king and subject that has to be re-established but the power balance of gender which needs re-qualification. This is done through banishing Vashti and writing an edict that all women should “treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike” (1:20).

This is how the text of Esther opens. Men make decisions, women are banished, and the male gaze seems to have triumphed, for in the ensuing

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“where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”; “what placements are determined for possible subjects?” and “who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?”

chapters virgin women are gathered from around the kingdom to arouse the king's pleasure. Chapter 2, which deals directly with the virgins all gathered in the harem, seems to feed directly into the male fantasy of young and beautiful virgins waiting in a harem for a male to "deflower" them. Esther enters. Her presence as "the better and more worthy woman" (1:19) than Vashti as she obediently appears before the king fulfilling the male fantasy both sexually and otherwise, plunges us further into the narrative world of males. Certainly so far patriarchal ideology rules the text, not least of all because the male's position as subject is established and re-established in the narrative through the fact that the woman that "wins" is the one who complies with the patriarchal order. The general feel of the text, therefore, is that it is the power of the male over the female which is triumphant. We sense that we are receiving this story from a gloating male.

However, even though the text of Esther seems "riddled by traditional gender politics: male as thinker and doer, woman as handmaiden and follower" (Bronner 1998:4), I want to suggest that the text is not monolithic in this ideological outlook. I suggest that it is possible to find competing ideologies in the text depending on the reader's position. This points to the notion of multiplicity of meanings in narratives. When we recognise that it is possible for a text to have more than one meaning, it becomes possible to re-imagine the ideology of a text. This method does not necessarily change the ideology of the text, but it questions whether the ideology is monolithic in nature. Mieke Bal demonstrates this method in her reading of the character of Eve in the creation story. She maintains that even though her interpretation of Eve might show Eve in a more positive light than do most common uses of the text, this does not suggest that the text itself is feminist, feminine or female oriented. My reading of Esther shows her as a wise woman who cleverly calculates her future with the little resources that she has. This is not to deny her rather un-feminist casting as sex object. In looking for the resources and victories inscribed in the character of Esther, my aim is not to suggest in any way that Esther is a

feminist, or that the text itself is feminist or female oriented in its ideological outlook. What I am demonstrating through the kind of reading I offer below is that the power that Esther gains in the end, raises the question of how powerful the male gaze really is and subsequently the male's apparent control of the female body. In other words, as Bal argues, reading this way means that we have to

account for the nature and function of a sexist text that is related to an ideology that cannot be monolithic. Efforts to make it so, both on the parts of the text and its interpreters are the more desperate, since theirs is an impossible aim (Bal 1987:110).

Essentially I think that a non-monolithic ideological outlook is a feature of Biblical narrative in general. Brueggemann (1992: 22), for example points out that there are at least two theological trends that can be detected in Biblical narratives. The first is one that he calls the "common theology." This theology is one that affirms the "legitimated order" of deed and consequence. Brueggemann argues, however, that the common theology trajectory is not the only trajectory that can be found in Biblical narrative. He names this other trajectory the "embrace of pain" trajectory. This is a trajectory of theological thought that is borne out of the concrete painful experiences of people, not necessarily as opposed to, but in juxtaposition to the "common theology." In other words, the two are kept in tension with each other. Although Brueggemann is referring to Old Testament theology and narrative in general, I think the same can be applied to particular Biblical narratives.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Liberation scholars such as Richard (1990:66) want the Bible to be about liberation. So he argues that the problem with the Bible is not the Bible itself but the way in which the Bible has been interpreted. Brueggemann, on the other hand, is saying that the whole Bible is not about liberation, but that contending voices to the oppressive ones can be found. Mosala (1992:132) is more strident in his critique, and cautions against trying to save the Bible from itself, and rather to revolt against the Bible as a text of domination of the ruling classes.

Strengthening the points made above, a close examination of the text of Esther shows very clearly that it is not monolithically ideologically patriarchal. To apply what Bal is saying to the text of Esther means that we have to see that it is not only the males in the book of Esther that wield the power of the politics of sexual ideology. Yes, it is only by being an object of the male gaze that Esther becomes queen, but it is also by using her knowledge of the power of the male gaze that she is able to save a nation. Chapter 7 very clearly illustrates not only her knowledge of the system of male dominance but her ability to negotiate within the system to get what she wants. Note her language in 7:3 very carefully: "If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me." This language of complete and utter deference to the king might seem on the surface to be conceding to the power of the dominator. However, a closer examination reveals that the issue is much more complex. It is strange that Esther should ask the king whether she has won his favour because we already know that she has. Out of all the women in the harem he has chosen Esther as his favourite (albeit for her performance in bed), so when she asks him if she has won his favour she already knows that she has. As for pleasing the king, we know that she has done that also, for he would not promise her half of the kingdom if she had not pleased him.

Her language of feigned obedience and deference shows that Esther knows, from Vashti's experience, that the king requires public displays of obedience. Esther co-authors, if you like, this official transcript that shows ideological hegemony to be secure.

The official transcript of power relations is a sphere in which power appears naturalised because that is what elites exert their influence to produce and because it ordinarily serves the immediate interests of subordinates to avoid discrediting these appearances (Scott 1990:85).

It is easier for Esther to get what she wants by allowing the king to think that she is a willing participant in his power game of dominance.

This rather short selective analysis of episodes involving the characters of Vashti and Esther have shown that the text is able to undermine its own ideology, in this case the patriarchal ideology.<sup>10</sup> This patriarchal ideology is embodied in several ways, through Vashti's banishment by a host of male advisors, through the lack of a speaking voice for Vashti, through the sex contest of beautiful virgins etc. The character of Esther, however, shows up the shaky ground on which this patriarchal narrative voice is based. It is both the language of the text (as shown in Esther's feigned obedience speeches) and my own womanist reading that subverts the text's apparent patriarchal ideology. I would argue therefore that although the narrative voice seems to lean on the side of patriarchy, it is subverted by its own language, and that of the reader's ideology, hence it becomes an unstable ideological voice. Later on in the dissertation, in a more thorough investigation of the character of Esther and Vashti, and when engaging with the way in which women readers within faith communities interact with the text, the patriarchal ideology of the text will be shown to be even more unstable. This short examination was simply to set the scene for where the ideological narrative voice is positioned with regard to gender, and how the voice in the words of Barrett (1995:272) can be "challenged, reproduced, transformed." Having shown how the narrative voice is positioned with regard to gender, I now move to a discussion of how the narrative voice is positioned with regard to issues of ethnicity.

### ***Ethnicity, Ideologies, Power***

In the Introduction, I asserted that it is helpful and possible to use postcolonial literary tools in the analysis of the text of Esther. Before embarking on the task

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<sup>10</sup> I concur with West (2002:194) therefore that the text has grain. However, I prefer to think that the grain is like a tartan piece of fabric, where the brightest color (un) determines the grain.

of appropriating postcolonial theories in our analysis, it would be appropriate to establish the legitimacy of applying modern postcolonial categories and concepts to ancient texts of colonisation, such as the book of Esther. Sugirtharajah (2001:251-258) has outlined at least three important functions that postcolonial criticism can serve in Biblical studies. For our purposes in this dissertation the first two are most important:

[First] it will revalue the colonial ideology, stigmatisation and negative portrayals embedded in the content, plot and characterization...The second task of postcolonial criticism is to engage in reconstructive readings of Biblical texts. Postcolonial reading will reread Biblical texts from the perspective of the postcolonial concerns such as liberation struggles of the past and present; it will be sensitive to subaltern and feminine elements embedded in the texts; it will interact with and reflect on postcolonial circumstances such as hybridity, fragmentation, deterritorialization, and hyphenated, double or multiple, identities.

The proposals made by Sugirtharajah, above, correspond in significant ways (though they are not the same thing) to Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutic of suspicion and hermeneutic of revision, respectively. The first task of postcolonial criticism is to expose the colonial ideologies in the text. The second is to read from the position of the colonised and to recover, as it were, either those neglected voices in the text, or those voices that are present but are subsumed by the dominant voice in the text. This is how I propose to use postcolonial methodology in my reading of the book of Esther.

Dube (1997:14) drawing on Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's work, asserts that a postcolonial setting,

covers the period beginning with the arrival and occupation of an imperial power, the struggle against it, independence, and post-independence – a continuity which remains valid with the persistence of imperial domination...post colonial texts are born in settings of intense power struggle and they articulate that struggle.

In terms of setting (assumed by the narrative), the book of Esther does not fit directly into the category of a postcolonial writing. This is because the oppressor is not in the land belonging to the oppressed. Rather, the oppressed are living in the land of the oppressor. We know from Biblical history that the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem were carried into exile by the Babylonians when the Temple was destroyed around 587 BCE. Babylon was eventually defeated and taken over by the Persian ruler Cyrus who allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem. However, some of them did not return and we pick up the story of Esther and the Jews who did not return, under the reign of Xerxes in about 486 BCE. We do not know why the Jews did not return, though some scholars speculate that life in Jerusalem was even harder after the Jews returned.<sup>11</sup> Even if life was easier for those who remained behind, the imperial setting in the book of Esther is nevertheless dominating. As Wyler (1997:115) asserts:

Esther is a book about an empire ruled by absolute power, where imperial laws are irreversible. Esther is also a book about how the king, as a personification of that absolute power, and the ruling class around him, deal with those who dare to disobey.

The question that we need to ask in determining the ideological voice of the narrative with regard to ethnicity is to what extent does the narrative voice in the book of Esther promote the colonial mentality? In other words to what extent is the narrative voice in the book of Esther an imperial voice? Dube

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<sup>11</sup> See Bush (1996) for further details on this theory.

(1997:16-17) puts forward some insightful characteristics of colonial literature. A good gauge of the extent of the colonizing voice would be to test it against some of the characteristics which Dube provides. The first feature of colonizing literature deals with characterizations. According to Dube, usually the colonizer and the colonized are sharply contrasted. The subjugated are depicted as helpless, evil, inarticulate etc. Basically, they are portrayed as completely “other.”

The inability of the colonizer to tolerate the “otherness” of the colonized is reflected in the fact that Esther is told by Mordecai not to reveal her Jewish identity. Moreover, this fact is most astutely reflected in Haman’s words to the king in 3:8:

There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.

Beal (1997:56) comments:

In a few words, those who are admittedly scattered and divided, difficult to locate, are fixed as one people (*am ehad*), that is divergent, anomalous (outside the king’s law and order) projected as the nation’s dubiously privileged image of alterity.

The second feature of a colonising text is that it presents an extremely gendered perspective of the subject. “The general picture is that imperialism is a male game with women characters articulating men’s power positions in it” (Dube 1997:17). Clines (1998), Wyler(1997) and Beal (1997) all argue convincingly that the impact of the ethnicity based conflict found in the bulk of the narrative is felt most acutely because of the gender based conflict with

which the story opens. The similarities between the gender-based conflict (chapter 1) and the ethnicity-based conflict (chapter 3) are striking, in that one almost knows what to expect in the latter conflict, because of the former. In the gender-based conflict, Vashti refuses to appear when summoned by the king. In the ethnicity-based conflict Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman (obedience is the rule of the king as Haman points out). We do not hear from either Vashti or Mordecai why they refuse to obey, though in Mordecai's case the servants speculate that it is because he is a Jew. Memuchan appeals to the king to banish Vashti on the basis that because of the disobedience of one individual all women will disobey. So a decree is sent out not only for Vashti but also to all the women in the kingdom. Haman appeals to the king, without even citing Mordecai as the individual who disobeys. He simply, on the basis of the disobedience of one individual, appeals to the king to pass a decree that will annihilate all the Jews. The king, on the advice of Memuchan, passes an irreversible decree banishing Vashti and ordering all the women to obey their husbands, and on the advice of Haman, passes an irreversible decree that annihilates not just Mordecai but all the Jews. The power relations in the story and the absolute power that is held by the royal males is established as a response to the disobedience of one individual in both the gender-based conflict and the ethnicity-based conflict. We almost know what to expect from the king when he is informed of the Jews' apparent disobedience with regard to his orders. As Beal (1997:57) points out:

Whereas the first law in chapter 1 was brutally explicit concerning its sexual politics ('every man should act as chief in his house'), so here the orders are chilling: 'to wipe out, to slaughter, and to annihilate all Jews, from youngest to oldest, children and women, in a single day [*yom 'ehad*; one day for one people]...and to plunder them for spoil (3:13).

Hence, the reader can only understand the absolute nature of the power relations operative in the text because of the story of Vashti, and consequently the story of Esther. Beal (1997:13) observes that in the book of Esther, “Representations of the other in terms of gender are inextricably linked to constructions of the other in terms of ethnicity.”

A third feature of a colonising text is the feature of travelling. Usually it is the coloniser who has travelled to the land of the coloniser, though in some cases such as in the case of Esther, “the subjugated may travel to the lands of their masters, but as powerless strangers, such as exiles, slaves, servants, who depend on the benevolence of their masters” (Dube 1997:16). One of the most striking features here is that usually the narrative texts construct both the coloniser and colonised to accept the legitimacy of their respective positions. This third characteristic is also featured in the book of Esther, where it is evident that the exiles<sup>12</sup> Mordecai and Esther have accepted their positions in the empire, and not only have they accepted their positions, but they actually serve the empire – Esther in her capacity as queen, and Mordecai, in his capacity as administrator and courtier. In fact Mosala’s heaviest critique of the book of Esther is that it does not provide a liberative political ideology. He argues that it simply provides a pure survival strategy (1992:8).

The three features of colonial narrative provided by Dube, and identified in the text, seem to suggest that there is a strong colonial or imperial narrative voice in the text. As with my arguments concerning the patriarchal voice in the text, I want to suggest that this is not the only voice that speaks on this issue. It is possible to recover the covert narrative voice with regard to ethnicity, by using the tools of postcolonial literary analysis, which allow for the development of strategies to de-colonise the text. Here, I propose one such strategy.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note the connotations of the word exile in its context of the conquering and colonization of Judah and Jerusalem. Hence, Esther is not only a story of exile but one of colonization too.

An obvious strategy for de-colonising the text is simply to view it as a farce or as Berlin (2001:xix) suggests, as burlesque.<sup>13</sup> She defines burlesque as:

an artistic composition...that for the sake of laughter vulgarises lofty material or treats ordinary material with mock dignity. The lofty material that Esther vulgarises is the Persian empire and the Persian court...A major policy decision, the annihilation of the Jews, is made casually; but a small domestic incident, Vashti's non-appearance at a party, becomes a crisis of state, with all the bureaucratic trappings that can be mustered.

The comic element is therefore intertwined with both the gender and the ethnic concerns of the text. At face value, chapter 1 might seem to praise the might of the Persian patriarchal system and its ability to marginalize a woman that dares to try to be in conflict with that system. However, the very nature of the way in which that marginalisation occurs makes it almost laughable. As Beal (1997:16) asserts, on the one hand, chapter 1 exposes the "vulnerability of the patriarchy that it is presenting, and, on the other hand the extremes to which the male will go in order to maintain the woman-as-object." Therefore as the text "makes a farce of royal masculine power relations, it encourages identifications with that royal power's ultimate *abject*," who in this case is Vashti. Understanding the vulnerability of the power that the males claim to be absolute, contributes a great deal toward recognising that a system, which is that vulnerable, is one that is unstable.

Jones (1982:437) makes the point that we should not object to the way in which women (and I would add Jews) are treated in the book because to do so would be to miss that the "objectionable features of the book are deliberate absurdities which the author has used skilfully...the author is not praising the Persian

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<sup>13</sup> Note that my decision to read Esther as political novella as proposed in the first chapter still remains. Burlesque, or more appropriately satire, as I argue, become the sub-genres of the book.

court, but laughing at it.” Utilising the comic element can be one way of de-colonising the text, though I am not so sure of how valuable such a strategy is in the South African context. Although I can see the motivation for Jones’s call for a recognition of the humour in the book’s opening chapter, especially with regard to the way in which the women are treated, I nevertheless have to wonder whether the humour that Jones is advocating remains when the issue turns to one of the genocide of an entire ethnic group. Yes, the ruling class’s insecure power is laughable but it is also lethal. As South African readers our antennas immediately go up with such an interpretation, especially given our painful past of random killings based on arbitrary factors such as race, class, gender and ethnicity. Hence, as plausible as Jones’ argument might sound, it is precisely the instability of the Persian court that makes the situation more dangerous. As was shown in the case of Vashti, this kind of unstable and vulnerable power leads to irrational and harmful decisions that affect not only the perceived perpetrator but an entire class of people – in Vashti’s case, all the women in the empire, and in Mordecai’s case, the entire Jewish nation. Hence, rather than use comedy as the de-colonising strategy, I would rather use satire.

Berlin (2001:xix) aims to steer clear of the term satire in describing the text, because she says that the purpose of the description of the Persian court is comedy, not critique. In other words, the element of critique is what distinguishes satire from comedy. I think that through the comic element a significant critique of the court emerges, especially through the actions of the two female principal characters, Vashti and Esther. My argument therefore is that in our context, given our painful past of both colonisation and apartheid, we cannot afford to view the text as farce. The element of critique is crucial, and I have shown through an analysis of the gender and ethnicity based conflicts that within each of the conflicts there also exists an inherent critique. It is only when one reads through a gender and ethnic sensitive lens that one can extract this critique from the text.

At the same time, moving on from the Persian ethnic-cleansing, to the Jewish ethnic-cleansing, one has to point out that sometimes the element of critique does not exist within the text itself, but with the reader. It is here that Fowl's argument that the reader is the location of ideology is partially true. The text does not provide any apparent disapproval of Esther's request for a second day of killing in 9:13. This obviously does not sit comfortably with South African readers, especially since the request is for the 'other' race which is not "chosen" to be put to death in their own land (Masenya 2001: 27). Jones (1982:180) argues that the second day of killing is only a "deliberate hyperbole... and those who are offended by the blood and by the so-called Jewish nationalism are either literalists or acting as if they were." Jones' arguments are not helpful the way they stand. I think that even if the request was just for literary effect, we who live with the Bible as "sacred Scripture" have to live with the effects. The killing of 55 Palestinians and wounding of a further 170 on February 25 1994, by Baruch Goldstein, after just celebrating Purim by listening to the annual reading of the book of Esther, in his local synagogue, perhaps indicates the transcendent effects beyond the text.<sup>14</sup> Hence the satirical element, I would argue, can only be acceptable as a de-colonising strategy, within the framework of theory that allows for critique that lies outside of the text as well. In other words there must be an element of critique regarding Esther's undesirable actions which shows what happens to power when it becomes corrupted. The de-colonizing strategy deals with the argument that the Jewish ethnic cleansing is where the "ideology of the text" has always been heading.

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<sup>14</sup> "Gunman slays 20 at site of mosque, Israel reports say" *New York Times* (late edition – Feb 25 1994) cited in Jobes (1999:27).

### *Class, Ideologies, Power*

Masenya (2001:26) argues “the class portrayed in this document cannot be helpful to many African women whose socio-economic conditions render them largely invisible.” A close examination of the narrative reveals that Masenya’s objection to the book’s class position is valid. It is certainly a court tale, and as Mosala (1992:7) reminds us, the text is silent on the conditions and struggles of the non-rulers: peasants, serfs, and the underclass. The excesses with which the book opens certainly suggest a class of people who are indeed wealthy. Mosala and Masenya would argue that the narrative then, is related through a voice that seems not even able to acknowledge that other people beside the ruling elite existed in the empire. Poor and marginalized women therefore will find it difficult to identify with the character of Esther.

If this is the only dominant voice in the narrative concerning class, then the challenge will be to see how poor and marginalized women actually do interact with the text. From my brief encounters with such women on the book of Esther, I believe that they are more interested in the process of the “rags to riches” story. This will be tested in the Bible Study groups.

The issue here is, to what extent can African women identify with the other voice of struggle in the text and not just the dominant voice of the ruling elite. The struggling voice also articulates a truth, about what it is to be a woman with no power. The process by which Esther becomes queen raises gender issues, but her struggles are struggles that most women, especially African women can identify with. This is because Esther was not always queen. In fact she was in one of the most disadvantaged positions a person could be in. She was exiled, an orphan and a woman. She was an outsider and in terms of class, probably one of the lowest in ranks. White (1989:167) argues that,

With no native power of her own owing to her sex or position in society, Esther must learn to make her way among the powerful and to co-operate with others in order to make herself secure. She uses whatever means are available for her to survive in such an environment where the laws of the king are irreversible.

Even though her actions can be criticised for not being revolutionary, I think that she shows how one can transcend class boundaries without getting thrown out of the system completely. It was a matter of survival. Mosala (1992:8) criticises this survival strategy and believes that the solution is not acceptable because it is not underpinned by any liberative political ideology, and that Esther is eventually incorporated into the feudal haven of the king. Mosala is correct in assuming that African women will not readily identify with the non-liberative class ideology prevalent in the text. My argument is that this is not the only voice in the text. There is also one of struggle, and the class struggle is tightly intertwined with both the gender and the national struggles. This is the voice that women can identify with.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the issue of ideology in Biblical texts is a complex one. At least three important trajectories emerged concerning ideology in the Biblical text. These three, I have shown through my analysis, are not mutually exclusive trajectories. Rather they each interact with and inform the other trajectories. The first suggests that literary products, even Biblical narratives, embody and manifest particular ideologies. This was demonstrated in the investigation of the functions of the characters of Vashti and Esther. It is clear that the text speaks with a particular patriarchal voice, by banishing the woman who disobeys the king, and replacing her with one who is apparently docile and subservient. It is in the choosing of the “better” woman

than Vashti, in the person of Esther, the one who is compliant with patriarchy that the patriarchal ideology comes forth most strongly.

The second trajectory shows that the text can contain more than one ideology. The text itself, through the strategic use of language, shows Esther to be much more than docile and subservient. The defiance of the patriarchal voice is ironically embedded in the very language which she uses to flatter the patriarchal ego. In other words, the “language within the language” is part of what defines this second trajectory of thought with regard to ideology.

Finally, Fowl’s assertion that “texts do not have ideologies, only readers do,” cannot be underestimated. Although I submit that this is only partially true, the reader’s own ideology informs, to a large extent, the way in which a text is interpreted. My own ideologies concerning gender, ethnicity and class have been clearly (and overtly) demonstrated in this chapter. As a woman with a womanist agenda seeking gender-social transformation in my community of faith, I have read the text with this particular focus in my mind. This has plainly demonstrated the point that readers’ ideologies influence the way in which a text is interpreted.

So, in this chapter I have problematized the notion of the existence of a monolithic ideology in a text. My arguments have raised questions about meaning – how it is derived, produced, negotiated. I have shown that texts do have their own ideology, that the ideology is not always singular and that readers, depending on their own ideological positioning, either activate existing ideologies in the text, or they read against the grain of the text completely. These processes do not always occur independently of each other but sometimes overlap, and interact with each other.

Further by suggesting that all readings are ideological, I realise that I have “destabilised the centre of Biblical scholarship,” by not subscribing in

Schüssler Fiorenza's words to "the hegemonic politics of Biblical studies" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:7). The kind of reading that overtly acknowledges these ideological underpinnings might not be well accepted in the academy. In fact, Jobes (1999:72) critiques readings such as those offered by Mosala, and dismisses them as "ideological." I quote her at length because I believe that her response is typical of the responses that my reading may receive from academic circles especially, though not exclusively, western ones. She argues:

We can gain valuable insights from listening to readings of the Biblical texts from others who have been shaped by experiences significantly different from our own. However, such readings must not be confused with the authoritative message of the Biblical text as intended by its author, which must form the basis of normative application in our lives today...The threat of genocide faced by the Jewish people in Persia and the struggles of black women in South Africa may be two examples (out of countless many) of the horrific power of evil, but their respective historical locations, and the issues specific to each must be respected.

One of the central aims of my dissertation is to show how the kind of literary reading I propose can be helpful towards a process of gender-social transformation in our communities. I do not believe that this can be done without taking into consideration the context of the readers. Showing how the ideological voices in the text can be multivalent depending on the location of the interpreter, in this case South African Indian women, demonstrates that the reading strategies of (South African Indian) women are themselves an act of resistance, not just to the ideologies inscribed in texts as suggested by Mosala, but to the ideologies of reading inscribed in the academy as a whole. In doing so we dispel the notion that feminist studies "misuse scientific methods in corroborating their preconceived and predetermined results and hence are ideological, with ideology being understood as 'false consciousness'"

(Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:6). I define my womanist stance along a similar wave of thought as Schüssler Fiorenza – that is, as a “ theory and practice of justice that seeks not just to understand but to change relations of marginalisation and domination”(1999:7). The fact that gender-social transformation is an end-goal of my interpretation is indicative of this. This goal can only be achieved when we recognise that there can be multiple ideological voices in the text.

Reading, Castelli et al (1995:302) argue,

is an ethical act that involves an encounter between reader and text, an encounter that is always situated within individual lives and institutional systems. This means that some readings are “better” than others. Better ideological readings are those that support and encourage positive social change that affirms difference and inclusion.

## CHAPTER 3

### PLOTTING THE NARRATIVE OF ESTHER<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter, I argued that narratives construct ideology in a particular way, and the interaction of the reader's ideology with that of the ideology constructed through the text is what produces meaning. At the same time, I argued that although the text might seem to construct particular ideologies, these ideologies are rendered unstable through the readers' interactions with them. In this chapter I demonstrate how this occurs in the book of Esther through an examination of the way in which the narrative is plotted and the ongoing plotting of the narrative by the reader.

#### *Plot vs. Story*

Brooks (1984:1) defines plot as:

The design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning...plot is the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression.

Brooks' early definition of the term plot clearly demonstrates that the plot is a powerful component of any literary work. It has the power to affect the way in which a reader interprets the narrative, since according to the above definition it is the plot which directs the reader from one event to the next. The way in which we are directed from one event to another is of crucial

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<sup>1</sup> I rely on some of the earlier work I have done for my MA thesis on the book of Ruth for this and the next two chapters, in which I develop those ideas further. See Nadar (2000b).

importance when analyzing the plot of any narrative. Brooks' definition also demonstrates that the concept of narrative time is intricately linked with that of plot and that time plays an important role in the way in which a plot is worked out. Temporal sequence is central to our understanding of the concept of plot for the simple reason that the term plot does not have the same meaning as story. Story signifies the events that happened, and the time sequence is preserved. Plot, on the other hand, signifies the way in which the author chooses to tell these events. The order of the events, the amount of time spent on each event and the words that are chosen to narrate the events are all clues to the way in which a plot is worked out. In Brooks' words (1984:14) "the plot, therefore, places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity."

Another useful way of explaining the distinction between the plot and the story is to use the concepts put forward by the cognitive psychologist William Brewer who studies the way in which people understand and make sense of stories. Brewer (1985:167) uses the concept of *event structure* to signify the order in which events actually happened, and the concept of *discourse structure* to signify the order in which these events are told. In other words there can only be one *event* structure, but there can be a number of *discourse* structures, and the way in which the story is told depends on the way in which the author chooses to work out the plot in the narrative. In other words *event* structure could be a signifier of the *story* of Esther, and *discourse* structure could be the signifier of the *plot* of the book of Esther. Hence, plot is that which shapes narrative discourse in a dynamic way – that which pushes the narrative forward.

Many literary critics, writing on plot, often choose to use the distinction made by E.M. Forster in his classic *Aspects of the Novel* (1976:87) to illustrate the above point more clearly. He says: "the king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a

plot. The element of causality is what distinguishes a plot from a story. This element of causality is often worked out by means of representing the characters and the events to the reader with the intention to impact in a particular way, often in a way that suits the ideological assumptions inherent in the narrative. As was shown in the previous chapter, however, this does not imply that the reader is simply a passive recipient of the ideologies of the narrative. In other words, I would argue that our views on monarchy, marriage or even grief might ultimately decide whether or not we feel sympathy for the queen in Forster's example. Therefore, even though the plot is obviously structured in a certain way to influence the reader (through various sources such as the voice of the narrator, the actions of characters, various motifs, and through the dialogue between the characters), ultimately it is both the text's rhetoric combined with the reader's own interpretive strategy based on past expectation (other texts) and the reader's personal location that leads to meaning. As argued in the previous chapter, all three processes are equally important and have to be held in tension with each other so that we might gain meaningful interpretation from a text.

### ***Reading for the end***

On the level of the text, the path that leads to this meaningful interpretation is the plot. In other words, reading for the plot means reading for the end – what is known in literary terms as a *teleological* progression. Fewell and Gunn (1993:105) suggest that an analogy can be drawn between the way a reader experiences the classic plot pattern and Freud's pleasure principle. In other words, reading for the plot is goal-oriented and we read to "get to the end because the end will make sense of what has gone before." What makes the plot interesting are the obstacles that stand in the way of what the reader might perceive to be a satisfactory ending. Bennett and Royle (1995:44) term this the "paradox of digression." They assert that, "one of the

paradoxical attractions of a good story, in fact, is often understood to be its balancing of digression, on the one hand, with progression towards an end, on the other." In other words the resolution of the complications through various skillful artistic techniques defines a good plot.

Green (1982:55) outlines three important aspects of a good plot. She asserts that firstly, a plot must be continuous and flowing so that the audience understands at all times what is going on. Secondly, the plot must have some kind of suspense in it both for the audience and the characters. And lastly when the climax has been reached the audience must be able to trace back the events that brought them to the end.

Similarly, Fewell and Gunn (1993:102) assert that the plot may be charted most simply with three basic categories that correspond to Aristotle's famous "*beginning, middle and end.*" These categories can be equated to the terms exposition, conflict (complication), and resolution. The exposition sets up the events which initiate the main complications of the narrative. Conflict obviously, follows up on the disorder or incompleteness set out in the exposition. The conflict situation then moves through various stages until a satisfactory resolution is reached.

### ***Multiple beginnings...multiple endings***

Although Fewell's and Gunn's categories of analysis might suit most narratives, the book of Esther does not fit well onto these grids of analysis. This is because it is not that easy to divide the narrative neatly into exposition, conflict and resolution. As in the previous chapter, where I argued that it is not possible to find a monolithic ideological viewpoint in the narrative, in terms of plot, it is also not possible to argue for the existence of a singular exposition, conflict and resolution in the narrative as well. Depending on where one's focus is on when one is reading, the

narrative might provide us with multiple expositions, conflicts and conclusions. Bennett and Royle (1995:48) suggest, through the use of a quote from the old man in Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987:124), that stories own us and direct us where to go:

The story is our escort; without it we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs.

I concede that stories direct us, but I argue that the direction is not singular. It is as if the story points us in multiple directions, and depending on where our particular positioning is we follow that particular route on the way to meaning.

This point is most noticeably made when we ask the question where does a narrative truly begin? Bennett and Royle (1995:1) are also interested in this question. They ask whether a text begins when the author first conceives the idea; whether it is when the author first puts pen to paper; whether it begins when the reader picks up the text and begins to read; whether it begins with the narrative's title, or with the first word of the so-called "body" of the text. All of these are important questions. Given the strong emphasis that I place on reader-response criticism in this dissertation, my first response might be that it is when the reader picks up the narrative and begins to read. That is when the text is given life. But, texts are also already begun within the narrative world itself. Meaning is only gained when the reader begins to engage her/his world with the narrative world of the text. The resultant engagement<sup>2</sup> between the world of the reader and the world of the narrative is what pre-occupies scholars such as myself, seeking gender-social transformation. In subsequent chapters I will be dealing in more

detail with the reader. Here I am particularly interested in the text, and particularly in where the narrative in Biblical text begins.

Of course, the narrative of Esther begins with the account of Vashti. Yet, Beal (1997:16) says that when he asks his college students in introductory Biblical studies courses to give a synopsis of the book of Esther, they usually completely leave out the story of Vashti.<sup>3</sup> I have had similar experiences in the classes which I teach in the Biblical studies department.<sup>4</sup>

Beal (1997:16) argues that the reason both scholars and students alike forget about the character of Vashti is that they read the first chapter much in the way that a formalist Biblical scholar would. In other words, they read Vashti's episode only as a prologue to the narrative. They see her as a character that essentially has to be dispensed with in order to make space for the real and permanent cast members and hence the real and permanent narrative. The question then is: if Vashti's story is not the real and permanent story then where does the real and permanent story begin? Most scholars and lay people alike will argue that the real story begins when

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<sup>2</sup> This engagement is not always necessarily a balanced one. In other words, not all parts of the equation namely, the text, the deconstructive text and the reader, share equally in the process of interpretation. In each case, the weighting is different.

<sup>3</sup> The Talmud indicates that the rabbis were also interested in the question of where the beginnings of the narrative lie. Nevertheless, they too (not surprisingly) forget Vashti. Berlin (2001:xxiii) says that the rabbis attempt to define a minimum required reading that must be recited during Purim, through a midrashic interpretation of Esther 9:29: "Queen Esther, daughter of Avihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority..." The rabbis are interested in the term "authority" and whose authority is being referred to. In Talmud B Megillah 19a, Rabbi Meir says it is the authority of Ahasuerus, therefore the reading should begin when he is mentioned; Rabbi Judah says it refers to Mordecai's authority and therefore the text begins when he is mentioned; and Rabbi Yose says reading should only begin when Haman enters the story. Berlin (2001:xxiii) points out that although the rabbis may not have "been given to literary analysis", they introduce three critical junctures in the main plot. They recognize, she says, the prologue introducing Ahasuerus, the introduction of Mordecai the hero, and of Haman, the villain. Both the rabbis and Berlin agree that the first two chapters are merely prologues to the story hence forgetting the crucial story of Vashti, not to mention Esther.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, once, after preaching a sermon at our chapel service, I discovered that even professors of theology did not know who Vashti was!

Esther enters the narrative. This is because in response to the question, “What is the narrative of Esther about?” most people would answer that it is about the salvation of the Jews. They would be partially right since that is where the bulk of the narrative is centered. If we maintain that the main narrative is about Esther and how she saves the Jews, then Vashti’s story is simply an exposition. Her story becomes peripheral to the main narrative – in Beal’s words, it simply becomes the framework – and a framework is exactly how we understand the framing of a picture. It is the picture that is important, not the frame.

The plot then seems, on the surface, to be structured in such a way as to make Vashti’s episode the exposition, that which merely sets the tone for the rest of the “real” story, or the “body” of the text. It seems that the plot is under-girded by what Beal (1995:87) calls an “ideological force” which encourages us to forget about Vashti and to erase her from the text. However, there is another force that simultaneously urges us to remember her. This is because, as Beal (1995:87) goes on to maintain, each of us are already ideologically positioned even before we begin to read the text, therefore we might very well resist the positioning of the text. This is certainly true of my own reading of the text. As one who is committed to the liberation of women, it is difficult for me to collude with the text’s rhetoric and to simply see Vashti’s story as an exposition. Her courageous act (albeit with its consequent punishment) cannot and should not be relegated to merely an exposition status in the narrative. The question is, is it possible to justify such a position? How do we justify the importance of Vashti’s story to the narrative as a whole, without relegating it to the status of exposition? Beal’s answer to this question is to read against the grain of the ideology of the book of Esther by resisting the text’s tug of the reader into the patriarchal ideology of the text. In other words, Beal is suggesting that a reader who is positioned in terms of reading the Bible for liberation

might want to expose this ideological intent of the text, and to read against it, by seeing Vashti as a positive character.

Clines (1998:5), on the other hand, suggests that the clue for reading against the patriarchal grain of the text, lies within the text itself. In other words, he suggests that the way in which the text is written itself is a clue in deconstructing the patriarchal ideology that may be inscribed in the text. He asserts that an exposition usually carries mere details of time, place and setting. Vashti's episode, however, is not just an ordinary exposition that details time, place and setting. On the contrary, we are presented with a mass of background that outlines in detail the symbolism of power as personified in the king's and the advisors' actions. It also outlines the absolute power of the male ruling class and how this male ruling class deals "with those who dare to disobey, whatever motivation drives them to do so" (Wyler 1997:115). The fact that the major theme of power, which runs throughout the narrative of Esther, is presented in such detail in a mere exposition, should indicate that Vashti's story is not a mere exposition, but central to the narrative's purposes and themes. Its function is to set up the power relations inherent in the narrative. Clines (1998), Wyler (1997) and Beal (1997) all argue convincingly that the impact of the ethnicity-based conflict found in the bulk of the narrative is felt most acutely because of the gender based conflict with which the narrative opens. The power relations in the narrative and the absolute power that is held by the royal males is established as a response to the disobedience of one individual. Hence, the reader can only understand the absolute nature of the power relations operative in the text because of the story of Vashti.

Viewing Vashti's story as more than an exposition means that we have to account for the fact that there might be more than one complication in the narrative. If the contention were that the narrative is about the salvation of the Jews, then the complication would obviously lie in the threat of Haman

to the Jews. However, by setting up Vashti's episode as integral to the narrative as a whole we set up not just one but two complications – one at a gender level and the other on an ethnic level. In fact one could argue for a third level of complication – class. Certainly, Esther's status as an orphan and an exile is indicative of the importance of taking into consideration the issue of class.<sup>5</sup>

In the book of Esther, like with most other narratives, the plot is worked out through various motifs. In Esther the motif that plays out the strongest with regard to the issue of ethnicity, gender and class, is the motif of power. It is integrated into the narrative right from the outset, as is evidenced in the story of Vashti, and is played out through a "reversal of fortune pattern." There are clear indications in the narrative that any imbalance in power or honor in the narrative needs to be reversed, so that a state of "equilibrium" can be reached once again. Unlike in the book of Ruth, however, where this state of equilibrium is clearly defined in terms of Ruth attaining a husband and bearing children, I would argue, in Esther the state of "equilibrium" that we seek to return to is not so clearly defined, especially when one is reading through womanist lenses. In the following, through an examination of the motif power, I will demonstrate this point.

### ***The Motif of Power***

The way in which the motif of power is played out in the plot of Esther is dependent on the way in which we understand the concept of power, both in

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<sup>5</sup> To reiterate, all of these categories are central to the concerns of womanism. These are the categories that float the plot and the eventual resolution of these complications is what leads to the denouement of the plot. The purposes for separating these categories are merely in terms of their function, and not their worth. As indicated in the first chapter, in womanism the nexus of race and/or ethnicity, class and gender is affirmed. All of the categories impact in a mutually inclusive way in the lives of Black women. Hence, it is imperative to reiterate that the issues of gender, ethnicity and class need to be taken into consideration when one analyses the way in which the plot works to resolve the complications which the narrative sets out, since they play out not only in the resolutions but in the complications as well.

our own context and in the context of the narrative. Power has to be understood in the broader framework of the cultures and social locations within which it is found. However, to identify power solely with authority within any given order is to preclude the possibility of political transformation, Beal (1997:89) argues. In other words, if we see power as lying only with males, or with the monarchy, or the government in any given society, then the possibility of holistically interpreting the power structures within that society eludes us. Beal is arguing that to inextricably link power with law and authority is a reductionist move. He rather opts to understand the concept of power in cultures through the shift in perspective presented by Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (1992:4), in their study of the role of power in different cultures:

We perceived a possible social function to be accorded to paradoxes and ambiguities: culture was no longer a set of rules of conduct followed blindly which supported the organization of society, but a structure of conflicting premises within which struggle for dominance took place.

Foucault (1978:102) offers a similar theory of power. His theory of power is that it is “a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced.”

### ***Codes of Power***

Both theories of power presented above are helpful for the way in which we understand the motif of power and how it aids plot progression in the book of Esther – i.e. the ambiguity of the power relations. Logically it would appear that the theme of power is ultimately linked to the theme of honor and shame. Hence if one has power, one should have honor in society and if one is powerless then usually one's position is associated with shame. In

order for the king to show and maintain his power he needs to have honor bestowed on him through many public mechanisms. These are codes for his power. Clines (1998: 8-10) outlines, in detail, three of these codes which demonstrate the theme of power in the text.

The first is the alimentary code. There are altogether nine banquets in the book of Esther. In fact almost each episode in the narrative is marked by a banquet. The first and second banquets are held simply in the king's honor (1:1-4, 5-8) so that he might display his vast amount of power over the 127 provinces that he rules. The third banquet is the one that Vashti holds for the women. This is a separate banquet from that of the king's (1:9). The fourth banquet is thrown yet again by the king in honor of his new wife, Esther. In fact the banquet is named "Esther's banquet" (2:18). The fifth banquet is held when Haman and the king have sealed the deal for the genocide of the Jews (3:15). The sixth (5:5-8) and seventh (7:1-8) banquets are both given by Esther for the king and Haman, in which she tries to expose the plans of Haman to the king. The eighth banquet is held by the Jews in every city celebrating the edict given by Mordecai (8:17) and the ninth banquet is the celebration of the Jews when they have taken their revenge on seventy-five thousand Persians, by killing all of them (9:16-17). Clines points out that the feasting both by the Persians and the Jews is a code for power. In other words, those that participate in the feasting are those that have power.

Contrasted to this, Clines (1998: 9) further points out, there is also a negative mode of feasting – fasting.

Persian power, as expressed in the first edict, is responded to by the spontaneous fasting of 4:3, a symbol of powerlessness. Esther's further demand for a fast of unparalleled severity, no

food or water for three days or nights (4:16) conveys how absolute is Jewish powerlessness.

In the end, however, the Jews return to a mode of feasting suggesting that they have relinquished their status of powerlessness.

Such a reading of the narrative might tempt an understanding that the denouement of the plot depends on a progression from powerlessness to power on the side of the Jews, and from power to powerlessness on the side of the Persians. In fact Clines (1998: 9) makes this conclusion when he says that: “since banquets celebrate success, it is appropriate that the first five should be Persian banquets, and the last four Jewish banquets, for the story represents the movement of power from the Persians to Jews.” However, to understand the progression of power in this way is too simplistic. The theme of power is most certainly the vehicle for plot progression, but to understand this theme in dualistic terms, I suggest, is not to do justice to the complexities of the plot, and to miss the agency of the so-called powerless in the narrative.<sup>6</sup> The basis for this argument will become clearer in the rest of this chapter.

The second code demonstrating the theme of power is the code of clothing. Clines (1998:10) draws the distinction between the dress of the powerful as specified at the beginning of the narrative in chapter 1 and the sackcloth that Mordecai puts on when he is powerless against the Persian edict to kill the Jews. Again, Clines (1998:10) intimates the “reversal of fortune” pattern that is hinted at already even before the end of the narrative, in chapter 6, when Mordecai is resplendent in royal robes of blue and white, fine linen and purple. This change in dress in chapter 6 already indicates

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<sup>6</sup> Contra Mosala’s (1992:8) argument that power is gained neither by the Jews nor the women since “firstly the oppressed must be seen to have bought heavily into the dominant ideology in order that their survival struggle should find approval,” and “secondly, in this

the change in fortune that Mordecai, the Jew, will ultimately achieve at the end of the narrative. Interesting enough, and demonstrating once again that the theme of power should not be understood in simple dualistic terms in the narrative of Esther, Esther's clothes do not change, even when there is a threat to her fellow Jewish people. She remains a Persian queen dressed in royal garb. Ironically, when she has to approach the king to beg for the sparing of the Jews (Jews represented by Mordecai dressed in sackcloth) she puts on her finest royal robes. When she has to appear before the king in the harem she also has to have months of cosmetic treatments and put on fine garments. As an orphan, an exile, and a Jew her change in clothing, already at the harem, signifies a change in identity. Yet, at the palace, while acknowledging that identity and having to fight for the salvation of the identities of her people, her dress code indicates an ambivalence with regard to the power that this dress affords her. As a woman, her change in clothing (helped by Hegai the eunuch) is what makes the king desirous of her, ultimately leading to her becoming queen. Yet we know from Vashti's experience that being queen does not equate with being powerful. It is clear that the ambivalences regarding the power structures seem to be a hallmark of the narrative of Esther.

The third code demonstrating the theme of power is the topographical code – the question of who is on the inside and who is on the outside, indicating who has power and who does not. The Jews at the beginning of the narrative are obviously on the outside. The power seems to be concentrated on the inside of the palace and the only way to gain power, it seems, is to become an insider. Esther gains her power by becoming an insider. Mordecai (symbolizing the rest of the Jews) remains on the outside. Clines (1998:10) points out the clear symbolism of this in Mordecai's walking outside the harem (2:11); sitting at the king's gate (2:19, 3:2); unable to

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book the survival of the group is achieved first and foremost by the alienation of Esther's gender-power and its integration into the patriarchal structures of feudalism."

enter the king's gate in sackcloth (4:2). Even the topographical code however indicates something of the ambivalent nature of the power code in the narrative. This is evident in the character of Esther, who though geographically on the inside, remains an outsider as a woman and in her hidden identity as a Jew. How she negotiates this ambivalent position will be examined in detail in the chapter of characterization, but it is certain that it is only by negotiating her way through the system on the inside that the denouement of the plot is reached.

### ***The Motif of Power as a Vehicle for Resolving Complications***

#### *Gender Complications*

As mentioned before, there are at least two complications in the narrative. The one is on the gender level and the other on the ethnicity level. Vashti's disobedience is what causes the first complication, since the king and all his advisors perceive her act to be not just a major domestic crisis (i.e. a matter between wife and husband), but also a major state crisis – note in 1: 16-18:

16. Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and his officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

17. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to come before him, and she did not come.'

18. This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath."

So Memucan and the advisors attempt to resolve the problem on both levels. On the national side, they decide that the king should issue a decree that all women in the kingdom shall be obedient to their husbands, and that all the husbands shall be masters in their own homes. This decree would prevent women in the kingdom from following Vashti's example. So, it would seem that the advisors had solved the problem of other women in the kingdom emulating Vashti's example, by the simple issuing of a decree, which as we learn later in the narrative is irreversible. If we understand the working out of the plot in terms of an "equilibrium, disturbance, equilibrium" pattern, then the issuing of the decree seems to be one step towards a return to equilibrium.

On the surface, or first reading, this is how the plot is worked out. This may indicate that the plot might position the reader to accept this state as satisfactory for the furtherance of the plot. However, the question of how readers perceive this state of equilibrium or resolution is a contested one. One can argue that the king has, through the writing of this decree, exposed his unfair might and power in that for the disobedience of one individual, all the women in the kingdom have to suffer. Hence this might not be a satisfactory resolution to the complication at all. On the other hand, some readers might not see Vashti's action as a complication at all, therefore the king and his advisors' speedy reactions to write a decree to the whole state might seem just a bit rash. Nevertheless, these are the actions that seem to be needed once again to push this narrative forward. This poses grave interpretive problems for a womanist reader who has to decide how to deal with the way in which the plot operates. As noted in the previous chapter, Berlin (2001: xxii) makes the point that "the largest interpretive problems melt away if the story is taken as a farce or a comedy associated with a carnival-like festival."<sup>7</sup> I think that this is too simplistic a way to deal with

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<sup>7</sup> Note also, as pointed out in the previous chapter, that Jones (1982:437) makes a similar argument.

the problems that a womanist reader experiences with the text. Contrary to Berlin, I maintain, as I did in the previous two chapters, that we read Esther not in the genre of a comedy, but as a political novella with a sub-genre of a satire. I refer once again to the definition of a political novella, as cited in my first chapter:

if politics were the ‘use of power’ and the ‘abuse of power,’ a political novel would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it (Nyantara Saghal quoted in Rai 1996:189).

Given that power has been established as a major motif of the plot, and that the plot seems to progress only through the unravelling of this motif, viewing Esther as a political novella is certainly plausible. Hence, instead of laughing at the arbitrary power which the king displays, we should take it seriously, so that we can appreciate the actions of the powerless to overturn the decisions made by the king more fully. It is only through an appreciation of the actions of the powerless that we can appreciate the denouement of the plot, since that is the way in which the denouement is reached.

The second part of the complication (i.e. the domestic side) is also sorted out with great haste. Vashti is disposed off and the search is on for one who is “better than she.” Although Vashti is immediately deposed, the king takes a long time – almost three years – to decide whom his new bride is going to be. His power as king allows him to sanction a nation-wide search for a new bride. The reader expects that this time the king has to choose much more carefully than he did the previous time, for he could not end up with another wife like Vashti who disobeyed him and humiliated him publicly. Careful choice of a new bride should help in solving the complication of the old wife’s disobedience. For this, the reader expects

that the king would have carefully chosen criteria for the potential candidates for the position of queen. However, the only criteria it seems that they had to fulfill was that they had to look beautiful (hence the twelve months of cosmetic treatment that they had to undergo at the house of Hegai the eunuch) and they had to be good in bed (after spending a night with all the girls, the king would only call back a girl that “delighted” him [2:14]). Eventually, the king does find one who fulfills these criteria in the person of Esther, and it would seem that with the introduction of Esther, as the king’s new wife a state of equilibrium is once more reached in the palace. This is the way in which this plot seems to work – through establishing and re-establishing the power of the male over the female. Morris (1993:34) argues that

Plot structure represents a perception of reality. Traditional structures show female destiny to be the passive acceptance of restricted choice, stoicism in suffering and punishment for transgression.

The book of Esther certainly seems to contain the traditional plot structure that Morris is speaking about. This is indicated by Vashti’s deposal and Esther’s apparent submissive acceptance of the position of new queen. So once again, it is apparent that the king’s arbitrary power (in that he chooses a wife in a way that clearly not only violates her, but all the women in the harem) is the vehicle that drives the plot forward. This arbitrary power embodied through the character of the king, re-appears in all the following scenes of the narrative as well.

### *Ethnic Complications*

No sooner has Esther become queen than a new complication to the plot emerges. We learn in chapter 3 that there is a certain courtier, by the name

of Haman, who demanded public displays of obeisance to him. Mordecai, Esther's foster father, refused to bow down to Haman. At this Haman became enraged, and plots the destruction of not just Mordecai, but all the Jews. He tells the king in 3:8,

There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.

The king's use of his power to punish all the women for the "transgression" of one woman is reminiscent in Haman's request. It comes as no surprise to the reader, therefore, when the king once again arbitrarily uses his power and sanctions the death of all the Jews in his kingdom, by giving his signet ring to Haman with the command: "to do with them as it seems good to you" (3:11). This complication sets the suspense for the rest of the narrative. How will this complication be resolved? The reader is filled with tension at this point for we know from Vashti's episode that the king's edicts are irreversible.

The first and most obvious solution to the problem is Esther, since she is Jewish and she is married to the king, hence she is in the most likely position to help save her people. However, there are two obstacles standing in the way of her helping the Jews. The first is that the king himself does not know that Esther is a Jew. We are told in 2:10 that she has kept her identity a secret, just as Mordecai had commanded her to. The second is that law dictates that she cannot go before the king without first being summoned. In this kingdom everything functions according to honor and shame codes. The king's honor will be questioned by his wife's shameful act of approaching him without his permission. Apparently it was just as

unlawful to approach the king un-summoned, as it was not to approach the king when summoned. The text has already indicated through Vashti's and Mordecai's examples what happens to those who disobey the king's laws.

Our attention is drawn again to the virtually powerless status of queen Esther, who nonetheless has little power of her own, because she remains both female and a Jewish exile. Even as queen, her positional power is limited. This is a kingdom ruled by absolute positional power. Day (1998:113) points out that in this narrative, "power and obedience are enforced through official laws (men presiding in their houses, the way to approach the king, the decree against the Jews, bowing down to officials etc.)." Day (1998:113) goes on to argue that this type of power is circumvented by Esther's actions. She says: "power is thus shown to belong not to the authoritarian regime but to those who are threatened, who take initiative against this legal system."

The way in which Esther gains this power, however, is not in the way that we usually understand power. It is not in the sense of a "sum-zero equation: as one person gains more power, other persons must necessarily lose the power they might have had" (Day 1998:109). Rather, through Esther's actions of feigned humility to the king, her seemingly powerless discourse, and her apparent submissiveness to the king, while helping him to think that he is more powerful, actually gives Esther some power of her own, so that she is able to achieve what she set out to achieve. We shall examine how she is able to do this more carefully in the chapter on characterization. The fact that she is able to change the king's edict against the Jews, questions the might of the king's power. Foucault's (1978:102) idea that power is a "multiple field of force-relations" is apt here.

## *Conclusion*

The plot is one of the vehicles through which the narrative's ideologies are transported. Hence, we can also understand the plot of a narrative within the framework of three tracks of thought. The first suggests that plots contain inherent mechanisms which guide the reader from one event to the next until a "satisfactory" ending is reached. If we agree that this is the only way a plot functions then we accept, with regard to the patriarchal ideology in the text, that the plot of Esther wants to entice us into the "logic" of the story – that men are initiators of action and only men are the custodians of power. As Morris (1993:32) asserts:

To be heroic, plots tell us, men must embrace action, seeking to shape circumstances to their will, whereas for women heroism consists of accepting restrictions and disappointments with stoicism.

Hence we will view Vashti's story as peripheral to the "main" plot of Esther, and Mordecai as the hero, since he seems to gain credit at the end for Esther's actions as it is he who writes out the final edict.

The second track of thought suggests however, that even though the narrative seems to chart out a plot that seeks to direct us in a certain way, that actually the text itself contains elements, which if we follow carefully might lead us in another direction. For example as Clines has shown through his exploration of the (non) exposition in the narrative, the text wants to give more significance to the story of Vashti than mere expositional significance. By choosing to read the text in this way, "[we] oppose the ideological implications of classic plot structures, prising open

alternative spaces of freedom for women within the text against the often relentless logic of the story” (Morris 1993: 33). The apparent logic of the plot structure of the Esther narrative seems to imply that power lies with the males and the Persians only. However, a careful examination of the way in which the narrative progresses shows otherwise.

The final trajectory with regard to the way in which we view plots, is the role of the reader in the understanding of a plot. When reading the narrative through womanist lenses, Esther’s ascension to the throne, although to some might seem as buying into the patriarchal game, can also be seen as a victory. A womanist reader knows how to follow the plot of how she gets there, since womanists know how to survive, without being thrown out of the system. A womanist reader will be in tune with the plot developments that culminate in Esther’s gain of power in the end, even though this might seem to be at the expense of her gender power. For ironically, it is the ambiguity of the power relations in the narrative that float the plot. So, even though it might seem that Jews and women are powerless in the narrative of Esther, it is only through their acquisition of covert power that the denouement of the plot is reached. As Klein (1995:175) argues: “powerless women and Jews can invoke power as long as they maintain required appearances.”

In this chapter I have shown that plots are more complicated than merely the beginning, middle and end. They serve to point us in a certain direction leading to meaning, but this is not always a facile task, as plots meet and interact with readers, who have particular concerns, and are already “ideologically positioned” (Beal 1997:85). Hence even though the narrative of Esther might seem to be already plotted, it is the readers who are engaged in a process of constant plotting and re-plotting of the narrative.

## CHAPTER 4

### NARRATED TIME AND TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

Having dealt with the ways in which a plot is worked out in the narrative and the way the narrative is subsequently understood by the reader, I now move on to a discussion of another literary technique, namely the use of time in narrative. I will show how even though the way in which the literary technique of time might be employed in ways that align itself with the patriarchal ideology of a text, a womanist reader is able to deconstruct these devices both by drawing attention to them and by finding alternative ways to interpret and use them.

Noss (1993:309) points out that in any successful piece of literary art, time is a prominent feature. Whether it is in the relation of time in the narrative, the use of time as a structural device, or in the treatment of time as a theme, time plays an important role in a narrative. Bar-Efrat (1989:141) cited in Amit (2001:104), also points out the importance of time when he asserts that: "A narrative cannot exist without time, to which it has a twofold relationship: it unfolds within time, and time passes within it." In other words, time exists both outside of the text and inside of the text. The external time refers to the amount of time it takes to tell or read a story. Amit (2001:104-105) distinguishes between external time and internal time correlating the two with the terms "time of narration" and "narrated time." She points out that time of narration is shared by more or less all readers. A short story could take half an hour to read, or a longer novel might take many hours to read. Narrated time, she suggests, is what is in the hands of the author:

The author decides how to use this kind of time by choosing which period in the heroes' lives to depict, where to expand or

shorten time, and what comes after what – all according to the author's purpose and rhetoric (Amit 2001:104).

What Amit, Noss, and Bar-Efrat underestimate in their explanations of how time operates in the narrative is the role of the reader, and how the reader makes sense of the use of time in a particular narrative.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest, therefore, that there is more to external time, or time of narration, than simply how long it takes one to tell or read a story. Our understanding of external time should also include an understanding of how the reader makes sense of the *modus operandi* of time in narrative. By linking the reader as a participant in the temporal process of understanding and meaning in narrative, we give importance to the reader's own "temporal experience" as well.<sup>2</sup>

Ricoeur points out that narratives appeal to us because of their structured sequential setting, hence we are able to understand and identify with narratives because our own life experiences are also sequentially structured.

The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world...Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience (Ricoeur 1984:3).

In other words, narrative is formulated according to our perceptions of our experiences, our varied "realities." To summarize, time is of significance in a narrative on at least three levels. The first is intrinsic to the text, that is the way in which the author uses time to accentuate those points that are important to the author's purposes; the second and the third are extrinsic to

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<sup>1</sup> Amit (2001:104) does briefly say that "for readers, the perception of this time is essential to the understanding of the story," though she does not develop this idea further.

the text, the amount of time it takes to read a story grounds the story within our own time framework, but more importantly, the reader's understanding of the way in which time is used in the narrative, is of particular importance to the interpretation/s which the reader ultimately extracts from the text. In this chapter, through a close examination of the intrinsic features of time in narrative, I will show the importance of time to narrative and the different strategic ways in which time can be used to strengthen the central themes of the narrative. I will show how each of the intrinsic time structures are linked with the theme of power in the book of Esther. Having shown the importance of these structures in the process of interpretation, I will also show how the text itself, can undermine its own time structures, and how the reader can interpret the time structures of the narrative based on the reader's own temporal experience. A few useful distinctions are needed first.

### *Story Time vs. Narrative Time*

As indicated in the previous chapter, the concepts of time and plot are tightly woven together. The sequence of beginning (exposition), middle (complication), and end (resolution) is what enables the reader to make sense of narratives (even ancient Biblical ones) in our own times. Thus far I have been using the term narrative time, but in order to understand the impact which time has on the plot, it will be useful to draw a distinction between narrative time and story time in the same way that the distinction between story and plot was made in the previous chapter.

Brewer's (1985:167) concepts of event structure and discourse structure might help clarify this distinction. To restate, event structure signifies the actual order in which events happened, while discourse structure signifies the way in which the story is told. Most written narratives use discourse

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<sup>2</sup> Again this focus on experience is an important feature of womanist criticism.

structure. Discourse structure allows for a variety of viewpoints to be portrayed when presenting a story in a way that event structure cannot. The same can be said of narrative time and story time. In other words, story time and narrative time can be understood in the same way that event structure and discourse structure is understood respectively. The governing principle is the same for both concepts. We can reason, therefore, that story time uses event structure, while narrative time uses discourse structure. Genette (1980:19) makes this distinction when he defines narrative as the “text that relates the story.” In other words the narrative is the signifier and the story is the signified, in the same way that narrative time is the signifier and story time is the signified.

Thus the following three features (which do not apply to story time) are the defining aspects of narrative time. Genette (1980:19) has termed these three features, order, duration and frequency. Order refers to the way in which the events of a story are sequenced. Even though temporal ordering is important, narratives also contain flashbacks, fast-forwards and other deviations from linear time sequence. Therefore, it can be said that narrative time, unlike story time, is non-chronological. It allows for events to be narrated in different sequences from the way in which they actually occurred.<sup>3</sup>

Duration refers to the amount of time allowed for the telling of a particular event, and the amount of time allowed for the telling of a particular event is left entirely up to the author. The author can choose to relate something that happened over ten years in two sentences, and yet use ten sentences to describe an event that happened in two minutes. Therefore the way in which narrative time is used in one discourse structure might differ from the way in which it is used in another discourse structure, even though the event

structure can be the same for both discourses. Since time is crucial to the working out of the plot, the amount of time allocated to the narration of certain events can indicate the importance of those events to the narrative as a whole, or the degree of significance that the author wishes to place on certain episodes. It is also true to say that it is significant when very little or no time is accorded to a character or a particular incident.

Frequency indicates the choice to repeat certain words, phrases or incidents for particular effect. For example, in the book of Ruth the constant use of the epithet 'Moabitess' to describe the woman, Ruth is obviously meant to highlight her foreignness. Further, the repetition of an episode in the form of a summary after the incident has already been narrated, for example Ruth's retelling of the events of the threshing floor incident to Naomi at the end of chapter 3, also functions to highlight the significance of that particular incident to the narrative as a whole.

All the features described above reiterate the point that the story is the what, and narrative is the how. In the analysis which follows then, story time becomes subordinate to narrative time, since the representation that we have before us is a narrative of the story of Esther. In other words, we need to remind ourselves that although Biblical narrative is often portrayed and considered to be history,<sup>4</sup> "we are not witnessing a videotape of a particular incident, but a recounting of that incident in someone's artful words" (Berlin 1983:101). The sequence in which the story is told, the amount of time that the person allows for the telling of the story, and the repetition of words, phrases and events, are all clues to the way in which the text seeks to provide roadmaps, as it were, to the treasure of meaning. However, as I have indicated throughout the first few chapters, this is not a preserved and

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<sup>3</sup> It is true, however, that Biblical accounts generally follow a chronological sequence, since Biblical narratives generally purport to be historical narratives. When they do deviate from this norm "they are always significant and functional" (Amit 2001:110).

self-contained process. The text itself can subvert these roadmaps, or the reader can create another path to follow on the way to meaningful interpretation. Having established how the literary conventions of time work, I now turn my attention to each of these elements and how they function in the narrative of Esther.

### *Order*

The rearrangement of chronological sequence affects the act of reading. Narrative is linear in that it cannot present two events simultaneously, and therefore has to narrate one before the other. When an event that occurs at a latter time is presented first, the reader, unconsciously rearranges these events into chronological order. Berlin (1983:98) rightly asserts that though narrative is linear, reading is not. To reiterate, order is the term that is used to indicate that the sequence of events in the narrative is not the same as the sequence of events in the story.

In the book of Esther, this tool of narrative time functions in a different way. Although the events in the narrative are not rearranged chronologically (that is we are able to read them as a linear sequence), the way in which the linear sequence is arranged is significant for our interpretation of the narrative. To demonstrate this point, I will examine the prologue, and the epilogue of the narrative. In the chapter on plot it was shown that usually it is understood (by both literary scholars and casual readers as well) that the most important details of a narrative are presented in the so-called “body” of the narrative – the middle. All that is presented before and after the body is meant to be seen as setting and concluding details. The narrative highlights that which is crucial to the plot, and in terms of time sequence that which is most crucial to the plot is placed in the

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<sup>4</sup> History here being understood as an objective narration of events as they occurred.

middle of the narrative (and given the most time in the narrative as well) while the other information fades into background information.

These standard literary conventions function to draw the reader into the world of the narrative, by dictating a particular understanding of how the events are meant to unfold. This particular understanding prescribes the view that the prologue to a narrative is meant to set the scene, while the epilogue is meant to close or round off the narrative, hence the significance or the meaning of the narrative is not to be found in either the prologue or the epilogue, but rather in the actual tale itself.

However, as was argued in the chapter on plot, not all readers are allured into this narrative structure and readers may at times choose to resist it. For example a womanist reader might choose to resist the way in which the device of time in the narrative, seems to focus our attention on Esther more than on Vashti. Particularly, womanist readers might resist the positioning of Vashti's account as a prologue, hence as background information. Even though the text seemingly constructs Vashti's story as a prologue or background information, the detail with which her story is presented, actually projects the opposite effect.<sup>5</sup> Berlin (1983:95) asserts that:

[I]t is much more effective to give information to the reader when it is most useful or significant, or to link it (the story) with other

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<sup>5</sup> My proposal, in the first chapter, that we read Esther in the genre of political novella, also supports the theory that Vashti's story is more significant than a prologue. The novella genre is almost synonymous with the short story genre, except that it is usually slightly longer. The genre of the short story demands that not only are the events of the story related in a way that persuades the reader, but also in a manner that synthesizes the order of the events without taking away the essential characteristics of them. Therefore, a "limited viewpoint is required" (Shaw 1983:195), while, "the unity of time and place needs to be kept" (O'Faolain 1970:206). Vashti's story exceeds the requirements of the genre in which the narrative is presented and gives the reader much more than a "limited viewpoint." In fact the viewpoint is rather extended and long, indicating a deeper significance.

relevant information, rather than present it in the form of an annal or chronicle.

The fact that Vashti's story is told with so much information and is not just presented as an annal or chronicle provides a womanist reader with enough evidence to buttress the argument that Vashti is much more important to the narrative than merely providing backdrop or setting information.<sup>6</sup> In fact it could be argued that *duration* of time contends with *order* of time with respect to Vashti.

In the same way that Vashti's episode denotes more than a prologue, a womanist reader who is sensitive to the issue of power in the narrative might also see the description of Purim and the subsequent honoring of Mordecai at the end of the book as representing more than an epilogue. This can be demonstrated by examining the coda of the narrative. One of the elements of plot that was not discussed in the previous chapter was the coda. The coda is usually considered to be the postscript of a narrative. Bell (1996:5) comments that the coda is "an additional remark or observation that bridges the gap between narrative time and real time, and returns the conversation to the present." In other words it is the point at which the plotline ends and the narrative is transported into contemporary time. The coda in the book of Esther begins at 9:18 and ends at the end of chapter 10. But like the "prologue" to the narrative, the "epilogue" or the coda also does not follow conventional literary standards of the novella genre. It presents too much detail, for a segment that is simply supposed to say "and

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<sup>6</sup> For example Vashti's purpose is clearly different from the purpose of Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion who appear in the first chapter of the book of Ruth. They appear only in the background of the narrative and act as agents. "Agents are characters who are not important in their own right, but function as pieces in the background or setting, or as aids in characterizing the major characters" (Berlin 1983:85). Elimelech is clearly a piece in the setting as his death provides a reason for Naomi returning to Bethlehem. In fact the meanings of Machlon and Chilion's names point to their function in the narrative. "Weakening and pining" and "blot out and perish" (Sasson 1987:322) certainly suggest a limited purpose for their appearance in the narrative at all."

that was that” (Bell 1996:5). The “prologue” takes up a whole chapter and the “epilogue” a chapter and a half. This is certainly an indication that this epilogue is much more integrally related to the working out of the plot of the narrative than we might think – that it is not simply an afterthought. Hence, even though the festival of Purim is put at the end of the narrative, Purim is obviously the pre-occupation of the writer throughout the narrative.

Certainly the epilogue tells the story of how Purim came to be institutionalized as a Jewish festival, but it also does much more. The main function of the book of Esther has long been considered to tell the story of the origins of Purim. The fact however, that this is pushed to the end of the book does not signify a lack in its worth in relation to the narrative as a whole. Noss (1993:309) indicates that:

Perceptually, the author begins with the Festival of Purim, a commemorative event known both to himself [sic] and to his readers. But from the knowledge of the contemporary event, he steps back in time to locate his story at a particular point within a continuum.

The reason for locating the story of Purim to the end of the narrative is to relate it to the present contemporary context. This is quite typical of Biblical narrative in that the text transcends the world of the narrative into our own contexts, through varied bridging phrases,<sup>7</sup> and also through the way in which the authority of the Biblical text is viewed. This will be discussed later on in the dissertation. The point to be made now is that the order in which the events are narrated is usually meant to indicate its worth in the narrative. In the book of Esther, however, this literary convention is

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<sup>7</sup> For example the covenant made by God with Noah, never to flood the earth again, is also extended to all future generations too (Genesis 9:1-17).

challenged. The narration of the origins of Purim does not simply close off or round off the narrative. Rather it opens up the narrative in a way, inviting the reader to re-consider Purim in the light of the central theme of the narrative, which is power. So this epilogue, by relating the origins of Purim and its celebration does not leave the world of the text to make a point beyond it, but re-establishes a relationship within the text:

It strikes me that the reason why Purim is so preoccupied with themes of carnival and masquerade – with blurring identities and subverting traditional structures of authority and power – is that Purim is very close to the text. As a communal, liturgical interpretation, the festival of Purim highlights a particular preoccupation in the book of Esther with the art and politics of identity, especially with the ambiguities of ethnic and gender identity, and with the problematics of political orders that are based on those identities (Beal 1997:2).

Inherent, then, in the very festival of Purim, which some scholars have argued is the only reason for the telling of the story, are the main themes of the text of Esther, the most striking of which is power. Viewed in this way, the coda (containing the story of Purim), even though it appears at the very end of the narrative and thus may be conceived as unnecessary to the main plotline, becomes as important as the other elements of the plot, namely the exposition, complication and resolution.

To sum up, although the temporal order is preserved in the narrative of Esther, the order of events is not typically patterned according to typical literary conventions. A close examination of the way in which the prologue and the epilogue functions within the narrative of Esther has clearly illustrated this point. This becomes clearer when we examine duration of time in the next sub-section.

### *Duration*

The term duration indicates the amount of time it takes to tell parts of the story. The amount of time allocated to certain parts of the telling of the story, as stated previously, is obviously an indication of the degree of importance that the author wishes the reader to attach to the event. At the same time, it indicates something about the importance of the character involved and something about where the weight of the narrative falls. As shown in the previous sub-section on order of events, the amount of time allocated to the telling of the prologue and the epilogue which is supposed to be merely “setting” information is certainly indicative that they are important to the narrative as a whole.

In as much as there is significance in the amount of time spent to narrate events, it is also true that duration also serves the function of creating narrative tension and suspense. For example, often the suspension of time in narrative also lends dramatic effect. In the book of Esther there are many instances where time is suspended. This creates the space for the reader to ask: “what will happen next?” or how will this tension be resolved?” Noss (1993:315) highlights three points in the narrative of Esther at which time is suspended. The first is when messengers are sent out to announce the decree of the destruction of the Jews. We are told in 3:15 that the king and Haman sit down to drink. As they sit down to drink, time is temporarily suspended. In this suspension of time, the king’s and Haman’s arbitrary powers once again come into focus. The womanist reader is placed in an awkward situation by the narrative – in a drinking party while the genocide of the Jews has just been sanctioned. Although the intention might be dramatic tension, this suspension of time creates space for a womanist reader, sensitive to ethnicity issues, to question the idea that the king and Haman can sit down to drink after just authorizing the genocide of thousands of people based on the notion that they “are different from us.”

Hence, this narrative device of suspension of time serves to bring the abuse of power and the arrogance inherent in the ownership of that power, into sharp focus.

The second suspension of time, Noss (1993:215) points out, occurs when Esther, at her first banquet, delays telling the king her wish and invites him to a second banquet. Between the first and the second banquet the storyline is interrupted by two scenes. In the first scene Haman is taking family counsel concerning the gallows he should build for Mordecai. In the second scene Haman gives the king counsel as to the honor he should bestow upon the person whom the king has forgotten to honor. After giving the king counsel as to how this person should be honored, Haman goes home in despair, after having discovered that it is Mordecai that the king wished to honor. It is at this point, in the suspension of narrative time, that the king's messengers arrive to take Haman to Esther's second banquet, and that the storyline is once more resumed. Of course, this suspension of narrative time is no accident. These "aside" scenes are not merely digressions from the plot. They are certainly important to the narrative as a whole, or they would not have been narrated in the first place. Apart from the dramatic tension which they create, in that the reader waits for the time when this "aside" will be over and the main story can be returned to, it also paves the way for the victory that the Jews will ultimately achieve. This suspension in time foretells and pre-empts Mordecai's great promotion in the kingdom of Ahasuerus, as he is paraded in the streets.

The third suspension in time is what ultimately leads to the denouement of the plot. It occurs at Esther's second banquet. In this scene, after Esther has revealed the plight of her people, the king rises from the banquet and goes into the garden – (7:7). We are not told what the king does in the garden. So time is temporarily suspended while the king is in the garden. We only see the scene inside the banquet where Haman is begging for his life. The

action resumes again when the king returns to find Haman on the couch with his wife. The suspension of time is significant in that we are not given access to the king's thoughts. The reader has to 'fill in the gaps' as it were, because the king's reaction is what will decide the fate of the Jews. We know from the king's dealings with Memucan and Haman, that he cannot make decisions for himself. The suspended time allows the reader an opportunity to think of what the king's next move will be. Will he call his advisors together, or will he ask Esther for advice?

Whatever his thoughts were in those moments in the garden, the reader gets drawn into the narrative again when the king returns, and we are released from this temporary suspension of time. It turns out that we will not know what his thoughts were on the revelation that Esther had made concerning the edict against the Jews. For the king's reaction is not against Haman's actions concerning the Jews. A womanist reader is immediately aware of his reaction, which is based on feelings of insult – not at having been used by Haman in his vendetta against Mordecai, not for the honor of his wife, but for his own honor. The suspension of time should have allowed readers to conjure up many responses from the king, but the response that the narrative shows is not a likely response, given the circumstances. The question that remains for the reader is what would have been the king's reaction if he did not assume that Haman was assaulting his wife? Would he have accepted that situation, once his anger had abated? The failure of the king to respond appropriately, especially after a brief suspension of time, when he could have responded in a number of ways, demonstrates the weak character of the king.

In other words, although this suspension of time might have been intended for dramatic effect, a womanist reader is able to glean much more from this suspension of narrative time than just dramatic tension. Through this suspension of narrative time a womanist reader is more able to (de) value

the king's reactions upon returning from the garden, which are once again only directly related to his own male honor. Therefore, allowing a fair amount of time to lapse between the scenes and events that are crucially needed for the advancement of the plot is a contrivance of narrative time. Besides creating dramatic tension it allows the reader to gain perspective on the situation, and allows for a more in-depth perception of the characters. Frequency of time also helps sketch characters more perceptibly as we shall see in the next section.

### ***Frequency***

The term frequency indicates the repetition of some events or words several times in the story. In a short story, like *Esther*, one would imagine that this would be a difficult task, since there would not be enough time for repetitions, as the short story or novella genre is characterized by "singleness of effect and economy of means" (Reid 1977:54). However, the book of *Esther* is characterized by several "repetitions and reversals, climaxes and anticlimaxes"(Berlin 2001:xxiv). The repetitions in the narrative, besides heightening dramatic tension, also serve to highlight aspects of character and the main themes of the story. There are several examples of this in the text, which demonstrate how the device of frequency as with the other narrative devices of time, portray and deconstruct notions of power and ideology particularly with regard to gender in the text.

The question: "What is your wish and it will be done, what is your request, even to half the kingdom?" is posed four times in the narrative by the king to Esther. The first is when she approaches the king in his chambers, un-summoned. His question which asks her what her wish is, allows the audience to breathe a sigh of relief in that the king has not sanctioned her death for appearing before him un-summoned (as she believes in chapter 4).

The suspense is heightened even more when Esther does not give the king her request but instead invites him to a banquet.

At the banquet the same question is repeated. Here again the audience expects the denouement of the plot in Esther's answer, but she again delays her answer by inviting the king and Haman to yet another banquet. At the second banquet the audience's expectations are finally fulfilled when the king poses the question yet again, and finally Esther answers him, by exposing both her own identity and Haman's villainous plans.

However, even though Esther gets what she wants from the king, this is not the last time that we hear this question. In 9:12 after the Jews have already defended themselves, the king repeats his question to Esther once again. Berlin (2001:xxiv) points out that "by this point, the question begins to sound like the king's automatic response whenever Esther comes before him." There are at least two good reasons for the repetition. The first is pointed out by Berlin:

The quadruple use of the king's question emphasizes the feature of repetition through the doubling of scenes, and it underlines the main reversal of the story: the decree to annihilate the Jews is reversed to permit them to annihilate their enemies (Berlin 2001:xxiv)

The second reason is that it aids in characterization – both that of the king and Esther. With regard to the king, it highlights his arbitrary use of power once again, in that he is even willing to grant to Esther half of his kingdom, before even knowing what her request is. Esther's repetitive and recurring response to the king when he asks these questions is also telling of her character. The phrase "If it pleases the king, and if I have won your favor," appears three times in the narrative (5:8; 7:3; 8:5). We see just how

strategic Esther is through the repetition of this deferential language, in that she knows how far the king can be pushed before her request is granted.

Apart from repetition of questions and answers in the narrative there is also the repetition of words and phrases. These serve to highlight or bring into sharp focus the main themes and pre-occupations of the narrative. For example, Beal (1997:17) points out that the phrase “in the presence of” (*lifne or lepanayw*) occurs nine times in chapter 1 with reference to the king. “In each case, it carries a connotation of control: to be in the king’s presence is – at least ostensibly – to be under his control.” The repetition of these words several times serves to demonstrate the king’s pre-occupation with physical demonstrations of his power, and the consequences of refusing to be “in his presence,” when summoned as is shown in Vashti’s deposal.

To be “in the presence” of the king is as important as it is to be “pleasing” to him.

The narrative is dominated by the discourse of pleasing/displeasing, which is developed primarily through verbal and adjectival forms of the word *tov* (‘good,’ ‘pleasing,’ ‘to be good,’ ‘to be pleasing’) (Beal 1997:19).

Once again these terms are related to narrative action involving the king and they occur five terms in 1:10-22 alone. The repetition of these words serves to highlight the king’s control which he wishes to maintain over his people. The repetition of the word “please” emphasizes the point that in order for him to maintain that control, all his subjects (including his wife) need to please him.

The central theme of power is also reflected in the excesses of not just the actual descriptions of the court but in the words used to describe the court. As Berlin (2001:xxvii) notes, “when it comes to the language of Esther, the medium is the message.” In other words the repetitive language is meant to demonstrate the awesome might and excesses of the king’s powerful kingdom. Berlin goes on to point out that there are lots of “alls” (“All the people who lived in the fortress Shushan,” “all the provinces,” “all the women,” “all the Jews,” “all the king’s servants”). Dyadic expressions consisting of the same word used twice (‘*ish va- ‘ish*, “every man”; *medinah u-medinah*, “every province”; ‘*am va ‘am*, “every people”) are used often. Synonyms joined together (“officials and courtiers,” “the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty,” “light and gladness, happiness and honor”) are also used often (Berlin 2001:xxvii). These repetitions of keywords highlight not just the vastness and expanse of the king’s muscle and clout, but the difficulty that anyone who tries to oppose that might and power may undergo. In other words, by presenting the supremacy of the king in such an exaggerated and repetitive (sometimes redundant) manner the reader is able to appreciate the brave efforts of the poor orphan girl who takes on this system much more. These aspects of Esther will be examined in greater detail in the chapter on characterization.

Berlin (1983:97) notes that “narrative is a product of *selective* representation.” The device of frequency so regularly employed in the narrative of Esther illustrates Berlin’s point very aptly. This is because even though Esther is a short story or novella which requires that the story be told in quick succession, the writer nevertheless chooses to take the time to repeat *selective* key phrases, words and sentences, to demonstrate the main themes of the narrative.

### *Time as a Focus in the Narrative*

A final element of the use of time in narrative (and this is separate from the use of time as a narrative device) is the actual narration of time as a factor within the narrative itself. The book opens with a phrase that seeks to set the narrative in a concrete historical time, during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), and yet at the same time it suggests that the narrative was written later: “This happened in the days of Ahasuerus” (1:1). There are a number of doubts regarding the historicity of the narrative. It is not relevant for my purposes to dwell on this issue.<sup>8</sup> The point is that “chronological markers not only tell the reader how much time has elapsed, it may also serve more complex requirements” (Amit 2001:107). I will demonstrate by analyzing the significance of a few chronological markers below, how these time markers highlight the issues of power and gender oppression (particularly the issue of rape).

The Biblical text says in 1:3 “In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his ministers and officials.” We know, therefore, that it is in this period of banqueting (that is in the third year of his reign) that Vashti is deposed. The time marker: “after these things” (2:1) which begins the search for a new bride, does not indicate that too much of time has passed between Vashti’s deposal and the nationwide pursuit for a new queen.<sup>9</sup> The next time marker is found in the latter part of chapter 2:

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<sup>8</sup> There has been much written on the historicity of the book of Esther. For the most recent, see Bush (1996), Berlin (2001) and Bechtel (2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Bechtel (2002:28) who suggests that although the meaning of “after these things” is imprecise, “the scene has all the symptoms of the ‘morning after.’ Fox (1991:172) also notes that the “after these things” does not imply a long lapse in time as “Xerxes does not seem like the sort of person to persist in his anger for very long.”

16. "When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign,

17. the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

It is clear from this that four years have passed since the king began his search for a new queen, and before Esther "wins his favor." One of these years was spent preparing the virgins with cosmetic treatments. After her treatments the time came for each girl to go to the king's palace. Another time marker indicates the amount of time that the girl spent with the king. "In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Shaasgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines..." (2:14). This process goes on for three years before Esther is chosen as queen. The time markers in these chapters suggest at least two things. That the king takes 4 years to choose a new queen; that during this time, apart from the one year that the women spent receiving cosmetic treatments, he had sexual relations with each of the virgins (indicated by the fact that each of them went into the palace from the virgins' harem, spent a night with the king, and then returned not to the virgins' harem, but to the harem of the concubines).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Contra Jobes (1999:94) who argues that "During the intervening years Xerxes was off fighting a disastrous war with Greece... Shortly after his return from Greece, Esther was chosen as his new consort." Jobes makes these statements as if they are self-evident and that this is actually what happened, oblivious to the fact that there are a number of issues that don't fit the puzzle of the historicity of this book. She then insists that feminist critics should not perceive this as an act of sexism, since Herodotus also reports that five hundred young boys were gathered each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court. Hence, she concludes that: "One might argue that the young women actually got the better deal. The gathering of the virgins, whether consensual or not, is not sexism. It is a brutal act typical of how power was used in the Persian court. Everyone, whether male or female, was at the disposal of the king's personal whims."

These bear great significance to the character of the king as an all-powerful character, whose every need, including his sexual ones had to be taken care of, irrespective of who he violated in that process. I will return to this discussion of the king's character in the chapter on characterization. The point here is to show that the time markers in a narrative can point to a number of important traits of narrative such as characterization. In this case the long period of time that the king takes to choose his new bride, reflects his power, but the fact that it is narrated in short sentences to pick up the pace of the narrative, might seem to suggest that the text does not want to dwell on this issue. It is the womanist reader that picks up on why such an abuse of power is simply "brushed off" in the text in short sentences.

A womanist reader is also sensitive to how the handling of time contributes to an understanding of the character of Esther, for example in the way that she chooses to time her revelation of Haman's schemes to the king. First the reader is kept in suspense, for after she gains access to the king's throne in chapter 5 (even though she was not summoned), and after she banquets with the king and Haman, she delays her revelation by inviting him to yet another banquet.

It is in the way in which she reveals Haman's schemes in the second banquet that we can appreciate Esther's sense of timing. Her revelation is not chronological. In other words she does not begin with how it came about that the Jews were to be annihilated. Instead she pleads for her life, "Let my life be given me – that is my petition – and the lives of my people – that is my request" (7:3) This opening statement is much more jarring than if it were told in narrative form, that is if she began with how it came about that she and her people were to be annihilated. Instead she chooses to connect her life with her petition. It is after she has jarred the king into reality, even into fear for her life, that she then explains how this calamity came about. Even the way in which she offers her explanation shows good

timing. She does not simply launch into an accusation against Haman. She first explains to the king that this is not only an offence against her and her people, but against the king as well: "...but no enemy can compensate for this damage against the king" (7:4). She builds so much of tension up in the king, that it is he who wants to know who could do such a thing.

By revealing the plight of the Jews in a non-chronological manner, Esther focuses on the matter that will appeal to the king the most – her own life. Her timing illustrates that she has thought strategically about how to save her people and herself. There are two aspects to her timing, namely when she chooses to tell and how she chooses to tell it. She makes sure she chooses the right time to tell the king. Having risked her life, to enter the king's court, she does not simply blurt out her request. Instead she chooses to still gain the king's favor further, by inviting the king and Haman to a banquet. It is only at the second banquet that Esther chooses to reveal her petition. The way in which she then presents her petition highlights her survival strategy. This is most appreciated by a womanist reader.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter on narrative time in the book of Esther I have aimed to show the importance of time to narrative, both intrinsically and extrinsically. I have shown that the use of different narrative time devices can point to particular interpretations, but that those very interpretations can also be destabilized either by the text itself or by the reader. In other words, what is important for a gender and ethnic sensitive reading of the text is the fact that although each of these time structures foregrounds the immense power of the Persian court and hence its ability to sanction genocides of people and the deposal of women, it also has the opposite effect of creating an appreciation for the characters who are able to engage with this vast and immense power and emerge victorious. By examining the sequence (order)

in which events are presented, through exploring the amount of time or lack of time spent on certain events (duration), and by highlighting the use of repetitive words and phrases in the narrative (frequency), I have shown how each of these time structures are linked with the theme of power in the text of Esther, both those who have power and those who do not.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHARACTERIZING CHARACTERS

Having dealt with the literary aspects of plot and narrative time, I now move on to one of the most crucial aspects of literary analysis, namely characterization. This chapter is the longest in this first section. As outlined in the introduction, there are a number of reasons for this. The first is that in this chapter, an in-depth character analysis of each major character will be undertaken. Another reason for an extended chapter and focus on character is that character is the most accessible way into the text for readers in faith communities. Literary scholars have long been pointing out the importance of analyzing the identification of readers with characters in literature.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, particular attention will be given to how the voices of the characters carry the ideological voice of the narrative, and how a self-conscious ideological reading (such as a womanist reading) can uncover the ideology embodied by the characters.

Two broad basic processes are involved in characterisation. The first lies on the level of the text and the second on the level of the reader. The first process involves the “revelation” of character, and the second is what Fewell and Gunn (1993:75) call “reconstructing” characters. These two processes do not operate independently of each other. They feed into each other constantly. In other words, by going through an almost unconscious process of collecting all the clues about the character that are supplied by the text (revelation of character), and coupling that with her/his own ideological assumptions, a reader attempts to reconstruct the characters. In the analysis that follows I assume the role of such a reader. The process of reconstructing characters will unfold automatically as my own ideological assumptions which are aligned with womanism inform my interpretation. In

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<sup>1</sup> See for examples, Beal (1997:40-50) and Cheney (1996:11-28).

the section on Bible Studies a more critical exploration of how women in communities of faith reconstruct characters will be explored. At present I will examine how I as a womanist reader come to know characters in a text.

***Revelation of Character through direct definition and indirect presentation***

Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations (Alter 1981:116).

Alter's description of character provides a good introduction as to how readers obtain knowledge about characters. The ideas he provides in the above statement can be divided into two primary categories which Rimmon-Kenan (1986:36) terms *direct definition* and *indirect presentation*.

On a simple level, *direct definition* can be attributed to the information we obtain about a character via the narrator. *Indirect presentation* indicates the information we get about the characters via the characters' themselves either through their actions or through their dialogue with other characters. These two basic categories of characterization are frequently used, but by no means are they meant to be definitive. I would argue that there is also a third level in characterization, namely the reader's reconstruction. This implies that the way in which readers reconstruct characters might be different to either the way in which the narrator defines them or the way in which their dialogue, or the other characters define them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My comments in the previous chapters regarding the resistant reader hold true here too.

In other words, the way in which the characters are revealed to us by the text does not limit or confine a reader's perception of that character. This is important to bear in mind when exploring the different ways in which character is revealed to the reader by the narrative.

With regard to the way in which the narrator provides information about characters, it is important, as was done in the second chapter, that a distinction is made between the narrator and the author. That distinction needs to be kept in mind in considering the role of the narrator because it implies that the narrator is to be understood as a fictional construct. In order for the narrator to play a decisive role in the way characters are portrayed, what Rimmon-Kenan (1986:36) terms direct definition, s/he has to present something of the inner life and thoughts of the character, describe their actions and motivations as well as their dress and their physical appearances, and to a certain extent evaluate them.

In Esther the narrator is different from other Biblical narrators of short stories, in that s/he is not as reticent about the characters and the setting as, for example, the narrator in Ruth is. The Biblical narrator usually provides very little information about the thought processes and motives of characters. The genre of the short story and novella requires that the narrator be even more economical than in other forms of narratives, for the reasons of time constraints and for the advancement of the plot. This is not enough reason, however, to declare all characters in a short story or novella as merely functions of the plot.<sup>3</sup> The characters themselves unfold in complex ways that allow the reader to interpret their actions and make judgments about their motives and internal feelings. Besides, in the case of Esther, as asserted previously the narrator is much more generous in

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<sup>3</sup> Henry James's (1986:174) famous declaration: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the determination of character?" indicates that plot and

characterization than s/he is in other Biblical narratives. In fact, as was shown in the previous chapter, we are provided with a deluge of information concerning the setting, and the actions of the characters. Apart from the suspension of time in certain parts of the narrative, very few details are spared.

While the amount of information the narrator provides with regard to a character is important for interpretation, it is equally significant when the narrator provides very little information about a character. The literary scholar, Forster (1976:103-118), has described those characters whom we obtain plenty of information about from the narrator as well as from other characters, as round characters or “full-fledged characters” (Berlin 1983:23). These are the characters who are complex and unpredictable. The opposite to round characters are flat characters. Flat characters refer to those characters who are not accorded an in-depth characterization either by the narrator, or by the other characters in the narrative. They are those who have “typical” character traits, and are very predictable.

Although in certain narratives one can clearly identify characters who are flat and characters who are round, sometimes it is possible to read against the narrative grain, and regard those characters who are deemed flat, and serving only a plot functionary, as round characters.<sup>4</sup> I argue that in the book of Esther it is dangerous to read the characters of Vashti and Esther as literary types,<sup>5</sup> because not only does it deprive the reader of an

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character have equal status in the narrative, and hence have reciprocally essential functions.

<sup>4</sup> This strategy is employed frequently by feminist literary scholars such as Tribble (1978) who demonstrate the importance of even the flat characters (who are usually women) to Biblical narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Scholes and Kellogg (1966:166-167) have argued that Biblical narrative is “primitive” narrative and, therefore, does not contain deep characters or in-depth characterization. According to them Biblical characters are “opaque” and “inscrutable.” They do not view this as a defect or a limitation but account for it as simply

appreciation of Vashti's strong character, but it also serves to re-enforce gender stereotypes around their roles, that is women who oppose chauvinism not only get thrown out of the palace, but also get thrown out of the narrative, and are robbed of a voice in the narrative.

Moreover, the fact that my focus, in this dissertation, is not only on the world of the Biblical text, but also our own world in relation to the Biblical text, compels me to maintain that characters are not merely literary types. In other words, if Biblical texts are used in our current context as a means for teaching and preaching, particularly because they are thought to contain examples of right living for humankind, then we cannot be satisfied with simply accepting characters as "types," because real human beings do not function as "types." I argue therefore, that in the quest for meaning the interpreter does not simply look through a window into the world of the Biblical characters but actually looks into a mirror. It is for this reason that Holland (1980:124) is able to assert that "all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves." Interpretation of character is, therefore, a two way process. The interpreter looks for attributes with which to identify in the Biblical character or to reject in the case of negative characterization.<sup>6</sup> It is also true that the womanist and feminist reader invests so-called "flat" characters with depth. This is an

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being a characteristic of Biblical literature. In other words they argue that all Biblical characters are types of a convention and, therefore, act in a way that is expected of them in terms of the dictates of the convention or the literary genre under which they fall. The socio-historical critic could perhaps similarly argue that the group oriented nature of most pre-modern societies did not allow for individuals to be thought of as having strongly individualistic tendencies that deep characterization seeks to emphasize. Characterization was generally stereotyped around certain archetypes which were thought to reflect reality. I would argue that such a view of characters as literary types in Biblical narrative is only valid if one's focus in interpretation is based on authorial intention and fixes meaning in certain cultural contexts only.

<sup>6</sup> Exum (1993:92) shows how Biblical narrative sets up "positive" and "negative" women as role models – for example in the Samson accounts good women are mothers, and bad women are foreign women. In her later work (1995:65-90) she also shows that within the paradigm of motherhood there also exists the good mother and the bad mother.

explicit womanist strategy as most female Biblical characters are rarely accorded in-depth characterization anyway.

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, the search for identification with positive and negative characters does not imply that the reader is slave to the text and persuaded by all the literary devices of the narrator such as denying Vashti a speaking voice. This point is illustrated in my reading of the character of Vashti. Even though literary convention would typically reveal her to be a “flat” character type, I have shown in my foregoing analysis of the role of her account in the narrative that she embodies much more, despite the fact that the narrator does not accord her a speaking voice.<sup>7</sup> So to term Vashti as a flat character type would be to undermine her important function and role in the narrative. As opposed to Vashti, whom the narrator does not develop as a character (I have shown in chapter 2 why this might be so), the narrator does allow for an in-depth characterization of Esther. As I will show later, we see her develop in different stages. Her well-developed characterization (both through direct definition and through indirect presentation) dispels the notion argued above that Biblical characters are merely types (Fewell and Gunn 1993:49).<sup>8</sup>

As indicated in the chapter on narrative voice “many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters, and more specifically through their speech and fate” (Bar-Efrat 1989:47). The fact that the

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<sup>7</sup> The narrator treats Vashti in a similar way to the manner in which Orpah, Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion are treated by the narrator in the book of Ruth. “The three men in the narrative and Orpah are silenced by the way in which the narrator deals with them in a third person narrative style. The narrator “names the characters, specifies their relationships, and describes their plight,” but this “does not allow for them to emerge as human beings” (Trible 1978:167) because all the information we are given about them comes from the narrator and not their own voices.

<sup>8</sup> Contra Berlin (2001:xx) who argues that in the book of Esther, “while some of [the] characters show growth as the story progresses, and their various traits can be probed and described in a manner that makes them seem almost full-fledged characters...they nevertheless remain types rather than full-fledged characters.”

characters “carry forth” the voice of the narrative, however, does not mean that they cannot emerge as individuals and autonomous beings with personalities.

Formalists and structuralists have argued for a long time that the major characters, like the minor characters in Biblical narrative, serve as plot functionaries or agents. Emerging from this argument though is the problem of whether characters should be analyzed as real persons or literary constructs.<sup>9</sup> If one accepts that characters are only literary constructs, then

Any complexity of characterization becomes subordinate to the character’s place (as an “actant” sender, object, receiver, helper, opponent, or subject) in a plot that is already dictated by the narrative genre (Gunn 1993:179).

If we perceive characters in this way then we are limiting ourselves to only the narrative world of the text and its plot. Even though I recognize that plot and character are inseparable in the same way that plot and narrative time are inseparable, in Esther there is an urge on the part of the reader to reach out and identify with the characters, in terms of the reader’s own world, rather than just in terms of the plot of the narrative. In other words, I am arguing that the true power of narrative is not only that we leave our world and enter into the world of the literary characters, but that the literary characters can also “surpass” the world of the text and enter into our own world. Characterization then is a collaborative process that takes place between the reader and the narrative.

In the same vein, and in line with a womanist hermeneutic, while it is true that characters come to us via an artistic medium, this does not imply that

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Chatman (1978:119) who argues that we allow characters to emerge as persons, not mere functionaries of the plot.

we have to preclude the possibility of analyzing character in the same way that we analyze real persons. Reader-response criticism affords us this opportunity because meaning is derived not from the actual physical words of the text itself but through the temporal process of reading (Fish 1980:67). In other words, during the process of reading, the narrative world of the character is fused with the real world of the reader, and the process of the interpretation of character consequently unfolds as the reader reconstructs the character in terms of her/his own world. Thus the character does not simply remain only a literary construct or a plot functionary. The character “as an effect of the reading process and as a paradigm of attributive propositions...may seem to ‘transcend’ the text” (Burnett 1993:3).

Therefore, in the following analysis of the different characters in the book of Esther, the process of reconstruction does not restrict itself to the characters as plot functionaries nor does it restrict the characters to the world of the narrative only. Rather, it seeks to open up the characters, and make them accessible even to contemporary readers, who seek to identify with the characters of the narrative world. As asserted previously, the hermeneutical circle begins with the reader. As such the reader, whether consciously or unconsciously, will attempt to identify with the characters because “narrative evokes a world and since it is no more than an evocation we are left free to enrich it with whatever real or fictive experience we acquire” (Chatman in Fewell and Gunn 1993:51).

In line with postmodernist modes of interpretation my analysis of the characters in the book of Esther is not meant to yield one definitive meaning. This is because interpretation is dynamic, and as such readers are not passive recipients of one given meaning, particularly of the author’s intention. Although the author’s intention or other previous interpretations might affect the process of interpreting, ultimately the text only comes alive

when readers engage it on their own level (Fewell and Gunn 1993:50). At this level readers are able to “psychologize”<sup>10</sup> about the characters much more, and the interpretive possibilities also remain much more open. Bar-Efrat 1989:77-78) asserts that:

As in real life, we have to build hypotheses about people’s motives. These hypotheses will be based on our knowledge of other actions and things said by the same person, as well as on our understanding of human psychology.

“Psychologizing”<sup>11</sup> also requires that we ask questions about the characters in the narrative world and that we relate the answers to our own world. My analysis of how we view characters in the narrative world will be informed by some useful questions put forward by Brooks and Penn Warren (1943:28) concerning characters:

1. What are the characters like?
2. Are they real?
3. What do they want? (motivation)
4. Why do they do what they do? (motivation)
5. Do their actions logically follow from their natures (consistency of character)?
6. What do their actions tell about their characters?
7. How are the characters related to each other (subordination and emphasis among characters; conflict among characters)?
8. How are the characters and incidents related to the theme?

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed argument for this approach, and one that directly relates literary characters to readers, see Schneider (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Besides psychologizing about characters, it is also true to say that womanist readers, “ideologize” characters, that is, they recognize the political function of the characters both in their own world and in the reader’s context.

It is clear from the above that the latter two questions are more related to the dimension of the actual narrative text, while the former ones offer us a way of “psychologizing” about the character. As discussed earlier both these dimensions are essential for an understanding of character. The analysis of the characters that follows employs Bar-Efrat’s method of building hypotheses about the characters’ motives as prescribed above.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Act of Reading Characters as a Womanist*

Before I proceed with the analysis of the major characters it is important to make a few preliminary remarks about the way in which I, as a womanist reader, approach Biblical characters. Feminist Biblical scholars have long ago acknowledged the patriarchal<sup>13</sup> nature of the Biblical text. There is little disagreement about this fact. Where scholars have not concurred is in the way in which to deal with the patriarchal nature of the Biblical text.<sup>14</sup> I think it is important, before I begin my analysis, although I have made these points earlier in the dissertation, to reiterate the particular assumptions which I employ in my reading of the characters in the book of Esther:

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<sup>12</sup> It is also important to state at this point that in the analysis of the major characters in the following subsections of this chapter, it is impossible to understand the character development of these characters without engaging other facets of the story as well, such as narrative voice, plot, and narrative time. Therefore, in the exploration of the characters that follows, these literary concepts already discussed earlier in the dissertation, will be engaged in this part of the discussion as well.

<sup>13</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:5) prefers the term kyriarchy, which she argues locates “sexism and misogyny in the political matrix or, better, patriarchy of a broader range of oppressions.” Cheney (1996:133) notes that “the term ‘patriarchy’ refers to the whole system of cultural values that gives preference to men, the upper class, and the dominant race. ‘Androcentricism’ refers more narrowly to a male perspective that excludes the female one.

<sup>14</sup> For a good summary on how different feminist Biblical scholars have attempted to approach the patriarchy contained in Biblical texts, see Cheney (1996:11-27).

1. The book of Esther is patriarchal in nature, that is to say it seeks to promote androcentric, ethnocentric and class-centric ideologies, through its characterization.
2. Although the text promotes this ideology, it also is capable of subverting its own ideology, through various means.
3. Women readers have to be aware of the text's agenda in promoting patriarchy and have to employ strategies for reading the Biblical text, either by activating the text's own subversive strategies, or by employing their own resistant readings to the ideologies inherent in the text.

The first two assumptions have been dealt with extensively already in the dissertation. At this point I want to elaborate on the last assumption – the need to employ strategies for reading the characters of the text. In my analysis of the major characters in the narrative of Esther, I develop particular reading strategies to read the characters of Esther and Vashti, but my strategies for reading the male characters are not as overt or well developed as the strategies which I develop to read the characters of Esther and Vashti. There are particular reasons for this choice. The first and most obvious is that I am assuming that the text is patriarchal, therefore I am particularly vigilant about re-reading the female characters in ways that liberate rather than oppress.<sup>15</sup> I do this self-consciously – aware that this is a deliberate ideological move on my part. I undertake this task unapologetically as I maintain that as Black<sup>16</sup> women not only are we trained to read in Western academic ways, but in distinct malestream ways as well.

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<sup>15</sup> Phyllis Trible (1973: 30-48) first pioneered this method.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote no. 20 in chapter 1 for details of how I appropriate this term.

The Biblical text is well known as a patriarchal text. As Fuchs (1985:143) argues:

Celebrated or denigrated, the characters of deceptive women, which constitute the majority of female characters in the Bible, serve as an effective ideological tool that perpetuates the suspicion and distrust of women and that validates women's subordination through discriminatory literary techniques.

So, if we are going to attempt to read in ways that liberate rather than in ways that oppress, then we have to find strategies for reading traditionally oppressive patriarchal texts. The challenge that I am taking up in my reading of the characters of Esther and Vashti is to find alternative literary techniques to read their characters in ways that liberate rather than oppress.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, women's experiences of reading have shown that the text entices us into identifying with the male point of view. Cheney's (1996:29) summary of Judith Fetterly's assessment of women's experience of reading American fiction is particularly apt for Biblical narratives as well:

Male experiences are often told in a way that female readers must identify against themselves. The story line requires female readers to identify with the male protagonist whose character is often defined by his power over women, usually abusive power. Women readers are asked to suppress any empathy with the female characters and to perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of women...Fetterly claims women must choose to be resisting

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<sup>17</sup> It is possible to use other methods as well when reading for liberation. Meyers (1988) and Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, 1984) are two examples of feminist scholars who use the historical critical method for analyzing female characters.

rather than assenting readers so that they expose the point of view of male-authored literary works as male-oriented, not universal or normative.

In the reading strategies that I provide for reading the characters of Esther and Vashti I resist the male point of view (which in this narrative serves to be particularly oppressive to women) that the text wants to put forward, and I re-inscribe a female point of view (one that is more liberating for women).

Thirdly, I do not employ particular strategies for reading the male characters in the narrative. Since the text aligns itself with the patriarchal point of view, I choose rather to expose the characterization of the male characters as being in line with the patriarchal ideology of the text.

Bearing in mind that these are the assumptions with which I approach the major characters in the narrative, I now proceed to the analysis of the characters.

## **CHARACTERIZING VASHTI**

As argued extensively in the first part of this chapter, Biblical characters are far too often understood as plot functionaries, hence as flat character types. In the case of Vashti, the temptation to treat her as a mere plot functionary, a necessary evil that must be eliminated so that we can get on with the main story, is even greater because Vashti is not even given a voice in the text. We only know of her through the male characters who speak of her, and via the narrator, and the information that is given by the narrator is sparse. So, the argument that the major characters, like the minor characters in Biblical narrative, serve merely as plot functionaries or agents, seems to apply in the case of Vashti. However, my problem with that argument is that it precludes the possibility of reconstructing literary

characters on the basis of the reader's experience and concerns and not just literary constructs.<sup>18</sup> I would contend that even the reader that would want to claim absolute objectivity could not deny that s/he tries in some way to associate the literary character with her/himself. This is particularly true of Biblical narrative.<sup>19</sup> Hence, in the reconstruction of the character of Vashti that I offer below, I do not view her as a mere plot functionary nor restrict her character to the world of the narrative only. Rather I seek to open up her character and make her accessible to contemporary readers who seek to identify with her.<sup>20</sup>

The story of Vashti is documented in the first chapter of the book of Esther. But, Vashti is an oft forgotten character in the story. As asserted in chapter 3 on plot, Vashti's story is usually read as a prologue or prelude to the story, hence her story is not taken to be significant for the narrative as a whole. Apart from the textual formalist arguments that can be presented for forgetting the story of Vashti, there are also contemporary contextual reasons that South African Indian women provide for forgetting Vashti.<sup>21</sup> They assert that when they have read the book of Esther in a woman's Bible study group or when they have heard it preached from the pulpit, they are told that they should not identify with Vashti. Esther and Vashti are set up as binary opposites against each other. Esther is portrayed in a positive light while Vashti is portrayed in a negative one. This identification of Vashti as a negative character finds continuity with Indian cultural notions of the role of a wife in relation to her husband. There are several Indian proverbs that

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<sup>18</sup> See my earlier discussion on the importance of "psychologizing" about characters.

<sup>19</sup> See Beal's chapter (1997:40-49) on the "The Bible as Moral Literature" for an elaboration on this point.

<sup>20</sup> I offer a similar approach to reading the character of Ruth. See Nadar (2001a).

<sup>21</sup> These insights were gained from informal preliminary discussions with a few South African Indian women after I preached a sermon on Esther in a church. I will reflect on the more formal responses gained in the Bible study groups in the subsequent chapters.

support the worldview that a woman should be obedient to her husband in spite of any circumstances.

One proverb says, “*kanavane kann kannda deivum*” – “the husband is the wife’s god in sight.” In other words by worshipping her husband she actually worships God. Another says, “*kallanalum kanavan pullanalum purushan,*” – meaning “a husband even if he proves himself worthless as a stone or grass, still has to be honored and worshipped as husband” (Robinson 1999:116). In the minds of women who have been brought up on these proverbs (both overtly and covertly)<sup>22</sup> Vashti can be seen as a very negative character. When Vashti is seen in a negative light it is easier to eliminate her from the text, to make space for her positive foil, Esther. In spite of the cultural and Biblical baggage, however, when given the option of seeing Vashti in a positive light women of faith have indicated that they actually find such an interpretation extremely liberating.

Given my own location as an activist and scholar, I want to seek out interpretations of the character of Vashti that will be liberating rather than oppressive to women. In the analysis that follows, I find ways of rediscovering Vashti, because I maintain that if we can reclaim the importance of her story to the narrative as a whole, then we can begin to understand how it can be liberating for contemporary women. I will now offer some strategies for reading the character of Vashti in ways that, I think, can be transformative and liberating.<sup>23</sup> Each strategy is under-girded by literary deconstructive techniques, what Tribble (1973) calls

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that these proverbs are in the Tamil language, and many South African Indian women of my generation (including myself) do not speak Tamil. However, the point to be made here is that although the language of the proverbs have been lost, the mindset behind them is still very much a part of the Indian identity and parents (particularly mothers) are known to teach these principles to their daughters.

<sup>23</sup> The idea to use strategies for reading the characters of Esther and Vashti was inspired by Clines (1998: 3-22) who approaches the text of Esther from the standpoints of five different strategies, formalism, structuralism, feminism, materialism and deconstruction.

depatriarchalizing principles. In other words, by employing specific exegetical tools, I intend to find liberating meanings or counter-voices within the patriarchal narrative (Trible 1978:202).

***Reading as a (non) formalist: Vashti and her story are important***

A first strategy is to recognize that the story of Vashti as recorded in chapter 1 is an integral part of the story of Esther as a whole and, contrary to popular and formalist arguments, it is not simply meant to be a prologue or an exposition that can be discarded after its function is served. I have dealt with how this notion can be deconstructed extensively in the chapter on plot in this dissertation, so I will not repeat those details here. It is important, though, to acknowledge the deconstructive technique here as a strategy for reading the character of Vashti.

A point that was not raised in the chapter on plot regarding the way in which the text seeks to position us as readers is the silence on the part of the text with regard to the motivations for Vashti's refusal to appear before the king. Fox (1991:167) points out that:

One reason for the author's silence on Vashti's motives may be to avoid drawing too much attention to a minor character at the expense of the central issue in this chapter, namely the fate of the women – and not only the women – who cross the king's will...the text's silence effects a sort of closure, limiting the attention to this character.

Another reason for the silence regarding Vashti's motives is that we are then forced to identify with those voices that are not silent – namely that of the male advisors and the king. The strategy that we have to adopt is to resist the text's positioning of us as readers to identify with the oppressors,

in the same way that we resisted the text's appeal to treat Vashti as a minor character.

***Reading Deconstructively: Vashti is not defeated!***

Deconstruction (within a womanist paradigm) as a strategy offers readers a way to destabilize established interpretations and at the same time helps to examine the way in which characters themselves resist domination within the text itself. Using deconstruction as a strategy to read Vashti's deposal illustrates this point. Through Vashti's deposal it seems as if the patriarchal viewpoint has triumphed, but as I have shown in chapter 2, there are other ways to view this by both reading for and against the grain of the text. If we read with the grain of the text, then ironically Vashti gets what she wants – that is she refuses to come before the king and as her punishment she is told that she is never to come before the king! Strengthening this interpretation shows how details in the text about characters themselves can deconstruct the patriarchy within the text.

On another level, we can use the text to demonstrate that the patriarchal ideology does not truly succeed, that within the cracks, counter-voices can be detected. As Beal (1997:100) demonstrates, although the text wants to position us in such a way as to erase Vashti from the text, she is never truly erased and “erasure marks remain.” Hence she is never truly defeated in that her presence “haunts” the rest of the text, both through the character of Esther and the king, who “remembers” Vashti (2:1). By reading against the grain in this way we are able to argue that Vashti's deposal is not a defeat and to reclaim the importance of the character of Vashti to the narrative.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the message of Vashti's refusal to be dominated is also passed on to all the women in the kingdom, means that her cause, at least, is not

defeated. Vashti's actions are made known to the women, ironically through the decree (fueled by the insecurity of Memucan who believes that Vashti will set a bad example for all the other women in the kingdom). Hence the decree attracts even more public attention than what he was trying to avoid.

***Reading as a Womanist: Vashti possesses strength and courage...***

*In all cultures, the woman who formulates her own claims or who protests against her own situation is given the cold shoulder (Bâ in Schipper 1987:46).*

*Traditional women sometimes collude with the forces of patriarchy (Latha 2001:37).<sup>25</sup>*

The above statements, the first by an African feminist writer and the second by an academic who is also a gender activist, points to the issues that women (particularly Black women) face in attempting to undermine the forces of patriarchy in our communities. The first statement demonstrates that women who attempt to resist domination are either subtly or overtly distanced from the community. The second demonstrates that women are also co-opted into believing that patriarchy is the only system which can order their lives.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Fox (1991:210) argues that reading in this way does not imply reading against the grain, but rather that it is reading with the grain of the text, since he maintains that the author of the book of Esther is actually sympathetic to the cause of women.

<sup>25</sup> This statement made by Latha is in the context of her analysis of Mariama Ba's novella *So Long a Letter*, where Latha is making the point that "the representativeness of this writing within a society in which traditional women sometimes collude with patriarchy is a debatable issue."

<sup>26</sup> It is also true that some women collude with patriarchy simply for survival.

Given these realities that womanists face, when viewing the character of Vashti through womanist lenses, we find that Vashti is a character of great strength and courage. A third strategy for reading the character of Vashti therefore is to read her through womanist lenses, because it is then that we can recognize and appreciate the potency that Vashti as a female character exudes. This is not an easy task since the text offers very scant details of Vashti. All we know is that she is beautiful enough for the king to want to show her off and that she is disobedient with regard to the king's request that she appear before him. Because the narrator provides us with so little clues about her character and because her voice is denied to us in the text, we have to reconstruct the character of Vashti from only her actions.<sup>27</sup>

Although she does not speak, Vashti's singular action or rather non-action speaks volumes about her character. Her singular non-action is enough to get the king and all his advisors to not just depose her but also to pass a decree, charging all women to obey their husbands. The decree, apart from highlighting the vulnerability inherent in the absolute power of the royal patriarchy, also serves to show that Memucan and the king are not afraid of Vashti, the queen. They are afraid of Vashti the woman. When the king calls Vashti, he does not call upon her to appear before him and his drunken friends in her capacity as a queen. He calls her to appear in her capacity as a woman – a sexual object. The king is subject and needs everyone in his kingdom to be under his subjection. Vashti, as Cohen (1996: 105) argues, was certainly no fool. She knew that the king's objective in staging the vast and great banquet was to demonstrate his wealth, power and authority. And yet, Cohen (1996:105) goes on to argue, "she was prepared to dismantle in an instant the king's entire carefully constructed façade by demonstrating to the world that she was a liberated woman." She does so with the conviction

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<sup>27</sup> Note Fox's (1991:167) point that the author's silence on Vashti's motives may be to avoid drawing too much attention to her. But, what the text does not provide, the womanist reader can and does.

that her dignity is more important to her than the king's display of his power.<sup>28</sup> She simultaneously ensures her position as an individual and not as the object of the male gaze.<sup>29</sup>

Reading the character of Vashti through womanist lenses shows that firstly she is a risk taker in that she knows that as a woman in her culture, she risks more than just receiving the "cold shoulder" as Ba above argues. Secondly, she is a woman who overcomes her patriarchal bondage within her culture, by not colluding with it. In essence then, she actually teaches the opposite lesson to what her character is supposed to teach, both in her own culture, and as a Biblical character, in our own cultures as well.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Reading as a New Historicist: Vashti is Honorable***

A fourth strategy, I propose, for reclaiming the character of Vashti as an important and central character, is to understand her through a matrix of an honor and shame value system. Adopting this as a strategy might indicate that I am stepping out of a literary-critical analysis, into socio-historical

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<sup>28</sup> Bickerman (1967:185-186) states that Vashti did not appear before the king because to do so would indicate that she was acting as a mere concubine. He draws this assumption from the fact that Persian wives were sometimes pressurized to appear before drunken men but that it was improper for women of rank to do so – usually it was only the commoners and the concubines that participated in such a practice. However, to think that Vashti did not appear before the king and all the other drunken men, simply to safeguard her rank as queen, may only be partly true. The fact that Vashti was having her own party for the women, away from the men, shows her own individuality and her closeness with other women.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Mulvey in Robbins (2000:50) has outlined some notions associated with the term "male gaze." She says: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *looked-at-ness*."

<sup>30</sup> See Laffey (1988:214-216) who asserts that Vashti's deposal and subsequent expulsion was meant to admonish upper-class Israelite women about challenging or defying their husbands.

critical analysis. I do this acknowledging that I am only making modest socio-historical claims, in a new historicist sense of the socio-historical. (Bennett and Royle 1995:93) point out that the implications of this,

Literary texts are embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed. But what is important for new historicists is that these circumstances are not stable in themselves and are susceptible to being rewritten and transformed. What is new about new historicism in particular is its recognition that history is the 'history of the present,' that history is in the making, that, rather than being monumental and closed, history is radically open to transformation and rewriting. New historicists argue that any 'knowledge' of the past is necessarily mediated by texts...

To apply what Bennet and Royle are saying to our analysis of the character of Vashti within the ancient system of honor and shame, means that we need to consider that this system (notwithstanding its historical status) is not stable in itself, and hence is open to being "rewritten and transformed," in the light of the character of Vashti. Hence my choice of new historicism as a reading strategy, rather than socio-historical criticism, which makes statements on interpretation based exclusively on the society which produced and consumed the narrative text. In the light of these points we consider the system of honor and shame as a reading strategy with regard to the character of Vashti.

Laniak (1998:36) argues that the purpose of the king's banquets were occasions for the king to honor himself.<sup>31</sup> Thus, he argues that the western reader needs to understand that when Vashti disobeys,

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<sup>31</sup> Bickerman (1967:185-186) also makes a similar point.

the king's most valuable possession was jeopardized...thus when Vashti is expelled it is neither indiscriminate punishment nor unthinking retaliation. It is the publicly demonstrated, logical consequence of her disobedient (dishonoring) behavior.

Laniak's arguments are similar to Jones' (1982:437) who focuses on the king's motivations for his behavior. The king's reaction to Vashti is therefore compliant with the king's perception that unquestioning honor and deference should be bestowed upon him. The problem with justifying the king's behavior with the argument that he was acting within a system of honor and shame is that the same argument can be made for the system of patriarchy both within the Biblical text and our own cultures too. Further it renders the king's reaction as justifiable to the extent that his honor becomes the frame of reference against which we are supposed to judge Vashti's actions. Consequently then, like in all major traditional interpretations, Vashti's need to preserve her own honor gets sacrificed on the altar of the king's honor. In fact Laniak (1998:41) almost suggests that Vashti should have obeyed the king since – "this was not a demand to do something difficult or dangerous. The issue at stake was more a matter of symbol than substance."

I would argue that this kind of interpretation is extremely dangerous and opens up the text to justification for the abuse of women. In a country like South Africa, where the statistics of violations against women are unacceptably high, I think that such an interpretation is undesirable. Hence I want to assert that we critically use the honor and shame matrix as a strategy, within the framework of new historicism. In other words, we develop a 'strategy within a strategy' so that the honor and shame system only remains suitable as a reading strategy if we give equal weighting to the honor of Vashti, and her need to preserve that personal honor. As Morris

(1993:24) asserts: "When women are perceived solely as objects of possession, and their virtue equated with male honor, they are never known for themselves."

To conclude our examination of the character of Vashti we should ask the question that Clines (1998:11) asks – does power truly reside with the males in the story? I would argue that the strategies I offer for reading the character of Vashti invites us to consider that it doesn't. As Clines (1998:12) goes on to argue,

Vashti's power lies in the fact that she refuses the king with no apparent reason. She doesn't need to have a reason for she is under no obligation. Her power lies in her freedom to choose for herself.

I would add her power lies in the strength to face up to the consequences of that choice.

## **CHARACTERIZING ESTHER**

Claiming Esther as a liberating figure for gender, class and ethnic oppressive contexts is not as easy a task as it was with Vashti. This is because, unlike Vashti, Esther seems to be no radical feminist. In fact, feminist scholars are quick to point out that in comparison to Vashti, Esther only possesses humility, beauty, grace, loyalty and obedience while Vashti possesses dignity, pride and independence. Esther also operates within the sphere of the court therefore, one could argue, like Mosala, (1992:7) that she operates from a completely high-class setting and therefore there is little possibility that poor women can identify with her. And although Esther is herself Jewish, she at first denies this identity, but then goes on to save her people by revealing her identity. In the end however, she exacts

the same fate if not worse on the people that wanted to destroy her nation in the first place. These character traits do not cast Esther in a positive light and it seems unlikely that we could view her as a liberating figure. However, I argue, in my analysis of the character of Esther that it is possible to find liberating elements within the text that would otherwise want to cast her as a female stereotype within a patriarchal world, by using depatriarchalizing principles.

In undertaking this task I run the risk of being labeled what Mosala (1992:4) calls a “liberal humanist” Biblical scholar. The defining characteristic of this oppositional approach, Mosala asserts, has not been the fundamental disapproval of oppressive Biblical texts (which he claims, as I stated in chapter 2, have inherent oppressive ideologies) but its disapproval of the *interpretation* (my own emphasis) of these texts. In the analysis of the character of Esther which I offer below, I might emerge as what Mosala terms a “liberal humanist” scholar. But I would argue that this is not necessarily a negative term for two reasons.

The first is that if we see our role as Biblical scholars as extending beyond the academy to engaging with the process of positive social change in our communities then we have to take seriously the absolute didactic and authoritative significance that the Bible holds for our communities.<sup>32</sup> To revolt or struggle against the text, as Mosala (1992:5) advocates, is not a reading strategy that will be readily acceptable in my community of non-academic women readers (and I would suspect in other communities of faith

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<sup>32</sup> In saying this I realize that not all Biblical scholars are interested in social change in their work. I, on the other hand, feel that it is not possible for my own work to be confined to the academy without impacting on the faith communities that surround me. Hence for me (and for many other African theologians and Biblical scholars), social transformation is a central concern which has to reflect in the work that we do. I will deal with the issues involved in community engagement in later chapters.

as well).<sup>33</sup> The second reason is that while offering a resistance to the gender, ethnic and class ideologies in the book of Esther, I still maintain that Esther negotiates the system to her advantage, and therefore traces of resistance can be found in her character. The tone of the resistance however, is not a loud, polemic one, but a subtle, subversive one.

Mosala (1992:6) argues that an African woman's interpretation of Esther should encompass three phases. The first should be polemical, "in the sense of being critical of the history, the devices, the culture, the ideologies and the agendas of the text and of itself." The second phase should be "appropriative of the resources and victories inscribed in the Biblical text as well as its own contemporary text." The third phase will be projective "in that its task is performed in the service of a transformed and liberated social order." Ironically though, Mosala's reading, although in his theory advocating a hermeneutic of appropriation and transformation, stops at the point of suspicion with regard to the character of Esther. In my reading of the character of Esther, although I will be suspicious of the patriarchal nature of the text, I also want to be appropriative and try to uncover the resources and victories inscribed in the character of Esther. This appropriative task is performed in the service of a "transformed and liberated social order" (Mosala 1992:6). I undertake this task by offering, as I did in the case of Vashti, reading strategies for interpreting the character of Esther. The strategies which I offer below are not meant to be exhaustive, they are simply strategies with the aforementioned goal in mind.

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<sup>33</sup> Though it is true that non-academic women do dismiss certain texts, their dismissal is not born out of a "revolt against the text," but rather a belief that these texts do not apply to their lives. See Tamez (1991: 64) for an understanding of how women in faith communities deal with Scripture that is oppressive. I will elaborate on her ideas further in the chapter on Bible studies.

### ***Reading as a Post-structuralist: Debunking false dichotomies***

I have maintained thus far that the text contains particular literary strategies that persuade readers to enter into and share in its patriarchal ideology. Structuralist critics look at the binary oppositions such as good and evil, woman and man, body and spirit, that at a deep level provide structure for literary works (Bellis 2000:30). The book of Esther seems to be structured according to this repressive binary ordering of identity within the patriarchal discourse of the narrative:

If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her position to another who is better than she (Esther 1:19).

In this one verse the text has both banished Vashti and has introduced us to her successor (even though we do not know who she will be yet) as someone who will be “better” than she. The text does not elaborate on what “better” means, but it is obvious from Memucan’s preceding speech about the magnitude of Vashti’s sin of disobedience, that the “better” woman will be more obedient. Obedience not only to the king, but to everything the king represents – that is patriarchy. Vashti’s successor will be compliant with patriarchy as opposed to Vashti who defies it. So the text prepares us for a woman who will be obedient and docile. The text sets up the comparison for us. Post-structuralist critique seeks to interrogate these oppressive binary oppositions that structure the text, and to “decode the repressive ideology of the text and its complicity with dominant power” (Morris 1993:139) through its use of these binary oppositions. So, the first

strategy that I propose for our reading of the character of Esther, is a post-structuralist reading.

It seems that feminist scholars have been drawn into this structuralist dichotomy by arguing that Esther is not better than Vashti, it is Vashti who is better than Esther, because she is independent and strong as opposed to Esther whose only saving qualities are her beauty and charm (Stanton and Chandler 1898:84-92). As shown above, women in faith communities have also been drawn into this dichotomy, but on the other end of the spectrum, that is that they have been taught that Vashti is bad and that Esther is good. They argue that Esther is better than Vashti because she was obedient and she reaped the rewards for her obedience, namely the salvation of her people.

By applying a post-structuralist critique in our reading of the character of Esther we remove her from the false dichotomy that she has been placed into both by the text and by our encounters with the text. In other words, we resist the positioning of the text which seeks to set up Esther and Vashti as binary opposites or as foils to each other. Further we recognize that analyzing Esther in this dichotomous way, over and against Vashti, is not helpful to women. For, as Bach (1997:2) argues

when female literary figures are analyzed solely against each other, too much cultural otherness is dropped out and a self-referential loop is created.

She goes on to argue that,

part of the ideological effect of the text is to splinter the power of women and the most efficient way of accomplishing this effect literarily is to isolate women from each other.<sup>34</sup>

Given the negative way in which Vashti is presented, that is as insubordinate and rebellious, readers sometimes feel like they have no choice but to choose in the same way that the king has chosen – Esther as the “better” woman. However, Vashti’s character, as I have shown in my reading, is not one dimensionally negative. Similarly, Esther is also not a one-dimensional character. Therefore, a first strategy, if we are to move beyond being suspicious of her character towards being appropriative and re-envisioning her character, is to resist getting drawn into dichotomous interpretations by removing Esther from the (false) dichotomy that has been set up for us both by the text and its subsequent interpretations.

### ***Reading With a Hermeneutics of Revision: Mirror on the Wall?***

A hermeneutic of suspicion locates the patriarchy inherent in a text, and exposes it as such. A hermeneutic of revision seeks rather to re-interpret responses to the patriarchy. It looks for evidence in the text of resistance, whether (overt or covert) to patriarchy. In other words, as outlined in chapter 1, it searches the text for “values and visions that can nurture those who live in subjection and authorize their struggles for liberation and transformation” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:11). It mines Biblical motifs,

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<sup>34</sup> Ruether (1985:58) has shown that setting up women against each other is also a patriarchal strategy. She argues: “Patriarchy has typically split women from women, across generational lines, mother-in-law from daughter-in-law in the patriarchal family, mother from daughter...women in the ruling classes from those in the servant classes...It has assumed that women do not like to be with each other, are competitive with each other, and value anything a male does more than a female does.”

personalities and events to reconstruct their identity (Sugirtharajah 2001:236).

Hence a second strategy I propose for reading the character of Esther is a hermeneutic of revision. This strategy directs us to focus beyond how patriarchy oppresses her as a character, to how she acts in response or how she counters the patriarchal bias against her. One way of doing this is to analyze how Esther responds to the male gaze.

Bach, in responding to Brenner's (1995) article, which compares *Alice in Wonderland* to the story of Esther, suggests that in Esther it is the prettiest who wins.<sup>35</sup> Bach argues that the battle in the book of Esther is a battle for escaping the looking glass, the gazed at female position. Alice slips past the looking glass, the fixed male gaze. Esther is caught in the gaze, but Bach concedes that she then "uses whatever power the game has given her to checkmate Haman." I contend that it is not just Haman that she has checkmated but all that male power represents.

Male power, as I have shown in the exploration of Vashti's character, is linked to the matrix of honor and shame. It is only through "shaming" herself that a woman can grant a man the "honor" that he deserves. Vashti needed to "shame" herself by appearing before the king and all his subjects in order that the king might be "honored." The woman's body as object becomes the site for the king to display his honor. Ironically, in Esther's case she knows that the greatest component in the little power that she has

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<sup>35</sup> This would give the impression that this is a beauty contest. That it certainly is, but it is also a sex contest. What happens to the bodies of all the virgin women who we are told in chapter 2:14 go into the king's palace at night and return in the morning, and do not return to the palace again until the king decides that he has "delighted" in her and wants to see her again? The bodies are violated, made to be objects of desire. I would further suggest that this part of the narrative constitutes what Tribble (1984) has called a "text of terror." The virgins are as violated as the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. What do we do with this text of terror? This question will be raised in the Bible studies, in the light of our current context in South Africa where women are still violated and raped everyday.

within this patriarchal game is her body. The king's obsession as we have learned from the first chapter is to assert his power by maintaining his subjectivity over and against a woman's body as object. This manner of dominating was the one way in which he showed that he was in control. What the king (and usually this is typical of those who possess the mindset of dominator) does not understand is that the dominated can and does play the power game in the public realm, to keep up appearances, but in the process of playing the game the dominated can turn the situation to their advantage.

Feminist scholars point out that Esther's character is inveterately and hopelessly patriarchal. She is a "stereotypical woman in a man's world" (Laffey1998:216).<sup>36</sup> It certainly does appear that Esther is in full compliance with the oppressive patriarchal system, but the fact that she is able to secure her victory seems to question the power of this patriarchal system that is supposed to keep her under subjection. Scott (1990:89-90), in his study of power relations between the dominator and the dominated, shows very clearly that appearances can be deceiving. In other words, the fact that Esther seems to be in full compliance with the patriarchal system through her deferent language, dress and mannerisms, and in her response to the male gaze, does not necessarily indicate that she has accepted her fated condition as subordinate. Scott (1990:89-90) points out that

the greater the power exercised over them and the closer the surveillance, the more incentive subordinates have to foster the impression of compliance, agreement, deference... just as subordinates are not much deceived by their own performance there is, of course, no more reason for social scientists and historians to take that performance as, necessarily, one given in good faith.

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<sup>36</sup> See also Fuchs (1985:137) where she articulates similar views.

If we apply Scott's arguments to the character of Esther it becomes clear that hers is a feigned deference. Scott (1990:93), citing Foucault arguments, goes on to assert that it is this feigned deference that

'causes beggars, poor folks, or simply the mediocre to appear in a strange theatre where they assume poses, declamations, grandiloquences, where they dress up in bits of drapery which are necessary if they want to be paid attention to on the stage of power.' The 'strange theatre' to which Foucault refers is deployed not merely to gain a hearing but often as a valuable political resource in conflict and even in rebellion.

The criticism of Esther's character is that she chooses to display herself before the king when Vashti refused to. Hence she responds positively to the male gaze. This is certainly true in chapter 2, but we do not know how much choice Esther has with regard to her role in the harem. We are told that she, along with all the other virgins in the kingdom, is "taken" to the harem for cosmetic treatments. Here it would seem that she does act in this "strange theatre." The question is, does she do this because she colludes with patriarchy, or is it because she is forced to, and hence she makes whatever use of power is available to her to survive in the patriarchal system.<sup>37</sup>

A close examination of her actions subsequent to her becoming queen may reveal the answer to this question. For example, in 5:1 we are told that "Esther dressed in royalty," when she goes to the king, un-summoned. In other words, she is not just dressed in her best clothes but she is dressed in

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<sup>37</sup> See Fox (1991:197) who argues that she did not have any choice at all because "*all* comely virgins were gathered; there was no further selection before they were taken to the king. In any case, the Persians have already proved themselves intolerant of female freedom of choice."

royal apparel – that is in her capacity as queen. Berlin (2001:51) points out that although the Masoretic text is extremely reticent concerning the description of Esther's clothes the Targum Sheni gives a more expanded version of what she was likely to have been wearing:

She then adorned herself with the jewelry that queens adorn themselves – she put on a royal garment, embroidered with the fine gold of Orphir, a fine silk dress encrusted with precious stones, and pearls which were brought from the land of Africa; then she placed a fine gold crown upon her head and put shoes on her feet (made of) pure refined gold.

Berlin states that the Targum's description of African gold is faintly reminiscent of the gifts brought by the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10:2, 10-11). She argues that both the allusion to the Queen of Sheba in the Targum's description and the fact that Esther is not just "dressed up" but dressed in royal garb, points to the fact that this was not a seduction scene as in chapter 2, but that this was a business meeting. She says that seduction scenes, like the one in Ruth 3, focuses more on the body, with rituals of anointing and perfuming as was done in chapter 2 to the women in the harem.

I want to argue that either way (that is whether the scene is a seduction scene or whether she is simply dressed for a formal, business meeting with the king), the fact is that Esther is playing the power game. She is deploying this "strange theatre" not just to gain a hearing with the king, but she is using the strange theatre as a valuable political resource so that she can negotiate her own ends. She does this by activating her own powers of persuasion and rhetoric, including as Bronner (1998:7) points out an "accurate, intelligent, political assessment of the king's likely reactions." *On the one level she understands the king's need for the physical beauty of*

his wife to maintain his honor. Esther is prepared to play this role when she dresses up for him. On the other level, she also knows that the king needs not just a wife to maintain his honor, but a stately wife, a queen. In this regard she dresses up as royalty. Given Esther's actions we have to answer the question of whether she complies with patriarchy in the affirmative. However, at the same time, we must remember that she complies *strategically*. In other words, even though the king's hold on power is based on his position over and against Esther as object, it is precisely in being that object that Esther is able to influence and even to control him. As Morris (1993:24) argues: "Ironically, it is men who create the masks by which women can deceive if they wish, so that even the security of male identity is thrown into doubt."

Esther's actions, then, dispel the argument put forward by Paton (1908:96) that:

Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place among the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty.

It is by using her beauty to a certain extent that Esther manages to get what she wants, but it is only because she knows what her beauty means to a king who possesses such great (though arbitrary) power that he can create a national crisis when he realizes that he does not fully own the body of his wife. At the end, Esther wins her victories precisely because she has the skill and character, not just to understand how the system of dominance works, but to work shrewdly and effectively within that system. By using a hermeneutic of revision we are able to expose this part of her character which might otherwise be lost within the patriarchal setting which seems to

govern her character. In other words, I have shown that Esther's character actually "subverts what it explicitly affirms" (Morris 1993:24).

***Reading through Depatriarchalizing Eyes: Re-interpreting Esther's Role as Trickster***

By arguing as I have done above, that Esther "manipulates" the king into getting what she wants, I have also opened up the character of Esther to the common stereotypical assumption made of female Biblical characters – that is that they are tricksters. Fuchs (1985:137) is the most strident proponent of the argument that Esther falls into the category of deceptive women who serve the patriarchal order to get what they want.<sup>38</sup> The designation of the role of trickster is obviously meant to be a negative one. However, feminist scholars such as Tribble (1978) have been arguing that we should not be satisfied with the negative portrayals of women as evil. Instead we should be actively seeking different models or frameworks for understanding these characters. In other words, we should be depatriarchalizing these characters. This process of depatriarchalizing requires that we read the text from the perspective of the oppressed.

By placing ourselves into Esther's position, and by reading as a womanist, (instead of reading with the patriarchal grain of the text) we have to ask the question: what options did Esther have? As I have shown above, the powerless usually have very little recourse to act in other ways. Often their only option is to be covertly subversive. In his exploration of the character of Esther, LaCocque (1990:49-83) shows that like Judith, Susanna, and Ruth, Esther has to be covertly subversive in an oppressively patriarchal and ethnic context. Although Esther's character may not be regarded as revolutionary, there are certainly important reasons why she would not

choose to be so. One of them would be the example of Vashti's banishment, but the other could very well have been mortal reasons (given the fact that the king could so arbitrarily endorse the genocide of an entire nation).

Scott's (1990:95) argument concerning the peasantry certainly applies to Esther in this case: "by making appeals that remain within the official discourse of deference, the peasantry may somewhat lessen the mortal risks incurred by the desperate act of petitioning." Understanding Esther's "manipulative" role in this way helps us to appreciate the motivations for her actions, rather than dismiss them as stereotypical of women's behavior or as merely "deceptive." In other words, Esther has to, like Ruth, negotiate the "creative tensions between patriarchal law and feminine resourcefulness" (Black 1991:35).

Beal (1997:130) also provides other reasons why we should appreciate the motivations for Esther's actions, by linking it with the issue of ethnicity. Drawing on Niditch's (1987: xi) assertion that Israel too, "throughout its history has had a peculiar self-image as the underdog and trickster," Beal argues that "the androcentric viewpoint of Biblical discourse is, in this moment of subjective ambivalence, identifying with such women than simply repelling them phobically." In other words, Beal is suggesting that in the same way in which we take sides with the underdogs – who are underdogs because of their ethnicity – that we also take sides with the underdogs – who are underdogs because of their gender. By understanding the role of the trickster in this way, we decrease the negativity attached with the idea of being a trickster. In fact I would suggest that we rather see Esther as a strategist. For in the trickster type of story "men are portrayed as the victims of women's unfair methods of disarming them. This reverses and masks the actual relations of sexual victimization and power between

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<sup>38</sup> There are an enormous number of women in Biblical literature who have been cast as tricksters, the most famous are Eve, Tamar, Lot's daughters, Jezebel, Rebecca, Delilah

men and women” (Morris 1993:19). By looking at Esther as a strategist rather than a trickster we expose those “actual relations of sexual victimization and power between men and women.”

### ***Reading from the Perspective of Character Development: Esther is Wise***

Another strategy for reading the character of Esther is through the literary concept of character development. It has been shown that a good way to understand the complexity of characterization in the narrative, especially the characterization of the main characters, is to understand the way in which they develop. Esther, especially, follows a process of characterization which Berquist (1993:34) terms “role dedifferentiation.” Role dedifferentiation is defined as the process by which persons respond to a crisis through adding roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times. In our interpretation of the character of Esther thus far, it certainly appears that she has undergone this process of role dedifferentiation. Both Vashti and Esther specifically act in ways that dedifferentiate their gender roles while the males, especially the king, acts in ways that are consistent with their “honorable” reputation in the kingdom.

Fox (1991:196)<sup>39</sup> provides a skillful exploration of how the character of Esther develops in three stages – from passivity to activity to authority. The strategy of development is a helpful one, hence I outline each of the stages provided by Fox in detail. We encounter Esther’s stage of passivity from the time we meet her for the first time in chapter 2 to the time in chapter 4 when she resolves to do her duty for her people. In this stage of passivity she is first introduced not in her own right as a person, but as the orphan child whom Mordecai has been raising, having “taken her to himself as a

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and countless more.

daughter” (2:7). Fox (1991:107) notes that normally the mother would be the “primary authority, tutor and model for a girl,” but as an orphan Esther is “entirely dependent upon and governed by males.” The keyword for this first stage of passivity is “taken.” Esther is “taken” by Mordecai as his daughter, then she is “taken” along with all the other beautiful virgins to the harem, she is “taken” for one night to the king, and finally she is “taken” as the king’s wife – the new queen.

So devoid is she of individual will that she does not ask for further aids on the big night – a request that might at least show active participation in the process. Her disinclination to ask for supplemental aids shows only self-effacing receptivity and passivity (Fox 1991:198).

Further to this, she also seems to demonstrate a certain amount of superficiality. We meet her for the first time after she has become queen when Haman’s plan to destroy the Jews is hatched and Mordecai is sitting at the gate, mourning. Esther responds by sending him good clothes “as if to solve a problem – whatever it might be – by improving appearances” (Fox 1991:198). Although Fox delineates this stage of passivity in great detail, I agree with his assertion that we should not judge Esther too harshly for her passivity. After-all, her passivity is “not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation...[and] her focus on superficials is to be expected from a young woman whose daily routine places overwhelming importance on her appearances” (Fox 1991:197-198).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even in this stage of passivity there is a foreshadowing of her role as national leader. In dealing with Mordecai at the gate she performs three acts that indicate this: “she sends, she commands, she inquires.” More than just

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<sup>39</sup> Other scholars such as Clines (1984:145) and White (1989:170) have also shown how the character of Esther develops.

giving us an indication of her new role as national leader, it also shows the shift in power from Mordecai to her, and the ability to act.

The second stage is that of activity. The essence of this phase is captured eloquently in 4:16:

Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish.

In these verses, the new and transformed Esther is very apparent. In the first part she commands Mordecai, and not just Mordecai but all the Jews and even her own maidens. In the second part she is willing to act contrary to law and to risk her own life. Fox (1991:200) asserts that “in convening such an assembly and issuing directives to the community, Esther is assuming the role of a religious and national leader, and doing so prior to Mordecai’s own assumption of that role.”

Although Mordecai is the one who asks her to plead on behalf of the people to the king, the plan of *how* to do that is entirely Esther’s own.<sup>41</sup> As shown above, contrary to scholarly belief it is not just Esther’s beauty and charm that helps her gain victory. As Fox (1991:201) points out, Esther could not just use lustful tactics as Judith does, since the king has free access to her sexuality as it is. “Esther must draw upon hitherto untested and unexpected intellectual powers.” She does this with dexterity and intelligent action and

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<sup>40</sup> As I show later (using Scott’s [1990] analysis), this apparent passivity could very well be a front or a strategy for survival, given the limited power that women in the Persian kingdom possessed.

<sup>41</sup> Contra Moore (1971:ii) who argues “Mordecai supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions.”

the fact that she delays her request to the second banquet certainly suggests that she has a pre-meditated plan. She builds up to the moment with great care and punctuates her conversation with apparent deferential and polite courtesies, right up to the point in which she tells the king of the danger of not just her own life, but of that of her people.

The second stage of activity is followed by a final stage of authority. In 8:1-2, Esther is given Haman's property. She then transfers that property to Mordecai's control. Although some scholars have taken this to mean that this shows that Esther is still under Mordecai's control, I agree with Fox (1991:202) that this shows that it is Esther "who is now a source and agent of wealth and empowerment for Mordecai." Fox goes on to point out that it then seems incongruous that she now decides to fall at the king's feet in 8:3 and weepingly implore him to reverse Haman's decree for the destruction of the Jews.

8.5. "If it please Your Majesty," she said, "and if I have won your favor and the proposal seems right to Your Majesty, and if I am pleasing to you – let dispatches be written countermanding those which were written by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, embodying his plot to annihilate the Jews throughout the king's provinces.

8.6 For how can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred!"

This is the approach that Mordecai had expected her to use in the first place, but as Fox (1991:202) points out, "she exploits it only subsequent to her initial success and her increase of personal power." Her language, even in her imploring, is extremely calculated. Berlin (2001: 74) points out how Esther stresses that Haman was the author of the plot and carefully vindicates the king from any responsibility. She does this with the full

knowledge that it is the king's ring that has sealed the endorsement of the genocide of her people. Once again her calculated speech is noticeable.

Her final display of authority is revealed in the fact that both she and Mordecai are issued with the authority to use the king's signet to allow the Jews to defend themselves (8:11-12). Although Mordecai is the one who writes the first letter informing the Jews that they could defend themselves, it is Esther who writes the second letter inaugurating the festival of Purim for all time. As Bronner (1998:8) points out : "In no other Biblical context do we find a woman sponsoring a written tradition or establishing the observance of a festival." Esther has truly undergone a process of role dedifferentiation in which she trades in her role of helpless orphan for powerful queen.

### ***Reading Post-colonially: Esther becomes a persecutor***

In gaining her power and becoming an authoritative queen, as I pointed out in chapter 2, Esther's request for a second day of killing in 9:13 does not sit comfortably with South African readers, especially since the request is for the "other" race which is not "chosen" to be put to death in their own land. Masenya (2001: 27) further elaborates why this part of the text is so problematic for South African readers:

Esther is one of the rare books in which the Hebrew name for God is not used. If one reads the book carefully, however, there are veiled elements of the Divine. God's hand is visible throughout the story. It is in the name of the Divine that Esther the Jew – Esther whom we rightly assume became queen through divine intervention (chapter 2) can display such cruelty against many innocent Persians, as revenge against the evil plan of Haman against her people. Given my South African history, this story

cannot help but remind us of how native inhabitants were plundered also in the name of God.

Notwithstanding Masenya's arguments for how Esther became queen, her critique against Esther's actions seems to be justified. Although Masenya also reads from within a liberation hermeneutic, and looks for ways in which to empower the ordinary African South African woman reader, her position as a Black woman prevents her from approving Esther's actions.

Other scholars have chosen to get around this vengeful act of Esther's. Fox (1991:203) suggests that all of chapter 9 is an expansion of a few sentences in an earlier version, and here "literary values are less important than liturgical purposes. Esther's request for a second day of fighting results more from the need to explain an existing practice than from any literary conception of her personality." Jones (1982:180) argues that the second day of killing is only a "deliberate hyperbole... and those who are offended by the blood and by the so-called Jewish nationalism are either literalists or acting as if they were."<sup>42</sup>

I personally do not find either Jones' or Fox's arguments helpful, and am inclined to agree with Masenya. Therefore I suggest that we read the character of Esther from a critical postcolonial perspective, within the framework of womanist concerns. As pointed out in chapter 2, I think that even if the request was just for literary effect, we who live with the Bible as "sacred scripture" have to live with the effects. Esther's undesirable actions here show what happens to power when it becomes corrupted. Thus far all the strategies I have proposed have been under-girded by the principles of liberation hermeneutics. Even liberation hermeneutics should be critical of

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<sup>42</sup> See another view proposed by Gevaryahu (1993:3-12) who does not attempt to argue away the revenge killings. Rather he argues, "Esther is a story of Jewish defense, not of Jewish revenge."

its own devices. Postcolonial critique can help facilitate this critique which is needed, in order to ensure that the liberation of one group does not imply the destruction of another.<sup>43</sup> Womanist critique can also assist liberation hermeneutics in this endeavor, because, as argued earlier on in the dissertation, womanism focuses on the well-being of all people, both male and female<sup>44</sup> and seeks to redress all aspects of domination (including racism and classism), irrespective of whether the dominator is a man or a woman. Using postcolonial criticism within the framework of womanism as a strategy to read this element of Esther's character is useful, because it allows us not just to explore the aspects of Esther's character that can be empowering from a gender perspective, but to expose those aspects of her character that are dis-empowering from an ethnic and class perspective as well.<sup>45</sup>

In this section I have shown that by reading the character of Esther strategically we can show that even though Esther does not seem bold and revolutionary, that "when Esther acts to save herself and her people she exhibits precisely those qualities; it is just that she is judicious in her boldness and disobedience" (Bronner 1998:9). As an orphan, an exile and a woman the difficulties that Esther had to undergo to achieve her victory would certainly have been great. But, she nonetheless achieves that victory not just for herself, but for her people. As White (1989:173) argues:

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<sup>43</sup> See for example Warrior (1995:279) who argues for the unsuitability of the exodus paradigm as a liberation paradigm for Native Americans.

<sup>44</sup> Note also Schüssler Fiorenza's (1999) choice to write the word women as "wo/men" to include both women and men who are subjugated under all forms of hierarchical domination, and Okure's (1993:77) argument that African feminist Biblical interpretation consists of both scholars and non-scholars.

<sup>45</sup> We should note, however, in understanding her character in this way we should not pass judgment on Esther the woman, since men also abuse and corrupt power.

The Jews in the Diaspora are also in the position of the weak, as a subordinate population under the dominant Persian government. They must adjust to their lack of immediate political and economic power, and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can. In the book of Esther, their role model for this adjustment is Esther.

In this chapter so far I have attempted to offer strategies for reading the characters of Vashti and Esther in ways that can be empowering for women in the South African context. Although the book has been perceived as troubling for South African readers because of its race, gender and class issues (Mosala 1992 and Masenya 2001), the transformative reading strategies that I have offered will hopefully provide ways of dealing with these issues. Bal (1991:92) argues that Vashti,

as an agent of ideological reflection...is eliminated for the sake of the ideology of male dominance. But she is eliminated only to reappear in Esther, who takes her place, avenging her punishment by turning disobedience into access to power.

Vashti and Esther are not opposites of each other, they are complementary. Hopefully understanding the text in this way will prove empowering for women in oppressive contexts in South Africa, who are usually forced to choose between these two powerful women.

## **CHARACTERIZING MORDECAI**

In the following three sections I deal with the 3 major male characters in the narrative. I do not attempt in my reading of the three characters to “rescue” any of them from patriarchal bias, for none of them are biased by the patriarchal ideologies of the narrator. So, in reading their characters I

employ a different strategy. This strategy is underpinned by a hermeneutics of suspicion, which seeks to expose how each of their characters, especially Mordecai and Ahasuerus, are aligned with the patriarchal ideology of the text. In other words a hermeneutic of suspicion does not take the patriarchal text at face value, “but rather investigates it as to its ideological functions in the interest of domination” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2001:175). With this in mind, I attempt an analysis of the character of Mordecai.

We are introduced to Mordecai in chapter 2 of the narrative, immediately after the king has decided that he will conduct a nation-wide search for a new queen among all the beautiful virgins of the land. Mordecai’s introduction is a bit jarring, given the fact that the king has decided that he will be looking for beautiful virgins, and yet we are suddenly introduced to a man! But, the significance becomes clearer when we discover in latter verses that he is related to a beautiful virgin. This is how Mordecai is introduced in chapter 2:

5. Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite
6. Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away.
7. Mordecai had brought up Hadassah – that is Esther – his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother. The girl was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.

This introduction of Mordecai is crucial to the rest of the narrative as it introduces the sources of what sets up the central conflict in the book. The first description that we have of Mordecai is that he is a Jew. The epithet of

Jew<sup>46</sup> remains with the characterization of Mordecai for most of the rest of the narrative (5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:29; 10:3). The reason for the epithet becomes glaringly obvious as the plot describing the genocide of the Jewish nation in Persia unfolds. He is also introduced with many other links all of which have inter-textual links with other Biblical narratives. The purpose for the inter-textual links is to connect Mordecai's Jewishness with the situation of exile. Both Beal (1997:33) and Berlin (2001:24) note that the word *exile* occurs four times in these verses alone.

Beal (1997:33) suggests that the association of Mordecai's Jewish character to exile is meant to be two-fold. Firstly, it is meant to be associated with "a disenfranchised genealogy, including an ousted dynasty and a raving anti-Davidean executed as a political criminal,"<sup>47</sup> and secondly, the experience of exile – "the experience of being carried off and dispersed." By introducing Mordecai in this way the text immediately begs the reader's identification with a character who is already so downtrodden.<sup>48</sup>

After this rather lengthy introduction of Mordecai, the Jew, we are also told that there is another person attached to his character. Here we are not introduced to Esther in her own right but from the perspective of Mordecai. He "takes" Esther as his daughter when her father and mother died. All we hear of Esther is that she is beautiful and that she is an orphan. Again the

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<sup>46</sup> Berlin (2001:24) notes that the term Jew derives from Judah, the name of the kingdom, but that it does not necessarily refer to someone from the tribe of Judah. This is the case with Mordecai, whom we are told hails from the tribe of Benjamin. The term Jew then refers to all of Judah's population irrespective of their tribe of origin.

<sup>47</sup> This is meant to be a reference to II Samuel 16:5-8. The reference to Shimei in the narrative is taken to refer to Shimei, son of Gera, a member of Saul's clan who harshly criticizes David, who subsequently orders his death.

<sup>48</sup> While the text overtly begs identification with Mordecai the Jew, it does not do so with Vashti the woman. It is only with our non-identification with Haman and the king that we then question our identification with Memucan and the king. In other words, it is the reader who has to make the connection between the two through "non-identification" with Memucan and Haman. See my later comment regarding the point made by Beal that the text dictates this identification.

text begs the reader's identification with her character too, for not only is she a Jew and an exile, but she is also an orphan. Her fortune, though, seems set to change in the next few verses where she too is taken along with all the other beautiful virgins of the kingdom to the harem.

The next time we hear of Mordecai is in 2:10 where we are told that "Esther did not reveal her people or kindred for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it." Although we do not know the part that Mordecai played, or the amount of choice that he had with regard to Esther being taken to the harem, we know that he has given Esther special advice concerning the non-revelation of her identity. The words chosen to express her identity is, in a way, "double-barreled." The Hebrew words *am* and *moledet* are very closely linked in meaning and as Berlin (2001:27) notes "the use of both terms together puts more emphasis on the ethnic dimension." So, in our first introduction to Mordecai we already sense the ethnic undertones related to his character. The text does not provide any reason for why he tells Esther to keep her identity a secret.<sup>49</sup> We do not know whether it would have been dangerous for her to reveal it. But from the subsequent encounters with Haman the text reveals that there is certainly danger in being a Jew. Beal (1997:35) suggests that Mordecai's command to his cousin, momentarily returns the focus to the issue of Esther's identity as Jewish cousin and daughter to Mordecai, "making clear that this new identity does not overwrite the former one, but rather is added to it (in potentially problematic ways)."

2:11 states that: "Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared." Mordecai is certainly still interested in the welfare of Esther, but we are not sure of his motivations. Was it simply altruistic or was there an element of self-interest? Unfortunately, unlike with the rest of the characters, the narrator is

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<sup>49</sup> The LXX says that Mordecai had a dream in which he saw the future crisis.

extremely reticent when it comes to the motivations and thoughts that underlie the character of Mordecai.

The next time we see Mordecai, he is still outside the gate after Esther has been crowned queen. Again the text tells us in 2:20 that “Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.” Most of the glimpses that the text has given us thus far is of Mordecai *outside* the king’s gate. However, we see that even though Mordecai is on the outside as opposed to Esther who is on the inside, she still obeys his instructions.

In 2:21 we learn that Mordecai has uncovered a plot by Bigthan and Teresh (two eunuchs) to kill the king. Mordecai learns of this plot by virtue of his position outside of the palace gate. He notifies Esther who tells the king in Mordecai’s name. After some investigation Mordecai’s story is found to be true and the king ensures that it is written in the annals. However, Mordecai gets no reward for reporting this important information. Fox (1991:188) suggests that Mordecai is a character without personal ambition because he claims no reward for informing on the eunuchs. Fox goes on to suggest that:

The laurels he does receive fall into his lap without affecting him much. He rises in rank and power without evident effort toward those goals; they accrue to him as incidental rewards for his devotion to his king and his people.

Fox is evidently filling in the gaps in the text with regard to the character of Mordecai. For though the narrator is reticent about his character there is certainly little indication that Mordecai is as altruistic as Fox would make him out to be. I suggest that the reason for Mordecai not being rewarded immediately is more a function of literary effect than of Mordecai not demanding reward. The literary effectiveness of the comedy of errors that

occurs when Haman thinks that it is he the king wants to reward, instead of Mordecai, at a time in the narrative when Haman's wrath against Mordecai is extremely great, is certainly noteworthy. To suggest, therefore, that Mordecai is not ambitious (as a character trait) is to miss the point of literary effect.

The narrator's reticence with regard to Mordecai's characterization comes into sharpest focus in 3: 2-5 when he refuses to bow down to Haman. Even here the narrator does not allow us to hear Mordecai's reasons behind his decision not to bow to Haman, even though it is his refusal that floats the rest of the plot. We hear through indirect discourse via the king's courtiers that he was a Jew. It is as if we are meant to infer from the previous intertextual links that have been established why Mordecai's being a Jew prevents him from bowing down to Haman. Fox (1991:192) after eliminating all the explanations for Mordecai's refusal, comes up with what he thinks is the most likely reason for Mordecai's refusal – and that is that Haman is an Amalekite, the ancient tribal enemy of Israel. However, although this motive might be the reason, the narrator never chooses to share this with us. It exists in the possible intertextual links but never in direct discourse.

One scholar (Hyman 1994:103-109) devotes an entire article to the problem. His article is entitled: "The Question with no Response," referring to 3:3, where the courtiers question Mordecai about his refusal to bow and the text says he "does not hear them." Hyman compares his lack of response to the Joseph story in Genesis 39:10 where Joseph does not "hear" Potiphar's wife when she says: "Lie with me." As in the Joseph story, in Genesis, the words "hear them" mean, "listen to and obey them" rather than "receive sounds from them." The point is that Mordecai's refusal to answer them is not because he did not physically hear them, but because he deliberately chose not to answer the question, possibly because it was

unsafe to reveal his reasons, given that he asked Esther to hide her identity as a Jew.<sup>50</sup>

Mordecai's silence seems to be a hallmark of his character. He sets the complications in motion and then remains silent. Then when Haman, as a result of Mordecai's refusal, orders the death of all Jews, he sets up Esther to rescue the Jews and then remains silent again.<sup>51</sup> It would seem that though saddened by the edict against the Jews, Mordecai does not take personal responsibility or act personally to save them. Instead he opts to use the "insider" route that he has in the person of Esther. Scott (1990:92) argues that: "most acts of power from below, even when they are protests – implicitly or explicitly – will largely observe the 'rules' even if their objective is to undermine them." Mordecai, it would seem, is acting with the limited power which he has from below, so instead of outright defiance of the edict (as opposed to Vashti who openly resists her domination, despite the consequences) Mordecai remains silent while he waits to see how the "insider" route – the one that "observes the rules" – will pan out.

Even when he does protest, his protest is obviously within the confines of what is acceptable. He shows his feelings when in 4:1 he "tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly." Many commentators have shown that this was a common Middle-Eastern practice.<sup>52</sup> His actions are significant in that his actions are typical signs of mourning, and as Berlin (2001:45) points out it is "not for a past loss, but for a future threat. It is actually a kind of public protest."

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<sup>50</sup> Fox (1991:192) provides another motivation for Mordecai not providing a reason for his refusal. He argues that it is because "the author does not rationalize the act that will endanger the Jews, perhaps because Jewish motives are not relevant to anti-Semitic malevolence."

<sup>51</sup> Note the irony, however, in Mordecai's declaration to Esther in 4:14 "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter..."

<sup>52</sup> See for example Berlin (2001:45), Bechtel (2002: 44) and Jobes (1999:131).

However, this “public protest” is within the acceptable norms of the society. The text does not say that Mordecai declared the reason for his mourning. This is the first time that we are given an idea of how Mordecai is feeling, but it is in indirect discourse. We do not actually hear his voice. Mordecai opts for the “safe” route of protest. Even when the king orders the death of Haman as a solution to Esther’s request to save her people, Mordecai still remains silent, while it is Esther who (because she recognizes that Haman’s death alone will not save her people) begs for the decree for the annihilation of the Jews to be reversed (8:1-6).

From our analysis of the character of Mordecai it is clear that he, like Esther, operates within the system of power that confines them. They are at a distinct disadvantage as exiles in a foreign land. Notwithstanding Mordecai’s covert efforts in defending his people, in concluding our analysis of the character of Mordecai, the question we should ask is: is Mordecai the real hero of the story? Some commentators (both ancient and modern) have argued that he is.<sup>53</sup> If we say that Mordecai is the hero of the story then we have to examine his character closely to see whether the text and Mordecai’s own actions reveal him as the hero.

On the level of the text, we have noted in our examination that the narrator is very reticent with regard to the character of Mordecai. Unlike with other characters, we are not privy to the feelings and motivations for Mordecai’s actions. We are simply told in indirect discourse what his actions are, but never given any true motivations for it. This is certainly odd since it is his action, or rather non-action, that sets up the major complication of the story. As with Vashti, where we are told that she simply said ‘no,’ with the actions of Mordecai as well we are told that he simply said ‘no.’ It is the servants’ who conclude that Mordecai said no because he was a Jew. I agree with Fox (1991:192) that the author did not see the need to rationalize the

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Moore (1971:ii).

behavior of Mordecai for that then lends credence to the evil motivations of Haman. The same can be said of Vashti. It is the king's insecurities about his own worth that leads to the irrational decisions taken against Vashti, and by trying to discover reasons for Vashti's refusal, we thereby dignify the king's response to her, in the same way that we dignify Haman's response to Mordecai if we feel that the text needs to provide valid reasons for Mordecai's refusal to bow. In spite of these points, the fact remains that it is Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman that sets up the complications to the plot.

By setting up the similarities between Vashti and Mordecai, in the previous paragraph, I have highlighted the argument that Beal (1997:17) presents with regard to the solidarity that the reader experiences with both Vashti and Mordecai:<sup>54</sup>

The text of Esther builds a striking solidarity between the other woman Vashti, marked over against the subjects of the law (the king, Memucan, and the other officials), and Mordecai as the "other Jew" over against the same (but with Haman replacing Memucan). Thus as we read we may identify not with the subject of the law, at the center of ostensible power, but with the one marked for oblivion as the subject's antithesis, and with forms of covert power that rely primarily on ambiguity.

Notwithstanding Beal's argument concerning the solidarity that is built up between Vashti and Mordecai as the characters with whom we should identify, this certainly does not imply that Mordecai becomes the hero of the story. For though he is the one under threat and we identify and

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<sup>54</sup> Although I agree with Beal's assessment, I would argue that it is not the text that sets up the solidarity but the reader. In other words, my womanist reading strategy, which focuses on the nexus of race and gender, is what compels me to look for the similarities in the oppressions that both Vashti and Mordecai experience.

sympathize with him concerning his plight, it is not his actions that lead to the denouement of the plot. He begins the process by which the denouement is reached, but he is not as wise as some commentators, especially Fox (1991), will have us believe. He implores Esther to approach the king and beg for the salvation of the Jews. If Esther had done exactly as he had asked, we know from Vashti's experience that she would have been thrown out of the system.<sup>55</sup> Instead it is Esther who devises a cleverer and certainly more strategic plan than Mordecai did. Even when the king orders Haman to be killed, as noted before, it is Esther that does the pleading, while Mordecai remains silent. Mordecai's only heroic nature lies in the fact that he chose to remain true to his Jewish principles and did not bow to another human being. Even though this is so, the end of the book still aims to fit into the mould of literary writing that portrays the male as the hero. In 9:20-22 we are told that the Jews did what Mordecai had written to them. Esther is given status again in 9:29 when she is writing to inaugurate the festival of Purim, though as Clines (1998:15) points out, despite the fact that the verb for writing is used in the singular feminine form (*taktav*) "some scribe, breaking grammatical concord, finds it necessary to add 'and Mordecai.'" Then at the end of the narrative (10:1-3), the text gives a detailed account of Mordecai's rise to power in the kingdom of Ahasuerus, as if the narrative was entirely about him.

Although in the course of the narrative itself there is no evidence which indicates that Mordecai is the hero, the final word (10:1-3), and subsequent interpretations, is proof of the text's intention and ability to position us as readers. Like the way in which the text through its plot structure seeks to woo us into its patriarchal ideology, so too the text woos us into this web of patriarchal characterization – the notion that the man is always the hero. My examination of the character of Mordecai, using a hermeneutic of suspicion,

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<sup>55</sup> In fact although he implores Esther to approach the king directly with her request, he himself employs other more clandestine methods of resistance.

however, proves that he is far from being the hero for neither his actions nor the narrator's representation of his character show him to be the hero. In other words, although the text at the end suggests that Mordecai is the hero, the text itself undermines this notion, by not providing evidence to support its final assertion. It is within this inconsistent space that a womanist reader is able to articulate a resistance to the notion of Mordecai as hero.

### **CHARACTERIZING HAMAN**

No other character in this narrative helps us to understand the term "interpellation" better than the character of Haman. Interpellation, as I have already pointed out in chapter 2, is "used to designate the process by which texts, as it were, hollow out a linguistic space for the reader to occupy. By assuming that place we also assume the viewpoint and attitudes that go with it" (Morris 1993:29). So far, I have been suggesting that we resist this linguistic space that is created for us as readers because we are dealing with a patriarchal narrative, and the linguistic spaces that are created for us as readers require that we identify with the patriarchal ideology in the narrative. However, with the characterization of Haman, the linguistic space that we are required to occupy compels us to identify with the ethnic ideology of the text. The ethnic ideology clearly takes sides with the Jews as an ethnic group, and this is most clearly demonstrated in the character of Haman.

Moreover, through the character of Haman (as an evil villain) we are persuaded of the injustice of the pogrom against the Jews. In my examination of the character of Haman, rather than read against the grain of the text, (because the text explicitly shows its disapproval of racial and ethnic injustice) I will "lay bare" the processes of how the text co-opts readers into accepting its ideologies. In other words, unlike the way in

which I read the previous characters, either through the text's own submerged meanings or my own "interested" reading, with the character of Haman, my intention is to depict the role of the text in the process of interpretation through its characterization of characters. With these thoughts in mind I offer the following analysis of the character of Haman.

We are first introduced to Haman in chapter 3. His introduction, like Mordecai's is very strange, because it does not seem to relate to the preceding events in the plot. Mordecai's introduction is peculiar because we are told that the king is searching for all the beautiful virgin women in the land, after which we are immediately introduced to a man – Mordecai. Haman's introduction is similarly troubling, in that in the previous chapter (chapter 2) we are told of Mordecai's heroism in saving the king and how the king wished to honor him – "this was recorded in the annals at the instance of the king" (2:22). Hence chapter 2 ends with the king writing Mordecai's name in the history books of Persia so that he could be remembered for his heroism. The reader then expects that Mordecai will be rewarded by being promoted or publicly recognized for his heroism. Instead, immediately after his heroism we are introduced in chapter 3 to Haman (whom we have not yet encountered in the text), and we are told that "some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of the officials" (3:1).

Berlin (2001:33) notes that the text "expresses the promotion in three phases – 'promoted Haman, advanced him, seated him higher,' adding to the grandiosity of Haman's rise to power." Already, even in the introduction of Haman, the reader senses trouble. The question, how is it that Haman gets promoted while Mordecai has performed a heroic act, is the first uneasiness that the reader experiences with the character of Haman.

The second uneasy reaction that the reader experiences with the character of Haman is the appellation with which he is introduced. We are told that he is “Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite.” The inter-textual links of this appellation have been laid bare by many scholars. As with the designation attached to Mordecai, the epithet attached to Haman is tactical. It is meant to connect Haman to the Amalekite king, Agag in I Sam 15:8. This reference is obviously to strengthen the already ancient antagonism hinted at in the introduction of Mordecai in 2:5. Berlin (2001:34) notes that the epithet remains (in different ways) throughout the narrative (3:10; 8:1,3,5; 9:10 and 24), with the same effect of emphasizing his Agagite connection. “The effect is to reinforce that an Agagite is, by definition, a Jewish enemy.”

This enmity becomes crystal clear as the narrative unfolds. Fox (1991:178-179) points out that Haman’s motives are never obscured. In other words, unlike in the case of Mordecai, with Haman the narrator is never reticent with words. At all times in the text we are made to see clearly what Haman is feeling and thinking. We are even made to see things from his point of view, as Berlin (2001:35) points out. In 3:5 we are told, “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow down to him, Haman was filled with rage.” When we learn that Mordecai refuses to bow down, we learn this from the perspective of the courtiers who notice that Mordecai is not bowing down. Their question is not why he refuses to bow to Haman, but why he refuses to “obey the king’s order” (3:3). They see Mordecai’s refusal not in terms of disobedience to, nor as dishonoring of Haman, but as dishonoring the king. Haman, however, takes Mordecai’s refusal to bow to him personally and the narrator allows us to see this, by allowing us to view Mordecai’s actions through Haman’s point of view. And from Haman’s point of view, Mordecai has dishonored him.

He thus decides that revenge served on Mordecai alone will not be adequate. He decides that Mordecai's entire ethnic group – the Jews – will have to pay. Fox (1991: 170) points out that:

What is revealed in all of this is a vast and tender ego. Haman's primary motivation in all his actions is neither racial hatred, though he hardly lacks this, nor undirected spleen, though he is certainly splenetic, but rather the need to confirm his power at every step. Haman is first enraged by Mordecai's refusal to show obeisance, in other words to confirm publicly Haman's power and status. Haman does not seek to punish Mordecai alone. Moreover merely to punish Mordecai alone would allow *him* to define the scope of the conflict: one person punished for an insult to one person. So Haman devises a vengeance embracing the entire people to which Mordecai belongs.

I agree with both Fox and Berlin, that Haman's motivations are directly related to his need for power. What this means is that his actions are neither motivated by his concern that Mordecai is disobeying a royal law (as pointed out above), neither is it because of racial hatred, as Fox points out above. But, in his request to the king for the annihilation of the Jews he appeals to the king's concern and need that his laws be obeyed and the false information that there is an entire ethnic group that does not obey the laws of the king:

3.8. Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them.

3.9. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.”

So, Haman cleverly couches his own need for power in language that appeals to the king’s need for power. Berlin (2001: 40) asserts that Haman is not just talking about the royal law which Mordecai has refused to obey (*mitzvat ha-melek*) but he is suggesting that all the Jews disobey imperial law (*dat ha-melek*). Hence Haman is saying that the Jews do not acknowledge the sovereignty of the king, and this constitutes treason. Although Haman is confident that the king will accept his proposal given the king’s obsession with public displays of power (as was clear in his dealings with Vashti), he still has to make doubly sure that his plan works. In order to do this he promises to put a vast amount of money into the king’s treasury either to compensate for the lack of tribute that the Jews would contribute to the empire were they kept alive, or as an indication of how much it is worth to Haman that all the Jews be killed (Berlin 2001:41).

Whatever Haman’s reasoning behind the way in which he approached the king – it certainly worked, because the king in the next verses gives his full authority for the Jews to be annihilated. Haman is then happy that his plan has worked and we meet him the next time at Esther’s banquet. After the first banquet the text says that he is happy and light-hearted (5:9), until he has an encounter with Mordecai at the gate of the palace again, and Mordecai does not even move or stir on his account. Haman’s wrath is greatly stirred against Mordecai again. He goes home and meets with his friends and his wife Zeresh:<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Apart from Vashti and Esther, Zeresh is the only other named female character in this narrative. Zeresh seems to be a strong woman, who unfortunately seems to share her husband’s love of power. She nonetheless is a powerful woman, and as Jobes (1999:146) notes: “The irony of this scene builds on that of chapter 1. Haman’s haste to elicit and follow the evil advice of his wife and friends (5:14) contrasts with the king’s order that ‘every man should be ruler over his own household’ (1:22).” Jobes’ assertion links the character of Zeresh, with the character of

5.11 and Haman told them about his great wealth and his many sons, and all about how the king had promoted him and advanced him above the officials and the king's courtiers.

5.12 "What is more," said Haman, "Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king.

5.13. Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate."

Haman's characteristics are most clearly exhibited in the above verses. His hatred of Mordecai the Jew is not because Mordecai is a Jew, but because Mordecai the Jew refuses to acknowledge his power and his status. Even his plan has not forced Mordecai to recognize that Haman is powerful nor to give him obeisance. It is this that enrages Haman. As Fox (1991:181) argues: "It was not because of his spite for Jews that Haman set out to eliminate them. Rather, he makes anti-Semitism an *instrument* for achieving perfect personal revenge." In other words, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai is to be explained not as a clash of race, but as "a defect of Haman's psyche," Fox argues.

I agree with Fox, that Haman's behavior says more about his need for public acknowledgement of his status and power than actual ethnic or racial hatred. I have argued already that the plot of Esther is floated by the theme of power and the two characters who embody this theme most intensely are the king and Haman. Beal (1997:78-79) delineates how the theme of power reflected so profoundly in the way in which the king and his advisors deal with Vashti in the first chapter, almost "reappears" in the encounters between Haman and Mordecai. There are at least three similarities that are

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Vashti, but not in a way that shows each of their strengths. Rather, her argument that Haman's listening to his wife is contrasted to the king's decree that every man should rule his household,

strikingly comparable. The first is when Mordecai for a second time in 5:9 refuses to acknowledge Haman's status by showing submission. The scene is reminiscent of Vashti's "dishonoring" refusal to appear in 1:12, and how her refusal throws the king into a burning rage. The word *hemah* is also used to describe Haman's rage.

Secondly, Haman returns to his home and boasts to his friends and his wife, about his great wealth and status and admits that all of that is worth nothing to him as long as Mordecai dishonors him. Beal points out that the boasting is similar to the elaborate detail with which the king's wealth and status is portrayed in the first chapter. Notwithstanding all that wealth and power, the king still feels dishonored if one individual refuses to recognize that status and power. Thirdly, in the same way the king seeks counsel from his advisors and Memucan, Haman also seeks counsel from his friends and wife who unlike Memucan, don't advise him to write an edict, but to build a stake fifty cubits high to have Haman impaled on it. Beal (1997:79) concludes:

As with the king in 1:21 and 2:4 so here, 'the word was pleasing' to Haman, and he did just as they recommended...The language here is nearly identical to that describing the king's reaction to and implementation of Memucan's plan with regard to Vashti. Thus, as in chapter 3, the pattern of relation between Haman and the other Jew Mordecai parallels the pattern in chapter 1 involving the king and the other woman Vashti. And thus the Jewish hero Mordecai and the non-Jewish heroine Vashti are once again identified with one another.

My arguments made earlier concerning Vashti's important role in the narrative, and how that role sets up the theme of power in the narrative as a

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seems to suggest that there is some inherent value in the king's decree.

whole, is clearly evident here in Beal's arguments concerning the similarities between the way in which the king deals with Vashti and the way in which Haman deals with Mordecai.<sup>57</sup> It underscores not just the misogyny of the king, nor the anti-Semitism of Haman, though each is both misogynistic and anti-Semitic in specific ways. What the similarities highlight most is the insecurities of those who have power, and the immense struggles they go through to maintain that power. Both Haman and the king have to have public displays of power in order to reassure themselves of their own worth. The only way they are able to have their own worth reassured is by calling the worth of the "other" into question. They need constant reminders of how powerful they are, and it is in this pride that they revel and carve out their existence. Hence it is Haman's pride that leads him to believe that the king wants to honor him (6:6). The need to experience that public display of honor overwhelms him in his planning of how that honoring should happen, to such an extent that he does not stop for a moment to think that the person the king wants to honor might not be him.

Haman, like the king, is fixated with the idea of control and power:

Such an obsession is a single, ineradicable notion that dominates the thoughts and feelings in spite of one's own will. Mordecai's refusal to show fear, indeed his very presence in the King's Gate, proves to Haman that, whatever his might, he lacks control: he cannot govern the Jew's emotions (Fox 1991:180).

Fox's assertion above captures the character of Haman succinctly. He is someone obsessed with control, and when he cannot force the other into

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<sup>57</sup> However, I point out again that I differ from Beal in that I do not think that the connection between Vashti and Mordecai is a self-evident one made for the reader by the text. Rather I believe that it is the reader who through deconstruction, activating the "submerged meanings" in the text, ultimately makes this connection.

acknowledging his power, the actions he takes become almost as, if not more, irrational than the king's re-actions, when he believes that his power is not being recognized and acknowledged. Both the king and Haman are two of a kind as we shall discover in the following exploration of the king's character.

### CHARACTERIZING AHASUERUS<sup>58</sup>

As with the character of Haman, the king is "all surface...it is hard to imagine Xerxes<sup>59</sup> having any thoughts not obvious to anyone. His character consists of a few obvious moods and impulses" (Fox 1991:171). This aptly captures the king's characterization. Nothing is left to the reader's imagination and even when it is, most times it is not difficult to guess what the king's reaction would be based on our knowledge of the way in which he deals with situations. The king is as central to the plot of Esther as Esther herself is. He appears in almost all of the scenes in the narrative. In the examination of the character of the king which I offer below I will show how his characterization points to the general theme of power in the narrative, with regard to gender, ethnicity and class. I will demonstrate this by carefully examining his relationship with three other characters in the narrative. In other words, I will be examining his character through the text's employment of *indirect presentation*, that is the way in which other characters function to sustain a consistent interpretation of the king's character. I will argue that his re-actions to Vashti, his encounters with Haman, and his relationship with Esther, all point to the way in which the

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<sup>58</sup> Both Paton (1908:51-54) and Fox (1991:14) show that the name Ahasuerus can be equated with Xerxes I, the son of Darius, who ruled the Persian empire from 485 to 465 BCE. Beal (1997:126), however, notes that other than the references in the first two verses, "there are very few details in the MT Esther which would be of use for a historical reconstruction, or for locating the book's earliest historical context other than as Jewish Diaspora in Persia."

<sup>59</sup> Note that some scholars such as Fox have no problem in referring to Ahasuerus as Xerxes since they argue that the Ahasuerus of the narrative of Esther is the same as the Xerxes of history.

king as both a male and a ruler abuses his power. With this in mind we now turn to an examination of the king's reactions to Vashti.

### *Ahasuerus and Vashti*

We are introduced to the king in the very first chapter. He is presented with an elaborate amount of detail concerning his wealth and his status. Several scholars<sup>60</sup> have noted that the elaborate detail with which the story opens is meant to portray the elaborate power and status that the king possesses. Besides this, as noted earlier, Laniak (1998:36) argues that the purpose of the king's banquets were occasions for the king to honor himself. He needs for all and sundry to recognize that he deserves honor. His generosity here is one way of "buying" this honor, for we see that there is no restraint on anything at his party, especially with regard to the drinking. His first party is intended for the nobles, the officials and the courtiers. The second banquet is extended to all the people who lived in the fortress of Susa, high and low alike. Berlin (2001:7) asserts, "the occasion for the banquet is not specified." In 1:4, however, a very clear reason for the banquet is provided. "For no fewer than a hundred and eighty days he displayed the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty." This reasoning is clearly in line with Laniak's argument that the king's banquets were simply occasions for him to honor himself. And he did not only seek out the honor of the nobles, but of the common people as well, hence his second banquet for all the people of Susa, "high and low alike."

Having established the nature of this king who seeks to reinforce his power through public displays of wealth and status, the reader is prepared for the next scene in chapter 1 when the king calls for what he might believe to be the final crowning of his glory, when he asks for the queen to be brought so that he might show off her beauty. Vashti's refusal to appear when bade by

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<sup>60</sup> For example Beal (1997), Clines (1998), and especially Laniak (1998).

the king to do so, is an insult in the greatest degree to the king, not least of all because the timing is not good. The king calls for Vashti at the climax of the period in which he has put his honor on display. The Persians conceived of honor as not only being able to secure ostentatious wealth, but as being able to secure submission and obedience. Memucan makes the point that wifely obedience equals male honor (Fox 1991:172). Furthermore honor is something that has to be bestowed freely, not by force.<sup>61</sup> Fox (1991:172) argues that:

Xerxes does not simply order Vashti dragged in. It is not enough for him to control her body; he must be master of her will as well. Having her brought by force might prove his mastery as king but not his power as a man. That can only be confirmed by his wife herself, and for this she needs at least ostensive freedom of will. Similarly the princes insist not merely that wives be forced to *obey* their husbands, but that they *show* honor to them (1:20). Power itself does not fill the need; men need a show of honor from their wives, like kings from their subjects, for they are always reading their images in other people's eyes.

The king's obsession with power as reflected on above, ironically does not make him any stronger. In fact it makes him weaker, so that he is unable to make decisions for himself. This is reflected in several episodes, the first being the incident with Vashti. He is at a complete loss as to how to re-act to Vashti's refusal and hastily calls in other people to advise him (1:15). He cannot even remember what his own laws are at that moment and he asks his advisors what the law says should be done with Vashti. Because there is no such law, the advisors have to find reasons for the law that they make

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<sup>61</sup> This point is demonstrated when Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. Haman could have probably tried to force him to bow down, by appealing to royal law. Instead he chose rather to exact revenge, for to force him would mean that Haman's honor is questionable.

up. The reason, not surprisingly, is related to the issue of male honor. In refusing to appear before the king, Vashti has not only dishonored the king but she has dishonored all the males in the kingdom, since their wives will also not show honor to their husbands. The law that the advisors come up with is that Vashti is never to come into the king's presence again:

1.19. If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus.

The king agrees with this proposal, and an edict is sent out to every province of his vast kingdom that Vashti is never to appear in his presence again, and that every man should have authority in his own home. By doing so, the king has agreed that his "domestic crisis" should be a national one, because all male honor has come into question through the actions of one woman. In asking Vashti to appear before the men she becomes:

A means to identification between the king and the other men, bringing them closer together and providing their subjective position in the center with ever greater definition. They require her as the object obliged to enable their identification with one another (Beal 1997:21).

In order to re-establish their identification as males with one another, over and against the females, they have to reverse the situation of dis-honor. The king in his position of power is able to do this and Vashti is removed. Although the king is happy to be rid of Vashti in order to re-establish his honor, he at the same time is not happy because Vashti's deposal leaves him without a wife. We see at the beginning of chapter 2 of the narrative, that he probably misses his wife. "Some time afterward, when the anger of

King Ahasuerus subsided, he thought of Vashti and what had been decreed against her,” (2:1). In the very next verse the servants advise him (as if they knew the inner thoughts of the king, and that they knew that he was thinking about Vashti) that he should gather all the beautiful young virgins so that he can choose a new queen. Berlin (2001:22) points out the irony of the fact that “Vashti’s behavior threatened to cause a rebellion by *all* the women in the kingdom; and now *all* the young virgins should be summoned.” The text speaks of this plan without any condemnation on it whatsoever, so that even subsequent interpreters have interpreted the summoning of the virgins to be a beauty contest rather than a sex contest.<sup>62</sup> But that is exactly what the summoning of the virgins turns out to be. The women do not just parade before the king in their best clothes while he chooses a winner. We are told that he spends a night with each of them:

2.14. She would go in the evening and leave in the morning for a second harem in charge of Shaasgaz, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the concubines. She would not go again until the king wanted her, when he would summon her by name.

What happens to the bodies of all the virgin women whom the king “tests” for one night? Where do they go, and what is their future after the king has “tested” out their abilities in bed? Is their performance in bed the king’s only criterion for the choice of a new queen?<sup>63</sup> To ask these questions is to throw an even worse light on a king, who is not only insecure of his honor, but who because of his insecurities needs to violate the bodies of hundreds of women before he can decide which one he will make his queen. His tenuous understanding of his own honor reflects not only in his

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<sup>62</sup> Recall my earlier argument that this part of the narrative be viewed as a “text of terror.”

<sup>63</sup> Phipps (1992:96) argues that: “Evidently Ahasuerus enjoys judging the contest, for four years elapse from the time that Vashti is deposed until someone is selected to take her place. He perhaps deflowered hundreds of virgins before deciding which damsel had given him the most pleasure.”

irresponsible actions toward the women he encounters, but with the villain of the text also, to which we now turn our attention to.

### *Ahasuerus and Haman*

In the same way that the king through his insecurities concerning his honor gives in to a preposterous suggestion that a domestic problem become a national crisis, in his interactions with Haman he exhibits the same qualities.<sup>64</sup> Haman, as a man and as a royal subject knows exactly what the king's biggest weakness is – his obsession with honor and power. And this is exactly what he uses to persuade the king to give his approval of the genocide of the Jewish nation. All Haman had to do was to claim that there were people in the kingdom who did not obey the king's laws. As we know from Vashti's example, obeying the king's laws is the same as honoring the king. Laniak (1998:48) suggests that

[T]he conceptual sphere of honor requires a particular, predictable public response in order for it to be complete...If honor is incomplete until it is recognized, if it is a tenuous commodity, subject to constant testing, then the person who has the most to lose at any given time is the one who assumes the highest position on the social or moral ladder.

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<sup>64</sup> The difference between Memucan's proposal in chapter 1 and Haman's proposal in chapter 3, both of which the king blindly accepts, is that whereas the reader who is not empathetic to feminist or womanist principles might very well find the first situation funny, the second is deadly. As Wyler (1995:122-123) argues: "Those who have smiled about the funny, even farcical setting and the totally exaggerated reaction of male chauvinism in chapter 1 are given a shock in chapter 3. The exercise of power as presented in chapter 1 can still be accepted as fairly normal, particularly by an audience not sensitive to gender issues. This does not apply to the execution of power as presented in chapter 3, where 'execution' is to be taken in its most literal sense. Chapter 1 needs chapter 3 in order to uncover the pattern of power abuse, whereas chapter 3 can do without chapter 1, since the abuse is so obvious."

Haman knows and understands the way in which this system works, since he himself knows better than anyone what it feels like to have his honor challenged. The king belongs to the same group of people as Haman and his royal advisors who understand honor in this way. Hence honor that is challenged will have to have repercussions that not only reverse the situation, but also will be so severe that it ensures that a repetition of the misdemeanor does not occur. Given that there is this unspoken understanding of honor, it is not difficult to see why the king then does not need much persuasion at all. He does not even question Haman's request and in fact he is happy to even give the money that Haman wants to pay into the treasury back to him. It is his honor that he has to protect, and he is willing to do that even at the cost of an entire nation.

#### *Ahasuerus and Esther*

In as much as royal power is related to the matrix of royal honor and shame, we know from Vashti's story that male power is also related to the matrix of male honor and shame. Ironically, it is the king's perception of the challenge to his own male honor that convinces him to oust Haman and grant Esther her wish in effect reversing the decree passed to protect his royal honor. The king's perceptions of honor and shame are certainly peculiar, especially to the modern reader. In the first place his male honor is threatened and he passes a decree to oust the woman who has threatened his male honor. In the second instance he is told that his royal honor is threatened and he passes a decree that will annihilate an entire Jewish nation.

In chapter 7 of the narrative, this peculiar understanding that the king has about preserving his honor comes into sharpest focus. The fact that he does not see it as dis-honorable that he violated the bodies of all the most beautiful women in his kingdom for approximately four years before he

decided which one he wanted to make his queen, illustrates this. But what is even more perplexing is that he does consider it dis-honorable (to himself!) if another man decided to do the same to his wife. This violation questions not the honor of the woman but the honor of the man. So, in 7:8 the king is not mortified that he thinks Haman is violating Esther (in her own right), but he is mortified that Haman could dishonor him enough to do it *in his presence, in his house*. In other words, he is mortified that someone is violating his property, namely Esther. The implication being that it would have been acceptable for Haman to violate Esther's body as long as it did not question the honor of the king – as long as it was not *imi babayit*, “in my own house” as the king so vociferously maintains. Derby (1994:118) has seen the disparity in the king's views of honor and comments that *babayit* is the funniest word in the Bible since when a whole nation's survival is being threatened all the king can think of is holding on to his status and power as a royal male. The fact that Haman wanted to violate his wife, not just anywhere but “in his own house” is what offends the king so much and what causes him to take the action that he takes.<sup>65</sup> It is not so much the vileness of what Haman has proposed to do to a whole nation (given that the king himself had agreed to this in the first place), but the fact that the king perceives that Haman has chosen to violate his male honor, that enrages him so.

From our brief sketch of the way in which the king is portrayed we see that he is certainly the weakest character in the text. Fox (1991:173) notes that

Though Xerxes is obsessed with the manifestation of authority, he is surprisingly indifferent to its actual exercise. The closest he comes to a refusal is when he protests that he cannot rescind his

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<sup>65</sup> Note once again, that a woman's body becomes the scapegoat for the power struggles between men.

own decree (8:7-8) – but then he immediately grants Mordecai and Esther royal authority by consigning to them his signet ring and empowering them to write whatever they wish (8:8).

The king's obsession for power and his love of "honor," a word that appears 9 times in relation to him alone, is what is used to forward the plot of the story. It starts with Vashti and ends with Esther, but each of the people that advise the king on what to do, play on his most delicate weaknesses – honor and power. The denouement of the plot is reached because Esther is the last one in a line of people, who know how to "press the right buttons" when dealing with the king. Hence, Fox (1991:173) concludes:

Thus the all-powerful Xerxes in practice abdicates responsibility and surrenders effective power to those who know how to press the right buttons – namely, his love of "honor," his anxiety for his authority, and his desire to appear generous.

### ***Conclusion***

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the reason that I have discussed the characters at such length is not only because characters are such a crucial part of literary analysis, but because they also provide the easiest "in-road" into a text for readers in communities of faith. In the next section and the subsequent chapters, we will explore how readers in communities of faith read the Biblical text, and to what extent the reading strategies and the critical tools that I have employed in the literary analysis in this first section can contribute to a process of gender-social transformation in my community.

## SECTION 2

### CHAPTER SIX

#### LEGITIMATING A HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION

In the introduction to this dissertation, I touched briefly on reasons why an analysis of the book of Esther that was only academic in nature, and hence only remained within the academy, would not be a satisfactory end to my research. I indicated that the research I undertook, although textual in nature, was with the goal of gender-social transformation in mind hence the fruits of the research could only be born in the community. In this chapter I delineate in more detail what engagement outside of the academy involves and why such engagement is necessary.

The last 5 chapters have focused primarily on literary and womanist readings of the text of Esther, focusing on issues of plot, narrative time, characterization and ideologies – all of which are traditional categories of literary analysis. Although the *modes* of interpretation I have presented are by no means “traditionally” literary in their outlook, the methodology nonetheless was literary. Yet, the interpretations and analyses offered were always overtly motivated by a specific ideological and ethical concern for discovering liberating messages for women in my community. It was my commitment to reading for liberation that made me argue not just for a hermeneutics of suspicion and revision, but for a hermeneutic of transformation as well. The question that this chapter seeks to answer is why is this hermeneutic of transformation needed at all? Although engagement between the academy and the faith community is not new, especially among African Biblical scholars (see for example West 1991, Dube 1996, Ukpong 1996, Philpott 1993) it is still not widely accepted in the academy as a legitimate way to discourse. West argues that there are at

least three reasons why Biblical scholars should be “converted” to this way of doing Biblical studies. The first thread that he identifies is liberation hermeneutics. This is because,

the primary interlocutors of liberation theologies are non-persons: uneducated believers, the poor, the exploited classes, the marginalized voices, women, all the despised cultures. Liberation hermeneutics requires that cognizance of the commitment to the experience of these non-persons is a necessary condition for reading the Bible and doing theology (West 1996:26).

A second thread that West identifies is that of postmodernism. Here West argues that

The postmodern shift allows Biblical scholars to abandon their quest for the certainty of “the right” reading in favor of the more humane concern for useful reading and resources that are part of a discourse that takes seriously questions of ethics, practices, and effects.

The third thread that West identifies is that of reader response criticism. I have already dealt with this in detail in the previous chapter, so I will not delve into the details here, except to add that West argues that reader response criticism also enables us as scholars to take seriously the interpretations offered by poor and marginalized readers of the community.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these reasons that West provides, I will show further in this chapter why community engagement is not only legitimate, but also

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<sup>1</sup> West (1999c:56-60) also later adds enculturation hermeneutics and postcolonial criticism to these three threads. Although acknowledging the contribution of cultural feminism and postmodernist feminist critique “of the universal experience and subjectivity” (West 1999c:53) he does not explicitly cite feminist critique as a “conversion catalyst” as the other threads are, because he assumes that feminism and womanism forms a part of liberation hermeneutics.

imperative and crucial. In other words, there are a number of grounds on which one could argue the importance of a hermeneutic of transformation to the practice of Biblical studies. I delineate some of them in the following pages.

### *A Womanist is an Activist*

Unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion and revision, a hermeneutic of transformation cannot be applied to the text.<sup>2</sup> A hermeneutic of transformation can only be applied and tested within a community of real readers. It is in this hermeneutic of transformation where womanism as a category of analysis becomes most significant. For example, Abrahams (2001:71) points out that one of the most important principles of womanism is:

Like Marxism, it is a body of theory, which must be tested in practice. In epistemological terms, we may say that its ultimate truth test lies in revolutionary practice. Womanist ideas may look great on paper. That is not the issue. The worth of womanist theories will only be seen in the ability of womanists to change the world.

Abraham's argument points directly to the thrust of my thesis, that is unless what we do in the academy changes our world in a significant (even if small way) then what we do is of little value. She rightly points out that Alice Walker (who first coined the term "womanist") considers herself primarily as a writer and an activist rather than an academic. In other words, the academic theories which undergird womanism must bear its fruit in the communities from which we hail. In this dissertation I have proposed a

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<sup>2</sup> Contra Schüssler Fiorenza (2001:188).

number of theoretical ways in which we could approach the text of Esther, but it is crucial that I test these theories in practice.

Feminism like womanism has also placed a certain degree of emphasis on this point. Lillian Robinson has reminded us that “the most important question we can ask ourselves as feminists is ‘so what?’” (quoted in Newton and Rosenfelt 1985:xv). Newton and Rosenfelt go on to argue that inherent in that question is a view that most of us as feminists share – “that the point of our work is to change the world.” Once Biblical scholars are done with their theories of a particular text (whether those theories are related to the socio-historic background of the text, or the text itself) the question still remains – so what? The primary dialogue partners of academics are academics, and no matter how groundbreaking or how liberating the interpretations that they offer are, most times their work never reaches nor is shared with people of faith in the communities – particularly those who do not share the theoretical knowledge that is so valued in the academy.

The liberating aspects of scholarly interpretation (like the ones offered in the last 5 chapters) are important, but only as long as they are able to reflect the same in the community. The importance of this is reflected in the way in which women in faith communities view the Bible. Tamez (1991:63-64) points out that in Latin America,

on the one hand, old-time anti-women customs of Hebrew culture have been declared sacred; on the other hand, certain texts have consequently been held up as Biblical principles to prove that women’s marginalization is natural in daily life.

The two implications spelled out by Tamez above holds true for many communities of faith and certainly the South African Indian Christian

community is no exception. If the Bible is used as normative, then the danger of legitimating the marginalization of women is very real, given that the Bible is a patriarchal document. Communities of faith are not as willing as some feminist scholars are to throw out texts that question the dignity of women or to reject the Bible as a sexist document. I have argued elsewhere that to reject the Bible is an irresponsible move by feminist and Biblical scholars (Nadar 2000b: 67-68).

Given that this is the case, I concur with Pobee (1996:162):

The scholarly study of Scripture is not an island unto itself; it is answerable to the hopes and fears of the society in which it is done. While I have room for erudition and for scholars raising questions which church people may find not really helpful, I do affirm the accountability of scholarship to the community of faith and its hopes and fears...In short, the Bible proves central in and for human transformation in Africa and elsewhere.

Those scholarly interpretations which are able to offer readings which affirm the dignity of women and which question the use of the Bible in their marginalization, but remain only in the academy beg the question "so what?" My argument is that unless the interpretations (which I believe are liberating) that I have offered in my academic reading impact in a positively transforming way on my community, its worth can be questioned.

In gathering all the academic paradigm shifts that enable Biblical scholars to take seriously the collaboration of Biblical scholars with the community, West has surprisingly left out a very important methodology, namely womanism and African woman's theology.<sup>3</sup> Articulating the realities and

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<sup>3</sup> Although West has used feminism as a component of his analysis, he does not indicate that feminism or womanism could be one of the paradigm shifts required for the "conversion from

legitimacy of our experiences as women, over and against abstract theological doctrine and dogma, is something that womanists, feminists and African women's theologies have been struggling with for decades. In other words, these disciplines insist on experience as a valid and legitimate source of God-talk and doing Biblical studies. When reading the Bible with communities of faith, I would argue that the methodologies used by feminism, womanism and African women's theologies should be foregrounded. Although it may be argued that liberation hermeneutics covers experience, often it is only the Black male experience that is considered important. Women's experiences are often left out of the equation of even Black theology. A very large number of the people whom West is referring to in his engagement with the community are Black women, and I would suggest that more than liberation hermeneutics or Black Theology is required in order to facilitate the conversion of Biblical studies to a genuinely engaged one. Using experience as a legitimate hermeneutical model does not imply merely individualized and personalized experience. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:49) asserts:

Rather, it begins with a critical reflection on how experience with the Biblical text is shaped by one's sociopolitical location. Equally it will ask for the experiences of wo/men and their cultural locations inscribed in the Biblical text. Hence a hermeneutics of experience critically problematizes the social-religious and intellectual locations not only of Biblical interpreters but also those of Biblical texts in relation to global struggles for survival and well-being.

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below," in the same way that he cites liberation hermeneutics, postmodernism, reader response criticism and later on even postcolonialism as conversion catalysts.

### *An Alien in the Academy: Dealing with "Fraudulent Power"*

Legitimizing community engagement means that scholars have to note their own location first and foremost. This means owning up to the fact that there are also personal reasons why scholars feel compelled to engage in this kind of discourse. The deep-seated conviction that scholarly work is of little value unless it impacts communities of faith is the driving force behind community engagement. This is not to deny the fulfillment that is derived from the insights that are shared at academic gatherings with other scholars. To deny that would be dishonest. But the fact is that even at academic gatherings, the faith community and how they would perceive and understand the interpretations offered by academics, remains a constant concern for those scholars concerned with liberation issues. Various levels of study have allowed me to become familiar with the academy, but even within that familiarity there are feelings of alienation. The reasons for this alienation lie in the two-fold bind of not just being in a male-stream academy but in a Western one also.

Elaine Showalter describes an episode at an academic conference which aptly captures my sentiments on this issue. She describes an incident that occurred when she was one of the speakers at an annual conference on Literary Theory in Georgetown University, in 1985. She says that on the first day that a Marxist theorist was introduced, a slender young woman in leotard and long skirt positioned herself a few feet from the speaker and whirled into motion, waving her fingers and hands, wordlessly moving her lips...She was translating into sign language. Showalter (1989:347-348) comments:

From the perspective of the audience, this performance soon began to look like a guerrilla theatre of sexual difference which had been staged especially for our benefit. After the first ten minutes it became impossible to listen to the famous man, immobilized behind the podium. Our eyes were drawn to the nameless woman and to the eloquent body language...The feminist implications of this arrangement were increasingly emphasized, moreover, throughout the first day of the conference, because, although the young woman reached ever more dazzling heights of ingenuity, mobility and grace, not one of the three white male theorists who addressed us took any note of her presence. No one introduced her; no one alluded to her. It was as if they could not see her.

Showalter further comments that her turn then came up and two women were assigned to sign for her. She says that she wondered how she should speak “from the position of power as ‘theorist’” when she also “identified with the silent, transparent woman.” Showalter saw the presence of the other woman as the return of the “repressed paradox of female authority.” She uses Jane Gallop (1982:126-127) to describe this phenomenon: “A woman theoretician is already an exile; expatriated from her *langue maternelle*, she speaks a paternal language; she presumes a fraudulent power.” Showlater (1989:348) concludes that

The translator seemed to represent not only the *langue maternelle*, the feminine other side of discourse, but also the Other Woman of feminist discourse, the woman outside of the academia in the ‘real world’ or the Third World, to whom the feminist critic is responsible, just as she is responsible to the standards and conventions of criticism.

The latter parts of Showalter's statement above are crucial to the discourse of dialogical engagement – the role of the (female) scholar. That is, that not only is she responsible to the standards and conventions of criticism, but that she is also responsible to the women outside of the academia in the “real world.” In my own experience, even though the “other woman” is not always as clearly visible in the academy as she is in Showalter's illustration, she is nonetheless still there, in the consciences of those who share a commitment to the women of faith in our communities, those who are not theoreticians.

In summary then, engaging new discourse partners beyond the academy is an attempt to engage with those issues of what Gallop terms “fraudulent power.” My argument here is that the power that women have within the academy is only fraudulent when the women, to whom they should be committed to in the community, are betrayed for “phallogentric” and sometimes Western ways of theorizing. Being committed to those women who are outside of the academy is a step toward not succumbing to the might of this “fraudulent power.”

### ***Reading as a “flesh and blood reader” – Excerpts from my Life***

Another motivation for why a hermeneutic of transformation is needed is that it exposes the fact that all readers of the Bible, whether scholars or not, read as “flesh and blood readers.” The problem is that most readers, particularly scholars, are not willing to admit that their positioning, both personally and communally, influences if not determines their Biblical interpretations. There are at least two theoretical keys that enable and expose this premise. The first is womanism. Abrahams (2001:71) argues that another defining feature of womanism is that:

It centers uncompromisingly on the construction of the self; both in the collective sense, as in the 'Black Woman' self we realize through communal activity, and in the personal sense, in that it offers a space for Black women to develop a sense of full individuality in a world where our experience of self has been over-determined by external definitions of our identity which are racist and sexist.

Abraham's point once again holds significance for my own argument in this dissertation. Defining myself at the outset is as important as defining myself within my community. It is only in this definition of the experiential self first, that one can begin to dialogue with others. I am an activist-intellectual (Haddad 2000a: 190), and my activism is shaped by my particular experiences.<sup>4</sup> So as I pointed out earlier using Palkar's argument, although feminism and womanism begins with the experience of women, not all women share the same experience, so we each begin with a unique construction of the self. As Abrahams (2001:72) maintains:

what gives womanism its strength is precisely its ability to provide us space to define and develop our understanding of our individual experiential location, in safety and without compromise.

The second theoretical key to unlocking the argument that our "flesh and blood" positions affect our interpretations is the fairly recent advent of autobiographical criticism within the field of literary studies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although sharing the use of this term with Haddad, I use it differently from Haddad. I consider myself an organic activist-intellectual, unlike Haddad who works in communities which are "other" to her (Haddad 2000a: 189), and who works through translation (2000a: 9). I will demonstrate more clearly the tensions that arise out of this in chapter 8, when I chart the shifts embodied in my own work within the framework of the work that Haddad and West have done in this area.

<sup>5</sup> See Anderson and Staley's (1995) *Semeia* volume on Autobiographical Biblical Criticism.

Autobiographical criticism is different from reader-response criticism. For example, Lategan would describe the first part of my dissertation as a reading of the “inside” of the text. The characteristic of this kind of reading is that:

The concern (therefore) is not with real readers of flesh and blood, but with how readers are anticipated by and in the text. It is interested in all that can be gleaned from the text in the form of instructions given to, and presuppositions shared by the potential reader of the text (Lategan1989: 7).

I concur with Lategan concerning the way in which readers are anticipated by and in the text, and like him regret the fact that it is assumed that this kind of reading does not deal with actual flesh and blood readers. Notwithstanding that in the first part of my dissertation I am not dealing with other “empirical” readers, I would argue that I myself am a “flesh and blood” reader. In other words, I am not imagining how a South African Indian Christian woman will read the text – I *am* a South African Indian Christian woman reading the text. Hence, in my reading of the “inside” of the text I foreground my “flesh and blood” presence, unlike most scholars, who hide behind the stance of neutral objective researcher. Hence my concerns are as real as the other “flesh and blood” readers with whom I engage.<sup>6</sup>

Since I have declared that I am a flesh and blood reader it is important that I share parts of my “herstory” here, so that a clearer perspective of my motivations may be obtained. Following Long (1996:29-43) and Staley (1994:221-259) I also maintain that “essential to a real-reader reading is the acknowledgement that I am more than one reader in my reading.” Again

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<sup>6</sup> Although I locate myself as part of the community, I also am different to many of the women in my community. I will articulate these differences more clearly in the next few chapter subdivisions.

following Long (1996:30-43), who outlines all the readers that he is when reading the book of Revelation, I outline some<sup>7</sup> of the readers that I was when reading the narrative of Esther.<sup>8</sup>

### **A South African Indian Pentecostal Reader**

*I was born into a Hindu home. When I was about a year old my parents converted to Christianity. Unlike my six older siblings I do not have any recollection of Hinduism. In terms of religious obligations, I have memories of the Sunday School, the youth group and subsequently the church. My father's family did not approve of my parents' decision to convert to Christianity, so we were literally thrown out of our home and onto the streets. I was just over a year old when this happened. All my other siblings were taken in by members of the church we had joined, while my mother took my father and me and went to live with her parents. Growing up I also sensed a further alienation from friends and particularly teachers at school, who always implied that Indian Christians were gullible fools who did not know their own religion well enough and were hence duped by white missionaries.*

*I grew up in a Pentecostal church. This church was a branch of the Full Gospel Church of God in Southern Africa, but it was only an "adopted child." It was never fully regarded as part of the Full Gospel Church because of the segregations between White,*

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<sup>7</sup> Although there are undoubtedly more kinds of readers that were involved in the process of my interpretation, I have chosen these ones specifically, because they overtly demonstrate the motivations for my particular reading strategies.

<sup>8</sup> The reason that I chose to do this here rather than at the beginning is because I want to locate my personal narrative within the larger narratives which define the community of women with whom I choose to read the book of Esther.

*Black, Colored and Indian congregations which the church enforced. So we were the adopted Indian children of predominantly white parents who ruled the church.*

I have chosen to relate this part of my story to highlight the experience of being an Indian convert. This is because being an Indian Christian was considered an anomaly in my community, and particularly in my family. Although I was not privy to the persecution my family experienced for the religious path that they chose, I did bear the subsequent alienation from my father's family, under-girded by their belief that we had chosen to worship the "white man's god." The subsequent alienation at school began what later developed my aversion to discrimination on any grounds whatsoever.<sup>9</sup> Further, the latter part of my personal narrative demonstrates that my "Indian-ness" needs to be understood in the broader framework of my "South African-ness." Apart from being alienated in my own community for being Christian, we as a group of Christians were also discriminated by those to whom we ostensibly paid our allegiance to, the White Christians. This explains my choice to read the book of Esther from a post-colonial perspective, where I particularly focused not only on the discrimination that Esther and Mordecai experienced for being Jews, but the way in which Esther subsequently oppresses the Persians as well.

### **A Defiant Cultural Pentecostal Reader**

*As with most Pentecostals, the Bible in our home was taken very seriously and very literally. So I was not allowed to wear jeans as a teenager, since jeans were considered a "man's garment" and the Bible said that it is an abomination unto God for a woman to*

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<sup>9</sup> Note Pillay's (1994:163) observation also of the way in which Hindus reacted to Christian converts. He quotes an excerpt from a letter to the local Indian newspaper, *The Leader*. "One religion is just as good as another...Only those who are ignorant believe in conversion...a rolling stone gathers no moss." Although this letter was penned in 1955, the sentiments were still prevalent into the 80's and the 90's as well.

*wear a man's garment. (Incidentally, it was also considered disrespectful in the Indian culture for a woman to wear jeans, but this cultural taboo had long since been broken in general Indian society, when it was still being enforced by the church). My mother relaxed on the rules when my older brother (who was an evangelist) was not around. However, as soon as he came to visit she would hasten me to "run upstairs and put a skirt on." One day, when I was about 13, I declined to go upstairs and change into a skirt. Instead I sat nervously waiting for him in the lounge. When he came in he sternly asked me why I was being deliberately defiant of the Word of God. Did I not know that what I was doing was an "abomination to the Lord?" Plucking up all the courage I could, and defying all the rules of acceptable behavior for younger siblings (particularly girls) towards older brothers, I asked him if he knew whether Jesus wore trousers. He answered that Jesus wore a robe, as far as he knew, to which I responded with the question: "Was Jesus defying God then, by wearing a woman's garment?" The point was made very clear and I was never again questioned on my preference for jeans, even though it was still considered a man's garment.*

I have related this particular incident in my upbringing for two reasons. One is that it is an indication that my concern about the discrimination of women began a long time even before I became familiar with the tenets of feminism. The other feature of the illustration is my resistance toward rigid, authoritarian and un-contextual interpretations of the Bible which perpetuate the gender inequity that finds parallels in the Indian culture. In retrospect, it was episodes such as this one that were to act as a catalyst in the process of my becoming a Biblical scholar. Hence, this episode captures my "critical instincts" already as a child.

## A Concerned South African Woman Reader

*Kerina's<sup>10</sup> eyes are downcast when her youngest sister asks her what she would like to do. She responds: "I can't do anything. The pastor says that I cannot leave him." She has been married for sixteen years now, and has two children aged 15 and 9. Her husband has been beating her periodically, for a number of years. They both come from working class backgrounds, with little education. She works in a shoe factory and he works casually. He is an alcoholic. She gets paid more than he does, and before acquiring this job he was also unemployed for some time. However, in order to make ends meet they need even his meagre wage. The whole family lives with Kerina's mother, a widow living on a state grant in a council flat, in a previously Indian only dormitory township. They belong to a very conservative evangelical church, one that does not ordain women, nor allow them to participate equally in the life and activities of the church. Kerina is asthmatic. Her youngest son is also asthmatic and epileptic.*

*Kerina's sister knows from her numerous conversations with her that there are many factors that not only hinder a woman from leaving an abusive marriage, but that help to perpetuate or justify the abuse. Whenever Kerina has made an attempt to leave this marriage, the pastor always comes up with all the religious reasons that she should not. He cites several Biblical mandates to justify the abuse. The first is the headship of the male over the female. The second is the lack of submission on the part of Kerina toward her husband. He does not just stop at the point of justifying the abuse. He goes further to dissuade her from*

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<sup>10</sup> Not her real name.

*initiating separation proceedings, citing from the Bible, that divorce is not permissible. Finally he suggests that anyone (like Kerina's sister) who are involved in trying to separate this couple, will face the "wrath of God" because "which two God have joined together, let no 'man' put asunder."*

*Kerina's family also prevents her from leaving this abusive marriage. For example, when Kerina was beaten, some members of the family justified the abuse on the basis that according to Indian culture, she was not a good wife. A good wife is one that wakes up at the crack of dawn to pack lunch for her husband (even though she leaves home 2 and a half hours before he does and returns only after him); one that irons his trousers with a perfect lined crease; one that cooks and cleans and waits on her husband hand and foot. This is measure of a good wife in the Indian culture. These family members therefore found reason for the abuse in the fact that the victim of the abuse did not fulfil the cultural expectations of a wife. The pastor and the elder reiterated this viewpoint on a subsequent visit to Kerina and her husband. Kerina's sister's voice (which encourages her to leave this abusive marriage) gets lost in the myriad of other voices emanating from culture and religion, that tell her to stay in this abusive marriage.*

This rather lengthy illustration of a true story in my community captures not just the critical, but the ethical and "flesh and blood" concerns that I have for women in my community who are kept in subjection and fear, and often at mortal risk, by the use of the Bible. This story indicates that the need for criticality and finding liberating elements in the Bible cannot remain just an academic or a theoretical issue. When culture and interpretation both collude in the oppression of women, putting their lives

at risk, it is imperative for those of us working in the field of liberation hermeneutics to not restrict our work to the academy. To do so is paradoxical given the nature of our criticism, and it also renders our work as irresponsible. It is for this reason that Vashti's story was so crucial to my analysis of the book of Esther. It is also for this reason that throughout this dissertation my focus has been on finding liberating messages for women in the Bible, especially given how the Bible, as shown in the illustration above, has been used to prevent women in my community from living full and abundant lives.

### **A Survivor of Rape Reader**

*At the age of 10 I was raped by a close friend of the family. He was not just a friend of the family but was also a member of the church we belonged to. In fact our association with him was because of the church. When my father died (I was eight years old at the time) he started frequenting our home, under the guise of helping a widow and her fatherless children. We needed help because my mother, who was married at the age of 14 (as part of the traditional arranged marriage system), did not have any independence either economically or otherwise from my father. He was the one who worked, and he was the one who took care of the financial matters. My mother, who did not have much education and also became the mother of seven children in quick succession, did not question this arrangement but fulfilled her duties as a good wife by taking care of the children, cooking and cleaning the house. So, when my father died she did not even know how to go to the market by herself and she subsequently had a nervous breakdown. The man who raped me was the "good Samaritan" who was helping us. How could I tell my mother or anyone that this "good Samaritan" had raped me? So I did not,*

*until seventeen years later, in the process of writing this dissertation, I first told my husband and my family what had happened to me as a child.*

This painful experience was not an easy one for me to relate. It is the one that is most crucial for an understanding of the way in which I have interpreted the text of Esther. It has influenced many of the hermeneutical choices which I made in my interpretation. It empowered me to read the episode of the king choosing a new queen with a hermeneutic of suspicion. It highlighted for me that the king had violated the bodies of all the virgins in his kingdom. Telling the story again has also made me realize that the forces of Indian cultural patriarchy that kept my mother uneducated, and therefore economically dependent, was a contributing factor to my rape. I contend that it is those forces that still keep women silent on issues of abuse and violence against them. Telling the story has also made me see that my rapist's association with the church is also what kept me from disclosing my rape. It was difficult to question someone who was heeding Biblical principles of helping the fatherless and the widow. Nobody taught me to question why the widow (hence the fatherless) needed help in the first place. Nobody pointed out that it was the Biblical patriarchal system that forced women to be in these economically dependent situations. It is the critical resources that I have gained in the academy that has helped me question not only Biblical patriarchy but cultural patriarchy too.

### *The “Flesh and Blood” Reader – Further Reflections*

Having declared my own location as both a critic and a real, “flesh and blood” reader, the question still remains. How does one begin a dialogue with those outside of the academy when those in the academy and those in the community proceed from varying positions? The community begin their interpretation from a standpoint of faith, while scholars attempt a “scientific” reading of the text. As already argued, the rise of postmodernism (and with it reader-response criticism) has helped in bridging this gap in that the notion of “scientific” and “objective” interpretations have come under serious scrutiny so that it is no longer possible to speak of “objectivity” in interpretation.

The role and importance of the reader in the process of interpretation is not undermined anymore.<sup>11</sup> Even though this is the case, the “reader” has still remained “theoretical.” As Long (1996:87) points out, all the readers in reader response criticism, “while very different, all have one important feature in common: none *actually* exists.” In other words, there has been a resistance on the part of scholars to interact with real “flesh and blood” readers. Part of this resistance stems from the fact that with the acknowledgement of real flesh and blood readers comes the acknowledgement of the scholar’s own social and ideological location, and most times, for varying reasons scholars are not able or willing to share this information, as I have done above.

I submit though that it is deceitful for scholars to use “ideal” or “implied” readers in their theories of interpretation, without ever attempting to touch base with the real reader. Long highlights Moore’s (1989:96) criticism of the theoretical reader, that this kind of reader is an “*unfeeling* reader,

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<sup>11</sup> Long (1996:86) has outlined in detail the different kinds of readers that reader-response criticism has given birth to. We have “Booth’s *mock* reader, Culler’s *competent* reader, Derrida’s *deconstructing* reader, Bleich’s *subjective* reader, Fetterly’s *resisting* reader etc.

lacking the emotional responses real readers bring to stories.” The real reader has a closer relationship to the text than the ideal theoretical reader, because all of us (and I would add whether scholars or not) “as we read, use the literary work to symbolise and finally to replicate ourselves,” (Holland 1980:123-124). Besides this, the real reader also never reads in isolation. As Stanley Fish has observed, individuals read as part of what he calls an “interpretive community.” My argument is that with real readers this interpretive community does not only consist of scholars and theoreticians but other people who consider their own experiences as legitimate sources of interpretation. Thus the real reader interprets texts together with other readers who share similar contexts and experiences with the reader, and hence provides a much richer framework for interpretation than individualistic, theoretical readers.

Real readers question the ethics of interpretation offered by scholars, who propose to “live up to a scientific ethos that gives precedence to cognitive criteria” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196). This does not imply however, that ethical interpretation lacks scientific basis. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:195-196) argues, to create that dichotomy is dangerous. In fact, when scholars engage with real readers, I would argue that scientific inquiry and ethical interpretation are married, in a way that shows that a

scientific ethos demands *both* ethical and cognitive criteria that must be reasoned out in terms of standard knowledge and at the same time be intersubjectively understandable and communicable, (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196).

Engaging not only with *theoretical* readers, but also with real “flesh and blood” readers, legitimates not just dialogical engagement, but also lends authenticity to the theory of reader-response criticism. It makes reader-response criticism what it should be – i.e. real. In other words, it moves the

discussion from “what the text meant” and what the text could mean if a particular reader read in a specific way, to actually what the text does mean for real people who read out of specific contexts and locations.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I have attempted to outline why it is important for scholars to move beyond a hermeneutic of suspicion and revision toward a hermeneutic of transformation. I have also argued that unlike the two former types of hermeneutics, a hermeneutic of transformation cannot be confined to the text. I also began to suggest that in order to facilitate a hermeneutic of transformation, one needs another important hermeneutic, namely a hermeneutic of collaboration. In the next chapter I explore the various ways in which this is possible.

## CHAPTER 7

### FACILITATING A COMMUNITY-BASED HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION – PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In the previous chapter I outlined a few reasons why it was important to develop a hermeneutic of transformation in the community. I briefly mentioned that for this to be done effectively, one needs to develop “organic links” (Mosala 1989:2) with the community. In this chapter I outline some of the preliminary considerations to note before the scholar attempts this task. I first engage a few of the problems inherent in some of the established methods, and then move on to an analysis of the socio-religious location of the community of women that participated in the Bible studies, and my own critical location within that situation. First, I outline some of the principles and problems of the Contextual Bible Study method, arguably, one of the primary vehicles of a hermeneutics of collaboration.

#### *The Contextual Bible Study Method*

One of my first concerns in undertaking this study was to find ways to dialogue with the community which they are familiar with. In other words, I realized that it is impossible to present my interpretations of the book of Esther to the community in the same way that I would present a lecture to university students, or the way in which I would present a paper to an academic gathering of scholars. One of the most familiar ways in which Christian faith communities interact with the Bible is through Bible study. Almost all the Christian communities whom I know are familiar with this kind of study. It is practiced in most churches at least once a week, where members of the church gather together and study specific Biblical texts.

The women chosen for my study were all familiar with this concept, albeit in varying degrees. Hence my choice of Bible study as the door through which I could open up an engagement with the community.

Although I chose to work within this paradigm of Bible study, the methodology that I used was different from the methodology of Bible study practiced in the churches. The women, despite being familiar with the concept of Bible study were to be introduced to a new style of Bible study, one more interactive rather than the mode that they were usually used to. The methodology that I chose was largely based on the Contextual Bible Study method as it is discussed by West (2001:169-184). Although I chose to work within this framework, I did not adhere to all its principles as outlined by West, for various reasons which will become clear as the discussion unfolds in the rest of this chapter. To facilitate this discussion I pose three crucial questions that need to be answered. I outline each of them and explicate them more fully in the following pages.

### ***What Is The Aim Of The Bible Study?***

The aim of the Bible study is along the same lines as the aim of this dissertation. To reiterate what I asserted in the first chapter, the aim of this dissertation was to read the book of Esther in a way that will enable gender-social transformation and liberation for women in my community. The fact that *I* am setting the aim, and not the women in the community, is the first point at which I differ from the principles of the Contextual Bible Study method, as defined by West and practiced by the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB). West says the following about the process:

The socially engaged Biblical scholar is called to read the Bible with them, but not because they need to be conscientized and given interpretations relevant to their context. No, socially engaged Biblical

scholars are called to collaborate with them because they bring with them additional interpretative resources which may be of use to the community group.

West is showing in the above statement that one of the characteristics of Contextual Bible Study is that it is the community that calls Biblical scholars to come and read the Bible with them. He further asserts that the communities' motives lie outside the realms of conscientization, somewhere with the need for interpretative resources which scholars can offer.

In my case, I have not been called by the community to read the Bible with them. Instead I am going to the community because I believe that I have resources to offer the community from my own reading of the text. This does not mean that I do not take the interpretations that are offered by the community seriously, but the reason that I feel compelled to go into the community is because I know how the Bible is read in my community, having grown up in it. I know that it is the preachers who are telling the people how to read the Bible, having been a part of the church for most of my life. In the community these are usually male preachers, who rarely value the experiences of women as legitimate sources of hermeneutics. The interpretations that are offered, as shown in the illustrations of the previous chapter, are also oppressive rather than liberating to women. And most times the women are meant to accept these interpretations because they are told that this is the "Word of God." The perception of the Bible as the Word of God adds a dimension that prevents the women from resisting oppressive interpretations. Instead they take on these interpretations, internalize them, and in some cases, actively preach them as well.<sup>1</sup> My reason for going into

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<sup>1</sup> I take Scott's (1990) arguments about the way in which the dominated resist domination by practicing artful forms of resistance as a means of survival very seriously. I believe that South African Indian women also do practice these arts of resistance when necessary. However, it has to be said that sometimes the arts of resistance do not work, especially,

the community is to offer them new resources with which to interpret the Bible.<sup>2</sup> In other words, my aim, unlike the aim outlined in the Contextual Bible Study approach, is overtly framed by a conscientization paradigm.

An apt way to explain this conscientization motive is through the wisdom gleaned from a fortune cookie – “Knowing and not doing are equal to not knowing at all” (in Messer-Davidow 2002:1). In other words, sharing the liberating knowledge gained from my work, and helping to transform the ways in which my community understands the roles of women in church and society, is what makes my knowledge valuable. Otherwise the knowledge gained in the first part of this dissertation becomes equivalent to “not knowing at all.” My strong motivation to provide women with resources for liberation seems to lean on the side of what West (2001:174) calls Marxist categories of analysis. Using the arguments put forward by Frostin (1988) and Segundo (1985), he describes such analysis as follows:

Popular religion was seen as the ‘opiate of the people,’ a manifestation of ‘false consciousness’ which kept the masses captive to the dominant ideology and slaves to systems of exploitation. The primary function was to ‘break the culture of silence’, and to enable them to create their own language.

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for example, in cases such as domestic violence where the woman is killed by her husband. My concern is that the Bible is used as part of the equation in keeping women subservient, sometimes to the detriment of their psychological and physical well-being. In cases like these, I submit that it is not enough to own a hidden transcript. The hidden transcript needs to become public. I am arguing that by providing women with resources to read the Bible in a way that liberates they are enabled to make the hidden transcript public, and to meet those who use the Bible to oppress them, on their own grounds as they prove that they too can read the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> In the process, there might be existing resources that the community possesses that can also help in the way that they interpret the Bible. This also enhances my own work, and helps me see my project as more than just academic.

West consequently argues for a shift from this kind of focus of the socially engaged Biblical scholar. Using Scott's (1990) analysis of the way in which the dominated react to their domination, West argues that while the oppressed actually do have creative ways of dealing with their oppression, they often do not because revolution is dangerous. Instead they show off a public transcript of subservience until it is no longer dangerous, and then they activate their hidden transcript of resistance. West's argument, then, is that the role of the Biblical scholar is to activate the hidden transcript of the oppressed, though he himself admits that he is not sure that Biblical scholars ever have access to the hidden transcript (1999c: 39-52). Although I am in agreement with West that the dominated do have creative ways of dealing with their domination, I also concur with the Latin American liberation scholars who argue that the dominated are in need of conscientization. My contention is that it is only during the period of conscientization that the hidden transcript (if one exists at all) may be activated. This point is demonstrated in the Bible studies, but for now the argument that I want to make is that the aims of the Bible studies which I conducted were not the same as the aims which West outlines for the Contextual Bible Study Process.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Who Are The Participants In The Bible Study?***

Related to these points is the way in which the Biblical scholar conceptualizes the participants of the Bible study. The term "ordinary" reader has come to represent those in the faith community with whom scholars engage.<sup>4</sup> West and Dube (1996:7) define the term "ordinary" in the following way:

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<sup>3</sup> It was my hope, however, that once I started the process that the women would want to have more of these Bible studies, perhaps where they would then set the aims and agendas, and I would be called in to help. This idea has already come from both the groups of women with whom I worked.

The term 'ordinary' is used in a general and a specific sense. The general usage includes all readers who read the Bible pre-critically. But we also use the term 'ordinary' to designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, those readers who are poor and marginalized.

The ideological underpinnings of the use of the word "ordinary" to describe those people who participate in contextual Bible study has been problematic for some African scholars. For even though most African scholars will agree that the dialogical method is important, not all agree on how this goal should be achieved. There are a number of points of contention in this regard and Maluleke (2000:93) has been the most rigorous in his arguments concerning the use of the term "ordinary" reader, in appropriating the dialogical method. His central argument is that the term "ordinary readers" is particularly ambiguous on race, gender and economic location. Besides this he also offers a more detailed account of his reservations with this term. I quote Maluleke's arguments at length for they are serious concerns which a scholar like myself has to engage with. He argues:

To begin with, the adjective "ordinary" in the phrase "ordinary people" does not communicate useful, key or decisive information about the subject it qualifies. Anybody can be and even look ordinary depending on what we are talking about or doing.

While "ordinary" and "trained" are power-relation categories, the tentative, evasive and "innocuous" nature of the terms tend to obscure, trivialize or palliate the economic, race and gender

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<sup>4</sup> It seems that the term was made famous by West (1991), but other scholars have also used the term regularly in their work. See Patte (1995) and Dube (1996) for examples.

(especially as it relates to Black women) basis of the power discrepancy concerned.

An unmasking of the essential basis of the power discrepancy between so-called “ordinary” and “trained” people in South Africa will lead us back to race, class and wealth as “allocators” of privilege, wealth and opportunity. This begs the question of why categories that highlight race, gender and class issues – of which there is no lack – are deliberately avoided in favor of the obscure phrase “ordinary people”.

In and of itself, the recognition of a “trained” as opposed to an “ordinary” class of people is quite innocuous if not superfluous. The real question is *how, which, and why* people are “ordinaried.” It is not good enough for a hermeneutic of liberation simply to posit and accept the existence of “trained” and “ordinary” readers as a starting point as if these categories were ordained from above.

Furthermore, the formulation of “ordinary versus trained” when used as a hermeneutical starting point, is probably based on an (uncritical) acceptance of the ideologies, choices and commitments inherent in the “training” of the so-called “trained.” The hope – which is in my opinion simplistic – is that a commitment to the “ordinary readers” demonstrated by being “socially engaged” (whatever that means) will on its own alleviate the more malign aspects in the “training” of the “trained” readers. There is no fundamental questioning of the “training” itself beyond urging the “trained” to “read with” the ordinary readers.

Maluleke's detailed arguments against the use of the term "ordinary" to describe those people from communities of faith convey at least two important observations which are critical to my own analysis. I will discuss the first observation under the current sub-heading and the other observation under the next sub-heading in this section. The first observation made by Maluleke can be recapitulated as unmasking of the race, gender and class of the participants in the Bible study, as a substitution for the term "ordinary." It is of course an impossible and obtuse, if not cumbersome, suggestion that throughout this dissertation I constantly refer to the women I work with as poor, female, South African Indian, Christian etc. To do so will not only be a tedious task, but it will probably also elicit a lackluster response from the reader of this work. I do not believe that this is what Maluleke is arguing. What he is suggesting is something that I have done at the outset of this dissertation. I have clearly and unambiguously stated that the women I work with will be South African Indian Christian women. I have deliberately avoided allocating class status to them, because the two groups of women with whom I worked have different class statuses. I will elaborate on that when sketching their backgrounds. By doing this I think that I have avoided not only the obscure term "ordinary" but also in my opinion, the obscure term "other."

I think that this term "other" is not helpful either, because like Maluleke's argument concerning the use of "ordinary" it conveys the message of generality. In the same way that Patte (1996:265-269) has argued that anyone can be ordinary depending on where they are positioned at any given time,<sup>5</sup> I would argue that anyone could also be "other" depending on where they are positioned at any given time. In other words, everyone

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<sup>5</sup> Patte (1996:266) notes that: "The same person can be at any given moment an 'expert-critical reader' or an 'ordinary reader' of the Bible. It is a matter of attitude and not of person." Patte has formulated this theory as a response to a set of articles on the "reading with" methodology (I will deal with the notion of "reading with" in chapter 8). I do not think that Maluleke would agree with this point. I think that the point that he would make is that it should be a matter of person and that that fact should be clearly and unambiguously stated.

including my spouse and my son is “other” to me. My spouse is “male” and I am “female” therefore he is “other” to me. My son is “younger” and I am “older” therefore he is “other” to me. I admit that these are extremely frivolous examples, and I do not mean to trivialize the issue. However, I think that a critical look at the original use of the term “other” might help us see that the term “other” has to be nuanced in our discourses, or it might not be as useful a term as we think particularly in the ways in which we appropriate it. The term was made popular by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, where he depicts how the West envisaged the Other, thereby managing to contain the colonial world in certain kinds of textual and other ways (Said 1985). Of course, since then the term has been appropriated even by the colonized in rhetorical and mostly sarcastic, almost derisive ways. The term has become common and widespread in its use in the academy. But, for the purposes of describing particular participants in a Bible study, I think that the term has to be more carefully interrogated, without assuming that it was “ordained from above,” to use Maluleke’s words.

It seems that the way in which we describe those with whom we work depends on our own locatedness as scholars undertaking research. For example, Cochrane (1999:95-117) entitles a chapter in his book, *Circles of Dignity*, “Voices of the Other.” In this chapter are contained his reflections of the processes involved in the conducting of a Bible study group in Amawoti, a Black township just north of Durban. The whole chapter attempts to grapple with the question of representivity, which Spivak (1988:271-313) raises. I will return to this discussion under the next sub-heading in this section. The point I wish to make at present is that the notion that the participants were “other” to Cochrane (and perhaps also to his research assistants, though he does not indicate this) is taken for granted. He assumes this from the initial questions that were asked by the group committee: “What does it mean for us and who are you? (Why should

we trust you?).” In other words, Cochrane contends that inherent in their questions was an indication that they did not trust that they would be recognized fully and respectfully in his research. “The claim for recognition posits both a self, and in relation to the one spoken to, an otherness,” contends Cochrane (1999:95). This implies that the participants posited themselves in relation to the researcher (the one spoken to) as “other.”

The question which I want to raise is not whether or not the “otherness” sensed by both the subjects is valid, but why does either subject feel a sense of “otherness.” In other words, it is not enough to assume the position of “otherness” without first investigating the factors that underlay the “otherness.” The questions that Maluleke (2000:93) asks about the ordinary have to be asked in relation to the “other” too. In other words, we should not be taking for granted that subjects are “other,” but we should be asking *how, which and why* people are “othered?” I contend that if we follow this process before naming our subjects as “other” it would reveal that there are what I would call “degrees of otherness” and that the “degrees of otherness” determine the amount of trust the “other” is willing to invest in us. The consequence of this is that the amount of trust that the “other” endows to us will determine not only the validity of our representation of them, but also the validity of their responses to the scholar as “other.” This brings us to the role of the scholar in this relationship.

### ***Who Is The Facilitator And What Is The Facilitator’s Role In The Bible Study?***

One of the most significant factors in the Bible study process is the person who facilitates the Bible study. It is important to establish the aims and the role of the facilitator. In West’s description of the Contextual Bible Study process it is clear that the facilitator of the Bible study is not always the Biblical scholar, who writes up on the process afterward. This, of course

raises the issue of a “double representativity,” since neither the facilitator nor the Biblical scholar are neutral participants in the Bible study. There are numerous problems with this approach. In what follows, instead of interrogating the problems inherent in that approach, I choose to highlight my own approach, by examining my own role in the Bible studies I conducted as both facilitator and Biblical scholar.

The first question to answer is who is, or should be the facilitator. I would suggest that there are three crucial characteristics that a facilitator should possess. One is that the facilitator should be trained with the tools of critical scholarship; two, that the facilitator should be committed to liberation in the community; and three, that the facilitator should be an organic member of the community. Each of these characteristics is not mutually exclusive, but complementary, therefore, I discuss them collectively. Firstly, what does being trained in critical scholarship mean? West and Dube (1996: 7) define this element of criticality as follows:

“Critical readings” are the interpretations, whether exegetical or hermeneutical, a dubious distinction which we will not develop here, of readers who have been trained in use of the tools and resources of Biblical scholarship. Thus, we use the term “critical” in the very specific sense that it has within Biblical studies. Ordinary readers do have resources to read texts critically, but they do not have access to the structured and systematic sets of resources that constitute the craft of Biblical scholars.

The problem with this definition of criticality is that it does not say anything about the critical/trained reader as a real reader as well – it only describes their credentials, though the reader’s commitment to the community is assumed. I submit that the character of the critical reader as real reader is crucial to the question of trust, and hence the participants’

responses. In other words, the critical reader also has to be a “flesh and blood reader,” and not assume that those readers in the community with whom they are engaging are the only ones who are “real readers.” As asserted in the previous chapter I as critical reader am also a “real reader of flesh and blood.” This means that the observation that Maluleke (2000:93) makes concerning the questioning of the training of the scholar is extremely important. In other words it is not possible to claim to be a “flesh and blood” reader unless the scholar has made a significant shift from the traditional modes of Biblical studies, since traditional modes of Biblical studies have assumed that the scholar is objective and distant, and even with the advent of reader-response criticism, the reader has still remained theoretical, as pointed out by Long (1996:87) in the previous chapter. These shifts need to be overtly stated as part of the process of saying that the Biblical scholar is trained to read critically. For example, I as a critical reader have been trained to read the Bible in specific ways, but because of my commitments to the community and to liberation, I choose to read the Bible for liberation. This does not always imply rejecting the methods I have been trained with. It simply implies a critical engagement with those methods. In other words, it negates Audre Lorde’s statement: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (quoted in Schüssler Fiorenza 2001: 4-5).

Making the admission that I do not read in the same way as other critical readers in the academy do, already decreases the space in the measurement of the “degrees of otherness” between myself and the community of women with whom I read, most of whom would be daunted with academic jargon and methods. In other words, although my modes of reading are not dissimilar to other Biblical scholars in my field, as a socially engaged Biblical scholar I embody particular life interests and bring these together with my interpretive interests to the process of interpretation (Fowl 1995: 32-34), and so unlike traditional Biblical scholars who only foreground the

latter, I overtly include the former as part of my agenda which extends beyond the textual.

Besides unmasking what it means to be a trained reader, one also needs to unmask what it means to be a committed reader. This means demonstrating to the community the genuineness of one's commitment to their empowerment. This can only be done if one can demonstrate not only that they empathize with the struggles of the community, but that they actively participate or participated in their struggles, either through personal experience or through having been a part of the community long enough to identify with their particular struggles.

Finally, the need to unmask the identity of the scholar is also crucial to this process. One of the implications of this is that I have to declare my location as a South African Indian Christian woman. The groups of women with whom I engaged with were not as suspicious of me, nor my intentions, as the participants in the Amawoti Bible study group were of Cochrane and his researchers. In fact their enthusiasm for the Bible study was overwhelming. This might have something to do with the sense of proudness that they felt of having someone from their own community who had advanced to the "center" come back with that knowledge to empower those at the "periphery." Masoga (2001:146) argues strongly for the organic presence of the Biblical scholar in readings of the Bible with faith communities. Locating organic academics at the center, and the community at the periphery, he argues, "Organic readers are produced by the periphery and advanced to the center to learn the ropes in the center, and their sole responsibility is the periphery." Given his assumption, the women from my community did not need to ask who I was, because most of them already knew me from the community. Some of them had even watched me grow up, and others had known me from participating in previous Bible studies conducted in collaboration with the Institute for the Study of the Bible, on

violence against women. To say this, however, is not to downplay the question of trust. The question of trust nonetheless remained an important one. I do not think that it is possible that they trusted me completely, but I think being part of the community, having established a relationship with them through other Bible studies, and by laying bare my intentions and motivations, they were much more able to trust me than they would have been, had I been a complete outsider.

This makes a difference to the way in which they responded to me. To use the term “other” to describe them or myself seems to indicate a distance, which is not fully compatible with my experience in the community. I did not see the people with whom I interacted as completely “other.” To be honest, my university education and, in the case of one of the groups, my class status to some extent, did make me different from them, but never to such an extent that I can claim with full confidence that those I worked with were “other” than I. Although an intellectual, I consider myself an organic-transformative intellectual (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:22) – one who is committed not just to the transformation of the academy but also to the empowerment of women in my community. Having grown up in the community and being a part of the dis-empowered, I identify with those in my community. The fact that I have chosen to research the relevance of my work to the community suggests that how they view my work and whether the reading strategies I offer can be empowering to them is more than a fashionable academic concern. It goes much deeper than that, to a genuine concern for the empowerment of a community of which I am an integral part, and no matter how much my class or educational status changes, I remain a part of the community, not least of all because of my concern that they are able to live their lives to the fullest.

Hence, Cochrane's (1999:95) use of Paul Ricoeur to define otherness, is, in my opinion, unhelpful in describing my relationship with the women in my community:

Is the other like me (the same, idem-identity) or unlike me (different, ipse-identity)? If sameness dominates the encounter, the other is defined as nothing more than the extension of the self, posing no challenge, no question, no confrontation, no threat. We do not change. When difference is recognized, however, we encounter, not just the other but our own selfhood in the making.

Cochrane seems to be making the point that unless we are different (to the point that the object of our discussion is defined as "other") that there is no room for questioning or challenge. I submit that it is in our sameness rather than our differences that we open up the conversation for challenge. In other words, it is the recognition that the person with whom one is conversing is not that different from the self, that the self is able to articulate the self's identity and perspectives more fully. This implies that it is this recognition that creates the safe space for one to articulate one's voice (Contra Spivak 1988:275).

Foregrounding samenesses, while recognizing differences, helps to deconstruct the hierarchy between the scholar and the community much more deeply. The need to foreground difference, it seems, stems from the fact that the intellectual might be located outside of the community. This contributes to the way in which the intellectual names the research subjects, as "ordinary" or "other" etc. But what the intellectual, perhaps, neglects to consider is that those in the community might resist such a labeling. The Bible studies groups with whom I worked are a case in point. For even though one group came from a particularly disenfranchised sector of society, I know that they would resist being called "poor and marginalized."

And even though the other group came from a much more affluent sector of society they would certainly resist being called “other,” simply because I was trained in reading the Bible and they were not. In fact, all of them might very well resist the term “ordinary” being applied to them, not least of all because it does not capture the essence of their varied identities.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding my arguments made in the above paragraph, claiming absolute similarities to the “flesh and blood” readers with whom I engage in the Bible studies would be dishonest. As already stated, some of them are less economically privileged than I am presently (and there are many other class and other differences which I will outline later on). The most important difference, and one that is most foregrounded by West in his description of the Contextual Bible Study method, is that I read the Bible “differently” from the way in which women in my community do. They read as “readers,” or as West and Dube (1996:7) assert, they read pre-critically, while I read as a “critic.” I prefer Lategan’s (1989:7) creative use of Fowler (1983:32-38) to explain the difference:

The reader accepts the text at face value, is intent on a positive realization of the text and in this sense becomes a “servant” of the text. The critic reads reflectively, keeps distance, and thus becomes a “judge and master” of the text.

Unlike Masoga (2001:145) I do not agree that the term “pre-critical” implies something negative. He argues:

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<sup>6</sup> I should note here as well that it is obvious that scholars such as West and Dube use the term differently and hence set it aside from its “ordinary” use, but the fact is that the term still carries particular sentiments which are not as ingratiating as the sentiments attached to the term “scholar.” I also recognize that these terms are used primarily for purposes of analysis, but if we are to remain faithful to those with or to whom we read, in our analysis of our interaction with them, then these issues should be engaged.

Who determines their naive and pre-critical frame of reference?  
Who owns and controls the jargon 'critical' and 'sobriety'? I suspect that these expressions and others are formulated and controlled from some powerful space, that of the center.

He is correct in assuming that these terms are formulated at the center. But his argument seems to be based on an idea that those in the center, because of their criticality, and their power, share little in common with those in the community. I would argue that my role as critic does not prevent me from also identifying with the "periphery" as Masoga calls it. My critical reading, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, is clearly, overtly, and unashamedly motivated by my "flesh and blood" experiences of the community, the Bible, my faith, my social and political location, my gender, my race and several other key factors. Hence my position is both that of critic and "flesh and blood reader." The fact that I read not just as an academic critic, but as a "flesh and blood" reader as well is what compels my need for engagement with the community.

The way in which the facilitator conceptualizes her/his role in the Bible study process is also related to the way in which s/he conceives of their relationship with the community, with regard to the act of reading the Biblical text. West (1996: 26) uses the term "reading with" or "speaking with" as opposed to "speaking for" or "speaking to," to discuss the way in which the Biblical scholar and those in the community interact. He argues that the term "speaking with" or "reading with" takes seriously the subjectivities of both partners in the dialogue, that is, both the scholar and the poor and marginalized reader. Notwithstanding that this is admirable in that a scholar is taking the agency of the oppressed seriously, I would argue that this might be an idealistic notion, even though West (1999c: 52-53) argues that it is not. One of the central reasons for my argument lies in the fact that West sees the readers in the community as "other" to himself.

I submit that “speaking with” or “reading with” does not ensure a “genuinely dialectical interaction between two vigilantly fore-grounded subject positions” (Arnott 1991:127 in West 1996:25). In fact, I suggest that the preposition “with” camouflages the respective power categories associated with identity that is associated in each subject position. It implies that the scholar comes alongside the community reader and hence reads “with” them. West (1996:26) counters this by arguing that “reading with” accepts real differences. If this is true, however, then there seems to be little space for conscientization, as the method itself accepts that real differences exist between the ways in which scholars and those in the community read, but does not move very much beyond that recognition.

I would argue for an alternative perspective. I would suggest that “reading with” the community should only be a preliminary step to the Bible study, for “reading with” implies that the scholar understands (even if the scholar does not agree with) the position from which the community is reading. By first “reading with” the community, the scholar already grasps the processes involved in the ways in which the community reads, before the actual Bible study. In other words, there is a shared or common understanding of the way in which the community approaches Biblical texts. But in the actual process of the actual Bible study it would perhaps be misleading to suggest that the scholar “reads with” the community. In other words, what I am arguing is that “reading with” is a notion that only works as a first phase in order for the scholar to not just “observe” but to genuinely comprehend the community’s motivations and principles of their reading practices. For example, in “reading with” my community, I understand where the notion that Vashti is a bad woman derives from. I understand, both as scholar and as a member of the community, the cultural and the theological codes which embed and aid such an interpretation. But in the process of the Bible study, for scholars and the community to speak together is not always possible,

especially when the scholar sees her/his role as conscientization, as for example, challenging the notion that Vashti is a bad wife. This requires a certain distance which in turn requires that the scholar shift out of the “reading with” paradigm to a “reading to” paradigm. Hence, I prefer Spivak’s (1988:275) use of the term “speaking to.” Inherent in this paradigm is an acknowledgement that even though scholars might gain insights from community wisdom, the truth is that what is intrinsic to our work is the assumption that we can transform our society, and that is not always possible if we stop at the point of “reading with” the community. Cochrane (1999:189) makes the following point, concerning West’s use of the terms:

Gerald West prefers to substitute the term *speaking with* for the term *speaking to* in contexts where the encounter between trained and untrained readers of the Bible take place. Where the trained person is organically one of the local community, this seems to make sense. But where this is not so (as is most commonly the case of clergy in many churches, for example), the preposition *with* seems too strong an indication of common identity.

Contrary to Cochrane’s point about the organic intellectual, I argue that even though I am organically one of the local community, that the term “speaking with” only applies as an initial step, because even though I share a common identity with my community, our ways of approaching the Biblical text are different given my role of critic, so I do not “read with” them, I “read to” them. This is particularly true since I have stated that I am working within a conscientization paradigm. Although Spivak problematizes the conscientization motif of the intellectual,<sup>7</sup> she nonetheless

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<sup>7</sup> See her example of the abolition of the practice of sati by the British imperialists as interpreted as an example of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988:297). Although this example ~~does not apply to the role~~ of the organic intellectual, Spivak insists that we maintain the analogy nonetheless, because as she asserts, both the

sees a place for the intellectual, but with the proviso that, “the female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 1988:309). In other words, I cannot represent my community simply by asserting that I know and understand the way in which the women in my community read by laying claim to the common shared experience of being female in the South African Indian context. (This I have argued is only a first step.) Neither can I represent the way in which women read by asserting that they do so as “self-knowing, self-representing” subjects. As Arnott (1996:82) observes, in both these assertions, “the mediating role of the representing intellectual has been obscured.” The acknowledgement that I, as intellectual, am “speaking to” rather than “speaking with” exposes the myth of innocent, dis-interested interpretation on the part of the intellectual, on the one hand, and on the other, it helps the intellectual to foreground the intellectual’s activist agenda. Having made these points about my own agenda, I now move onto an examination of my role within the Pentecostal community with which I worked.



### ***Locating the Pentecostal Community, Locating the Biblical Scholar***

Thus far I have argued the importance of disclosing not only the scholar’s location but the community’s location as well in the Bible study process. I argued along with Maluleke (2000:93) that it is not enough to refer to the faith community as “ordinary” or “other” without being specific about their located identities. I turn my attention now to sketching the background of the women’s locations, both from a social and a faith perspective. The information about the community which I provide in this chapter has been gleaned from two principal sources. The first is personal unstructured

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imperialist ideology and the feminist cause is motivated by the question “what can we do for them?” I do not think that Spivak essentially sees this motivation as an unhealthy one (at least not on the part of the feminist.) What she is arguing is that we should own up to this rationale in our writings.

interviews with women in leadership roles in the church, and also with some men in key leadership roles in the Full Gospel Church of God (FGC) in Southern Africa.<sup>8</sup> As well as the interviews, I also took as my starting point my own experience as one who belonged to the FGC for eighteen years<sup>9</sup>. As with my views on Biblical scholarship, in this preliminary research as well, I rejected the notion of “disinterested objective researcher,” in favor of a more postmodernist and subjective approach, contending that neither the process of writing nor interpretation is neutral. Rather, they are motivated by the writer or reader or researcher’s ideological location:

[T]he observer is not objective but ‘paradigmatic.’ All searchers and researchers work with points of view and vested interests which influence what they see and what they discover. The best image for gaining knowledge is not ‘dredging up facts by the bucketful.’ (Thomas Kuhn; cited in Walker 1993:147).

Walker goes on to use West’s idea of the searchlight to make the point more clearly. The searchlight, West says, is “inevitably directed from a point of view... and what it illuminates is determined as much by this as by what there is for it to shine upon” (West 1991: 11-12).

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<sup>8</sup> The findings of this preliminary research have already been published. See Nadar (2001b: 73-84). This research was conducted in October 2000 as part of a larger project on women and spirituality in post-apartheid South Africa. I interviewed not only Indian women in the FGC, but the moderator of the FGC and the principal of the Bible College where all the Indian FGC pastors are trained. Both the moderator and the principal were male. After interviewing them, I interviewed six other women, three of whom were ordained ministers, and three of who had key leadership roles in the women’s department in the church. Although I wanted to gain insights about the way in which the women felt about their roles in the church, I also thought that it was important to hear how the male leadership perceived the roles of women in the church. Three of the women interviewed were from Phoenix, and two were from Effingham. The women chosen for the Bible studies were also from these areas. I will provide more details about these areas in the following pages.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted also that apart from the work done by and Oosthuizen (1976) and more recently Pillay (1994), very little other extensive academic research has been documented on the South African Indian Full Gospel Church.

In what follows then, I obviously choose to foreground those issues which are most significant to my gender transformation commitment. By highlighting my “interested” role as researcher, I admit to my own locatedness in re-presenting the community to the reader. I do not make any claims of objectivity or distance. In fact some of the information that emerges from this chapter will appear with more than a tinge of emotionalism. I make no apologies for this, besides acknowledging it as part of my womanist-activist stance and the hermeneutics of experience with which I analyze the specifics. One of the principles of womanism is its acceptance of emotional knowledge as a legitimate category of academic analysis:

It values emotional knowledge as highly as it does intellectual knowledge. This follows naturally from an activist position: when you strive to change the world, you need to work with people. In order to do so successfully, you need to understand them and speak their language. Being human, people are reached and influenced as much through the emotions as through the intellect. It would not help us to devalue that form of knowledge (Abrahams (2001:73).

This principle is significant for my work as I conceptualize myself as not just an outsider peering into a community of women, wanting to report on their struggles with the Biblical text. Having grown up in the church and being intimately aware of the oppression of women within this church lends a different slant to the way in which I conducted my research, but also points to the motivating factor of why I think Bible studies that conscientize,<sup>10</sup> liberate and empower are necessary.<sup>11</sup> Hence, although I will

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<sup>10</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza (2001:94) points out that the term conscientization: “is a term derived from the Portuguese *conscientizacao*. It was introduced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to designate a learning process in which groups become skilled at recognizing forms and experiences of social, political, cultural, religious, and economic oppression and dehumanization.” Although I do not apply Freire’s method to the letter in

be attempting to sketch the background of the faith community and the women within the community, I do so *analytically* rather than *descriptively*. The specifics with which I work are obviously filtered through my womanist grid. The way in which I describe the FGC is with the purpose of demonstrating why the critical resources of the academy can be helpful in developing a hermeneutic of liberation, particularly for women in the church.

I will first give a brief background of the women's spatial location and then proceed to locate them in the faith community. The women that were chosen for the Bible studies came from two differing backgrounds. This was a deliberate choice, as both backgrounds reflected the movements in my own life as I moved out of the dormitory Indian township where I had grown up, called Phoenix, to a relatively more middle-class suburb in the last two years of my high school career, to live with my sister and her family in another all-Indian area known as Effingham Heights.

Phoenix is a dormitory Indian township designed by the apartheid government, specifically for those who could not afford to build their own houses, or those who earned a very low income. The houses were of poor quality and were known as "renting scheme" houses. Essentially this meant that one rented the house from the municipality for a number of years before one was able to purchase the house. Phoenix is a huge area divided into what is known as units. Unlike the other Indian dormitory township, Chatsworth, the streets in Phoenix had names, but each street still belonged to a unit. My home address, for example, was 72 Pinecroft Place, Unit 8,

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the Bible studies, I do as Schüssler Fiorenza does, "engage the Bible for such conscientization."

<sup>11</sup> At the same time I recognize that what I offer in this chapter is a re-presentation of my community (Spivak 1988: 271-313), mediated through my own interests. By disclosing this fact at the outset, I come to terms with, and take seriously Spivak's (1988: 309) argument that "the female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish."

while in Chatsworth one's address would be House no. 72, road 702, Unit 7. Like Chatsworth, Phoenix has a large number of people living there who belong to the Christian faith. One is able to tell this just by the large number of churches in existence in Phoenix.<sup>12</sup> I lived in this area for approximately 14 years of my life, so am familiar with particularly the religious ethos of the area. Most of the Indian churches in South Africa are Pentecostal, usually belonging to the FGC. I will return to a detailed outline of the nature of Indian Pentecostalism within the FGC, once I finish briefly sketching the women from the Bible Study groups.

The first group of women chosen from Phoenix were all housewives,<sup>13</sup> except for one who was a pastor. The oldest woman in the group was 51 and the youngest was 39. All of them were married and had children. The second group of women was chosen from Effingham Heights. They were also all married, and all of them except one had children. As stated already, Effingham Heights is a more affluent area than Phoenix is. There are far fewer churches in this area than there are in Phoenix, though it must be said, that the area is much smaller than Phoenix.<sup>14</sup> A large number of the population in Effingham Heights are from Hindu backgrounds. Most of the people in this area are professional people, and the profile of the Bible study group was no different. The occupations of the women from this group ranged from teacher and banker to lawyer. The oldest woman was 51 while the youngest was 32. Like the women in Phoenix, these women also knew me not just from when I was a child but also from a previous Bible

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<sup>12</sup> Although there are no figures for the exact number of churches in Phoenix (due to the large number of "autonomous" churches), from my own knowledge there are approximately 5 churches in Unit 8 alone. One of them seats 4000 people.

<sup>13</sup> Some of them chose to describe themselves as "home executives."

<sup>14</sup> Another way to account for this small number might be through the large number of studies that have shown that Pentecostalism usually takes root amongst the poor (Pillay 1994:6). See also Spittler (1976) and Synan (1975).

study conducted with the Gender Desk from the Institute for the Study of the Bible on II Samuel 13. This Bible study was part of a larger campaign run by the Institute for the Study of the Bible, called the “Tamar Campaign” which aimed at challenging churches on the issue of “violence against women.”<sup>15</sup> The reason for introducing this Bible study, apart from the fact that I became familiar with the Contextual Bible Study method which I have already elaborated on, was also that it was an opportunity to create safe spaces where the women felt they could speak openly and freely. It created an opportunity for them to get to know the university, and to experience the academy in a way that was non-threatening and familiar.

All the women chosen from both groups were literate, even though some of them had not completed high school, and some of them obviously did not possess tertiary education. I originally intended that both groups would belong to congregations that were affiliated to the FGC, since this was the denomination that was predominantly prevalent in the Indian areas. The FGC, however, had lost its predominance in the Indian areas, and many of the pastors, even those that had trained at the FGC Bible College, had since left the FGC to begin autonomous churches, while others left to join other affiliations such as those from the Charismatic denominations. Although all the women from the Effingham group were drawn from not only the Full Gospel Church, but also the same church, the women from Phoenix were not. They had all belonged to the FGC, at some point or the other, but had since moved on and now most of them belong to these autonomous churches. However, it was not difficult putting these groups of women together, because despite moving out of the FGC, the ethos of the autonomous churches were still very similar in theology, spirituality, and most significantly Biblically, to the FGC.

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Phumzile Zondi Mabizela for introducing the practical aspects of the Contextual Bible Study method to me and for allowing me to actively participate in her work, in order to strengthen my own work.

In what follows, I outline some of the information which I was able to learn from the interviews, about the FGC with regard to its position on women and women's issues in the church. As asserted already, this background will serve as a demonstration of why I feel that alternative ways of reading and interpreting the Bible and theology (particularly the use of critical tools) are needed in this church if women are ever to be emancipated, both in the way in which they read the Bible, and in their social lives as well. It also serves as a motivation for my own need to have forums such as Bible studies which empower rather than oppress women.

### ***Introduction to the Full Gospel Church***

*Ara-panahy* are Malagasy words which translated means "according to the Spirit!"<sup>16</sup> In Madagascar people understand this term as encompassing ecstatic worship and praise, evangelization, speaking in tongues, laying of hands and the exorcising of demons. In their worldview any problem can be solved "*ara-panahy*." Hence, it is not surprising that the church believes that they should deal only with matters "spiritual" – and matters "spiritual" are confined to the above definition. The term *ara panahy* with all its related associations aptly captures the way in which the presence of the Spirit is understood in the FGC in South Africa too. Within the FGC it seems that the presence of the Spirit is felt most acutely only within the confines of the church in practices of ecstatic worship and speaking in tongues that emphasize the vertical relationship between people and God. The roles that South African Indian women have played, and continue to play within the church, are intricately connected to this understanding of

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<sup>16</sup> I first heard this term being used by Cynthia Holder Rich, a doctoral student working on development issues in Madagascar at a doctoral seminar at the School of Theology, University of Natal. She was describing the way in which the Malagasy people divide life into "matters spiritual" and matters "not spiritual." I decided to use the same term to describe Full Gospel spirituality because I think that the term aptly captures the essence of Full Gospel spirituality.

spirituality. My experience has been that this one-dimensional understanding of the role of the Spirit restricts the church from engaging with pressing social concerns such as the emancipation of women. Understanding the statuses of women within this church will help us understand why their full emancipation is necessary, but first I sketch a very brief account of Bethesdaland, the name given to the previously all-Indian groups of Full Gospel Churches in Southern Africa.

### ***A Brief History of Bethesdaland, the Indian Full Gospel Church***

Indians first came to South Africa in 1860, as indentured laborers, and the vast majority of them were Hindus from the lower castes of Indian society. Only 5% were Christians. The Pentecostal movement took root mainly among poor, ex-indentured Indians (Pillay 1994:6). Subsequently, however, a considerable number of members have become fairly affluent, especially in the last ten years or so.

Bethesda was founded on 11 October 1931 by Pastor JF Rowlands. Although he was an Englishman, he did stress cultural continuity with the Indian tradition and often "emptied" Hindu concepts and practices of their religious content and "baptized" them with Christian meaning (Chetty 1995:152). In recent years much of this cultural continuity has been broken and the emphasis is on an iconoclastic, non-ritualistic form of worship. In fact anything that is foreign to an American western form of Pentecostalism is deemed "demonic" or "evil." Many other aspects of the kind of Pentecostalism that Rowlands advocated have changed drastically since his death. Chetty notes that

the death of Rowlands provided the space for 'typical' Pentecostal and also unique practices to emerge in the life of Bethesda under the 'freedom' of the Pentecostal umbrella of the FGC. The 'brakes'

that Rowlands put on emotionalism was now disengaged. His 'middle path' between the formalism of the established churches and the fanaticism of Pentecostals was jettisoned for 'classical' Pentecostal beliefs (1995: 158).

Emotionalism (loud wailing, "laughing in the Spirit"<sup>17</sup>, etc) has become, in recent years, a hallmark of Indian Pentecostalism.

What is interesting to note is that even though most FGC's stress a discontinuity with Hinduism, there are some forms of Hindu rituals that strongly resonate within these churches. For example, when people are "filled with the Holy Spirit" they go into a trance-like state not very different from a Hindu trance. The "trance" is characterized by periodic deep intakes of breath, accompanied by loud shrieking voices, and a vigorous jumping up and down or spinning around in total euphoria oblivious to those around you.<sup>18</sup>

We can sum up the characteristics of the Indian FGC's as follows. They started off with an emphasis on cultural continuity but as the years progressed that emphasis was lost. The emphasis, at present, is very much on emotionalism and the more emotional you are the more spiritual you are deemed to be – speaking in tongues and ecstatic outbursts are regarded as signs of a higher spiritual level. Within this emotionalism many facets of Hindu ritual worship, as practiced by South African Hindus, unconsciously surface.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This practice has a particular history – the so-called "Toronto blessing," and was common to many Pentecostal and Charismatic in the early to late 90's, though its popularity has decreased somewhat in the last few years.

<sup>18</sup> Although there are broad similarities between Hindu ecstatic trance and FGC Pentecostalism, there has been no documented comparative links between the two. The point I make here is from my own observation of these ecstatic practices, but more work remains to be done in this area.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that within Hinduism, there are two strands of thought. As Desai and Goodall (1995:26) point out: "One is more 'internal,' focusing on the mind, intellect and Spirit.

### ***Women Within the Church***

The roles that South African Indian women have played in their churches have changed significantly over the years. From occupying submissive and silent positions within the church, they now occupy ordained ministerial positions. However, women in the ministry are few and far between, and the issues run much deeper than merely a change in the constitution of the church to allow for the ordination of women. The way in which women view themselves, and the way in which men view women – both in the home and the church – dictates the extent and levels to which women are willing (or allowed) to advance in the church. Although women's domestic roles are transposed into the church, their emancipated ones are not. By this I mean that although many women work outside the home in professional jobs, their roles within the church and the home are still confined to the domestic sphere. In these churches very few women are elected onto the councils and even fewer serve in sacramental duties.

There is also an essential discrepancy between legality and reality. Legally (i.e. according to the Full Gospel constitution) women are now allowed to participate fully in the church, even to be ordained. In fact, according to the moderator of the denomination, the constitution never "disallowed" women from being ordained. It was just silent on the issue. However, the fact that right until the 1980's women were allowed to train for up to two years only, while men were allowed to train for the full duration required for ordination, certainly suggests that there was an implicit discrimination against women. The fact that they could not complete their full tenure at the college obviously meant that they could not be ordained. Presently, according to the moderator, women can participate fully in the church and can proceed to the level of ordination if they so desire. However, the reality

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Another way is more 'external,' focusing on outward practice by, for example, visiting a temple, observing chosen festivals openly or by fasting, praying and chanting.

is that they do not. They are still relegated to what has been considered traditional tasks for women (e.g. making the tea, being in charge of the Sunday School, helping with the "sisters' meetings, etc), and they very rarely take up leadership positions.

Besides being previously constrained by the church, it is also true that the Indian culture has also played a role in the way in which women view their own capabilities. Culture is an undeniably strong influence in most Indian lives. Hence, one cannot speak about faith and spirituality without engaging with some discourse concerning culture. The fact is that South African Indian women have certainly become more liberated than their Indian counterparts in India. Notwithstanding that women in South Africa might be somewhat more liberated than their Indian counterparts in India, their collective psyches have not been completely emancipated from an inferiority complex or the need to be subordinate to a man (Desai and Goodall 1995:26-29). Many of the practices that Indian women have adopted in South Africa, both within the church and in secular life, are largely due to the unconscious appropriation of various discriminatory cultural ideas that prevail in India even today. Such cultural ideas find roots in ancient Hindu Scriptures, and also in folklore and mythology (Padma Rao 1998:71-87). Even though Indians abandon Hinduism once they become Christian, the fact is that the cultural ideas found in Hinduism still impact on men's perceptions of women and of women's perceptions of themselves. However, the issue is not as simple as an uncritical appropriation of Hindu cultural practices. The fact that Christian Scripture (especially the Jewish law codes and some of Paul's writings) finds continuity with the Indian culture is also a significant contributing factor, as pointed out by some of the women in the interviews.

When exploring how women function in and out of the FGC, cognizance has to be taken of the various levels with which one is dealing. At least

three levels are operative. The first is that of the all-American Pentecostalism that is diligently followed and imitated.<sup>20</sup> This means that even those conservative American Pentecostal views on the roles of women, which mostly originate from the conservative “Bible belt” in the USA, are uncritically appropriated. The second level is the level of the culture of Hinduism from which most Indian Pentecostals have emerged.<sup>21</sup> And finally, and most importantly for my purposes here, are the Christian Scriptures whose comments regarding women connect well with the way in which Indian women are seen in their own culture. Although the factors of American forms of Pentecostalism and Indian culture are significant in the oppression of women, I would argue that the most limiting notion of spirituality is grounded in an understanding of the Bible as the indisputable, infallible Word of God.<sup>22</sup> As McClintock-Fulkerson (1994:254) notes:

Pentecostal beliefs in the infallibility of the entire canon have important implications for the rules of reading. They implicitly require that all scriptures that refer to women must be obeyed.

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<sup>20</sup> Naidoo (2001:48) notes this aspect of Indian Pentecostalism: “To a great extent, the church programs were almost totally influenced by western theology and teachings. Soon, Indian Christian leaders were imitating the Western way of preaching. Role models like T.L Osborn, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, Kenneth Hagan, Jimmy Swaggart and Benny Hinn were imitated by many.” He then adds, almost sarcastically: “The distinctive twang in their new found language is still evidenced today. South African Christians of Indian origin became ‘copy cats’ of Western Christianity.”

<sup>21</sup> Padma Rao (1998:71-87) gives a detailed account of how patriarchy operates within Hindu religion and culture.

<sup>22</sup> This was clearly demonstrated at a Tamar Campaign Workshop which was facilitated by Phumzile Zondi Mabizela and myself with pastors from the Chatsworth minister’s fraternity. There were about 30 ministers present all of whom were male. After the Bible study one of the ministers raised the following point: “Given the Bible study that we have done today, should we not, instead of saying that the Bible *is* the Word of God, say that the Bible *contains* the Word of God.” He was immediately told by a senior member of the fraternity that if he wants to think that way, he should not be a member of the Full Gospel Church, as the Full Gospel Church takes as its starting point that the Bible *is* the Word of God. Then Revelation 22:18,19 was quoted: “18. I warn everyone who hears the words of prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. 19. If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” And with that the topic was closed.

The subsequent uncritical, non-contextual interpretation of the Bible as normative and authoritative contributes to the discrimination against women with regard to various issues that prevent them from enjoying a fullness of humanity equal to that of the men within the church.<sup>23</sup> Some of the areas wherein this inequality is played out are in issues of ordination, divorce, dress codes – and as I was told recently by an ordained minister, even to issues of salary.

This idea of the Bible as the indisputable Word of God, which has no need of critical or contextual interpretation, is directly linked to the idea that the Spirit enables interpretation, and that the interpreter is simply an innocent unmediated voice of the Spirit. “I try to give them the Bible, not just what I think,” is a typical statement made by Pentecostal preachers (McClintock Fulkerson 1994:280)<sup>24</sup>. Hence, in sermons or Bible studies, very little additional material apart from the Bible itself is used. McClintock-Fulkerson (1994:280) notes:

They do not use scholarly commentaries to prepare their sermons; when they use anything other than Scripture they are likely to use church literature. Their primary Biblical practices are ordered by prayer, fasting, much time spent reading the Bible, and trust in the Holy Spirit, whose anointing they understand to be essential to the success of their preaching.

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<sup>23</sup> Ironically, Mosala (1989:19-20) makes the same point about the use of the Bible as the Word of God in Black theology. He argues: “An approach to the study of the Bible as the Word of God, therefore, presupposes a hermeneutical epistemology for which truth is not historical, cultural, or economic. For such an epistemology of the Word of God is pre-established. Its relevance does not issue out of its character as a historical, cultural, political, or economic product.” In other words, the Bible is perceived as being beyond history, literature, culture and economics.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Biblical interpretation and Pentecostals see Montague (1976), Lederle (1988) and Gaybba (1987)

In summary, the Bible seems to play a significant role in the lives of Pentecostals, but at the same time, because of the authoritative status that is vested in the Bible, “they require that all scriptures that refer to women must be obeyed,” as McClintock-Fulkerson asserts above.

It is within this framework of understanding that I had to approach the Bible studies with the women in my community. In taking seriously the first stage of “reading with,” I had to find ways of not just understanding these values inherent in Pentecostals’ views of the Bible, but I had to find ways of positioning my liberation hermeneutics within their framework of understanding. In other words, I could not dismiss the role of the Spirit in Pentecostal Biblical interpretation. Rather, I had to find ways of operating within this particular framework. As Abrahams (2001:73) has argued concerning the activist-womanist stance:

This follows naturally from an activist position: when you strive to change the world, you need to work with people. In order to do so successfully, you need to understand them and speak their language.

What I attempt to do in what follows, then, is to suggest ways in which women’s liberation can be possible while still articulating it within Pentecostal categories of interpretation.<sup>25</sup> In other words, I want to demonstrate that a critical view of the Bible and the Spirit’s role in the

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<sup>25</sup>Following Patte and Grenholm (2000) who suggest that Biblical scholars do *scriptural criticism*, because they want to highlight the nature of the Bible as a religious text, I also use the term to describe the role of the Bible in my interpretations. Their suggestion is helpful in developing alliances with a community who places much emphasis on the Bible as Scripture. Further, it also helps place my own critical work within the categories of Pentecostal interpretation. “Since the Bible is the sacred text of a substantial community and influences their behavior...interpretation of the Bible always matters” (Draper 2001:153).

interpretation of the Bible can help to contribute towards gender-social transformation.

The first step is to acknowledge the limited nature of the Pentecostal understanding of Scripture, with regard to the emancipation of women. Next, if this limited understanding of the work of the Spirit in our community has proven to be inadequate for the emancipation of women, as I am arguing, the question remains as to what should constitute a more holistic understanding of the Spirit. In other words, what considerations are necessary, to enable a hermeneutics of liberation, while still taking seriously the role of the Spirit in interpretation?

I use three scholars, (Rakoczy 2000, Fowl 1998 and Walker 1993) to propose three suggestions. Although these scholars are not Pentecostal themselves, I think that their categories and concepts, besides bearing useful resonances with Pentecostal categories of interpretation, also, I would argue, help enrich and elucidate Pentecostal understandings of the work of the Spirit. It is important to note that these proposals in respect of a more holistic understanding of the Spirit, which I make below, besides being an indication of the ways in which I conceptualize the Spirit, also frame the way in which I will facilitate the Bible studies.

Firstly, a more holistic understanding of the Spirit is one that takes into consideration the full humanity of all people, including both women and men. Any kind of spirituality that denies the full humanity of women is one that is deficient. Secondly, the spiritual realm must be seen in a complementary and enriching relationship with the physical or material realm, and not in a polarized or dichotomous way. And finally, as Fowl (1998:97-127) argues, we need to read the Spirit and read with the Spirit, in order that our Biblical interpretations are empowering rather than oppressive. My final proposal is obviously the most important for the

purposes of this dissertation, but I think that a discussion of the first two is also important since interpretation of the Bible in the FGC does not function independently of these first two issues. In discussing these proposals I also cite examples of women's oppression in the church. The examples range from matters that might seem rather innocuous to matters that actually relate to life and death. I have deliberately chosen to embed these examples within three categories that relate to the Spirit, in order to articulate my points within the spiritual focus of Pentecostalism.

### *Spirituality for Life*

Comblin (1989:61 cited in Rakoczy 2000:85) describes the presence of the Spirit in five ways. He says that the Spirit should produce life, freedom, speech, community, and action. Rakoczy (2000:85) maintains that "each of these experiences can testify to the authenticity of the Spirit and are important foundations for discernment." One of the most important questions we can ask in regard to these criteria for discernment is "are people more free, liberated from interior and exterior enslavement, free to grow as their best selves in God?" The fact that women were denied ordination in the FGC for so long implies most certainly that they were not free to "grow as their best selves in God."<sup>26</sup> In fact, they were actively restricted from such growth, given that they were denied the complete tenure required by the seminary for ordination. Every woman is called to the "fullness of life" as expressed in John 10:10. The fact that they are denied this fullness of life in the ministry questions whether the spirituality that the church is espousing, is a spirituality for life, or one that denies the full humanity of women. Discerning the life giving aspect of the Spirit and

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<sup>26</sup> Although women within the FGC did not struggle for ordination in the same way that their Anglican sisters did (see Ackerman, Draper et al 1991), my research has shown that the women did express a dissatisfaction with the fact that even when the Bible College allowed women to study for the full term required for ordination, once they completed their studies they were not ordained as pastors in their own right, but were simply labeled "missionaries" in the church (Nadar 2002:149).

allowing for that life-giving aspect to permeate every aspect of our lives is a difficult process, especially for women in the FGC like in so many other churches around the world. This is because as Rakoczy (2000:87) asserts,

There are so many forces which oppose life: structures which dehumanize women...which use culture as an excuse to discriminate, which demean their dignity in large and small ways.

The challenge for women in these situations is to find alternative freer ways of discerning the presence and manifestation of the Spirit, other than those confining ways which the church dictates.

### ***Dispelling The Dichotomy Of Spiritual And Physical***

My research has also shown that the church teaches that there is an essential difference between the spiritual and the physical and that the spiritual is more important than the physical. In other words even though a substantial number of women are constantly faced with issues of abuse, poverty and economic dependence, the Spirit seems unable to deal with these issues. So, the women are encouraged to forget about their real problems and focus on matters that are “spiritual” such as speaking in tongues. In other words, it is believed that life is divided into matter and Spirit, body and soul, and these two aspects can be kept separate. Paget-Wilkes notes the danger of such a dualism when he argues that:

Such a division leads to inadequate interpretations of the Gospel. For as long as faith can be divorced from reality the demand for the church to face the facts of human existence, is unheard (1981:44-45; cited in Walker, 1993: 185).

At the same time the women themselves report that they are the happiest when they are in church, since the ecstatic experience provides a form of escape for a little while, from the reality of their oppression. The Spirit manifestations in the FGC provides temporary relief for the suffering woman, but the next step of dealing with the reality of her oppression, by empowering her, is never realized because according to the FGC's understanding of spirituality, that would mean stepping out of the realm of the "spiritual" or as one pastor describes it the "anointing realm."

Sugden (1988:352) describes this dualistic understanding in terms of inner and outer realms. He says that the "inner realm is the locus of the vertical relationship with God...a realm of unchanging spiritual realities," and "the outer realm is the locus of horizontal relationships...of physical and material existence." Walker (1993:185) argues that "the effect of this form of thought is to move material, social, and political aspects of life out of the orbit of God's influence." Therefore, even though gross inequalities might exist in the material and physical world, it is of little consequence, as long as the vertical relationship between God and oneself is "correct." In other words the focus is on personal piety. Once again it is clear that this predominant focus on the vertical and personal relationship with God is what causes a lack of social engagement on the part of the FGC especially with regard to gender concerns. "As long as concerns for the healing of society can be kept separate from a primary mission of soul saving it is possible to relegate these interests to the sidelines" (Walker 1993:184). It seems like this is exactly where women's issues are relegated to – the sidelines. Even those women who are ordained as ministers find it difficult to bring issues of gender into their sermons since they are accused of becoming "worldly" in their interests, and thereby deviating from the "spiritual."

Understanding this problem from a race perspective might also throw some light on the gender effects of this dualistic understanding. Morran and Schlemmer (1984) conducted a study of predominantly white charismatic and Pentecostal churches in South Africa a decade before the democratic elections in 1994. They found that there had been a great exodus of people from main-line churches to the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, during this period. When questioned as to why they had joined these churches, a typical response was that they liked what they heard at these churches – “there was no social gospel – it was the Word of God” (Morran and Schlemmer 1984:149). The typical teachings that came from the pulpits of these churches at the time were: “Be concerned about yourself, rather than everyone else around you. If you have Jesus he will take care of others as he sees fit” (Morran and Schlemmer 1984:182). This focus on the “spiritual” to the exclusion of those painful aspects of reality can be applied to the painful aspects of gender inequality within the FGC as well. During my interviews one male pastor said to me: “You should not be fighting for these things [meaning gender equality], since when you do that you downplay the role of the Spirit and begin to fight in the flesh. The Spirit will allow these things to happen in his [sic] time, in the same way that racial liberation was gained in this country.”

His statement clearly indicates that he thought that the Spirit had brought about liberation and that this Spirit operated separately from the material and physical liberation struggle, fought by among others, clergy persons like Desmond Tutu and Frank Chikane. This clear dichotomy that is set up between the work of the Spirit and issues of justice, specifically gender justice, is one of the factors preventing women from being truly emancipated within this church. I argue along with Schneiders (1996:43) for:

the reintegration of what has been dichotomized, the empowerment of that which has been marginalized and abused, the liberation of that which has been enslaved.

***Interpretations Of Scripture: “How The Spirit Reads/How To Read The Spirit”***

The first two proposals which I make deal with the issue of Pentecostal’s understanding of the Spirit. In my final proposal I want to deal with Pentecostals’ perceptions of the Bible, particularly in the way in which it is used to discriminate against women, or prevent them from enjoying a fullness of life. The question that I want to raise here is, can the way in which the Bible is used to discriminate against women be described as Spirit-inspired interpretation and what defines Spirit-inspired interpretation? Fowl (1998:100) asserts that in order to understand how to read the Spirit within Scripture, we need to understand first, how the Spirit reads Scripture. In other words, it is only when we understand how the Spirit reads that the Spirit will be able to effectively guide us in our interpretations. Of course, several questions arise when we think of the Spirit’s role in interpretation in this way, the most significant of which Fowl raises (1998:100): “Are there ways of talking about the hermeneutical significance of the Spirit that do more in practice than pay lip-service to the role of the Spirit and then continue as normal?”

He goes on to suggest that “over time one could distinguish Spirit-inspired interpretation and practice by its *effects*” (my own emphasis). I agree, but what may be judged as good *effects* for male interpreters are not always regarded as good effects for female interpreters. In fact, many of the interpretations offered by male interpreters within the church have been blatantly oppressive to women. It would seem to me then that before the importance of the effects of the interpretation are highlighted, the method

of interpretation needs to be considered. I contend that a critical contextual interpretation that focuses not only on the context of the text, but our own context as well, is crucial to the process of attaining love, peace and justice (which should be the goal of any Spirit-inspired interpretation). Fowl (1998:100) hints at this kind of interpretation when he suggests that,

the Spirit's role is to guide and direct the process of continual change in order to enable communities to 'abide in the true vine,' in the various contexts in which they find themselves.

I found that this process of continual change is not possible in the FGC, because ironically their interpretations of Scripture prevent it. I will cite some examples to demonstrate this point.

In South Africa domestic violence is an extremely common phenomenon. It is estimated that one out of every six women is assaulted by her husband or partner.<sup>27</sup> Women in the Indian Full Gospel Church, unfortunately, are not exempt from being a part of the alarming statistic. A detailed study by Phiri (2000a:85-110) was carried out in Phoenix on domestic violence in (Pentecostal) Indian Christian homes. 84% of the 25 women who were interviewed admitted to having experienced domestic violence. They were also all wives of leaders in the church. Her study concluded that it was biblical beliefs, such as those on submission, which made these women stay in abusive relationships. McClintock Fulkerson (1994:296) also makes a similar point about the role of the "discourse of submission," when she asserts:

One of the most prominent oppressive outcomes of such discourse is the willingness of women to stay in battering situations.

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<sup>27</sup> "Domestic Violence: Part 1 Wife Abuse," *PACSA Factsheet*, no.45 [November 1998], pl.

Women's willingness to be battered is often linked to the kind of ecclesiastically supported languages of submission that appear in Pentecostal women's stories.

In my own research, I asked several of the people (both men and women) whom I interviewed how they deal with cases where the wife is being abused, especially physically, since this is quite a common occurrence in the community. Almost all the people I interviewed, except two, said that they would first investigate why the beating occurred since in most cases "when a man hits his wife, it is because of something she has done." A senior lecturer at the Bethesda Bible College where almost all the ministers in this denomination are trained, argued that in most cases that he has dealt with when a man has beaten his wife it is simply because she has "irritated" him. What he (and other ministers that he knows too) does in cases like these, is that they bring the woman in and counsel her from the Word of God as to how she should behave toward her husband ("since there cannot be two captains in a ship") and then send her home. In other words, according to this pastor, in every case of wifebeating there is always a reason behind it and most times "it is the woman's fault," according to his experience. The most common response from ministers when approached by women who are being physically abused by their partners is that they should go back home and persevere in prayer for their husbands and the Spirit will eventually speak to them (their husbands) and convict them of their wrongdoing. Even when the victim has decided that she can no longer tolerate the abuse and wants to leave the marriage she is actively dissuaded by the church from doing so. The most common reason provided is that divorce is wrong according to the Bible and the Scripture reference quoted is Matthew 6: 31-32. The other reason is that the church's constitution does

not permit divorce, except in cases of marital infidelity and even in those cases every effort must be made to reconcile the couple.<sup>28</sup>

In the past, the Bible was also used to control the way in which women had to dress to church. Following Paul's injunction that women should have their heads covered during worship, FGC women, previously, had to have their heads covered with a piece of material known as a *doek*. Almost every woman in the church followed this practice until the last ten years or so, when the practice began to die out and has now completely disappeared. As almost all the women I spoke to take as the point of departure to their faith the Bible as the infallible Word of God, applicable to all ages, it was interesting to hear how some of them explained this passage, and their abandonment of the practice. Some said that the passage was taken too literally – that actually the passage meant that one's husband was one's covering. Others said that a woman's hair was her covering. All the women admitted that they were re-interpreting Scripture differently from the way it was interpreted before, but did not see that their interpretations still leaned toward patriarchal bias. However, the fact that the women expressed discomfort with these texts, betrayed an ability (to a certain extent) to deconstruct them, in their own ways. It also demonstrated that even though these strict rules on the Bible as the Word of God existed, the women were also able to negotiate this to a certain extent. This was a good sign, as I recognized that this was one of the spaces through which I could articulate a hermeneutic of liberation in the Bible studies. Tamez (1991:64) points out a similar situation in Latin America. She notes that in Latin America, women in grass-roots communities react in different ways to difficult Biblical texts:

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<sup>28</sup> In fact one pastor who counsels married couples, as part of his calling to the ministry, said to me that even in cases of marital infidelity on the part of the husband, the woman still needed counseling because his theory was "if you don't feed your dog, it will rummage in your neighbor's rubbish bin."

Sometimes they disregard anti-women texts, at other times they juggle them to come out with a positive side or they soften the oppressive nature of the content. On other occasions they wisely simplify the problem by stating that those were other times, that reality should be different today, that God is a God of life and therefore he cannot favor discrimination against women.

Tamez's observations above are also applicable to the South African Indian women. They seem to do the same. But if they handled all patriarchal texts in the ways described by Tamez, there might not be a problem. But they do not. Most times they are coerced into colluding with the text's patriarchal ideology.<sup>29</sup> For example, three Pentecostal (two are by local South African Indians and the third is by an American) interpretations of the character of Vashti will illustrate this point. Two of these interpretations are by women:

Vashti represents the feminist movement; those who usurp the husband's authority in the home and cause discord, disturbance and finally divorce. Esther represents women who are purified and who have servant-hood as one of their traits. She was a woman above reproach, patient and longsuffering. God used her in a very critical situation (Chetty 2002:10).

She [Esther] undoubtedly replaced the "brier." We notice that her predecessor Vashti was thorny, wild and hardy. Isaiah was right. (Govender 2002:6)

Vashti's Spirit is in the world today, destroying marriages, homes and families. Everywhere women are upsetting God's order by asserting themselves over their husbands. Little wonder that our

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<sup>29</sup> My analysis of the Bible studies in the next chapter will explore more closely why women do this, even when they are able, in some instances to resist.

society is poised on the verge of disintegration, for ‘a false balance is abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight’ (Gimenez 1986:24-25).

Judging from the above interpretations I concur with Tamez (1991:63) that the problem is serious:

Its seriousness comes, first, from the effects that these antiwomen biblical readings have produced on so many women and men who have internalized, as sacred law, the inferiority of women. Second, there is an inherent difficulty in interpreting texts that not only legitimate but legislate the marginalization of women. Third, and this is mainly for Protestants, the problem is the principle of Biblical authority as it is traditionally perceived.

Given the relationship that the FGC has to the Bible as normative for the way in which its members are to live their lives, it is not surprising that women in this church are oppressed. This is because the Bible is taken as normative without the acknowledgement that it is a patriarchal document. It is understood as being completely Spirit inspired, therefore even passages concerning divorce are taken literally. So women are discouraged from divorcing abusive husbands. They are told instead to pray for their husbands. It is not surprising that many women die at the hands of their partners, while waiting for the “Spirit to speak to him so that he will change his ways,” or while they are “persevering in prayer” for him.

I return to Fowl’s argument that in order to understand the role of the Spirit in interpretation we should first know how the Spirit reads Scripture. The question is: can an interpretation that results in the deaths of women who are already victims of abuse, be an interpretation of the Spirit? I suggest not. If we are to truly understand the passage quoted in its own context, the

context of the Jewish laws concerning divorce, and our own context,<sup>30</sup> then any law passed by the church saying that a victim of abuse is not allowed to leave her husband, “because the Bible says so,” cannot testify to the work of the Spirit. The Spirit that gives life surely cannot read the text in a way that leads to destruction, and surely we cannot read the Spirit as One who creates death rather than life.

Thus far I have shown the need for the use of critical tools in helping the process of conscientization. But it is also true that Pentecostal women have resources (probably that main-line groups do not have) that can actually advance the roles of women. McClintock-Fulkerson (1994:287-288) points some of these out:

First, their community [Pentecostals] is characterized by rules for reading that are famous for their openness on who can read. The answer is not gendered, nor is it limited to the ‘professional’ – the academically trained...Second, the Pentecostal set of rules removed class restrictions as well. An important feature of the rules for reading was the avoidance of critical disciplines that were taught in mainstream educational institutions.

McClintock-Fulkerson is suggesting that inherent in the Pentecostals own system of beliefs lies the power to transform and liberate Biblical interpretation regarding women, firstly because they do actually allow women to read, and secondly because they are not constrained by historical-critical and other mainstream training that might actually oppress. However, these are not opportunities in and of themselves. As Phiri (2000a:109-110) and McClintock Fulkerson (1994:296) herself has shown, the women although having access to this space where the Spirit is “democratic,” do not always take full advantage of it, and hence remain in

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<sup>30</sup> Note again the element of criticality that is needed.

abusive marriages as they are caught between this “democratic” space and their “theological space” which argues that the Bible is the Word of God. So, McClintock-Fulkerson’s arguments about the resources that Pentecostal women have for liberation (the way they stand at the moment) are only potential opportunities which only those with a hermeneutic of liberation can unlock, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

### ***Conclusion***

In this section of the chapter I have focused on various aspects of the Full Gospel Church, particularly its focus on the spiritual. I have argued that the limited understanding of the spiritual and the subsequent limited interpretations of the Bible, are contributing factors to the oppression of women in this church. I have also argued that there is a need to move beyond a one-dimensional understanding of the Spirit and that the Spirit can be felt in multi-faceted ways with an over-riding concern for the preservation of life. This Spirit that empowers us and calls us to life, Johnson (1992: 124-149) aptly names as “Spirit Sophia.” Rakoczy (2000:70) concludes that

a Christian feminist spirituality for our South African context is an approach to life which seeks and finds God in all the circumstances of life, affirms life and growth in others, works with others to bring a greater fullness of life (wholeness and right relationships) into every situation and structure of culture and society, including the church.

I have tried to demonstrate that as long as the spiritual remains separate from the physical, women can never be truly and fully emancipated. One way of enabling the emancipation of women, I propose, is to find more holistic ways of engaging with the Bible. This requires not just taking into

account those factors that affect interpretations such as culture, but an acknowledgement of the need for criticality in the process of interpretation. To uncritically accept the Bible as the Word of God, without interrogating its patriarchal nature, for example, can lead not just to discrimination against women, but as the examples of violence against women pointed out, to the deaths of women as well. I have shown in this chapter that it is possible to stay within the Pentecostal framework of the work of the Spirit in interpretation, while at the same time ensuring a more holistic and liberating understanding of the role of the Spirit. This I believe can contribute in some way toward the liberation and empowerment of women within the FGC. I have used my experiences within the FGC and the preliminary research which I conducted (in which I interviewed some women and some key authority figures in the FGC) as a motivation for the reason why I think that the kind of critical reading of the Bible that I have to offer can contribute toward the empowerment of women in my community.

In the next chapter I will show how I undertook these Bible studies, taking into careful consideration the points made in this chapter, both regarding the way in which scholars represent those with whom we work, and the way in which the scholar holds in creative tension, the beliefs and the values held by the community, and the scholars hermeneutic of liberation.

## CHAPTER 8

### REFLECTIONS ON FACILITATING A COMMUNITY-BASED HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION

In the previous two chapters I demonstrated *why* a hermeneutic of transformation is important to my work as a Biblical scholar, and *how* I think such an engagement could be facilitated and effected. In this chapter, having actually facilitated this hermeneutic of transformation with two groups of women in the South African Indian Christian (Pentecostal) community, through the process of Bible studies, I now reflect on that process. But first, there remains a crucial introductory point, which despite having being discussed to a certain extent in the previous chapter, has to be made more explicit in the present chapter. This is the point of representation.

I submit that explicitly related to the question of representation is the question of the ability of the subaltern to speak, both in the intellectual's actual *engagement* with the subaltern and the intellectual's subsequent *representation* of the subaltern. So, in my discussion of the issue of representation, particularly in the way I represent the community, I also assess the extent to which their voices can be heard not only through my representation of them in this dissertation, but the extent of their representation of themselves to me in the Bible studies. This discussion is important here since in the process of analyzing the Bible studies I do actually represent the women with whom I worked. To facilitate this discussion on representation, I bring West (1999), Haddad (2000a) and

Spivak (1988) into dialogue with each other,<sup>1</sup> and then offer my own perspectives on the issue.

### ***Re/presentation: The Task of the Intellectual?***

In representing the voices of the community who participated in the Bible studies in this chapter, I operate within the assumption (to apply Spivak's use of the term "subaltern" to the women in my community) that the "subaltern does speak" both to me in the Bible studies and through my representation of her in my scholarship (Contra Spivak 1988:308 who concludes that the "subaltern cannot speak"). My argument is based on Spivak's critique of the representation in imperialist discourse of the self-immolation of the Hindu widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Before I demonstrate how a deconstruction of Spivak's own argument concerning the representation of the *sati* ritual by imperialist discourse actually demonstrates that the subaltern can speak, I first turn my attention to West's and Haddad's arguments relating to the postulation that the subaltern does speak in representative discourse.

Notwithstanding my position, that the subaltern does speak, my assumption is not based solely (though it does rely on their arguments to a certain extent) on the same arguments that West (1995:174-192) and Haddad (2000b: 39-51) provide, when they conclude that "the dumb do speak." In terms of how the subaltern speaks during his engagement with them, West's arguments are based on an understanding of Scott's (1990) theories of the hidden and public transcript. West argues that intellectuals have assumed that "ordinary readers" do not speak because intellectuals only have access to their public transcript of "apparent submission" to the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Spivak is speaking about representations of the subaltern woman by intellectuals in postcolonial discourse, I nonetheless, following West (1999), Haddad (2000) and Cochrane (1999) use her notion of the subaltern as equivalent to the women in the community, and her concept of the postcolonial intellectual as equivalent to the Biblical scholar.

dominant discourse. He asserts, “the subaltern does speak, but in forms of discourse we cannot hear if we only listen.” (West 1999:52). He suggests that in order to “hear” what the subaltern is saying we have to move beyond a “listening to” or “speaking for” to a “speaking with” mode of understanding.

Haddad (2000b:49) concurs with West, but goes further to suggest that poor and marginalized women “articulate and own their own interpretations of faith” when the intellectual is able to build “alliances of solidarity” through collaboration with the community. And drawing on Scott (1990), she argues that when there is a genuine collaboration and alliance, a “safe and sequestered social site” is created. Haddad, although acknowledging her relationship (as a non-organic activist-intellectual) with the community of Black Zulu-speaking women as being fraught with racial, class and language politics,<sup>2</sup> does argue that their “common experience as women was sufficient, even before we had secured common ground to risk collaboration”(Haddad 2000a:296). So Haddad, like West, sees a role for the socially engaged intellectual, but unlike West, conceptualizes herself as being closer to the community than West is, by virtue of her gender. This solidarity with the community, and the safe space that is created is what enables the community to speak, she argues.

Hence both West and Haddad then seem to indicate that the community does and will speak if they are sure of the intellectual’s commitment to creating “alliances of solidarity” with them, and a safe site is created where they can speak and articulate their subjugated expressions of faith. As Haddad (2000a:301) asserts, “For survival theologies, hidden and

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<sup>2</sup> See Haddad (2000a:25) where she foregrounds her identity as a South African woman of Lebanese descent, who was “given” white status in the apartheid era, but chooses to align herself with African women, and sees herself as a South African-African woman who is “not quite-white” and who has chosen to be shaped by her “blackness” rather than by “whiteness” as she lives and works in post-apartheid South Africa.

subjugated knowledges, to be given full-throated expression, women such as those of Vulindlela<sup>3</sup> need to secure a safe and sacred space.”

I concur with both West and Haddad concerning the ability of the community to speak in the process of our engagement with them, and the fact that in most cases the women in the community speak most freely when they are provided with a safe space to do so. However, where I differ with West and Haddad is their use of the term “reading with” to reinforce their argument that the subaltern does speak in the subsequent representation of them in their scholarship. Both West (1999:52) and Haddad (2000b:47) seem to make the point that the intellectual can argue for the notion that the subaltern does speak because the intellectual has moved beyond listening to, or speaking to, or speaking on behalf of, to “speaking with” or “reading with.” They argue that the “speaking with” mode emphasizes the subjectivity of both the scholar and the “ordinary reader” while foregrounding solidarity between the two subjects.<sup>4</sup> The reason that both West and Haddad are so intent on foregrounding the notion of “reading with” or “speaking with” is clearly captured by Haddad (2000b:47) who commenting on West’s argument has argued that “reading with” or “speaking with:”

is crucial if, as activist-intellectuals working with women from different backgrounds, we are to avoid constructing what Mohanty terms *colonizing discourse* which merely masks unequal relations of power and falsely suggests a *solidarity* with those less privileged.

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<sup>3</sup> Vulindlela is a semi-rural area in Pietermaritzburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa, where Haddad conducted her research.

<sup>4</sup> West insists that the relationship between the scholar and the “ordinary” reader is subject to subject and not subject to object.

Haddad's observation points to a crucial position in the debate, and that is that the "reading with" notion is principally and especially (and perhaps only) significant for the activist-intellectual working with women from *different backgrounds*. I would argue that in these cases the foregrounding of the "reading with" method is vital. West (1999:49) acknowledges this, when he says that the "listening to" or "speaking to" method:

Fails to take sufficient account of contestation taking place between the public and the hidden transcript, particularly when we are present – particularly when 'we' are people like me who are not *organic* intellectuals.

In other words, West and Haddad are arguing that the "speaking to" model is not possible for those who are not organic intellectuals. But, what if those intellectuals who are working in the community are organic intellectuals? The starting point of their dialogue is then different to that of West's and Haddad's (and consequently their representation of the community would also be different). In other words, organic intellectuals might not want to make as strong a claim for the "reading with" paradigm as West and Haddad might want to.<sup>5</sup> This is because the organic intellectual, like myself, might see my role as moving beyond "reading with" to actually "conscientization." This leads me back to my early argument that the notion of representation is clearly linked with the intellectual's perception of the ability of the subaltern to speak in our engagement with her. The fact that I see my role as not just "reading with" in order to hear the subaltern speak and articulate her "subjugated knowledge" (when given a safe space to do so), but that I see my role as progressing further into the mode of conscientization, immediately distinguishes the way in which I represent those I work with, and the way in which Haddad and West represent those

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<sup>5</sup> This argument does not preclude my argument made in chapter 7 that the "reading with" paradigm is only a first step in the process of collaboration. Here I simply want to point out that it is not the most crucial part of the process.

with whom they work. This is because both Haddad and West do not see their roles as conscientization. Haddad (2000b:49) explicitly states this:

I now recognize that my role is not to conscientize but to enter into mutual dialogue and collaborative work with those I work with. In so doing, I recognize the need to be re-shaped and re-made. It opens me up to transformation and re-constitution. I am less bold or hasty than I used to be about what action I think should be taken against the many gendered injustices I see around me. I listen more, speak less and do not rush into any prescribed solutions to these evils...At times in discussions with women of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, I have not been able to be quiet and found myself speaking out my perspective on their oppression. Instead of having the desired effect of moving them into unanimous agreement, it has more often than not elicited silence.

Haddad's statement above clearly shows her paralysis in influencing these women in their journey to transformation. Her speaking out against their oppression elicited only silence. In other words, the women were not able to "speak back" to her when she "spoke to" them. Given that they were not able to "speak back" to her, her argument then is that the women themselves have ways of speaking about their oppression, and that her role is not an interventionist one, but simply one of forging "alliances of solidarity," which in turn provides a safe space for the women to articulate their "survival theologies." West (1999) sees his role in the same way – that the community is in possession of "hidden transcripts of resistance" and that the "hidden transcripts" can become public if they are provided with a safe space to do so. He sees part of his role then as providing this safe

space, but not further to conscientize given his own location as a white male Biblical scholar.<sup>6</sup>

To relate this to Spivak's argument concerning the practice of *sati*, I would suggest that West and Haddad, in arguing for survival theologies and hidden transcripts in representative discourse, are saying that the position of what Spivak (1988: 297) calls "the Indian nativist argument" that "the women actually wanted to die," is the public transcript which contains coded forms of resistance, and that it is the role of the intellectual by "speaking with" the subaltern to uncover the actual "hidden transcript" which we assume, might say that the women did not want to die. Spivak would argue that this is not a bad notion in and of itself. Spivak's (1988:297) problem with this situation would be that by West (or any other scholar from a differing background to that of the Indian widow) doing this, they replicate the argument made of the British that became a commonly understood argument that this was "a case of White men saving brown women from brown men."<sup>7</sup> Both the arguments, that "the women actually wanted to die," and that "white men are saving brown women from brown men" are equally unhelpful in foregrounding the voice of the subaltern. Spivak's conclusion is therefore, that the subaltern cannot speak in representative discourse. However, she does concede that the intellectual is able to offer a critique of the subaltern's position if the intellectual is willing to admit s/he is "speaking to" the subaltern, by virtue of the intellectual's status. Spivak (1988:295) says:

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<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding their aversion to conscientization it must be said that both West and Haddad do participate in the conscientization mode, particularly through their leading questions, (or the additional interpretative and critical resources which they bring with them to the process), though not as overtly as I do (or perhaps I am *able* to as an organic activist-intellectual).

<sup>7</sup> Spivak (1988:297) notes that even "White women – from nineteenth century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly – have not produced an alternative understanding."

In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern women, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* “unlearns” female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized.

It would seem to me that by West (1999) and Haddad (2000a) calling for the need to hear the “ordinary” and “poor and marginalized women” articulate their struggles in their own voices, and with their own covert strategies, they are “simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized<sup>8</sup>” (poor and marginalized) without critiquing the postcolonial discourse (in this case patriarchal discourse) which undergirds the reason that the subaltern remains colonized (oppressed by patriarchal forces). Their lack of critique is because when they do critique they close down the conversation as their identities prevent them from dialogue. In other words, in taking Spivak’s arguments seriously, both scholars attempt to avoid the notion of “white men (and women) saving brown women from brown men,” by claiming that the community are in possession of hidden transcripts, without feeling *able* (as inorganic intellectuals) to speak out about why they need hidden transcripts, or to critique the structures that keep them oppressed, as the reaction they might get (as inorganic intellectuals) would

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<sup>8</sup> Sugirththajah (2001:280) argues similarly along my lines: “The validity of an interpretation does not depend on positing an alternative reading or supporting it with new data. Simply replacing an alternative reading with a subaltern one does not make the latter more legitimate than the one it tries to dislodge. Combating one set of data with a counter set is not enough to unsettle hegemonic readings. Instead the discursive modes through which narratives and facts are produced must also be called into question.” Cochrane (1999:4) although noting the value of what he calls “community wisdom” or “local wisdom” also concedes that, for example, with regard to the critique from Black theologians of the African Independent Churches: “Black theologians have a point in their negative analysis of the political significance of the AICs. It would be romantic idealism to imagine that the faith and reflection of local Christian communities, because they may be black, poor, or oppressed, is free of distortion, of entrapment in increasingly dysfunctional paradigms, or of contradictions not yet experientially significant. Ordinary believers may well hamper the emancipatory goals for which Black theology strives, and even act as counterrevolutionary agents against freedom.”

be silence, as Haddad's statement above illustrates. My point here is not that inorganic intellectuals fail to point out what the structures and constraints of oppression are, because as West's and Haddad's work demonstrate, they do. My point here is that although they acknowledge the oppressions, they feel unable to critique these structures because of their own social locations.

In other words, I am not arguing that the theory of the hidden transcript is not valid. It is valid given that the hidden transcript is a tool used by the oppressed, most times for survival.<sup>9</sup> However, the theory cannot be used in isolation of the inherent questioning and revealing of the structures that necessitate the hidden transcript, through for example, making the subaltern conscious of why it is they need a hidden transcript, and if they do not have a hidden transcript, to expose the way in which the consciousness of the subaltern has internalized these oppressive structures. Spivak (1988:295) agrees:

Reporting on, or better still, participating in, anti-sexist work among women of color or women in class oppression in the First World or the Third World is undeniably on the agenda. We should also welcome all the information retrieval in these silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology.

Spivak's (1988: 295) contention with this argument is:

Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with

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<sup>9</sup> As I have shown in my analysis of the character of Esther in chapter 5, and elsewhere (Nadar 2002b).

the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever.

It is interesting that Spivak here uses Foucault's terming of such scholarly activity as 'epistemic violence.' In using Foucault in this way, Spivak is pointing to a very important aspect of her analysis which she does not always say stridently enough – that is that epistemic violence is a result of the scholarly activity of primarily those who are inorganic intellectuals. By drawing an analogy between feminist intellectuals and post-colonial critics, (both of whom she would name "leftists") in the way in which they represent the subaltern, she camouflages the actual thrust that lies behind her critique, and that is that although an organic intellectual's representation of the subaltern is not authentic in and of itself, it is nonetheless closer to a fuller representation than a non-organic intellectual's is. She both disclaims this (almost apologizes for it) and yet admits to it:

First a few disclaimers: In the United States the third-worldism currently afloat in humanistic disciplines is often openly ethnic. I was born in India and received my primary, secondary, and university education there, including two years of graduate work. My Indian example could thus be seen as a nostalgic investigation of the lost roots of my own identity. Yet even as I know that one cannot freely enter the thickets of 'motivations,' I would maintain that my chief project is to point out the positivist-idealist variety of such nostalgia. I turn to Indian material because, in the absence of advanced disciplinary training, that accident of birth and education has provided me with a *sense* of the historical canvas, a hold on some of the pertinent languages that are useful for a *bricoleur*, especially when armed with the Marxist skepticism of

concrete experience as the final arbiter and a critique of disciplinary formations (Spivak 1988:281).

In not saying this directly in the end, and by disguising it with a call for the (female) intellectual to not disown the circumscribed task of representation, and concluding therefore that the intellectual has to own up to the fact that the subaltern cannot speak, Spivak loses the potentially powerful argument of the “speaking to” method. She argues along with Marxist critique that experience is the final arbiter and what forms the critique of disciplinary formations, and yet at the same time she does not carry this argument to its logical conclusion at the end. I would argue that if Spivak stayed with this line of thought, she would end with something like “the subaltern does speak, because I as a (post) subaltern speak to the subaltern and the subaltern speaks back.”<sup>10</sup> I, as (post) subaltern then represent the subaltern voice, (though never in its entirety) minimizing the risk of ‘cohering with the imperialist subject-constitution under the guise of the notions of education and civilization.’”

Added to this would be the foregrounding of my own status and intentions as intellectual in contrast to the women whom I represent. In my own case foregrounding my intentions means owning up to my conscientization motive. This in turn has a direct effect on the way in which I choose to represent the community – either I foreground their role in the conscientization process, or I foreground my own role as critic.

West and Haddad would foreground the former much more than the latter in their representations, even though they would each admit to varying degrees of their roles as critics. I, on the other hand, would place much more emphasis on my role as critic, because unlike the situation that Haddad

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<sup>10</sup> Here it is true that the subaltern may not speak back in her “full voice”, but given that the organic intellectual has what Spivak politely calls “a *sense* of the historical canvas,” s/he is able to represent the subaltern’s voice more fully.

describes above, where an intervention from her side (“speaking to”) is met with silence, in my case it is met with conversation and even debate (“speaking back”). To summarize this part of the discussion on representation, then, in my representations of the women in my community, I am not just reporting on the ways in which they interpret texts when given a safe space to interpret through their own lenses, because in these cases I would concur with West and Haddad that the women do speak. But, what I am also reflecting on is my own role of bringing to consciousness, or helping them to become more ideological about their oppression,<sup>11</sup> which it seems is a process that lacks in West and Haddad’s work because as inorganic intellectuals, they do not see this as part of their work.

In representing the women in my community in what follows, I would argue that I position myself in between the two analytical trajectories concerning the relationship between the scholar (as activist-intellectual) and the community. West (1999:37) drawing on Segundo’s (1985: 17-29) work explains the two trajectories as follows:

The one line of analysis emphasizes the categories and contribution of the theologian or Biblical scholar, while the other foregrounds the categories and contribution of the ‘common people.’

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<sup>11</sup> Most of the essays in the 1996 *Semeia* volume on the “reading with” methodology seem to focus on the agency of “ordinary” African readers. Without doubting and taking seriously the agency of “ordinary” Africans, I do think that the intellectual at the same time has to critically examine and expose those areas in our cultural communal mindsets which oppress (See for example Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992). As Cochrane (1999:4) above has observed: “It would be romantic idealism to imagine that the faith and reflection of local Christian communities, because they may be black, poor, or oppressed, is free of distortion, of entrapment in increasingly dysfunctional paradigms, or of contradictions not yet experientially significant. Ordinary believers may well hamper the emancipatory goals for which Black theology strives, and even act as counterrevolutionary agents against freedom.” Given Cochrane’s point above, it seems that critique and conscientization is necessary, but the levels of critique and conscientization offered by the intellectual, will depend largely on whether or not the intellectual is an organic part of the community or not.

I, like Segundo, although recognizing the worth of the latter approach, am “reluctant to give up the *critical* function inherent in the first line of analysis” (West 1999:39). I believe that forms of critical consciousness are necessary so that the community can forge their own language of resistance. I recognize though that while explicitly avoiding romanticizing and idealizing the contribution of the community, by foregrounding the development of a critical consciousness, that I also have to avoid minimalizing or rationalizing their contribution (West 1999:37). McClintock Fulkerson’s (1994:241-242) insights from studying Pentecostal women’s experiences in the light of feminist accounts of gender, power and language are helpful in this regard. She maintains that she does not claim to have found some hidden revolutionary spirit in Pentecostal women. Her analysis concurs with the way in which I represent the women in this chapter. She says:

Judgment regarding their patriarchal constraints is a product of my feminist grid, in light of which their discourses have a transgressive but predominantly status quo relationship to the rules of their canonical systems. There is some indication, however, that interesting and more radical effects can result from their discourses for women in situations of desperation when these women have other options than the patriarchal communities of their religion.

It is the “other options” to the dominant patriarchal status quo that McClintock Fulkerson is pointing to in the above statement which I want to focus on in the present chapter. From my literary-womanist analysis in the first five chapters of this dissertation it was clear that the Biblical text possesses a dominant patriarchal ideology. In the previous chapter it was shown that the Full Gospel Church, drawing on many factors such as

culture, but most specifically the Bible, practices many forms of patriarchal domination against women. The autonomous churches which emanate from the FGC's function within the same framework of patriarchal domination. We can deduct therefore that there are at least two levels of patriarchal oppression that the women chosen for the Bible studies suffer from. The first is the Bible itself, which sometimes simply cannot be rescued from its patriarchal character, and the second is the interpretation of the Bible by the churches which the women belong to. In this chapter I wish to explore how these women respond when offered other options both for reading the text, and for reading the way in which the text has been interpreted to perpetuate domination. In what follows I outline the theory which will undergird my analysis of the Bible studies.

### ***Forging a Theoretical Basis for Analyzing the Bible Studies***

The central question that this chapter aims to answer, or at least grapple with, is to what extent does my role in conscientizing and the critical tools that I offer in that process, enable firstly, the hegemonic to become ideological, secondly, the unconscious to become conscious, and finally non-agentive power to become agentive power (Comaroffs 1991:22-29). (I am obviously using the Comaroffs in a particular way, but I will return to that discussion in a while). In articulating this as my central question in this chapter, I betray the fact that I partially work within what West (1999:40) drawing on Scott (1990), calls a "thick account of ideological hegemony." Drawing on Giroux (1985) he explains this account as follows:

Such accounts of ideological hegemony argue that 'when oppressed people live in silence, they use the words of their oppressors to describe their experiences of oppression.' It is only within the praxis of liberation and in dialogue with organic intellectuals that it is possible for the poor and the marginalized

‘to break this silence and create their own language.’ So within liberation theologies, whether they be Latin American, black, womanist, or feminist, the role of the intellectual is crucial in breaking ‘the culture of silence’ – in enabling a language and a speaking.

This “thick” version of ideological hegemony places much value on the role of the (activist) intellectual in conscientizing. Although I agree with the basic tenets of this version of ideological hegemony, I submit that there are varying levels of intensity and strength at which the forces of ideological hegemony operate. If there were not, then it would be futile to try to facilitate a hermeneutic of transformation because it would be impossible to break the stranglehold of the patriarchal ideology both within the text and the community as well. The Comaroffs (1991), who West (1999:40) argues have a “thin-ish” theory of hegemony, have stressed that hegemony becomes unstable when confronted by ideology. They show this by placing hegemony on a continuum with ideology, with the two at opposite poles, and consciousness and unconsciousness parallel to the hegemony-ideology continuum, with unconsciousness lying on the hegemony side of the continuum, while consciousness lies on the ideology side of the continuum. Framing both these parallel continuums are the concepts of culture and power. Since I will be using these concepts in my analysis of the effectiveness of the Bible studies in promoting gender-social transformation, I think a clarification of how these terms are understood is in order at this point.

Hegemony, according to the Comaroffs (1991:23) is:

That order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies – drawn from a historically situated

cultural field- that come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it.

More significant to our analysis here is the Comaroffs' observation that:

This is why its power has so often been seen to lie in what it silences, what it prevents people from thinking and saying, what it puts beyond the limits of the rational and the credible.

They go on to assert that hegemony is very rarely openly contested and that when it is, it becomes other than itself (Comaroffs 1991:24). They then draw on Williams' (1977) definition of ideology as "an articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as the worldview of any social grouping." They go on to assert that ideology can manifest itself both explicitly and implicitly:

Borne in explicit manifestos and everyday practices, self-conscious texts and spontaneous images, popular styles and political platforms, this worldview may be more or less internally systematic, more or less assertively coherent in its outward forms.

The significance of these two concepts for the present analysis is that they provide a way of understanding the extent to which conscientization can allow for that which is hegemonic to become ideological. In other words, to what extent does hegemony become unstable and vulnerable when confronted by ideology? The challenge though is to influence the thinking of the subordinate enough to let go of the hegemonic and to ask questions that are ideological. The "letting go," however, does not imply a complete abandonment. Rather, the appeal is made with the acknowledgement that neither of the poles operate as binary opposites, but as points on a continuum so that one is able to qualitatively measure the strength of the

ideology or the strength of the hegemony operational at any given time of the process.

Specifically related, or running parallel, to the hegemonic becoming ideological is the extent to which the unconscious becomes conscious. Again the Comaroffs (1991:29) would assert that neither of the concepts are completely opposed at any time. Although they posit the unconscious as parallel with the hegemonic and the conscious as parallel with the ideological, they do note that the extent to which the unconscious becomes conscious does not necessarily signify the extent to which the hegemonic can become ideological (Comaroffs 1991:29). In other words, simply raising “unmarked practices” to the level of explicit consciousness does not guarantee that they will become ideological.

It is at this point that the issue of power comes into play. Although the concept of power frames their discussions of ideology and hegemony, consciousness and unconsciousness, they also place the analytical category of power on its own continuum parallel to hegemony and ideology, unconsciousness and consciousness. Power also has two poles, non-agentive power on the one hand, and agentive power on the other. Non-agentive power, corresponding to hegemony, “presents, or rather hides itself in the forms of everyday life,” while agentive power, corresponding to ideology is the

(relative) capacity of human beings to shape the actions and perceptions of others by exercising control over the production, circulation, and consumption of signs and objects, over the making of both subjectivities and realities (Comaroffs 1991:22).

Agentive power, like consciousness, depends on human endeavor. All three continuums have a direct relationship with culture which the Comaroffs (1991:21), following Gramsci (1971:349), describe as follows:

An order of values, norms, beliefs, and institutions that, being 'reflected in ...language' and being also profoundly historical, express a 'common perception of the world,' embodied in a 'cultural social unity.'

In my analysis of the Bible studies which follow, I will use the Comaroffs' three continuums, shaped by culture, as a measure of the extent to which the hegemonic can become ideological through the process of conscientization regarding gender, using the critical tools of literary and womanist methodologies. Another reason that I choose to use the continuums as a grid on which to posit my analysis is that they in a way reflect the process of the logic that controls the Bible studies. The explanation of this is clear. The first continuum of the hegemonic and the ideological elucidates my opening assumption that the patriarchy of the Bible and the FGC are hegemonic in that the women accept them as normative<sup>12</sup>. I also assume that the women concur with the patriarchal domination because they believe in both the authority of both the Bible and those in authority in the faith community who interpret the Bible in ways that are oppressive.

The second continuum of the conscious and the unconscious explains my second assumption. Inherent in this assumption is the notion that I, as organic intellectual, can make the women conscious of the way in which they are oppressed by the Biblical text and its interpretations, but also provide ways in which they can resist those oppressions, and possibly ultimately overturn them. This second continuum obviously emphasizes my

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<sup>12</sup> This assumption was clearly confirmed in the Bible studies.

role as organic intellectual. As the Comaroffs (1991:29) point out, “it is also the realm from which emanate the poetics of history, the innovative impulses of the bricoleur and the organic intellectual.”

The third continuum of non-agentive and agentive power corresponds with the final assumption that I make for the Bible studies. That is that once the women have become conscious of their oppression, they learn how to articulate it first ideologically, and then they actually put their ideologies into practice. This last continuum is independent of the organic intellectual. The intellectual’s role is limited to the first two continuums, while the last continuum is dependent entirely on those in the community. This implies that how they choose to act once they become conscious of their oppression, and once they have learned how to ideologically resist or overturn that oppression, is up to them. The extent to which they use “agentive power” to resist oppression depends on them. This last part is key in determining not just gender transformation with regard to the text, but also social transformation as well with regard to the community. All three continuums, though, need to be reflected in the Bible study. In what follows, I demonstrate this.

### ***Bible Study Process***

The first five chapters of this dissertation although influenced by my life interests, particularly focused on my interpretative interests (Fowl 1995:32-34). After writing the five chapters, I had to “unravel” in a sense those pertinent issues which emerged in my interpretative interests which were motivated by my life interests. I then took those pertinent issues and worked with them to formulate the questions for the Bible studies. This is where my conscientization motive becomes most stark as I deliberately formulated the questions to elicit particular responses which would then open up dialogue. Having done this I set out to invite women to the Bible

studies. All the women who were invited were literate, though some of them had not completed their secondary schooling. Although there are women in the Indian community who are illiterate, for the purposes of my research I chose women who were literate, as those who are illiterate are few, and they are mostly over the age of 60. Most of the women chosen were women whom I already knew, while the others were invited by those who had responded positively to the invitation. As stated before, all the women were from the Pentecostal tradition.

I originally envisaged conducting the Bible studies in weekly sessions where I would break up the text into strategic parts for each session. Unfortunately, all the women could not commit to a weekly session that ran for 6 weeks. Instead they opted to come for whole-day Bible study sessions, over two days. The Phoenix group, which comprised mostly women who did not work outside of the home, opted to meet for two consecutive Wednesdays, while the Effingham group who were mostly professional women, opted to meet for two consecutive Saturdays. Again, this was a deliberate choice as I wanted to evaluate the effects of class and education on women's interpretations of the Bible. I chose to meet with them in a venue outside of their churches, as I thought that the women would be freer to participate outside of the church setting.

The Phoenix group consisted of six women, while the Effingham group consisted of seven. I deliberately chose small numbers of women so that our discussions could be more intensive and so that all the women could participate equally in the discussions. Each of the participants were given a folder which contained a program, a form which they had to fill in, the tasks which they had to complete for the Bible studies, a photocopy of a New Revised Standard Version of the book of Esther, and some writing material. The Bible studies took place in structured workshops. Each group was divided into two (by myself as I wanted to ensure that there was a

balance in terms of those who are more out-spoken than others), they were given the same task, they had time and space to talk amongst themselves in these groups first, before reporting back to the plenary session (see Appendix 1 for the program). They had three tasks to complete on each day. On the first day that we met, before Task 1, I asked them all to fill a form which required them to fill in their names (which was optional), their age, occupation, to say whether they had read the book of Esther before, and how many times they had read it (Appendix 2). The final question asked them to say whether they had heard a sermon on the book of Esther before, how many times they had heard the sermon, and what the theme of the sermon was.

This form was also related to Task 1, as both the form and Task 1 were gauges for me (as facilitator) to assess how much they actually knew about the book, and to what extent their interpretations are influenced by the dominant interpretations which they are exposed to at church. As their answers on the forms indicated, although most of them had been Christians for over a decade, and some for most, if not all of their lives, their forms indicated that none of them had ever heard a sermon on the book of Esther more than twice, some even none, though most of them had heard reference being made to her in the context of Mordecai's famous words to her "You have been called for such a time as this."

I had asked each of them to come ready to the Bible study having read the book from start to finish at least once, preferably twice. Once they had filled out their forms, I introduced my dissertation to them, and I told them how the Bible studies fitted into my dissertation as a whole. I also made them aware that I was using the tape recorder for my research and that I would not disclose their identities, even though I would use their comments and their statements. None of the women were uncomfortable with this arrangement, and gave me permission (to even use their names if I

so desired). Having thanked them for their participation, I asked each of them to delineate what they expected to get out of this Bible study. The general feeling was that they were there to “learn.” Those who were present at the Tamar Bible study said that they had learned so much and that “they were hungry for more from the Word of God.” Some who were not present at the Tamar Bible study said that they were eager to learn. One woman from Phoenix, who had not been a part of the Bible study on Tamar, but knew me as a child in the church, commented that she felt so honored in me choosing her, because she felt like her opinions mattered and that, having never been to anything like a conference before, she felt like she (“*a simple woman with little education*”) was being invited to a “conference” as a delegate. This highlighted the importance which this woman attached to the Bible study, and made me question my own positioning as I had deliberately set up the room not to look like a conference venue. The women sat on comfortable lounge chairs, and even worked on the floor when they broke up into groups. My reasoning was that a conference atmosphere set up too academic and (male-stream) an atmosphere, and my experience from going to women’s only conferences is that women work more comfortably in circles rather than in straight rows, outside rather than inside, in little groups rather than big plenary sessions. What I discovered though was that this woman, having never experienced a conference before, wanted to work within the setting of what she thought a conference would look like. I do not think it is because she liked it any better, but because as she said, it made her feel important. I elaborated on this point, because this was my first lesson that I learned from the women.

The reasons which the women provided for being there, also helped me confirm my own positioning as intellectual. Although some of the women had known me since I was a child, they nonetheless expressed a great respect for the fact that I had now attained university education and that I was willing to share my “university knowledge” with them.

Once they all gave their reasons for being there, we opened up the session in prayer (all the Bible studies were always opened with prayer, as both the groups and I take our faith seriously). I then broke them up into two sub-groups, which they stayed in for the rest of the day. I pointed them to the program with the times allocated for each of the tasks. They had to choose a scribe for their sub-group who would report back on what the group had discussed. The scribe's duty was to record on newsprint the thoughts of the sub-group and thereafter put them up on the board, discuss it, and allow the group to add anything that she had left out. The other sub-group would then also put up their newsprint recognizing those points which they had in common with the first sub-group, but focusing on those points which they differed on, or those points which the other sub-group had left out in their discussion. I would then engage them in a discussion of their various interpretations pushing them and probing them to examine their interpretations, making them conscious of the processes involved in their interpretations. In what follows I describe the methodology of the Bible Study more fully.

### ***Bible Study Methodology***

The methodology chosen for the Bible studies corresponded more or less to the method used by the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) namely the Contextual Bible Study method (CBS), the limitations of which were described in the previous chapter, particularly with regard to my conscientization motive. I adapted the CBS method in drafting out the tasks and I also used some questions that Van Wijk-Bos (2001) provides under discussion questions in her book, *Ruth and Esther – Women in Alien Lands*.

Before attempting the Bible study on Esther, I familiarized the women chosen for the Bible studies with this method,<sup>13</sup> by co-facilitating, together with the ISB, a Bible study based on the text of II Samuel 13. The theme of the Bible study was violence against women. Interacting with the women in this way prior to the Bible studies helped me become familiar with the method, and it also helped to create safe spaces for the women participants to freely converse and share. Although the method chosen was similar, the way in which the text was to be divided was problematic. This is because the text of Tamar is short – only part of a chapter, while the book of Esther is much longer and I had to strategically break up the text into specific units. However, I still tried to keep the general focus of the CBS method, because the questions open up the text from a literary perspective. Before, I outline the tasks from the Bible studies, I want to show how the tasks drew on the CBS method and at the same time differed from it. These are the questions which the CBS method asks:

Thematic Questions – In this exercise the plenary is divided into groups where they work on the theme of the text chosen.

Textual Questions – Here the group is given a set of questions. These relate to the literary content and context of the text.

Contextual Questions – the group is required to relate the text to their own context.

Action Plan- The group is required to reflect on whether the Bible studies can contribute towards social transformation in their communities. If they agree that it can, then they will be asked to formulate an action plan to indicate how the liberating elements of the Bible studies can be implemented in their communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately not all the women who attended the Tamar Bible study attended the Bible study on Esther, though a significant number of the women did attend.

West (199b 51-63) explains that the questions are divided into two types. The first and the last questions are meant to evoke “community consciousness,” while the two in the middle are meant to evoke “critical consciousness.” I deviated from this method slightly in that I focused much more on the critical consciousness. Task 1, for example, was meant to immediately draw the group into some measure of critical consciousness because its purpose was to assess the ability of the group to gain critical distance from the text. As I show in the analysis of Task 1 the groups (particularly the male pastors) were surprised to see how little critical distance they are able to practice when reading the Biblical text.

Although focusing on critical consciousness much more, it was necessary through the initial questions in the other tasks, most notably questions 2-4 which remained the same for all the tasks, to ask what West calls “community consciousness” questions. These questions almost always elicit interpretations which the participants have received in the past, and feel safe to acknowledge publicly (West 2001:182). However, I did discover that in some groups this was not always the case, and I was surprised to learn that they were much more critically conscious than I assumed with regard to issues such as culture, for example. However, the critical consciousness is meant to extend to other issues as well, and the questions in, for example, Task 6 were deliberately structured in this way. They were meant to open up discussions on the larger issues such as the role of the Bible as the Word of God, and how that related to the oppression of women.

So, the tasks that I set for the Bible studies, although premised on the principles of the CBS method, went beyond it in terms of my conscientization motive, and also in terms of my literary-womanist analysis of the book of Esther. I now outline all the tasks that were given to the women so that the reader gets an overview of them, and then I discuss and analyze the women’s responses to each of the tasks.

## **Bible Study 1**

### **Task 1**

In your groups summarize the whole story of Esther. Your summary must include all the main characters and a description of what the story is about.

### **Task 2**

1. Read chapter 1: 1-21 aloud in your groups.
2. What is this text about?
3. Who are the main characters in this text?
4. What is the role of each of the characters?
5. What is the function of this passage in relation to the rest of the story of Esther?

### **Task 3**

1. Read chapter 2: 1 – 18 aloud in your groups.
2. Answer questions 2 – 4 of Task 2.
3. Imagine and discuss Esther's feelings when she was selected and placed in the harem.
4. How does physical beauty play a role in terms of female value today?
5. Is beauty a quality that occurs often in the Biblical text? In what contexts is physical beauty mentioned in the Bible?

6. Why did Mordecai tell Esther to hide the fact that she was Jewish?

## **Bible Study 2**

### **Task 4**

1. Read chapter 4: 1-17, chapter 5: 1- 8, and chapter 7: 1-8 aloud in your groups.
2. Answer questions 2-4 of Task 2.
3. Why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman (chapter 3); what is Haman's reaction to Mordecai's refusal? What is the king's reaction to Haman's request? What do these passages tell us about each of the male characters?
4. How do you understand the character of Esther from these passages? Has she changed from the Esther we meet in chapter 2? How?

### **Task 5**

1. Read chapter 8:1-11 and chapter 9:29-10:3.
2. Answer questions 2-4 of Task 2.
3. Discuss the way in which Esther and Mordecai move in and out of the story. Does Esther's role seem to be in the shadow in these last passages of the book? In your opinion, who is the hero of the story? Does your opinion differ from the person whom the text wants to make the hero of the story?
4. Esther asks the king in 9:13 for another day of killing. How do you feel about this? Should Esther have been more merciful?

### **Task 6 and Concluding Questions (Done in Plenary)**

1. In this Bible study we have looked at the book of Esther from a literary perspective. Is it helpful to look at characters in the Bible in the same way that we look at characters in a novel or a film for example?
2. What do you think of the fact that nowhere in this Biblical text is the name of God mentioned? What do you think the role of God has been in the text?
3. What do you think the message of this story is? If you had to prepare a sermon on the book of Esther what would the theme of the sermon be?
4. What is your opinion of the character of Vashti? What is your opinion of the character of Esther? Do you know of women in your community who are like Vashti and Esther. Tell their stories.
5. Do you think that the book of Esther can be used for social transformation? How?
6. What will you do now in response to this Bible study?

The tasks were deliberately very open-ended and were meant to foster discussion in the groups, and they did exactly that.<sup>14</sup> After spending some time in their groups discussing the task, we returned to the plenary session and each of the groups had to report back on the discussion. These were the most important times of the discussion for not only did we discuss the text, but these were the times in which the women shared their stories and told of how the text related to their personal lives. In the analysis which follows,

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that all the groups did not place emphasis on the same questions, and not all the questions were answered. I did not view this as a setback as the questions were simply there to open up discussion.

following West (1999:155) and Haddad and Sibeko (1997:83-92), I also acknowledge that my analysis is significantly shaped by my own interpretative interests. As facilitator of the reading process I presented and channeled many of the questions from literary and womanist perspectives. Like West (1999:155) I also saw the CBS process as an “enabling” process.<sup>15</sup> I now turn my attention to the analysis of the Bible studies.

Before, I do that though, one more comment about the analysis needs to be made. One of the arguments which the women put forth at the end of the Bible studies was that although they felt empowered by the Bible studies, they felt that the people who really needed to see these different ways of interpretation were the men – particularly the male pastors. I was challenged by the women to set up similar Bible study sessions with male pastors in the Pentecostal denomination. I took up the women’s challenge and made numerous phone calls, and sent out letters, to invite pastors to this Bible study. Of the 30 pastors which I invited only 6 responded, while the rest of the pastors all said that they were too busy. Even those that did agree said that they were too busy to sacrifice two whole days for the Bible studies, hence I had to conflate the two Bible study sessions into one, though I allowed for extended time on that day. In the analysis that follows, I will refer to the pastors’ responses in the Bible studies, though it must be noted that it was not my intention to conduct Bible studies with male pastors, and their Bible study session reflect a much more condensed (perhaps rushed) set of ideas than the Bible studies with the women. Nonetheless, their responses were extremely interesting compared to those of the women, and made me realize that a task that lies ahead is also to facilitate Bible studies with male pastors.

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<sup>15</sup> Though perhaps I saw this enabling process in a much stronger sense than West does, given my conscientization motive.

## *Analysis of the Bible Studies*<sup>16</sup>

### **Task 1**

**In your groups summarize the whole story of Esther. Your summary must include all the main characters and a description of what the story is about.**

In this task, I stressed to the group that there was no evaluation or analysis required. I asked them to pretend that they were telling the story to a child and therefore to begin with “Once upon a time.” This exercise was well suited to the textual questions that the CBS method advocates. It was meant to focus on the content of the narrative, rather than on an analysis of its form, context, evaluation or history. In other words, I wanted the group to get familiar with reading the “text as text” before reading the text for evaluation. They had to try to stay as “true” to the text as possible pointing out only those things that were in the text. Further, drawing on Tamez (1991:67) I asked them to gain distance from the text, but asserted that in the process of gaining distance from the text, that they would actually get closer to their own readings of the text, and would be able to see not only why they interpreted the text in that way, but why previous interpreters experienced the text in that way as well. Tamez (1991:67) argues the importance of this first stage in reading:

To counteract myth-laden readings of Biblical texts and to avoid the risk of repeating the interpretations of other readers, I believe in the importance of gaining distance from the text, mainly from those parts that have been frequently read and therefore have

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<sup>16</sup> Although in this chapter I only provide an analysis of the Bible studies and not the full transcripts, I do have in my possession all the Bible studies on tape.

become overly familiar to our ears. When I say ‘gaining distance’ I mean picking up the book and ignoring the interpretations that almost automatically come to mind even before reading the actual text. To distance oneself means to be new to the text (to be a stranger, a first-time visitor to the text), to be amazed by everything, especially by those details that repeated readings have made seem so logical and natural.

In the analysis which I offer below, I gauge to what extent the two groups of women were able to gain distance from the text, by doing a close and careful reading of the text. This task was also meant to gauge how much prior knowledge each of the groups had of the book of Esther before coming to the Bible study itself. For ease of reference we shall call the Phoenix group (P group) and the Effingham group (E group). As pointed out earlier, within these two groups there were two subgroups each, which I will refer to when necessary as such. Where I refer to the male pastors who came for the Bible study I will refer to the group as M group. It should be noted here as well, that the M group only worked in groups for the first two tasks. They preferred to work in plenary.

The P group, in their summary of the story, tried to be as accurate to the text as possible though they did deviate from the text in a few significant ways. The most considerable points at which they differed from the text was that firstly they said that Vashti’s reason for refusing to come before the king was because he was drunk. The text does not provide a reason. Secondly, they said that the king “advertised” the position for a new queen and that all the young women in the kingdom applied for the position. The text does not mention anything about an advertisement, but rather speaks about the “gathering of all the virgins from all the provinces.” Thirdly, they said that Esther (being queen and forgetting where she came from) was embarrassed by Mordecai sitting in the courtyard in sackcloth and ashes and

therefore sent him clothes. The text does not provide a reason for Esther sending out clothes to Mordecai. Fourthly, they said that Esther and all the women had to go through a process of sanctification and purification before they could appear before the king. The text does not mention sanctification and purification, simply “cosmetic treatments.” And finally they also noted, like the E group, that Esther was Mordecai’s niece. The text says that she was Mordecai’s cousin. Another interesting point to note is that this group did not give the summary of the story in sequence. They began their summary with Esther as queen of Persia, and they asserted that she was the main character in the story. Then they mentioned in passing that Esther had become queen because Vashti disobeyed. Then they went back to Mordecai, and eventually told the story in sequence, remembering, unlike the E group, that the denouement of the plot was not reached with the death of Haman.

The E group of women in their summaries followed the instruction very carefully and gave only a summary of the “bare bones” of the narrative. There were nevertheless a few points at which in telling the story they differed from what the text said. The first point at which they differed from what the text said, was that they referred to Mordecai as the uncle of Esther. He was, as pointed out earlier, Esther’s cousin and not her uncle. The second difference was that they saw the denouement of the plot at the point at which Haman was put to death, leaving out the part where the king gives his signet ring to Esther because he cannot revoke the edicts and she then takes action. They were able to tell the story in logical sequence from beginning to end, except for the end, where they thought that the denouement of the plot was reached when Haman was put to death.

From the M group’s responses to this first task, it was clear that they were not as able to gain distance from the text as the women were. In response to this task both sub-groups were not able to give a full summary of the book of Esther. They started off with the main events of the beginning, but were

not able to take the summary to its end. One sub-group was able to go up to chapter 3 and the other chapter 4 in their summaries. The key points that emerged from their summaries was that the name of God did not appear in this book, and that Esther was nonetheless chosen by God to save the people. They also said that when one person refuses to obey the call of God, God will raise up another, even the stones of the earth, or even a poor orphan girl like Esther to fulfill His [sic] will.

The responses from all three of these groups elucidates the extent to which the participants were able to read the text, independent of their own life interests (Fowl 1998:32-34), and independent of the interpretations which they were familiar with. In other words, through this task, I was able to make the groups more aware of the processes of their interpretations and their (in) abilities to read the text with their own biases. All three groups betrayed something of both the hegemonic and the ideological in their summaries, though these operated at different levels. The hegemony of patriarchy was clearly evident in the choice of the P and E groups to see Mordecai as Esther's uncle rather than Esther's cousin. When I pointed out to them that the text actually said that they were cousins, both groups admitted to seeing their relationship in this way because of the dominance that Mordecai had over Esther, as they said was evidenced in the text. The hegemonic hold of the interpretations of the FGC were also clearly evident in P group's choice in viewing the cosmetic treatments as "sanctification." They all commented that they had heard this in sermons and therefore assumed this as the correct interpretation of the text. When I pointed out to them that this was not in the text at all, some expressed shock at how such an interpretation could have been obtained in the first place.

Through Task 1, I was able, as facilitator, to gauge where the participants were with regard to their accommodation of the hegemonic, and the task that lay ahead was to bring to consciousness their internalization of the

hegemonic. At the same time, it must be noted that not all their interpretations can be attributed to the hegemonic domain. For example, with the P group it was clearly an ideological choice, in terms of their class, to assume that Esther was embarrassed for her uncle when she sent him clothes. They indicated that they thought this way because they knew how some people who “develop from rags to riches” forget that they also used to wear rags when they start wearing the garments of the rich. This was an interesting observation, which pointed to the way in which meaning is sometimes uncontrollably (uncontrollably, because the women did try to only give the bare bones of the story as they were instructed to) affected by where we read from, and as stated in the previous chapter the P group were women who belonged to a lower socio-economic group than the E group.

The same point can be made about M group’s choice to seeing Vashti as just a means to an end, the end being part of God’s will. This was clearly an ideological choice. In other words, M group’s inability to simply provide the “bare bones” of the story, instead providing theological interpretations of what the text means for a good sermon, showed that their summary was theologically ideological. M group were not forced to interpret the Bible in this way, they were the ones who upheld the hegemonic system of interpreting the Bible in this way. In other words, their interpretations were obviously motivated by their position as ministers of religion, to always elicit a theological message from the Bible, without considering the effects of the literal text on believers.

The responses to Task 1 helped me see my role more clearly – I had to bring to the conscious what the participants automatically assumed was “logical and natural” in the unconscious. In some cases what was in the unconscious was hegemonic (on the level of patriarchy or theology). In other cases even though their interpretations were ideological, they needed to be made conscious of competing ideologies to their own. In other words

although the P group were ideological in terms of class, they were not conscious of how their class ideologies affected their interpretations. The same was true for the M group. Although they were ideological with regard to their theological interpretations regarding the Bible (as Word of God),<sup>17</sup> they were not conscious (or they chose to ignore) that it was in their best interests to always find a theological meaning because they were ministers of religion, and that other more liberating ideologies might exist. I envisioned that my role therefore was to make the groups conscious of the processes involved in their interpretation, that is, why, how and when they interpret, and the effects of their interpretations on their life contexts. Bearing this task in mind we moved on to Task 2.

## **Task 2**

- 1. Read chapter 1: 1-21 aloud in your groups.**
- 2. What is this text about?**
- 3. Who are the main characters in this text?**
- 4. What is the role of each of the characters?**
- 5. What is the function of this passage in relation to the rest of the story of Esther?**

Task 2 was also a set of textual questions, but it was set in such a way as to both deliberately foster discussion and debate, but at the same time to force the group to gain critical distance. I told the groups that they were free to “analyze” and “psychologize” about the characters and to provide their own opinions as well, but the textual questions were designed to keep on encouraging them to go back to the text. Task 2 was designed to help the participants see that the text had a “voice” (through plot (question 5) and characterization (questions 3 and 4).

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<sup>17</sup> See chapter 7 where I discuss what the Bible as Word of God means to Christian communities, particularly Pentecostal groups.

All the discussions in all the groups centered around the character of Vashti, and when they did focus on the other characters it was in relation to the character of Vashti. It seemed like characterization was the tool with which to open up other forms of literary analysis.

In P group all the members of the group, except one said that Vashti was a bad woman, and that they did not like her character. Some of the typical responses were:

*Against the performance of Esther it is good she got fired.*

*If it wasn't for Esther, I would have liked her, but Esther is obviously the better character.*

*From a cultural point of view we are taught to honor our husbands, even if they are bad. Vashti did not just dishonor her husband in a private place, she dishonored him in a public place and that was bad.*

*Disobedience is bad. It is only when women recognize the man as the head of the home that a lot can be won.*

The one woman who argued for Vashti as a good character said:

*I like Vashti. She is a strong woman and she believed in her own dignity. Esther was simple, like Lady Diana. She did what she had to do. Vashti had her own ideas, and she did what she thought was right for herself.*

It was clear that the majority of the women had either bought into the hegemony of patriarchal culture or the patriarchal nature of the Biblical text, or they were giving me a public transcript, maybe what they thought either I or the other women wanted to hear. So I probed further, wanting them to become conscious of why they were interpreting the text in this way. I asked them to imagine that they were Vashti in South Africa in the year 2002. I asked them if they were placed in a similar situation would they respond to their husband's call to show off their beauty in front of his drunken friends. They all responded without hesitation and almost immediately that they certainly would not. Their immediate response indicated to me that they were not showing off a public transcript, as it would not have been that easy to coax them to let go of it, especially since a public transcript is written under specific conditions where the "author" of the script feels it unsafe to display the hidden transcript.

The fact that the women responded immediately and without hesitation when I probed them with a critical question seems to indicate that they were not afraid to say what they thought.<sup>18</sup> They just had not thought of personalizing the text before, of imagining that they were Vashti. They obviously felt that by siding with Vashti, they would be betraying their alliance with Esther, whom they had said earlier was the main character in the story. (To this group Vashti did not even feature in their summary of the story. They began the summary with Esther). It seemed that this group were operating within the hegemonic space of patriarchy both within the culture and the Bible (as indicated by their assertions that it was not cultural to

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<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this was only in front of me, and perhaps they would not articulate the same views in church or in front of the pastor. Perhaps in front of the pastor or in the church they would still maintain that they would not do what Vashti did. In any event it was clear that they felt this a safe enough environment to actually say that Vashti was not wrong. As an aside, they certainly felt more free to make jokes about issues that they would not otherwise do if there were men present. For example, most of the women did not know what a eunuch was and when I explained what a eunuch was, there were many shared comments and sardonic remarks made (even about pastors) which I am not at liberty to mention here!

disobey one's husband, and not Biblical to disobey one's husband as he is the head of the home). However, coaxing them to contextualize Vashti in terms of their own experiences, enabled them to start the process of making the hegemonic ideological.

My next question probed even further. I asked why they would not appear if their husbands summoned them to display their beauty. Given that this was the group who in Task 1 filled the gap by providing the reason for Vashti's refusal as not wanting to appear because the men were drunk, I thought that this question would push them further to seeing how dangerous an interpretation that sees Vashti as a bad woman might actually be. The answers were telling. Some women expressed fear, because some of the women had experiences with alcoholic husbands, others with alcoholic fathers. They said they knew and understood the very real danger of appearing before drunken men, simply to show off one's beauty. Still others saw contradictions in men's requests. One woman commented that if her husband asked her to appear before his friends to show off her beauty and she did not, then he would be angry.

*On the other hand if he did not ask me to come before his friends and I appeared in shorts and a strappy top, would he not beat me?<sup>19</sup>*

It was clear that the women in saying that they did not like the character of Vashti were simply locating themselves within the hegemonic interpretations of both culture and the Bible which they were used to hearing. Once I gave them the opportunity to look at Vashti through the lenses of their own experiences, they rapidly changed their opinions. I probed even further. I asked them to reflect on why they had been so quick

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<sup>19</sup> It was interesting to note that nobody in the group expressed any dismay at the suggestion that a husband could beat his wife for appearing with shorts and a strappy top.

to dismiss Vashti as a bad character. In doing this I was trying to make them conscious of the processes involved in their interpretations. Their answer was contained in an answer already provided by another participant.

*From a cultural point of view we are taught to honor our husbands, even if they are bad.*

The fact that the women could pinpoint (on their own) the factor that promoted their hegemonic interpretation was a step in the right direction. I had anticipated culture as an influencing factor of interpretation already in my interpretation of the character of Vashti in chapter 5, where I argued that although Indian women in South Africa do not speak their mother tongue they are nevertheless influenced by the mindsets that lie behind the vernacular Proverbs.<sup>20</sup> The women said that they learned by example. Some women pointed out that they had alcoholic fathers and when he called his mother to prepare and bring in the “bites”<sup>21</sup> to him and his friends, she obeyed. They had seen this as a measure of a good wife.

By asking leading questions, such as “what would you do in Vashti’s situation?” and “why would you not appear before drunken men,” and “why were you so quick to dismiss Vashti as a bad character,” I was encouraging the women to make conscious what was in the unconscious. This was the first step. Once they indicated to me that they were able to do this, the next step was to ask them to then offer alternative interpretations of Vashti. Here the women used their imaginations and their contexts to reformulate opinions of Vashti. Some said that maybe she had already done this many

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<sup>20</sup> In chapter 5 I cited one such proverb - “*kallanalum kanavan pullanalum purushan*,” - meaning a husband even if he proves himself worthless as a stone or grass, still has to be honored and worshipped as husband” (Robinson 1999:116). I argued that in the minds of women who have been brought up on these proverbs (both overtly and covertly) Vashti can be seen as a very negative character.

<sup>21</sup> This term refers to traditional Indian snacks that are served to men when they drink.

times before and had been embarrassed, therefore she decided that this was the last time, she would make herself feel this uncomfortable. Others said that because the man was the head of the home, did not mean that he could humiliate his wife. This opened up the discussion for analysis of the characters of the men. A significant analysis that emerged from the group was that the men who advised the king to depose Vashti were insecure of their own “governance” in their homes.

*They [the advisors] thought if the king who is so powerful cannot command the obedience of his wife, imagine what will happen to us, who are not as powerful as the king. It will be petticoat government!*

They argued that the men’s actions were based on their insecurities of their own power. This sparked further reflections on how men and women relate in the present context. One woman said:

*Men always think that they are on top and women are under. But what they do not realize is that women have much influence. Take Adam and Eve. Adam had the Word of God, yet he could not resist Eve’s offer to eat the apple or whatever fruit she was offering him.*

She concluded that women are not necessarily as weak as men think they are. The other women in the group concurred with this conclusion. They asserted that they make men think that they are the heads of the home, because as long as the men believe that they allow the women to make the most important decisions that they need to make.

*Men are the heads, but women are the necks!*

It was clear here that even though this group of women, all of whom had very little education, and had never read or heard about Scott's (1990) theory of the hidden and public transcript, that the theory seemed to operate in their own lives, even if it did not in their interpretations of the Bible!

I then asked the group to focus on the final question of Vashti's relevance to the rest of the story, especially since they were now all in a sense "reading with" the character of Vashti. Did they want to throw her out like the narrative, to make place for Esther? One woman said that it is true that Vashti was needed so that Esther could come into the picture. God had to use Vashti to make a place for Esther. So I asked them if it was God's will for Vashti to be deposed in this way? The participants were clearly not comfortable with this question and said that it was a really difficult question to answer. One participant ventured an answer which the group was clearly not satisfied with. She said that we should understand that sometimes God has a perfect will, and sometimes God has a permissive will.

*Vashti being deposed was not in the perfect will of God but it was in His [sic] permissive will.*

In other words, God did not want this bad incident to happen to Vashti, God just allowed it because it was the only way in which the Jews could be saved. Because I sensed that the group thought that this was an extremely sensitive matter, I did not probe the question further from a theological point of view. Rather I offered them the literary strategy (used in chapter 3, on plot) of seeing Vashti's importance as a crucial part of the entire narrative, not just as an introduction. They seemed much happier with this interpretation than the theological one which they were mooting previously.

P group's initial response to Vashti demonstrated that they were clearly operating from the hegemonic location of culture in their interpretations. Although the women used headship language, they confined this hegemonic move to culture and were not keen on locating their hegemonic interpretations to the Bible immediately. I did not force them to make that connection just yet, even though they themselves had unconsciously brought this up through the use of headship language. However, it was clear that they thought that the Bible wanted them to think that Vashti was bad and that Esther was good, given the fact that almost all of them said that Vashti was bad in comparison to Esther. In fact one even admitted that if Esther was not in the picture she might have liked Vashti. It was clear that the ideology of the Biblical text which claimed that the woman who replaced Vashti would be "better than she" (1:19) had an influence on their interpretations. Added to this was the notion that this was what Indian culture required them to think. One woman retrospectively commented:

*Maybe if we were white women we would have thought differently.*

What was interesting to note was that once they were able to bring to consciousness the motivations behind their interpretations, namely culture, it was not difficult for them to take the next step by making their interpretations more ideological.<sup>22</sup> They then looked at the text through the lenses of their own experiences and were able to come up with much more liberating views of the character of Vashti.

E group's interpretation of the character of Vashti was remarkably different to the interpretations offered by P group. All of them thought that Vashti

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<sup>22</sup> They were not so keen to do the same for the Biblical text at this stage, and I sensed that they were not ready to tackle that issue yet.

was a strong woman, and they all saw in her characteristics to be admired. Some of their typical responses were:

*Vashti's integrity was more important to her than beauty.*

*She is a role model. She teaches women not to take abuse.*

*She had a strong mind, for despite the fact that she knew that the consequences of her actions would be serious, she went ahead and did what she thought was right.*

*She stood her ground. If it was not for the banquet which she had with the women, we could almost see her locked up in a room all by herself while the king had his own party.*

They further imagined that Vashti would have been chosen to become queen in the same way that Esther was chosen – simply for her beauty. Vashti knew that when the king was summoning her to appear it was not for her mind, but her body. In their words, she would have said,

*I am sick and tired of being treated like an object and appreciated only for my body and not my mind.*

She wanted to be more than a “trophy.” They even asserted that Vashti herself was a “party type” given that she was having her own banquet for the women, and unlike traditional Indian women they did not think that this was necessarily a bad thing.

These interpretations were intriguing to me, given that I was assuming that, like the P group, they would either be influenced by the patriarchal hegemony of the text, or by the patriarchal hegemony of the Indian culture.

Their interpretations were clearly not influenced by either of these. In fact I would argue that in terms of the Comaroffs' continuum of hegemony and ideology, their interpretations would have been on the top end of the ideological side. Nevertheless, I probed why their interpretations were so different, by informing them of the other group's initial conclusions and how when P group were made conscious of their hegemonic interpretations that they attributed it to culture. My question to this group was why did culture not affect their interpretations? The overwhelming answer from the group was that they had transformed culture. They spoke at length about how this was made possible. Most of them said that they had become empowered through education, others said through the changes in the country. Still others attributed it to the fact that they were now economically independent. They said that had they not been, they would not so easily endorse Vashti's actions. They knew that if they experienced that kind of abuse that they would leave because they could take care of themselves and their children financially. They said that in the past, women were given in arranged marriages and like Esther in the harem did not have much choice in the matter. One woman related how she knew of a friend whose father said he will "chop" her up, if she did not marry the man which they had chosen for her. This group were very conscious of why they had made the interpretations which they did.

My next question was the final one asked in the task. What is this story's relation to the rest of the text? The group were not as quick to answer this question as they were to answer my question on culture, indicated above. It seemed like they were reluctant to say that Vashti was only there so that she could be deposed to make place for Esther. They were reluctant to let go of Vashti that easily. There was a long silence, before someone said that even if Vashti was not there God would have made another plan to make Esther queen. Another, following up on this said that maybe Vashti was not equipped to save the Jews, as she might also have been Persian. Therefore,

the role had to go to Esther. A third equated it to the problem of Judas in the crucifixion of Jesus. Did Judas behave that way out of his own will, or was he just a part of God's plan? It seemed on this question that their interpretations lay somewhere in the middle of the continuum between the hegemonic and the ideological. They were not too quick to give up on the theological hegemony here, but they also clearly did not want to give up on the ideological either. I probed further. I gave them the explanation that was offered in P group, of God's perfect will and God's permissive will, and asked if this was a better way of answering the question. Again they thought that this was a difficult question. They admitted that it was difficult because this was not a novel, it was the Bible, hence the Word of God. I then offered them the literary interpretation that although Vashti's story might seem unimportant in terms of the way the plot is worked out (chapter 3 on plot), and in terms of us understanding the way in which the ideology in the text works with regard to gender and ethnicity (chapter 2 on ideology), Vashti's story is important to the rest of the text. They liked this interpretation as it seemed not to force them to "spiritualize" Vashti's role, neither to write Vashti off as they liked her character so much, but rather to see her story as a necessary part of the text.

From E group's initial responses it certainly seemed like this group did not need any "conscientization." This was because they did not side with either textual hegemony or the hegemony of culture. However, implicit in the difficulty expressed in answering the question of Vashti's relevance to the rest of the story was uneasiness about the questioning of God's will for Vashti. Although they aligned themselves with her character and read with her, they were not willing to "carry" her through the rest of the text, because they felt that this would be questioning God's will (which they obviously thought was to have Esther as queen instead of Vashti). I have argued throughout this dissertation that womanist and feminist hermeneutists should always take cognizance of the importance of the Bible

to women in faith communities, that their perception of the Bible as the Word of God directly affects their capacities for interpretation. The E group's reaction to the last question of the text was a clear demonstration of this. It is at this point that Biblical scholars who are also activist-intellectuals have to take Patte's and Grenholm's (2000:1-54) argument concerning Biblical studies as Scriptural criticism seriously. Although I have some reservations about certain aspects of Patte's and Grenholm's thesis concerning the tri-polar model, I do agree with their fundamental argument that when we look at what we do as Scriptural criticism it emphasizes the character of the Bible as a religious text. They also argue for readings of Biblical scholars from within a religious tradition (emic) rather than outside it (etic).<sup>23</sup> In my interactions with the women it was clear that in order for me to offer any resources for transformation, I had to operate within the framework of the Bible as the Word of God. Despite having grown up in the Pentecostal tradition, presently I have a particular understanding (obviously inspired by my academic work) of what this means. However, I had to go back, as it were, and locate myself within their framework of understanding, in order to make my "conscientization" effective. In other words, I knew that the women were not going to easily abandon Scripture, and given my personal relationship to Scripture I did not think that they needed to. So I offered them particular strategies, such as the literary reading of Vashti's importance to the plot, as a way in which to read the Bible for liberation without having to let go of its significance to them as the Word of God. Like with the P group they were much more comfortable with this mode of reading than they were with questioning the Bible as the Word of God, but it should be noted that as the Bible study proceeded to the end the women themselves began asking questions that nuanced their perceptions of the Bible as the Word of God. We shall deal with this later.

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<sup>23</sup> See Brett (1996:3-22) for further explication on these terms and their usage.

The M group's response to this first task was extremely rushed and limited because of time. This was unfortunate as I had to collate two Bible studies into one day, and the fact that most of the pastors had arrived almost an hour later than the scheduled time simply exacerbated the situation. So we had to go through this first task quite rapidly in order to get on schedule for the rest of the day. Nonetheless, the pastors in their reading of the first chapter also focused on the character of Vashti. Some argued that it was admirable of her to refuse to "dance" before drunken men as this was not "comely" behavior for any woman, and that the king's request was unreasonable.

When I pointed out that he was not asking for her to dance but only to appear before the drunken men, debates arose concerning the incident. Some argued that it would have then not been dangerous to appear as they were only asking to see her beauty and they did not see anything wrong in that. Others argued that it was dangerous as all the men were drunk. Others still indicated that the phrase "merry with wine" did not exactly mean that the men were drunk, and that we were judging the king and his party companions too harshly. They then rationalized their interpretations with the theological answer that irrespective of what we thought about the character of Vashti that she was just a part of God's greater plan which was to make Esther queen so that she could save her people. When presented with the same strategies for reading the character of Vashti in terms of plot and characterization, not all were entirely convinced of the argument. It was clear that their interpretations were governed by their ideological theological interpretations, and it was difficult making them conscious of this because it seemed that they could not let go of the "details that repeated readings have made seem so logical and natural" (Tamez 1995:67) that in a way it seemed like I was debating with God! I decided, given our time constraints, not to probe the argument anymore, and to link the gender conflict with the ethnic conflict in later discussions.

### **Task 3**

- 1. Read chapter 2: 1 – 18 aloud in your groups.**
- 2. Answer questions 2 – 4 of Task 2.**
- 3. Imagine and discuss Esther's feelings when she was selected and placed in the harem.**
- 4. How does physical beauty play a role in terms of female value today?**
- 5. Is beauty a quality that occurs often in the Biblical text? In what contexts is physical beauty mentioned in the Bible?**
- 6. Why did Mordecai tell Esther to hide the fact that she was Jewish?**

This task was constructed specifically to encourage the participants to read this segment of the text as a “text of terror.” However, I used beauty standards as a way into the subject of the rape of the virgins. All the groups had a few common responses to some of the texts. In reflecting on the roles of the characters all the groups said that Mordecai was Esther's uncle, instead of cousin, even though we had already discussed this in our reflections on Task 1. In delineating the characters in this segment of the narrative, all the groups mentioned the main characters as Esther, the king, the servants, Mordecai, and the two eunuchs Shaasgaz and Hegai. All of them omitted the virgins in their enumerations of the characters. None of them saw or described the process of the choosing of the new queen. They all saw it as a beauty pageant, and this was a fact that was taken for granted in their interpretations.

P group made some interesting observations about the characters of the king and Esther. They said that in this passage it was clear the king was once again taking advice, this time not just from the advisors but from his

servants. They also noticed that obedience was a trait that characterized Esther. She was obedient to Mordecai, to Hegai and to the king. A further observation was made regarding physical beauty. They said that most times physical beauty is spoken about with regard to females in Biblical narrative, but when it is, “usually sin follows.” One sub-group said that Esther was excited to be chosen and placed in the harem. Another sub-group commented that she was probably scared. They all saw Esther’s rise to queen-ship as an act of God, nevertheless.

Given that my goal was to conscientize the women into seeing how the patriarchal nature of the Bible worked, I wanted to encourage them to pay more attention to the process of the choosing of the new queen. For P group it took over half an hour of continuous probing questions, such as “what did the cosmetic treatments involve? and “was this just lipstick and eyeliner?” before they could see that the cosmetic treatments that the women were receiving were more than for just a beauty parade. Eventually they commented that:

[These women were receiving] *bodily treatments, equivalent to modern day aromatherapy and massage. These were not just cosmetics such as lipstick and eyeliner.*

Having made that connection I then asked them to read 2:12-14. One person read it out loud and then the group just sat in silence. They were shocked to read that every night a woman was sent in to the king and when she returned she went to the harem of the concubines. They were even more shocked to learn that this process continued for three years before the king decided which of the virgins he wanted for a new queen. Nobody debated what the implications of these verses were. They were shocked and some of the women even expressed disgust that the women were now “used commodities,” after their one night with the king. However, their shock was

clearly not enough to prevent them from rationalizing this act. One woman in the group pointed again to the fact that this was God's permissive will coming into play again.

*God is omnipotent and omniscient. God knew that Esther had to go through this process in order that she might become queen. He [sic] knew that the ultimate victory would be her's as the Jews would be saved through her.*<sup>24</sup>

From my experience with Pentecostal women this would be enough of a rationalization for the women to respond with a loud "Amen!" as they would rationalize even those things that seemed unacceptable, with "It must be the will of the Lord." I knew that the group were on their way to a process of conscientization when this explanation did not seem good enough anymore. They were silent.

Their silence indicated that they were probably caught in the middle of the continuum between the hegemonic and the ideological. But there was something still needed to get them to the ideological. I decided to deal with this through the standards of beauty question. I asked them, "What are the standards of beauty set for women that men never have to aspire to?" I was relating this to the idea that all the virgins in the harem had to have cosmetic treatments for a whole year so that they could please the king. They had much to say about this again. Some of them commented that men could be fat and have "pot bellies" and this was not considered offensive, but when women were fat, they were told that they did not take care of themselves. Others said that men could get away with committing adultery, but women were judged as prostitutes, if they did the same. It was as if men, by their very natures, were inclined to do these things.

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<sup>24</sup> This statement concurs with Mosala (1992) and Wyler's (1995) arguments that Esther is only emancipated as a Jew, not as a woman. In other words, she sacrifices the gender struggle on the altar of the national one.

Looking at the way in which roles seemed “naturalized” even when they were not, provided a good way to investigate the Biblical text for ways in which some incidents are made to seem natural or logical, without any judgment being passed on the action. I then asked the group to reflect on why the fact that the virgins were all being raped by the king every night did not stand out for them in the text. I also asked them to reflect on why it was that none of them had pointed to the virgins as characters in the text. Although I suspected it was because they were using the classic plot principle, reading *teleologically*, that is for the end, and the end is the desired outcome of Esther becoming queen, and it did not matter how the text achieved this end. Textual hegemony then clearly played a role here. Further it was the obvious perception again of the Bible as the Word of God, and the notion that God always has a plan that prevented the women from seeing the horror in the process of the choosing of the new queen, as was indicated by one of the women.

However the women themselves pointed out that they were cheering for Esther because they identified with her as an orphan and as a Jew. In other words, the women were so busy supporting Esther in rising from “rags to riches,” that they had neglected to see the process that was enabling her to get to the riches. From a group that was reading from a very particular lower socio-economic background, and from a group that were particularly marginalized as Indians, their neglect to see the process was almost understandable. However, given that when I pointed this out to them, that they were able to recognize or bring to consciousness this part of their hegemonic interpretations, I thought that I should also provide them with another source of hegemony – namely textual hegemony.

Again I deliberately left questions of the Bible’s authority as Word of God to the end, and chose to rather use literary criticism to explain how they

missed such a crucial part of the text, as women readers. The part of the segment that describes the king's "liaisons" with the women seems to inscribe rape into the text, but at the same time to erase it by focusing the reader's attention on the "glorious" occasion of Esther being chosen as queen. As Higgins and Silver (1991:2) point out:

Analyses of specific texts, when read through and against each other, illustrate a number of profoundly disturbing patterns. Not the least of these is an obsessive inscription – and an obsessive erasure – of sexual violence against women (and against those placed by society in the position of 'woman'). The striking repetition of inscription and erasure raises the question not only of why this trope recurs, but even more, of what it means and who benefits. How is it that in spite of (or perhaps because) of their erasure, rape and sexual violence have been so ingrained and rationalized through their representations as to appear 'natural' and inevitable to women as to men? Feminist modes of 'reading' rape and its cultural inscriptions help identify and demystify the multiple manifestations, displacements, and transformations of what amounts to an insidious cultural myth. In the process, they show how feminist critique can challenge the representations that continue to hurt women both in the courts and on the streets.

Higgins' and Silver's points above raised a number of issues which I then raised with all three groups given that none of them had paid much attention to the fact that this was a "text of terror." I did this through a number of ways which I outline below. The first point that they raise is that the way in which rape is presented makes it seem almost natural. I pointed out to the groups that this is clearly so in the book of Esther, as the virgins who the king has sex with are categorized according to the euphemistic adjective "delight" – that is the girl that "delighted" him was asked to

return. The second way in which this rape is represented so as to make it appear natural is in the amount of time that is spent on describing the process, before it is “erased.” Interestingly enough I did not pick this up myself in the chapter on narrative time, but the women pointed out to me, that they did not spend much time on the process because only two verses were used to describe it before the text moved on to the main event – the choosing and crowning of Esther as queen. The third point that the authors raise is that unless one reads the text with a feminist critique in mind, it is difficult to uncover the masked references to sexual violence. I pointed out to the groups how their particular locations and experiences affected, for example, their interpretation of the character of Vashti, and that unless we read with a particular liberation hermeneutic in mind, we perpetuate the violence. Related to the third point, the fourth and most important point was that unless we read these texts and expose them they will continue to hurt women in the courts and the street and I would argue the church as well. By emphasizing to the women how not just the cultural but the patriarchal hegemonies of the Bible affected their interpretations the women became more conscious of how they had been shaped by cultural and patriarchal hegemonies.

This then led to their interpretations becoming more ideological. Some of them related the scene where Esther and the virgins are taken to the king to the practice of arranged marriages in the Indian culture. They began to read with the virgins, by re-inscribing them into the text and with Esther. They imagined that as dreadful as it was for young virgins in the Indian community to be taken to their husbands whom they had to sleep with even though they were meeting them for the first time, it must have been the same for the virgins and Esther. They also reflected that as an orphan and an exile Esther would have been terrified and vigilant not to offend anyone.

The responses from the P group demonstrated a number of important points. The first was that they were reading from their class and race perspectives, more than a gender perspective, given that they were focusing on Esther's "rags to riches" story rather than on how she got to the top. This demonstrates that in terms of race and class, these women were clearly ideological in their interpretations. Secondly, once they were able to see that the patriarchal hegemony of the text also served to "erase" the "text of terror" image from their minds, replacing it with the race and class ideology, they themselves were able to assert the ideology of gender and to re-inscribe rape into the text. The final point, and one that is crucial to Pentecostal women, is God's role in all of this. This required me to focus on theological hegemony and again as facilitator, I chose to leave this for a discussion in the end.

The E group, although in their summaries of the segment they also overlooked the rape(s) implication in the text, once they were made conscious of it did not take as long as the P group to grasp the significance of it. They expressed absolute shock at discovering both the rape(s) and that the king took three whole years to make his decision. They could not account for why they had overlooked this crucial part of the text, but they were satisfied with the explanation that the specific literary techniques of plot, narrative time, ideology and characterization (or lack of it as in the case of the virgins) all contributed to their neglect.

Once the use of the literary-critical tools made them conscious of the way in which their neglect actually colluded with the patriarchal ideology of the Biblical text, they found their own ways of deconstructing the narrative to not just expose the rape, but also to find liberating ways of looking at the character of Esther. They focused on the fact that Esther did not have a choice – that she was "taken" to the harem by her uncle and the king's men. They further revised their previous opinions that Esther must have

been excited when chosen to go to the harem and rather asserted that it must have been a daunting experience. This group also related Esther's experience to the tradition of arranged marriages. They further reflected on the fact that Esther did not take anything extra with her to the king's palace, except what Hegai advised. They saw in this a silent defiance on the part of Esther – that is that she was not a willing or consenting participant in the king's game, but that she had no choice in the matter. Esther's ability to win the king over, they argued, did not lie in her sexual abilities, but the fact that she was a nice person as is indicated by 2:9 and 2:15, which shows her as winning the favor of the eunuch and the favor of all who met her.

From these interpretations, it was clear that these women only needed me to provide them with the critical tools of interpretation. Once I had given them the womanist and the literary tools they were able to read from what I would almost describe as a “womanist” perspective, even though I am sure that none of them would approve of such a labeling. They took the process beyond characterization into contextualization with the question on beauty standards. They reflected not just on standards of beauty that are set up for women, but almost “natural” expectations that women should be in charge of child-care and domestic duties as well. As professional women some told their stories of how supportive their husbands were in this regard, by breaking with conventional expectations of them as women, while others still reflected on the lack of male support in this regard as they still felt coerced by cultural arguments concerning the place of women. This group needed help making the unconscious conscious, but once that process was complete, they were able to almost completely transform patriarchal hegemony into the ideological.

The M group also ignored those parts of the text that focused on the process leading up to the king's choice of Esther as queen, and focused almost exclusively on the coronation of Esther as queen and the hidden hand of

God in her becoming queen. Trying to make them conscious of their neglect proved to be a much more difficult task than it was with the women. Their reluctance to read this segment as rape was clearly located in their characterizations of the king. These were some of the descriptions of the character of the king which the pastors offered:

*He was capable of loving because the text says that he loved Esther.*

*He was capable of making good choices as he chose the best woman.*

*He was a good man.*

I decided to use the key, namely characterization, which they had provided as an entry point into the text. I requested that we re-read the text together as a group to test their descriptions of the character of the king as loving and good. After reading that the king had spent a night with each of the virgins, there ensued a debate as to whether or not the king had slept with the virgins. All the pastors except two argued that the king did not sleep with the virgins. They further argued that spending a night does not necessarily imply that he had slept with them. One pastor suggested that he might even have been “praying” with the virgins. Another further argued:

*Even if he did sleep with them, surely you have to give him more credit than that that was his only criteria for choosing a bride. Let's face it sex only takes five to ten minutes. He could have been spending the rest of the night getting to know their personalities!*

This suggestion was met with much laughter from the whole group. Then another pastor suggested that even though the other virgins slept with the

king, Esther was different and she did not. His argument was based on the king's decision to choose her for a wife. He argued that the king saw that Esther was different in that she was not a "loose woman" like all the other virgins. His definition of "loose" was a sexually promiscuous woman. He could not explain how a virgin could be considered "loose" except to argue that they could have refused to have sex with the king, the way in which Esther had refused. Unlike the E group who saw Esther's refusal to take extra items in with her as a reflection of her silent defiance against what was being done, this pastor saw it as a sign that she refused to have sex with the king and it was her "decency" and "morality" that won over the king.

It was clear that this pastor was sharing,

the well documented bias of rape law where representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men's fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women's bodies (Higgins and Silver 1991:2).

The one pastor who did not agree with these interpretations retorted:

*Let's face it, this was a king who thought with his 'pants down!'  
If he could banish a woman for not appearing [before him], what  
would he do to a woman who refused to have sex with him?*

All my efforts, including contextualizing the debate, did not succeed in convincing the pastors that this was a "text of terror." However, this statement by a fellow pastor seemed to have made an impact on them and they conceded that the king was not as noble as they might have thought.

On the question of the standards that were expected of women, the pastors also conceded that there were standards expected of women that were not expected of men, not just in terms of beauty but in terms of societal expectations too. One pastor actually saw the way in which Proverbs 31 was used to preach about the “ideal” woman, whom he claimed was no more than a slave, as contributing to this problem. Although the other pastors did not disagree with this, they also argued that the women themselves had the opportunity to change these things by empowering themselves.

From the pastors’ interpretations above it was clear that they were not willing to let go of their ideological position that easily. I submit that their interpretations were ideological because the crucial dimensions of the hegemonic patriarchal culture and theology are in their interests to maintain. In other words, they were consciously maintaining the hegemony of patriarchal culture and patriarchal theology. What I was trying to do was to present them with other ideologies, such as the womanist ideology, and to see if they would be able to transform their own ideologies<sup>25</sup> when confronted with a more ethical ideology.<sup>26</sup>

However, this group was not willing to abandon their patriarchal ideology no matter how much of evidence I provided to the contrary. I would suggest that this had more to do with my identity than anything else. I am significantly younger than the majority of the group, and of course I am a woman. It just took one statement from a fellow pastor to coax them into changing their minds. In this sense the hegemonic walls that they put up

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<sup>25</sup> Recall my use of Michele Barret’s use of ideology in chapter 2: “Ideology is a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed.”

<sup>26</sup> Recall my use of Emmanuel Levinas’s statement in chapter 2: “To say that all readings of a text are ideological is to insist that the act of reading is fundamentally ethical.”

were almost impenetrable, hence I was not even able to encourage them in terms of the ethical issues involved, let alone convince them to see the terror of the text. Most times they saw it as a laughable matter. Although they conceded in the end, I still had a strong sense that this was only a public transcript on most of their parts, and that their patriarchal ideologies still remained intact.

#### **Task 4**

- 1. Read chapter 4: 1-17, chapter 5: 1- 8, and chapter 7: 1-8 aloud in your groups.**
- 2. Answer questions 2-4 of Task 2.**
- 3. Why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman (chapter 3); what is Haman's reaction to Mordecai's refusal? What is the king's reaction to Haman's request? What do these passages tell us about each of the male characters?**
- 4. How do you understand the character of Esther from these passages? Has she changed from the Esther we meet in chapter 2? How?**

Task 4 had a combination of functions. It was meant to foster discussion on the male characters in particular, but it was also meant to chart the development of Esther's character. In this analysis I will discuss all the groups responses collectively as they did not differ that much from each other. I will signal when one group thought differently from the other.

The discussions in all the groups began with the decree against the Jews and what a terrible catastrophe this was. To make them conscious of how the hegemony of patriarchy in the Biblical text sometimes "naturalizes" gender oppression, while simultaneously condemns ethnic oppression, I posed the question of why when the decree against the women was

proclaimed it was not thought of in such catastrophic terms, since it reflected the same arbitrary power that the king possessed. All the groups, notably the M group, indicated that they only became aware of the seriousness of the king's abuse of power in chapter 3. In chapter 1, when the issue of the king's abuse of power was related to gender, they conceded that it was almost a laughable matter. Wanting to make them conscious of the factors which influenced their interpretations in this way, I probed further as to why the matter was considered laughable. They pointed out that the text presented the gender conflict in this way (recognizing textual hegemony) and the women pointed out that even in the community matters relating to women are always told in jest (recognizing cultural hegemony).

Having established the factors undergirding their interpretation of the edict against the Jews, I then probed them further on the reasons behind Mordecai's refusal. All the groups although making the inter-textual link between the ancient enmity between the Jews and the Amelakites, felt that Mordecai should have bowed to Haman, because what was required was not worship but obeisance. I probed further (using the strategies developed in chapter 5 for reading the characters) by linking the male characters to the system of honor and shame. All the groups were convinced that the main male characters in the book were obsessed with honor. They said that Mordecai's honor was at stake, therefore he did not bow to Haman, Haman's honor was at stake therefore he asked the king to pass a decree to kill all the Jews, and the king's honor was at stake, because Haman told him that Mordecai was refusing to bow down to him, therefore he agreed with Haman's suggestion to annihilate the Jews. By recognizing the "tripartite" link of honor and power with the male characters, all the groups suddenly developed an appreciation for the female characters much more. This was even true of the M group as will be seen in their analysis of the character development of Esther.

One pastor who responded to the question of Esther's character development said:

*We do not see Esther the poor little orphan girl taking instructions anymore. She now gives instructions.*

The women also traced Esther's development from passivity to activity. By referring the groups to the way in which narrative time is used in the text, that is the frequency with which certain phrases are used (such as Esther's apparently deferent and subservient language), all the groups acknowledged that Esther had good strategies. However, some men from the M group questioned whether she just did not feel inadequate. They conceded however, that the strategy was needed. Although at the time of the Bible study I endorsed Esther's strategies, in the writing up of this analysis I cannot help but feel ambivalent about this. On the one hand, the women in the Bible studies all knew and understood why strategies were needed in the first place. On the other hand, I felt that maybe I should have reflected a bit more on the gender struggle that was lost at the expense of the national struggle. At the same time reading as a womanist, I understand the needs of those who are kept in subjection to liberate all aspects of their lives, not just the gendered ones. It is also true to say that the gender battle was not entirely lost, for as I argued throughout the dissertation, the instability of the power of the males raises the question of who really had power in this narrative? Does power have always to be overt?

The responses from all the groups were very important to note in this task. It seemed like they had become more comfortable with using the tools of womanism and literary criticism with little help from myself. In other words, my literary-type questions in the first three tasks seemed to have substantially helped them to start making the connections themselves. In fact most of their interpretations hinged more on the side of the ideological

than the hegemonic, with regard to gender, and they did not need as much “conscientizing” for this task as they had needed for the previous ones. This means that they themselves were beginning to interpret self-consciously. This was an interesting change particularly for the M group who had steadfastly hung on to their patriarchal ideologies in the previous task. They were indicating in this task, through their responses, that something had changed.

### **Task 5**

- 1. Read chapter 8:1-11 and chapter 9:29-10:3.**
- 2. Answer questions 2-4 of Task 2.**
- 3. Discuss the way in which Esther and Mordecai move in and out of the story. Does Esther’s role seem to be in the shadow in these last passages of the book? In your opinion, who is the hero of the story? Does your opinion differ from the person whom the text wants to make the hero of the story?**
- 4. Esther asks the king in 9:13 for another day of killing. How do you feel about this? Should Esther have been more merciful?**

### **Task 6 and Concluding Questions (Done in Plenary)**

- 1. In this Bible study we have looked at the book of Esther from a literary perspective. Is it helpful to look at characters in the Bible in the same way that we look at characters in a novel or a film for example?**
- 2. What do you think of the fact that nowhere in this Biblical text is the name of God mentioned? What do you think the role of God has been in the text?**

- 3. What do you think the message of this story is? If you had to prepare a sermon on the book of Esther what would the theme of the sermon be?**
- 4. What is your opinion of the character of Vashti? What is your opinion of the character of Esther? Do you know of women in your community who are like Vashti and Esther. Tell their stories.**
- 5. Do you think that the book of Esther can be used for social transformation? How?**
- 6. What will you do now in response to this Bible study?**

Although Task 5 and Task 6 were not combined, the discussions from the questions in Task 5 seemed to lead onto the discussions that were intended for Task 6, namely the question of gender and social transformation and the Bible as the Word of God. So, in my analysis, I will allow the one discussion to flow into the other. Although this was not the intention of the questions of Task 5, the fact that the groups were already making the move to the questions in Task 6 meant that they were seeing the larger significance of these kinds of explorations (namely womanist and literary) of the Biblical text. It should also be noted that in all the groups, the discussion went beyond the focus of the questions, which was the intention of these questions in the first place.

P Group was at first divided as to who the real hero of the story was. On the one hand they argued that Mordecai was the driving force behind all of Esther's actions. Others countered this argument by asserting that all Mordecai did was tell Esther to go and plead with the king. They argued, however, that if she did as he asked they would have never had success. Esther used strategy to get what she wanted. They further argued that had it

not been for Mordecai's obsession with his own honor, the Jews would not have been in the predicament which they were in, in the first place.

The other sub-group was still not convinced. They were reacting this way after they had read 10:1-3, which seems to indicate that Mordecai is the hero. Wanting to make them conscious of textual hegemony, I then posed the question: "What does your gut feeling tell you about who the hero of the story is." One woman's response, which the rest of the sub-group agreed with, was:

*Our gut feeling tells us it is Esther, but the Bible shows us that Mordecai is the hero.*

I probed with a further question: "Can you list what evidence the text provides to suggest that Mordecai is the hero, and what evidence the text provides to support the argument that Esther was the hero." For Mordecai they could only cite one incident which could plausibly render him heroic – that is his "activism" outside the palace gate in sackcloth and ashes. They conceded that there was no other textual evidence to suggest any heroic action on Mordecai's part. For the argument of Esther as hero, they were able to list at least 3 character traits that suggested that she was the hero. The first was the big risk that she took in entering the king's presence unsummoned. The second was that she was extremely strategic in her use of language and her beauty to persuade the king. The final was that she was intelligent enough to recognize that the decree was not abolished with the killing of Haman, and that there needed to be a further plan.

The group realized that all Esther's actions show her to be the hero, yet they could not reconcile this to the fact that the Bible seemed to give all the praise to Mordecai. 10:1-3 reads:

1. King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea.
2. All the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?
3. For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants.

Seeing how the Bible was clearly in conflict with what they thought, and wanting to probe them further on the issue of the hegemonic hold of Biblical authority, I probed further and asked why they were so afraid to say that Esther was the hero even if their gut feelings told them that she was. The following were their responses:

*I am afraid to say that she is the hero, because we know that the Bible is inspired, and this is taken for granted by everybody, therefore we had to accept.*

Another said:

*There are a lot of things which we are not happy with in the Bible, but we know that God's word is truth so we have to go with it.*

The probing questions had enabled the group to bring to consciousness the reasons that they felt that they could not read against the grain of the text – namely that it was the Word of God. Now that they were able to reach that step, the next step was to try and make them bring the hegemonic to the

ideological, in terms of Biblical authority. So my next question was: "Will you now just accept that the Bible as the Word of God says that Mordecai is the hero, and deny your gut feeling that tells you something to the contrary?" Some women then came up with some creative ideas as to how to deal with this dilemma. One woman suggested that chapter 10 is not even a part of the Bible therefore it is not the Word of God. She was arguing, in other words, that chapter 10 is merely a postscript and therefore a later addition that does not belong to the text. I am not sure if she knew it, but she was using a historical critical method in her interpretation of the text in this way. The other women were not comfortable with this and responded that even if chapter 10 was just part of a postscript, the fact remains that it is still a part of the Bible. This woman then responded that the Bible must be recognized for what it is – a compilation of different subjects, history, geography, poetry, literature, God's word, man's word etc. This was man's word and a part of historical information, she argued. The women were still not too happy with that suggestion.

Another woman then offered a solution which was more acceptable to the women. She maintained that the text could be countered with the text itself. Although she did not realize it she had learned how to use the text to deconstruct itself. She argued that if we were to revisit the evidence that the text provides concerning Esther's action,

*she will win the prize of hero hands-down.*

By accepting this interpretation over and against the other historical critical interpretation (which is perfectly valid to a scholar) the women clearly made a choice here for literary criticism as a tool for liberating interpretation as opposed to historical critical criticism which required them

to step outside of the location of the text as Word of God.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, they all admitted that the ending of the book was clearly influenced by a patriarchal hand. This recognition opened up the discussion to the whole notion of what the Bible as Word of God meant.

Here the women were very clear on their arguments.

*The Bible is the inspired Word of God, and it says in Revelation that not a word should be added neither should a word be taken away.*

All the women were of this opinion. This was another case where it was clear that the hegemonic hold that the text as “Word of God” had over them, was not one that could easily be challenged with an appeal to a historical critique of the verse from Revelation which they had just quoted. I opted to use other tools of conscientization which remained within the confines of what was acceptable to the women. I opted to use text to counter text. I suggested that Revelation 14:1-5 also speaks of the fact that only 144 000 men, those who have not defiled themselves with women, will be redeemed. This then led them to start pointing out that the Bible is also contradictory on many other issues too. For example they said that Paul said that women should be silent in the church and yet he also said that in the kingdom of God, there is neither male nor female. Reflected in this statement was a clear indication that the women were making their way toward the ideological in terms of how they viewed the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. They were admitting that the Bible does not speak in one authoritative voice only, and that was a signal that they were finding new ways of looking at the Bible.

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<sup>27</sup> Even with Esther’s request for a second day of killing, they said that she was justified, because she was simply reacting to her own oppression.

Because time had run out, I left them with the possibility that the Bible may speak with more than one voice, and then moved on to the final part of the Bible study where I asked them what they would now do in response to the Bible study. (Unfortunately, we had to leave the story telling out of this Bible study, though some of the stories did emerge in their action plans). One woman said that she knew of many women in the community who were like Vashti, who were abused by alcoholic husbands, but stayed because they had children and no means of support. (It was interesting that particularly this group of women constantly referred to the king as a 'drunkard.') The woman said that unlike Vashti these women did not have the courage to leave, because they did not have support from the church or other women. She said that in response to this Bible study she was going to set up support groups for women like these.

Another said that she had learned not to "spiritualize" everything that was in the Bible, because it was in the Bible. One woman said that she realized now, that God also wanted her to take credit in her own right and not simply be there to do all the hard work without credit. She cited the way in which women in the Full Gospel Church, who were in the ministry for many years before they were allowed to be ordained, were always given the title of "missionary" instead of pastor, and hence were never given credit for their work, even though they worked twice as hard as the male pastors. She commented that these women were like Esther and the men like Mordecai, taking credit where they did not do any work. She further asserted that this Bible study has reminded her not to take the Biblical text for granted. She said she was reminded of what she was taught to do at Bible College – that is to read the Bible, "verse by verse, chapter by chapter and book by book." She said that this Bible study had encouraged her to gain distance from the text first before coming close to it. She also indicated that more of these kinds of Bible studies would also be helpful. Another commented that from now on when there is abuse in the Bible, like

there was with the virgins in chapter 2 she would expose it. This was an interesting observation in that this woman was now clearly looking at chapter 2 as a text of terror and not as a metaphor for sanctification, as so many Pentecostal pastors preach it as. In other words, she was now rereading rape in the way that Higgins and Silver (1991:4) have argued:

The act of rereading rape involves more than listening to silences; it requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring that is, the violence – the physical, sexual violation. The insistence on taking rape literally often necessitates a conscious critical act of reading the violence and the sexuality back into texts where it has been deflected, either by the text itself or by critics: where it has been turned into a metaphor or a symbol or represented rhetorically as titillation, persuasion, ravishment, seduction, or desire (poetic, narrative, courtly, military).

The proposals offered by the women indicate two levels at which they thought that transformation could be effected. The first was on the level of the social, while the second was on the level of interpretation of the text itself. Although some would argue that the Bible studies did not completely succeed in moving them from the hegemonic (in terms of gender and Biblical authority) to the ideological, according to the Comaroffs' continuum, the fact that they indicated that they would like, in the light of the Bible studies, to exercise agentive power and not just to be confined by the non-agentive power that dominated their lives, is an indication that they were now placed closer to the ideological on the continuum than they were to the hegemonic even if this position was only just a bit over the half-way mark. In other words, whether they actually become agents is still to be determined, but in Scott's (1990: 94) terms, the Bible studies may be understood as the rehearsal for their future agency.

The E group also began their discussion on the topic of who the real hero of the text was. The sub-groups were also at first divided as to who the hero of the story was. However, the sub-group that asserted that Mordecai was the hero quickly changed their minds once they heard the arguments about why Esther was the hero. In fact they expressed disbelief that they could have even thought of Mordecai as the hero in the first place. When the sub-group that saw Esther as the hero were posed with the question of whether they thought they were going against the grain of the text, hence against the Word of God, by maintaining that Esther was the hero of the story since the Biblical text did make Mordecai the hero, they responded:

*After you allowed us the opportunity to look at the text with a new mind, it was easy for us to say that Esther was the hero, without thinking that we were going against the Word of God. But if we looked at it the way Pastor would have preached it on a Sunday, or the way we were taught to interpret the Bible, then we would not have been comfortable going with our gut feelings.*

They commented that patriarchal bias is even applied today, for example, to pastor's wives who are never given any credit, even though they are the "religious secretaries" in the churches, who do not get paid. They were now able to argue that the ending was a clear reflection of the patriarchal bias in the text. They also asserted, as the P group did, that all the evidence in the text of Esther's actions made her the hero. Once they acknowledged the patriarchal bias of the text, the women also noticed other significant points as well. They said that the Biblical text never tells us about how women feel. For example, they noticed that the text told us that the king loved Esther, but nowhere did it indicate whether Esther loved the king. They pointed out that it seems in Biblical texts women are always acted upon. They related this to contemporary society where women are still not

considered in their own rights as persons, for example, “*Dr. Govender’s wife.*”

Another woman raised a question which she said the Bible studies had made her think about very seriously. The group spent most of the rest of the afternoon discussing her question. Her question was:

*If the Bible is the Word of God, then why did God allow such denigrating images of women to be contained in it?*

I did not step in immediately to answer this question. I rather let the group deal with it, because I wanted to assess to what extent the hegemony of Biblical authority had become ideological. The first response that came from one of the women was,

*That was the way things were in the Old Testament but Jesus changed all that.*

She then went on to outline the ways in which Jesus did this – by touching the menstruating woman, by speaking with the Samaritan woman, by liberating the adulterous woman and by allowing the women to be by his side, right until the time that he was crucified. A second solution posed was that the women knew God personally and the God that they knew was a just God who loved them as much as He [sic] loved the men. It was not the God that they could reconcile with the Biblical text, so maybe we should be suspicious of those parts of the Biblical text which showed a bias against women as the influence of male writers.

Another question that emerged from the women, and this time moving away from the gender issue was,

*Why did God choose the Israelites to be His [sic] chosen people and not anyone else, for example the Indians?*

I saw that the women were clearly moving away from the hegemonic idea of Biblical authority, so I thought that I would urge them a bit further, so I brought in the whole question of Paul's advocacy of slavery as the will of God. The women all agreed that this was something they were not comfortable with. Some women began to appear distinctly uncomfortable, so I thought that I had to be a bit more pastoral about the issue. I told my own story of how I also went through a crisis of faith when I first discovered the "earth-shattering" news that the Bible was not always on my side. In fact, I told the group how some texts in the Bible made me distinctly uncomfortable and yet I chose to accept it simply because it was the "Word of God." I also shared with them that to ask these questions does not mean that one has to lose one's faith. I explained that I had learned how to keep the two aspects of faith and the academic in creative tension with each other.

Sharing my own journey through this process eased the women's' minds and they went back into their probing mode. It was as if this was the moment for them to express those things that they were becoming distinctly uncomfortable with in the Bible. This also opened up discussion about Esther's asking for a second day of killing. They said that when they had read the text before, they never thought to be uncomfortable with this because they were always taught to read with the Jews in the Bible. But they said that they had to recognize that Esther at that point became no better than the king, because she also abused her power.

The women then went on to relate stories of women whom they thought were like Esther and Vashti. One woman told the story of someone she knew who was being emotionally abused by her husband, who constantly

compared her to his first wife who had died. He always reminded her of the way in which his first wife used to do things, and thus tried to control the way in which she dressed, cooked, took care of the children and kept the house. When she sought help from the women in the church, they all told her that she should compromise and try to submit. She was determined not to, and she even went to the court to get a “peace order”<sup>28</sup> against him so that he could not emotionally abuse her anymore. Her story, unlike Vashti’s though, had a pleasant ending, for her husband respected her for standing her ground and knew that she was not the kind of woman who was going to take abuse and “*keep quiet and accept it.*” The women reflected on this story and also told similar stories of women who were like Vashti. Others told stories of women who were like Esther, who even though they did not openly oppose abuse, found subtle ways of circumventing it. As one woman said,

*Why attain something by using vinegar when you could just as well use honey?*

All the women agreed that certain situations required Vashti’s actions, and certain situations required the actions of Esther. Here it was clear that they knew how to negotiate between the hegemonic and the ideological, or in Scott’s terms when to use the public transcript and when to activate the hidden one.

Finally, I asked the women what they would do now in response to the Bible studies. One woman said that she would start transformation in her own family first, because she believes that her children are the future leaders of society, and by changing the way in which they think about gender she is effectively making social change. She said that she would

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<sup>28</sup> Many of the women in the group did not know that one could get a peace order even if there was no physical evidence of abuse. The ex-attorney in the group explained how it was possible to do this, and how the process was much simpler than getting an interdict.

teach her daughter that she is “*more than just a pretty face*.” She will teach her son also that girls are more than “*pretty faces*” and that they need to be respected not used and abused. She said that this Bible study had taught her to start in her own home.<sup>29</sup> All the other women endorsed this and also made similar comments about their own children.

One commented that this Bible study had taught her to question those things that seem “natural,” for example the fact that she has taught her daughter how to cook but not her son. Others said that they did not think that they could start any new support groups for abused women but that they would work closely with those that already exist. Another commented that in response to the Bible study on the text of Tamar, they had already been part of a project of setting up a call center and shelter for women who are abused, and that they would continue to strengthen their links. They also indicated that they would like to have more of these Bible studies, where more women from the church could be invited as well. They said that they would like to also invite the ISB to do Bible studies with them.

E group was clearly much closer to the ideological in terms of Biblical authority than P group was. Their many questions concerning Biblical texts, other than Esther, showed that they were beginning to develop a critical consciousness by applying the principles that they learned in this Bible study to other Biblical texts as well. The ideological stage that they had reached clearly enabled them to make suggestions of how they could become agents of power, even though, like with the P group, this remains to be determined.

M group also started their discussions with a focus on the debate as to whether Esther or Mordecai was the hero. Unlike E group and P group, who

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<sup>29</sup> This may also show the real sense they have of how difficult it is to do anything substantial in the larger community, or in the public realm.

were divided on the issue, M group all said that it was clear that Esther was the hero of the story. Despite having chapter 10 read out loud, they did not even notice that the Biblical text portrayed Mordecai as the hero. When I pointed out to them that the Biblical text portrayed Mordecai as the hero, they quickly changed their minds and began to find reasons why the text would want to make Mordecai the hero.<sup>30</sup> Some rationalized that,

*Esther's only purpose was to save the Jews. She was a Christ type.*

Another pointed out that Mordecai was the hero, because God wanted to show us the importance of intercessory prayer. He demonstrated this by using a commonly known saying amongst the Indians in the Pentecostal tradition,

*What makes a good pastor? The little old ladies who pray for him.*

In other words, he explained that the intercessor was more important than the one being interceded for.

*The church needs more intercessors like Mordecai who will put on sackcloth and ashes and come before God.*

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<sup>30</sup> This is very similar to the story told by West (2003:2) about Isabel Phiri's experience when doing research on an evangelical woman who was ordained in her church as a bishop. Working within a clear liberation hermeneutic, Phiri probed the pastor's interpretation of those passages of Scripture that called for women to be silent in the church in the light of this woman's ordination. The church, after revisiting the Scripture, decided to rescind the ordination of this woman! Phiri's intention, which was to make the church show how Scripture can be interpreted in a liberating way for women, actually had the opposite of the desired effect! Reflected in Phiri's story, and the above example where the men were not aware of the text's positioning of Mordecai as hero, lies the danger of too much conscientization, which it seems can have the reverse effect!

Given that the group had started off with what seemed to be the ideological, but reverted to the hegemonic once they knew what the Biblical text said, I urged them to investigate why it is they all said that Esther was the hero without taking notice of the text. They could not provide a reason, but conceded that,

*It is obvious that the authors of the Bible were men, therefore we are probably getting a male bias in the text.*

They were clearly moving back towards the ideological, by being conscious of the way in which they are persuaded by the Biblical text and the gender of the narrator or the author as they put it.

This consciousness paved the way for me to ask the next question, relating it directly to the issue of the hegemony of Biblical authority. "If the text is portraying a male bias, and all of you have indicated that the Bible is inspired, then where does inspiration lie? If the text is oppressive to women or to other race groups, for example, Esther's request for a second day of killing then where's the inspiration in that?" One pastor indicated that from a spiritual point of view, he believed that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. However, he indicated that if we looked at the text from an academic point of view, as was done at the Bible study, then there seems to be some contradiction especially with regard to women and the way in which the Persians are so unfairly killed at the end. Another pastor responded:

*There's no contradiction. The Bible was inspired by God. God needed a male perspective because society at the time was a male society. If the Bible was written in our own times, it may be possible to get women's perspectives in it as well.*

This pastor was obviously finding a creative way to deal with the hegemonic so I probed further: “What about those churches then, that still preach from the Word of God, by using the norms and values found within as normative, for the way in which people are supposed to live out their lives, even in the modern age? For example, Paul’s injunction for women to be silent is still used as an argument for not ordaining women”

Another pastor endorsed that this is still being done, by relating the advent of a “new wave” in Pentecostal circles called the “Apostolic Reformation.” He said that this reformation is trying to revive the five-fold ministry that Paul talks about. The proponents of the “Apostolic Reformation” argue that women are excluded from the ministry on the basis that Jesus did not have any female disciples. He further related how he heard a pastor once preach an entire sermon on a text that had a woman as a central character, but everything that he said was negative about women. The question then was how does one deal with this?

A proposal from one pastor was that

*One needs academic and critical tools to overcome the biases against women in the Bible, but we should let love dominate our interpretations. But there comes a time when you have to take a step out of the realm of the natural and take a step of faith for that final interpretation. This might not seem rational to academics and it is not meant to be rational. It is a spiritual aspect.*

The others agreed with this suggestion, and I did not want to push this discussion any further as I felt that this was the closest that this group would get to being ideological about Biblical authority. So I moved on to the next task.

I did not ask this group to tell the stories of women in the community whom they know are like Vashti and Esther. Instead I focused on the question of how will this Bible study have changed the way in which they now prepare a sermon on the book of Esther. One said that he would preach on *“relevance for the day – that the church is called for such a time as this.”* He said that in spite of the name of God not being mentioned, he definitely saw the hand of God working in the book of Esther. A second said his theme will focus on *“standing in the gap – persevering in spite of all odds.”* A third said that he would preach on the *“important role of men and women in partnership.”* He saw Esther and Mordecai as partners working together for the kingdom of God. One said, to the laughter of the rest of the group, that he would preach a sermon on abuse against women, focusing on Vashti, and the title of his sermon would be: *“Which part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?”* Another pastor did not agree with this suggestion as he argued that, *“you could not hold up Vashti as an example, as she was mentioned at a point of disobedience.”* It was clear that this pastor had not been influenced by his introduction to other ideological perspectives such as the womanist perspectives on the character of Vashti, hence held fast to his patriarchal ideology that said that Vashti was a bad woman.

Nevertheless, the fact that the other pastor was willing to associate the text with the contemporary issue of abuse against women, opened up the discussion for my next question, which was whether it is possible to effect social transformation through this Bible study. One pastor responded that he did not think that this was possible. He said that you could preach about the text on a Sunday and you could talk about gender, race and class issues, but these should be seen from a spiritual point of view. To see it in the light of social transformation meant that one would have to “allegorize” too much. As Morran and Schlemmer indicated in their study of Pentecostals and Charismatics, this was the dominant view of Pentecostals and

Charismatics in the apartheid years too, “there was no social gospel – it was the Word of God,” (Morran and Schlemmer 1984: 149). Not all the pastors agreed with him. One commented that the book of Esther could help us to dispel gender stereotypes, by focusing on the way in which Vashti refuses to be the object of male desire. Others also thought that social transformation was possible but they indicated that they did not have time to finish the discussion as many of them needed to leave early. So unfortunately that discussion was curtailed.

### ***Reflections on the extent of transformation in the groups***

In the first 5 chapters of this dissertation, at least three positions were put forward for what was needed for liberatory readings of the Biblical text – readings that will be able to transform not just interpretations of the Bible, but society as well. The positions can be summarized as following.

1. The text has grain. In other words, I argued that the text of Esther seems to collude with the dominance of patriarchal, ethnic and class convictions. By analyzing the way in which the ideology, plot, narrative time, and characterization of the narrative worked, I was able to prove this theory.
2. Although the text has grain, the grain is not monolithic in nature. I have argued that within the structures of the ideology, plot, time and characterization techniques of the narrative, inherent in the text there also existed covert techniques, which if activated, could undermine these structures of dominance.
3. Although the text’s grain may be pre-determined, it is not unlikely that readers can choose to resist the text’s persuasive techniques, and read with a hermeneutics of experience. In other words, the reader can determine which of the grains of

the text to follow – those that are the dominant and “logical” ones, or those which are concealed beneath the text’s surface and need to be activated in order to be functional in interpretation.

Through the Bible studies, my intention was to train readers in the community of faith to begin to unlock these particular practices of reading the Biblical text, so that literal interpretations which are oppressive are not allowed to be used to oppress people, particularly women. To examine to what extent this rationale was successful, I will use the Comaroffs’ three continuums of analysis as I have done intermittently throughout the foregoing examinations of the Bible studies. I will do this by posing the following questions of each of the groups. First, to what extent have I been successful in allowing the unconscious to become conscious, second, to what extent has this consciousness enabled the hegemonic to become ideological and third, to what extent has the ideological enabled agentive power?

**Group P: At the half-way mark on the journey from the hegemonic to the ideological**

In the beginning this group indicated through their responses that they had clearly been influenced, and to a certain extent even been pressured, by the hegemonic. The hegemonic was clearly linked with their perceptions that the Bible is the Word of God and cannot be challenged, but it was also linked to patriarchal culture and the patriarchal nature of the Biblical text as well. In each of the tasks they seemed to border on the ideological but were restricted by their understanding of the authority of the Bible, even when they were willing to let go of the hegemonic in relation to culture. In answering my probing questions concerning the motives for their interpretations they were able to become conscious of their motives in

interpretation. However, although this consciousness sometimes led them to becoming more ideological in their interpretations, this was clearly a difficult move to make, as was indicated in their insistence on seeing Vashti as a pawn in God's bigger game of the salvation of the Jews. As we got to the end of the Bible study they seemed to at least display a consciousness of the way in which their interpretations were constrained by the notions of authority of the Bible. For example, in the end the women were willing to read with their "gut feelings," even when this meant reading against the text.

These women, as pointed out earlier, came from lower socio-economic groups. It was interesting to note therefore, that an appeal to allow their interpretations to be filtered through their life experiences is what convinced them the most to move from the hegemonic toward the ideological. For example, although the majority of the group disapproved of Vashti's actions in the beginning, once asked to place themselves in that situation in our own times, they quickly changed their minds. The same was true for their interpretations of Mordecai as the hero. Although they wanted to be faithful to the text and argue that he was the hero, when challenged with the realities of their own situations where many of them work really hard, only for the men to get the credit, they also revised their stances. Although these women were familiar with reading the Biblical text through their own experiences, they were taught only to do so in particular ways by the church. For example, as one woman said:

*When I do not have money even to buy a loaf of bread, I know that my God, He is Jehovah Jireh my provider.*

It seemed that it was fine to quote Scripture in this way, as long as it did not translate into any concrete social action. The story of one particular woman's story demonstrates this point aptly. She told of how all pastors are

required to send their tithes (a tenth of their salaries) to the Head Office of the church. Someone from the Church structures usually comes to collect these tithes, once in three months or so. One day, this pastor who works for a meager salary anyway, went to visit the home of one of the members of the church, and found that this woman was living in a house where her electricity had been turned off and she did not even have money to buy milk for her baby. The pastor herself not an affluent person, took out the only money she had in her bag, an accumulation of six months of tithes which had not been collected and gave it to the woman. When the "tithes collector" eventually came around and she did not have the money, she went to the senior overseer of the church to explain. Instead of understanding her need to take care of the poor, he accused her of being a fraud, and used that as an excuse to undermine her ministry.

This story clearly indicates the levels at which a liberating interpretation of the Bible is allowed to impact socially by the church. By showing the women that their experiences were a valid source of interpretation of the Bible, they were able to become more ideological in their thinking. Based on their new ideological readings they were able to articulate ways in which they could use agentive power. This was indicated in their suggestions of the way in which they will respond to these Bible studies. However, to say that these Bible studies would cause complete gender-social transformation in these women's communities will not be a true reflection of the success of these Bible studies. I would say that these women being not just women in the church, but women with little economic independence as well, were "doubly oppressed." This is why they enjoyed the story of Esther's rise to queenship so much. It showed them the possibilities that God can even raise up the lowly. Being oppressed themselves, they were not that disapproving of Esther's request for another day of killing. Although they expressed discomfort with it, they also understood her need for revenge, being an orphan, a woman, and a victim of the Persian system. I can say with a

certain degree of confidence that these women were introduced to a new way of reading the Bible, and even if they slip back into the hegemonic at times, their consciousness has already been awakened. On the continuum I think that these women are somewhere in the middle between the ideological and hegemonic. It can be concluded that these Bible studies succeeded in moving them from the hegemonic to the middle, though not all the way to ideological. Much more of these Bible studies will be needed before these women can transform the hegemonic into the ideological, though the first step has been taken. Bible studies with this group have also made me re-evaluate my commitment to Phoenix, the place where I grew up. It reminded me that part of the work that lies ahead for me now that they have “advanced me to the center” is to continue to empower those at the “periphery.”

#### **Group E: Varying Degrees of the Ideological**

This group at first seemed to be already on the side of the ideological on the continuum. They all liked Vashti. She was an inspiration. They were clearly and overtly strong, empowered women. However, the crack in this image of their empowerment was revealed with Vashti’s relationship to the rest of the story. These women were willing to transform culture by reading with Vashti, but they were not willing to transform the Bible by allowing Vashti to re-emerge in the rest of the story. They perceived that that would be going against God’s purpose of the salvation of the Jews. Arming them with a particular form of womanist-literary critique, however, seemed to have resolved their reluctance. From that point onward, the women began to be more conscious of their interpretations.

The questions that they asked on the second day of the Bible studies were much more than even I had anticipated. For example, their questioning of the “chosen-ness” of the Israelites as God’s people, to the exclusion of the

rest of humanity, is a question that not even theological students are willing to grapple with and yet this group was able to, after these Bible studies. This clearly demonstrated their move from the hegemonic, with regard to Biblical authority, toward the ideological. In terms of the hegemonic hold of culture, it seems that this group were actually more on the ideological end of the continuum than on the hegemonic end, especially in relation to P group's position on the cultural continuum.

Overall, it seems like E group did not need as much conscientizing as P group did<sup>31</sup>. My role as facilitator and intellectual seemed to be needed primarily in terms of providing the critical tools with which to interpret. Once I had done that, I sat back and watched in amazement at what these women were able to do with these new resources. In fact, after attending a women's day service at their church, in which one of the women who attended the Bible studies preached, I am convinced that these women have begun to use their agentive power more than they did before. This was reflected in the sermon that this woman preached, the women's responses to the sermon with loud "Amen's!" and the "drama" that the women performed in relation to violence against women. Although they might encounter difficulties making substantial changes in the community, I do believe that the Bible studies were a big step already in that direction, but as with the P group the fruits of this can only be tested with time.

### **Group M: Responses to Competing Ideologies**

It was clear from the beginning that this group's readings were ideological in the sense that they were consciously reading for domination. As I argued earlier, it was in their best interests as ministers of religion to keep the patriarchal hegemony of the Bible as "Word of God," the patriarchal

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<sup>31</sup> Note my earlier point that these women seemed to be more ideological because of their education and mobility.

character of the Biblical text itself, and the patriarchal hegemony of culture firmly intact. So my evaluation of this group is not based on the extent of their shift from hegemony to ideology, but the extent of their recognition of other ideological perspectives such as those offered by womanism, and their subsequent willingness (or lack thereof) to allow those perspectives to transform their own patriarchal ideologies.

It seemed in the beginning, particularly with their interpretations of chapter 1 and 2, that the men were reluctant to let go of their patriarchal ideologies, as was reflected in the ways in which they characterized the king as a “good man,” and their unwillingness to read chapter 2 as a “text of terror,” or even simply to see the king’s abuse of his power in spending a night with each of the virgins.

Their interpretations, not surprisingly shifted when the issue of the king’s abuse of power turned to an ethnic one. They were quick to then pass judgment on the king.<sup>32</sup> In the absence of the ethnic complication one wonders to what extent the men’s patriarchal ideologies would have been challenged. Nevertheless, they were, and as the Bible studies progressed they were beginning to forge new interpretations, particularly with regard to the way in which they saw the Bible as the “Word of God.” The womanist ideologies which had been presented to them were obviously challenging them to revisit their views on Biblical authority, and in the end they came up with a resolution at least to acknowledge the need for some sense of critical consciousness when approaching the Bible, especially with regard to the way in which women have been treated in the Bible, and the way in which women continue to be treated as a result of the church’s dependence on the Bible as normative for the way in which people live out their lives in our context.

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<sup>32</sup> The issue of Black males arguing for racial liberation, while circumscribing the issue of gender liberation has been argued by both African women theologians (Okure 1992, Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992) and by African male scholars (Maluleke 1997).

Overall, I would not argue that this group's patriarchal ideologies were completely transformed when confronted with womanist ideologies, as is reflected in the reluctance of one pastor to use Vashti as an example in a sermon, as he still maintained that she was a bad example because of her disobedience. However, it seems that on the question of the hegemony of Biblical authority the pastors had shifted substantially, and it was certainly a first stage in beginning the dialogue around the issue of gender-social transformation.

### ***Conclusion***

As my analysis of all the groups indicate, I cannot confirm that any of the groups actually had such a raised level of consciousness that they were able to effect gender-social transformation. I would argue that this was not because they did not want to effect transformation, but rather an indication of the very real constraints in their lives. The power that those with competing ideologies possessed, in comparison to those ideologies which they acquired in the Bible studies was certainly a factor. However, it was clear that their consciousness was raised to such a level that they became aware of the processes involved in their interpretation. But what may have been brought from the hegemonic to the ideological, through the process of conscientization might now become hidden! So, while West (1999: 39-52) argues that the oppressed are already in possession of hidden transcripts of covert resistance, I argue that the process of conscientization causes the oppressed to become ideological about their oppression, but that once they become ideological, the ideological might become hidden, though this is not always necessarily so. As I pointed out from my experience at Group E's church almost a year after the Bible studies, the ideological was very much present. So, the extent to which the ideological (which I argue is made possible through the process of conscientization), becomes hidden is a

function of the power and the force of the competing ideologies, such as patriarchal, theological, or cultural ideologies.

So, I have offered here my perceptions of the extent to which the Bible studies offered them the opportunity to seriously think about the issue of gender-social transformation, and to also offer concrete suggestions as to how such transformation can be effected in the community. All the groups indicated that they certainly learned from the Bible studies, and that they learned enough to begin transformation in their homes, in their reading practices, in their confrontation with issues of abuse in the community, and in the case of the pastors, even in the church with regard to the way in which they preach. Whether their intentions to use this potential agentive power which they indicated that the Bible studies have afforded them, results in them actually using it, remains to be taken up in a further study.

## CHAPTER 9

### REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY FROM A HERMENEUTIC OF LIBERATION TO A HERMENEUTIC OF TRANSFORMATION

While showing in the previous chapter that the journey from a hermeneutic of liberation to a hermeneutic of transformation requires a hermeneutic of collaboration with those in the community, I now move toward a conclusion of the implications of this study for both those in the academy and those outside of it. But first I provide a brief summary of what was actually done in this study.

#### *Concluding Summary*

The aim of this study, as was outlined in the Introduction, was to read the book of Esther in a way that would enable gender-social transformation. This was done in two sections. In the introduction to the first section, I argued that the two most appropriate theoretical frameworks needed to accomplish this aim were literary and womanist modes of analysis. I further asserted that the literary mode of analysis was appropriate because it was the easiest “in-road” into the text for the community. A womanist, as opposed to feminist, approach was taken as I argued that feminism did not adequately take into account the racial and class issues which affect Black women’s lives.

Having established my aim in the first chapter, in the second chapter I focused on ideology, both as it affects the production and reception of interpretations, and the way in which ideological readings make fundamentally ethical judgments. I chose to begin the section on literary analysis with this chapter as I argued that the ideological implications of the text and the way in which the reader reads the text impacts on all

aspects of a literary reading of a text. Using Fowl's (1998:63) assertion that "texts do not have ideologies only readers do," as a springboard, I problematized the notion of the existence of a monolithic ideology, particularly with regard to gender, ethnicity and class, in a text. My arguments raised questions about meaning – how it is derived, produced, negotiated.

By drawing on the work of several feminist scholars, I attempted to "depatriarchalize" the patriarchal ideology of the text, while at the same time arguing that there were other ideologies in the text, besides the patriarchal ideology. Then using the work of Sugirtharajah (2001), who works with a postcolonial critique of the Bible, and Dube (1997), who works with a postcolonial feminist critique of the Bible, I attempted to expose how the ideology of ethnicity worked in the text, and how a womanist reader armed with the tools of postcolonial criticism could deconstruct those ideologies, or activate the competing ideologies in the text. Finally, drawing on Masenya's (2001) and Mosala's (1992) work on the book of Esther, I attempted to show how the book of Esther is positioned with regard to issues of class and how womanist readers could deal with this ideologically.

Having demonstrated in chapter 2 how the dominant ideology of the narrative could be rendered unstable by a womanist reader, I moved on to an analysis in the third chapter of how this occurs in the book of Esther through an examination of the way in which the narrative is plotted and the ongoing plotting of the narrative by the reader. Drawing on the work of other literary Biblical scholars such as Clines (1998), Beal (1997) and Wyler (1997), I showed how an interrogation of the motif of power can be used as vehicle for resolving gender and ethnic complications in the narrative. I concluded that even though the narrative of Esther might seem

to be already plotted, it is the reader (in this case the womanist reader) who is engaged in a process of constant plotting and re-plotting of the narrative.

In chapter 4, I took my literary analysis further by examining the role of narrative time in furthering the patriarchal ideologies of the text, and how the womanist reader is able to deconstruct these devices of narrative time both by drawing attention to them and by finding alternative ways to interpret and use them. I argued that time is of significance in a narrative on at least three levels. The first is intrinsic to the text, which is the way in which the author uses time to accentuate those points that are important to the author's purposes; the second and the third are extrinsic to the text, the amount of time it takes to read a story grounds the story within our own time framework, but more importantly, the reader's understanding of the way in which time is used in the narrative is of particular importance to the interpretation/s which the reader ultimately extracts from the text. I showed how each of the intrinsic time structures are linked with the theme of power in the book of Esther.

I further showed that the use of different narrative time devices could point to particular interpretations, but that those very interpretations can also be destabilized either by the text itself or by the reader. In other words, what is important for a gender and ethnic sensitive reading of the text is the fact that although each of these time structures foregrounds the immense power of the Persian court and hence its ability to sanction genocides of people and the deposal of women, it also has the opposite effect of creating an appreciation for the characters who are able to engage with this vast and immense power and emerge victorious. By examining the sequence (order) in which events are presented, through exploring the amount of time or lack of time spent on certain events (duration), and by highlighting the use of repetitive words and phrases in the narrative (frequency), I showed how

each of these time structures are linked with the theme of power in the text of Esther, both those who have power and those who do not.

Chapter 5 was the most crucial and longest chapter in the first section. This was because character, I argued, is the most accessible way into the text for readers in faith communities. This was the chapter that would lead into my interaction with the faith community, and so I devoted much time to doing in-depth character analysis of each major character in the narrative. Given my argument that the text has a particular patriarchal ideology, I developed strategies for reading the characters of Vashti and Esther so as to avoid colluding with the text's patriarchal assumptions concerning these female characters. Hence, I gave particular attention to how the voices of the characters carry the ideological voice of the narrative, and how a self-conscious ideological reading (such as a womanist reading) can uncover the ideology embodied by the characters. It was also a way of re-inscribing (particularly in the case of Vashti) the worth of the female characters to the narrative as a whole.

In my analysis of the major characters of the narrative, I consciously chose not to restrict the reconstruction of the different characters in the book of Esther to the characters as plot functionaries, nor did I restrict the characters to the world of the narrative only. Rather, I sought to open up the characters, and make them accessible even to contemporary readers who seek to identify with the characters of the narrative world. This was crucial, as this chapter led up to the next section where I explored how readers in communities of faith read the Biblical text, and to what extent the reading strategies and the critical tools that I have employed in the literary analysis in the first section, could contribute to a process of gender-social transformation in the community.

I began the second section, before actually documenting the process of engagement with the community, by using the sixth and the seventh chapters to discuss why and how a hermeneutic of transformation could be effected in the community. Chapter six aimed to show why a hermeneutic of transformation was needed at all. Drawing on the work of scholars such as West (1999) who call for such an engagement, I showed why such an engagement is not only necessary but also crucial, given the way in which the Bible is used to oppress (particularly women) in faith communities. I also drew on autobiographical criticism to show my own subjectivity and “interestedness” in issues of gender oppression, and how this affected the research that I conducted. I argued that scholars cannot go on pretending that their own locations do not affect their interpretations, and further, along with Long (1996) I argued that the readers which scholars use in their theories of Biblical interpretation have for too long remained only theoretical. The tension between the academic and the activist was highlighted in my use of Showalter’s (1989) illustration of her discomfort with the work of the academy which excludes those women in the community, to whom she argues feminist scholars should be committed to.

If chapter six dealt with why community engagement is important, chapter seven dealt with how such an engagement can be effected. I examined in chapter seven the limitations of the current methodologies which are used in scholarly engagement with the community. I argued strongly for the need for conscientization to be foregrounded as a motive on the part of the scholar in their choice to work within the community.

Having made these arguments, I then went on to sketch the socio-religious location of the women who were chosen for the Bible studies. I undertook this task with the purpose of demonstrating why the critical resources of the academy can be helpful in developing a hermeneutic of liberation, particularly for women in the church. I did this through a critical

examination of the ways in which the Full Gospel Church view and treat women within the church. I admitted that my documenting of this aspect of my research was filtered through my own womanist grid and that in attempting to sketch this background, I did so more analytically than descriptively. I then attempted to suggest ways in which I thought women's liberation could be possible while still articulating it within Pentecostal categories of interpretation. In other words, I wanted to demonstrate that a critical view of the Bible and the Spirit's role in the interpretation of the Bible could help to contribute towards gender-social transformation. I did this, drawing on Rakoczy (2000), Fowl (1998) and Walker (1999), by offering three proposals as to how the Spirit could empower one to interpret in ways that were life-affirming rather than oppressing.

Having sketched the community with which I worked, and the ways in which the Bible study was to be facilitated in the seventh chapter, I moved on to the eighth chapter where I analyzed the Bible studies. Before analyzing the Bible studies, however, I further problematized the notion of representation and the ways in which scholars write about those with whom they work. Critiquing the work of West (1999) and Haddad (2000) in the light of Spivak's (1988) arguments concerning representation, I argued for the need of organic intellectuals in the project of scholarly engagement with the community.

I then moved on to an analysis of the Bible studies, where following West (1999) and Petersen (1995) I used the Comaroffs' (1991) concepts of the continuums of the hegemonic and the ideological, the conscious and the unconscious, and agentive power and non-agentive power, as grids through which to filter my analysis of the Bible studies. I concluded that my analysis of all the groups involved in the Bible studies indicate that I cannot confirm that any of the groups actually had *such* a raised level of consciousness that they were able to effect gender-social transformation.

This was because many of them had very real constraints in their lives and the power of those with competing ideologies in comparison to those liberating ideologies, which they acquired in the Bible studies, was certainly a factor. What I could confirm was that all the groups indicated that they certainly learned from the Bible studies, and that they learned enough to want to begin transformation in their homes, in their reading practices, in their confrontation with issues of abuse in the community, and in the case of the pastors, even in the church with regard to the way in which they preach. I maintained that whether their intentions to use this potential agentive power which they indicated that the Bible studies have afforded them, results in them actually using it, remains to be taken up in a further study. In other words, further study needs to be done on the extent to which the Bible studies have enabled agentive power, and how.

Given that these were the conclusions of my study, and that I assert that further work still needs to be done in particular areas, the question remains as to what the implications of my study are for those in the academy and those in the community.

### ***The Road Ahead: Implications Of This Study***

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The first implication is that there is still a need for South African women, who straddle the divide between the academy and activism, to continue the struggle of finding a theoretical basis for our work. Although we have been trained in the tools of (Western) Biblical criticism, we have yet to carefully and theoretically integrate these tools with our activist stance, or our commitments to the community. In choosing womanism as a tool of analysis I situated myself within a range of South African and African women scholars, particularly those belonging to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, who choose to work within a liberation

paradigm, but struggle to find ways in which to name what they do.<sup>1</sup> Madipoane Masenya (the only Black South African woman to hold a doctorate degree in Biblical Studies currently) embodies this struggle to some extent, and I am not sure that she has resolved it through her use of the *bosadi* hermeneutic. This is because her work still shows her struggle to situate her arguments within the larger debate around the way in which women practice liberation hermeneutics, particularly with regard to her critique of other African women (for example Oduyoye 1992, 1995, 1998 and Okure 1992, 1993) also working within a liberation paradigm, whom she claims through their work “demonize African culture.”

It seems to me that Masenya, by opting for a specifically cultural hermeneutic, namely the *bosadi* approach, is reluctant to critique those aspects of culture which oppress women, for even though she claims that she does recognize that culture has both positive and negative elements for women, she chooses to ignore the negative aspects, while foregrounding the positive (Masenya 1996:157). Notwithstanding this, Masenya’s work has been the boldest attempt yet to name what she is doing in her work in a way that captures the African context. She herself charts a shift from naming her work first as black feminist theology within feminist theology, later as African womanist hermeneutics, and most recently as a *bosadi* hermeneutic (Masenya 1997:15).

It is obvious from Masenya’s shifts that she herself struggled and perhaps continues to struggle to use feminist categories of interpretation while remaining true to her commitment to women within African culture, particularly those in the Northern-Sotho culture. In this study, although I

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Kanyoro (1995), Okure (1993) Dube (1996), Williams (1990) and Jordaan (1995), (the last two who do not belong to the Circle as far as I am aware.) Besides women theologians, there are also other women in the secular field as well who are struggling to name their liberation work in an African context. *Agenda* (2001 and 2002), a journal based in South Africa committed to empowering women for gender equity, which dedicated two whole volumes to the issue of “African Feminisms,” and contained several articles which dealt with the issue of womanism, attests to this fact as well.

chose womanism as one of my theoretical frameworks, it was not an indication that I did not recognize the North American influence of this term, but rather it was an attempt on my part to dialogue with the term while using it as a functional theoretical framework. So I used those aspects of womanism that pertain to my own work, particularly the activist component of womanism, and its focus of course on class and race as well. However, much more work remains to be done in this area if we are to keep the conversation open on the ways in which our “locatedness” affects our interpretations, and this study, I submit, is simply opening up that conversation for further reflection.

The second implication of this study is that it forces scholars, particularly feminist scholars, and other liberation scholars as well, to re-examine their roles as activists. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:95) argues,

If feminist scholars want to radically change discourses that deny the full citizenship of wo/men and other non-persons, feminist studies cannot move to a specially protected space but must remain bilingual, intellectually speaking the language of the academy and that of a political movement for change.

In this dissertation I have shown that speaking both the language of the academy and the language of a political or religious movement for change, though not easy, is possible. Although it is easier for some scholars to speak bilingually than others, it seems that most Biblical scholars have needed what West (1999:34-62) terms a “conversion from below,” to do this. My work, has in some way, embodied this process of conversion.

However, in advocating this conversion, it is also necessary to state that scholars cannot do this simply as a “fashion statement”<sup>2</sup> in the academy. In other words, I would argue that this study has shown, by emphasizing the scholar’s role in conscientization, that scholars need to be genuinely committed not just to the transformation of the academy but to the transformation of the community as well.<sup>3</sup> Although the transformation of communities has long been on the agenda of Latin American liberation scholars, who as I pointed out in chapter 7 saw their role as deflecting “false consciousness,” recently, scholars working within a liberation paradigm, such as West and Haddad, have been more interested in how they are shaped by the work which they do in the community, rather than how their work can help to shape the community. West (1999:34-62) and Haddad (2000a and 2000b: 48) go to great lengths to argue how the scholar should be “partially constituted” by those with whom they read, but though acknowledging this, they also downplay or minimize the ways in which the community becomes constituted by their readings with the scholar. Note the “I” language in the following quote by Haddad (2000b: 49):

I now recognize that my role is not to conscientize but to enter into mutual dialogue and collaborative work with those I work with. In so doing, I recognize the need to be re-shaped and re-made. It opens me up to transformation and re-constitution.

The fact that both West and Haddad speak about the need for the scholar’s transformation and are reluctant to speak *for* the community might well

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<sup>2</sup> We can relate my argument here to Moore’s (1995:19) point concerning autobiographical criticism. In other words engagement with the community cannot simply be “a gold hoop dangling from the navel of one’s arguments,” in one’s academic discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding this argument, I also recognize that activism does not always equal change or transformation. The limitation of this study, and future work in this area, is the fact that simply being an “intellectual-activist” or a “transformative-intellectual” does not always guarantee that transformation or conscientization will take place. Transformation or conscientization happens through a process of dialogue, exchange and mutual respect. This process is an on-going one.

indicate their attempt to be honest about their social locations, and hence they are reluctant to speak for the community. Their point about the community is understandable, but what I am arguing for is a shift in the language about the academy and the scholars in the academy. The assumption in the call for scholars to be “partially constituted” or “transformed” by the work they do in the community, is that scholars are not already partially constituted by the community. This might be true for some sections of the academy, but not all. In other words, their discourses exclude those of us in the academy who are already partially constituted by the community (because we are already a part of the community), and who feel strongly that it is this partial constitution that compels us to return to our communities to transform them.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in making these arguments I do not doubt West’s and Haddad’s commitment to the community, but in couching it in language that ignores the fact that there are other scholars in the academy who do not need this “transformation” or “partial constitution” as much as they do, they render the conversation difficult, if not lop-sided.<sup>5</sup> I submit that an implication of my work is that it opens up the dialogue from another perspective in the academy. For example, the perspective of those (like West and Haddad), who in Weems’ (1996:161) words, “step from behind the safety of [their] ivory desks and do [their] part in repairing the world where real people use the Bible as their manifesto for living, dying, fighting, dreaming, struggling, and maiming each other,” but also for those who do not need a “transformation” or “partial constitution” of our identities in order to make that step, but who are already transformed enough to take that step.

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<sup>4</sup> See my comments on Showalter’s illustration in chapter 6, for example.

<sup>5</sup> Again, I should point out that in making this point I am not indicating that the scholar is in no need of transformation, because both inorganic and organic scholars are always in need of transformation in the process of engagement. The point here is that like the way in which “degrees of otherness” exist, so too do “degrees of transformation” exist.

Finally, and notwithstanding my comments above, the most important implication of this study is that it has shown that literary critical modes of reading the Biblical text (such as the ones undertaken in the first section of this dissertation) can contribute in a variety of ways towards gender-social transformation in our communities. In other words it has shown that the collaboration between scholars and the community is a vital one, and the challenge that remains is for more organic intellectuals to use the opportunities which they have been given through their privileged access to education, to empower those in the community who have afforded them the opportunity.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Program**

#### **Day 1**

<b>9: 00 – 9: 30</b>	Open in Prayer / Brief Introductions
<b>9: 30 – 9: 45</b>	Fill out forms
<b>9: 45 – 10:10</b>	Task 1
<b>10:10 – 10: 30</b>	Report back on task 1
<b>10:30 – 11:00</b>	<b>TEA</b>
<b>11:00 –12:00</b>	Task 2
<b>12:00 – 12:30</b>	Report back on task 2
<b>12:30 – 1: 30</b>	<b>LUNCH</b>
<b>1:30 – 1:50</b>	Task 3
<b>1:50 – 2:20</b>	Report back on task 3
<b>2:20 – 2:40</b>	Task 4
<b>2:40 – 3:00</b>	Report back on task 4
<b>3:00 – 3:30</b>	<b>TEA</b>
<b>3:30 – 3:50</b>	Task 5
<b>3:50 – 5:00</b>	Report back on task 5 and concluding questions

## **Program**

### **Day 2**

**9:00 – 10:00** Task 4

**10:00 – 10:30** Report back on task 4

**10:30 – 11:00** TEA

**11:00 – 12:00** Task 5

**12:00 – 12:30** Report back on task 5

**12:30 – 1:30** LUNCH

**1:30 – 3:30** Task 6 (Done in Plenary)

**3:30–4:00** TEA, CLOSING, VOTE OF THANKS

## **APPENDIX 2**

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Occupation:**

**Name of Church:**

*Please answer the following questions briefly:*

**Have you read the text of Esther before?**

**If so, how many times?**

**How many times have you heard a sermon on the story of Esther?**

**Can you briefly describe what the sermon/s was/were about?**