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Theologizing with Joyce Vilakati in the Eswatini Kingdom : A Feminist Critical Interpretation of Historical Texts

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11 | Theologizing with Joyce Vilakati in the Eswatini Kingdom:

A Feminist Critical Interpretation of Historical Texts

Sonene Nyawo

Abstract

African women theologians, using gendered lenses, challenge the pervasive rhetoric that depicts African women as inferior, inexpressive and docile. These theologians are committed to magnifying the whimpering voices of African women victims and survivors of the patriarchal wrath, irrespective of their religious associations. Amongst them are African matriarchs, whom we hold in high esteem as founders and earliest champions of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle). Through research and publication, these founders have made historical contributions towards the expansion of the Circle since its inception in 1989. As torch bearers, they have continued to swim against the patriarchal tide, and denounced hierarchies that promote power imbalances between women and men. Now, it is time to celebrate their role in shaping the membership of the Circle into strong, resilient and resourceful women. Some of these champions might have changed residence, and are in the other world, whilst others have aged to remember their contribution. Retrieving their insights is more to recognise that they still speak to our hearts and minds. This chapter is therefore an exploration of five (5) selected works of Joyce Vilakati, a feminist literary critic who engages with historical texts to discover the hidden voices of women, whilst exposing patriarchal beliefs and stereotypes that relegate women to the periphery.

Keywords: Feminists, historical texts, interpretation, patriarchy and Joyce Vilakati

Introduction

Joyce Tsabedze who is the subject of this narrative inquiry is discussed as Joyce Vilakati. Five years after attending the Convocation of African

Women Theologians at Trinity College Legon-Accra September 24th - October 2nd, 1989, her legal identity changed as she reverted to use of her maiden name Vilakati. A legal process which was concluded in 1994 nullified her marriage. That personal experience became the crucible of her constantly developing and multidimensional feminist hermeneutics. At another level, Ms Vilakati's journey in biblical hermeneutics has undergone a massive shift since she presented at the said convocation on "Women in the church [1 Timothy 2:15, Ephesians 5:22]". When she wrote and presented her short paper with the foregoing title, she was concerned to argue for a contextualised reading of biblical texts without much critique of the context itself that shaped scriptural content. Many years later, she still believes biblical texts are to be read in context but that such a context itself needs critique and ideological contestation from an explicitly identified hermeneutical perspective.

In yet another sense, biblical scholarship for her is no longer about a narrow focus on publishing disciplinary research but about the intersectionality of teaching and learning in her field. This latter development emerged from her constant passion for teaching and learning which found resonance when she came across the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in the early 2000s. Since then, for Ms Vilakati, biblical scholarship has been informed by a constant reflection on the professional practice of teaching and learning. She happily identifies as a founding member of the Circle of African Women Theologians under the pioneering and visionary leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Although Ms Vilakati's professional work has seen her growing away from the Circle instead of into it, the Circle remains a significant catalytic narrative point in her hermeneutical development. Her hermeneutical journey is best conceived as a trench coat of many colours that her Momma and many other women [and some men!] made *with* her.

As a biblical scholar, and throughout her professional lane, Vilakati has remained committed to the precepts of the Feminist Critical Theory which primarily calls for the interpretation of biblical narratives through a lens that highlights the voice and agency (or lack thereof) of women (Vilakati, 2002). Her critical engagement with the biblical texts helps her see certain themes popping out, which define female experiences, expose patriarchy whilst saving women from being 'the other' (Clifford, 2001). Her critical analysis to a text reflects in her papers, where women are portrayed as: sharing in the divine image in their human' beingness'; desirable life partners to men; the first to stray from God's instructions;

deservedly consigned to subordination to men; instigators of incestuous reproductive relationships; prone to rivalry among themselves; eavesdroppers; humble and hospitable to strangers; blackmailers; tricksters; part of the material possessions of the men in their lives; taking leadership initiatives and demonstrating agility at such; of loose virtue; conniving; available for savage disposal by the men who have socially sanctioned claim over them; positively resourceful; being sources of wise counsel to children and rulers; dogging pious men; generous; wealthy; exemplars of religious devotion; capable of profound bonds between each other; holding their own in theological conversation with men of high standing; and them being innately fickle. What this chapter therefore discusses is her hermeneutical journey which also highlights summaries of selected academic papers. Her critical approach to biblical texts is then contextualised to conclude the discussion.

Her Hermeneutical Journey

When pursuing her post graduate studies, Vilakati, for her area of specialisation, chose to be in biblical studies with a concentration in Old Testament. Her passion lay with a literary approach to the Bible due to her background and love for literature. For Vilakati, the Bible is a composite literary masterpiece and a minefield for enthralling cognitive and social engagements. Put differently, Vilakati finds God to be far more than what is recorded about God in the Christian Bibles. The Bible reflects the human struggle to comprehend God through the human failings and imperfections. Thus, it is a script inviting all of human characters to participate in the quest to establish a meaningful relationship with God. That is why in her biblical studies courses she has developed and shared with her students two mutually enforcing mantras, namely; how one reads the Bible has fundamentally to do with how one views the Bible; and for every interpretation of any given biblical text, there is a practical consequence. In the early phase of her biblical scholarship, Vilakati had not yet developed a “hard-nosed”¹ hermeneutic as suggested by Mosala (1989). Such

¹ This is a hermeneutical construct coined by Itumeleng J. Mosala and used in his book where he critiques the contextual hermeneutics of Black theologians whom he faults for exhibiting an unstructural understanding of the Bible as well as the unstructural understanding of the black experience and struggle.

a hermeneutic, explains Mosala, is based on a comprehensive definition of the complex nature of the entire Bible as a text that is multi-vocal hence it contains both liberatory and counter-liberatory messages despite the editorial attempts that were taken to harmonise it. Persuaded by Mosala's argument, Vilakati has subsequently grown in her hermeneutical journey and in the process has received influence from other biblical scholars too many to recount in this writing space. However, she mentions with distinction the intellectual mentorship of such women and men as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Renita Weems, Phyllis Bird, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Ilana Pardes, Gerald West, Jeremy Punt, David Clines, Norman Gottwald, and Cheryl Exum. In the area of critical theory including feminist theory, Vilakati has received monumental shaping influence from bell hooks (Gloria Watson)² and Terry Eagleton. With these influences, Vilakati is now able to clearly define her hermeneutic in any analysis of a biblical text.

A Selection of Vilakati's Academic Papers

At an annual BOLESWA Conference in 1988, themed 'The Role of Women in Social Transformation', Vilakati presented a paper titled A Biblical Portrait of Woman. In this seminal work, she paints in bold strokes the portrait of biblical women that emerges from the depiction of specific female characters and/or from rules and injunctions pertaining to their place in various social spaces from the family through community enclaves to wider society. Vilakati's purpose in this paper was to present a problematized view of women as overtly and covertly encoded in the Bible and through that to demonstrate that there is no unified, fixed, and stable portrait of women in the Bible but a complex if paradoxical one. Building around a schematic framework to structure her analysis, Vilakati goes on to observe that there is a potpourri of negative, affirming, paradoxical, and obscure images of women in the Bible. Her schema was to look into matters of women's human agency; ascribed roles; ontological descriptions of femininity; imputations on their moral standing and

See Mosala, I.J. (1989 reprint. in 1990). *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

² See Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.

motives.³ Vilakati's conclusion was that trumping a singular view of women from the Bible has no sound basis in the pages of the biblical text. Set against the conference theme, the motivation for this paper was to sound a cautionary note to say there would not be any exclusive position to tout as an archetypical basis to either include or exclude women from processes of transformation in any society.

In 1989, Vilakati presented a paper at the Convocation of African Women Theologians, Trinity College, Legon-Accra, with the title, Women in the church [1 Timothy 2:15, Ephesians 5:22]. In this, brief paper presentation, Vilakati adopts a historical critical reading of the two texts that respectively proclaim a ban on women's participation in religious instruction in the church (1 Timothy 2:15) and command women to be submissive to their husbands as to the Lord coupling the latter with declaring the headship of husbands over their wives. Vilakati is concerned to underscore the cultural conditioning of the texts and to argue that such has resulted in the androcentric views of the world behind the text being inscribed in them. Vilakati's interpretive focus here is on exposing the androcetrisism encoded in the biblical text in view of the fact that it is texts like these, *inter alia*, that have been used over the ages by the church to rule against women's ordination. Delivering a paper with such a concern at the historic Convocation of African Women Theologians was of epistemic cogency given that the close of the decade of the 1980s was a time during which the issue of the exclusion of the women from the priesthood was being hotly contested not only within the ecclesial context but also within academia specifically in the interrelated disciplines of feminist theology and feminist hermeneutics.

³ In the paper it is noted that women are portrayed for example as: sharing in the divine image in their human 'beingness'; desirable life partners to men; the first to stray from God's instructions; deservedly consigned to subordination to men; instigators of incestuous reproductive relationships; prone to rivalry among themselves; eavesdroppers; humble and hospitable to strangers; blackmailers; tricksters; part of the material possessions of the men in their lives; taking leadership initiatives and demonstrating agility at such; of loose virtue; conniving; available for savage disposal by the men who have socially sanctioned claim over them; positively resourceful; being sources of wise counsel to children and rulers; dogging pious men; generous; wealthy; exemplars of religious devotion; capable of profound bonds between each other; holding their own in theological conversation with men of high standing; innately fickle; etc.

Applying a synchronous and in-front of the text⁴ method of reading, Vilakati published in *UNISWA Research Journal Volume 16*, titled, Lomalongelo's Suppressed Quest for Religious Freedom: Gender Construction in the Book of Job. In this paper she explores the construction of gender in the book of Job with particular attention to the narrative frame (Job 1-2 and Job 42:7-17). The focus is on exploring the gendered nature of the narrativity of Job's theological struggle around the mystery of innocent suffering. As a reader committed to gender equality as well as social inclusion in general, Vilakati exposes the disproportionate narrative portrayal of the male and female characters in this biblical drama and points out the gender implications of this skewed narrativity. For internal evidence in the text, the article foregrounds several narrative details. First, the focus of the story is overly on Job, the male character, much against his introduction at the beginning of the story as a family man who has been blessed with ten children – Vilakati finds it interpretively significant that the story registers only Job's parentage to the children without once mentioning that of their mother much against natural logic. Second, is the flitting insertion of Job's wife which comes with a calculated immediate and definitive ejection of her from the grand tale such that she is absent even in the epilogue of the text when Job's life and fortunes are restored. A third detail that is highlighted in Vilakati's analysis is demonization of Job's wife trauma-filled questioning of her husband's apparent stoic response to the family's tragic experiences. According to Vilakati this serves as an ideological justification of the marginalisation of Mrs Job which has remarkably succeeded to enlist many interpreters of the story from each age in the act of unduly vilifying her as an unholy antagonist in the story.

⁴ Vilakati notes that Mrs Job's appearance in the story is restricted to a single verse at Job 2:9 that reads, *Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."* and that she is then dismissed in the next verse as a boorish woman who ought to know better than what she has said about God. For Vilakati, she's afforded this momentary narrative space to protest bitterly about hers and her husband's indescribable suffering via an invective against her husband. Vilakati departs from the age-old interpretations of Mrs Job's words as morally misguided and intended to beguile her husband in his impeccable path of faithfulness to God and instead sees them as an authentic response to the trauma that came with catastrophic events that she and her husband had gone through as a family.

Overall, Vilakati's gender analytic lens leads her to argue that it is not an innocuous narrative act that the author of the biblical story privileges and prioritises Job's faith struggle while quashing that of his wife, thus reducing Mrs Job to a mere foil character. Rather, Vilakati continues to argue, Mrs Job's momentary insertion in the story⁵ is designed to explain her relegation to the background while the narrative spotlight overwhelmingly shines on her husband. Thus, Vilakati concludes, this disparity in the narrative portraits of Job and his wife is neither a benign literary wrinkle nor an authorial slip but both a function and a consequence of the underlying gender inequalities prevailing in the community that produced the text. Vilakati interprets Mrs Job's brutal silencing and ejection from her husband's epic crisis of faith as suppression of her quest for religious freedom and ultimately draws a hermeneutical analogy between it and women's exclusion from theological instruction and learning in the patriarchal community in which Job's text is set.

Continuing her interest in Joban studies and still adopting an in-front of the text reading strategy, Vilakati has an article in BOLESWA Occasional Papers Vol. 1 Number 9, with the title, God's Vulnerability and Human Vitality in the book of Job. Here, conducts a comparative analysis of the characterisation of the figure of God and that of the *satan* character within the narrative unit of the text alternately known in Old Testament scholarship as the Divine Wager/Joban Wager.⁶ This is the part of the text

⁵ Vilakati notes that Mrs Job's appearance in the story is restricted to a single verse at Job 2:9 that reads, *Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."* and that she is then dismissed in the next verse as a boorish woman who ought to know better than what she has said about God. For Vilakati, she's afforded this momentary narrative space to protest bitterly about hers and her husband's indescribable suffering via an invective against her husband. Vilakati departs from the age-old interpretations of Mrs Job's words as morally misguided and intended to beguile her husband in his impeccable path of faithfulness to God and instead sees them as an authentic response to the trauma that came with catastrophic events that she and her husband had gone through as a family.

⁶ In the Prologue (Job 1-2) of Job, God is reported to have entered into a bet (wager) with a member of the heavenly council, the *satan* (executioner) by which God grants permission to the latter to test Job's integrity by taking away his material possessions and decimating his ten children. In the narrative context, God is shown to be extremely proud of Job's devotion to God, so proud as to initiate the bet with the *satan* so as to demonstrate the exemplary piety of Job.

where God is reportedly in dialogue with the Satan (*ha satan*) a personality understood in Jewish theology as the adversary of human beings distinctly known for being a master of deception and/or a physical executioner. Vilakati specifically applies a deconstructionist analysis of the narrativity of God's portrayal within the Divine Wager. The central observation in the paper is that the portrait of God that emerges from the Divine/Joban Wager is embarrassingly unflattering in contrast to that of the satan. Vilakati highlights that God comes through in the text as naïve, unwitting, rash, unperceptive, and therefore recklessly gambles with Job's life by surrendering him to the executioner who, true to character seizes the moment and strikes Job with tragedy after tragedy in swift succession such that he forlornly ends up on ash heap in ill health and barely able to afford so much as a whimper. By contrast, Vilakati continues to observe, the satan is in his best element, effortlessly gains the upper hand in the sport and gets both God and Job where he wants them to be – estranged! The paper goes on to posit that once God and Job are estranged, the stage is set for Job to engage in a bitter and protracted struggle to protest his unwarranted suffering while God remains absent (and perhaps oblivious to Job's sad state of affairs?) by God's silence. Vilakati argues that this narrative depiction of God and the satan reasonably, and scandalously so at that – results in exploding the dogmatic conceptions of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. On the other hand, it evinces human vitality (resilience) in that Job subsequently emerges from the weight of this crushing experience and finds strength to wrestle with God and his friends. The paper concludes by underscoring the ambiguous value of dogma in theological construction in that it does not capture the whole truth about some core beliefs, especially some of those that are purportedly based on biblical content.

In the paper Faith without Wisdom is Dead: An Exploration of the Integration of the Wisdom Traditions and Jewish Faith in the Old Testament, Vilakati explores the integration of the Wisdom traditions into the Jewish faith expression in the Old Testament (OT). The impetus for this hermeneutical exploration is the observation that the books designated as Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job) in the OT do not at first glance seem to have an obvious theological connection with the texts of the Torah that enjoy a distinct position of esteem in the Jewish rule of faith. Adopting holism as a theoretical perspective, Vilakati argues that mundane as the wisdom traditions appear to be at a superficial level, they do have a profound albeit subtle connection with the celebrated covenant

traditions of the Torah and that neither tradition speaks in full of Jewish faith apart from the other. She uses the combined constituent elements of wisdom to demonstrate their significance for incorporation to faith practice. The said elements as proposed by Ryan (2008) are: (1) wisdom as epistemic humility, (2) wisdom as factual knowledge, (3) wisdom as useful knowledge, and (4) wisdom as successful living.⁷ Building on this definition of wisdom, the paper argues that these aspects make for spiritual discernment which is a necessary intuitive dynamic that enables a person of faith to transit safely and congruently to and from between faith and practice. Part of the exploration, Vilakati inserts the gender dimension by positing that it is incumbent on women as part of the community of faith to recognise the reciprocal link between faith and wisdom to their benefit. In addition, she highlights that the patriarchal biblical text does not succeed to obliterate women's role in embodying, generating, and dispensing wisdom despite overtures in the internal hermeneutics of the Bible to present wisdom as a male preserve. The main title of the paper, *Faith Without Wisdom is Dead*, is an intertextual rhetorical appropriation of the argument of the New Testament Letter of James.

Vilakati's Gender Analytical Lens discussed within Context

Vilakati is a Liswati woman, whose hermeneutical journey has unfolded whilst growing up in a context where culture and western Christianity is an intertwined web. The patriarchal nature of the Swati society often fuels behaviour where women are seen as subordinates to men. Family members for instance are positioned in hierarchical power relations where males have authority over women, and women are obligated to comply with the authority that has been defined within these relationships. The husband is therefore culturally accepted as the ruler of the family, and is regarded as the formal authority to whom the wife and children owe their allegiance (Nyawo, 2014).

The advent of Christianity in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) is unique in that it was at the initiative of a religio-cultural figure, the king, who was and is viewed as a unifying factor and a symbol of culture and religion to the nation. Eswatini consequently built her socio-economic and political

⁷ Ryan, S., 2008, 'Wisdom', in E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008 edn., n.p. Retrieved August 2008, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/wisdom/>

ideology upon shared cultural values and the Bible; thus making culture and religion an intricate and intertwined web (Nyawo, 2014). The duo therefore becomes an inseparable pair in defining the status of women as subordinate actors of history. Also, it gives men the status as heads of households and decision-makers, all of which accords them control over members of that family (WLSA 2001). Kabonde (1996, 213) confirms these sentiments by stating that “cultural teachings are so intimately related to religious teachings such that religion cannot be divorced from culture; thus the two act upon each other, they influence each other and they propagate each other;” hence, Vilakati’s advocacy for Christian Feminist theology versus Christian theology introduced by predominantly male missionaries, which engages biblical texts uncritically. This is how Clifford (2001, 29) defines Christian theology of the missionaries;

“a gender blind” concept because it is faith in God being brought to understanding from the perspective of male experience... this is the type of theology that only incorporates the lived experiences of relationship to God of Christian men, and women’s experiences of God relatedness are excluded.

Rakoczy (2004), Clifford (2001), and Riley (1989) attribute the adaptation of Christian theology into the biblical texts and social contexts to the influence of Greek and Latin classics on early and medieval church fathers. They argue that over the centuries many Christian theologians have treated women not only as “dissimilar species” but also as a defective one (Clifford, 2001:30). Drawing on *Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, Augustine, On the Trinity Book, and Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*, Clifford summarises the theologies of church fathers as follows;

Tertullian (ca 160-225b) characterized women as “the devil’s gateway,” Augustine (ca 354-430) argued that man alone can fully image God; a woman images God only with her husband, Aquinas (ca 1225-74) influenced by Aristotle spoke of women as “defective” and “misbegotten” (Clifford, 2001:30).

The distinctive feature of Christian theology therefore is the exclusion of women’s relational experiences with God. The least to happen when women’s experiences are embraced in theological discourse is to pick on negative female figures in the Bible to warn society about the dangerous species known as “women” (Clifford, 2001:29). For example, I have observed in my society Eswatini that it cannot be a successful tent revival

meeting without male evangelists preaching about the story of the “promiscuous” Samaritan woman that met Jesus at the well (John 4:1-33). Emphasis is put on the woman’s loose character that could only change if she would drink from the living water, and she would not thirst again. The prompt response of the Samaritan woman to the “good news” of Jesus, and that she was the first evangelist in Samaria, a gentile territory, can either be mentioned haphazardly in sermons, or not at all. Other examples of biblical women characters that are usually represented negatively in churches, and who church women are warned against, are Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-28) and Queen Vashti (Esther 1:122). Queen Jezebel is often portrayed as an evil-hearted manipulator that led astray her husband King Ahab of Israel and the entire nation into idolatry; her good traits - that she was a strategist, an intelligent, courageous and tactful woman - are never mentioned in sermons. Similarly, instead of stressing the courage of Queen Vashti to safeguard her dignity against all odds, pastors’ sermons usually focus on the price she paid for being disrespectful to her husband’s command.

The last example of a woman’s character is Ruth who is always cited as a point of reference to young women in terms of their relationship with their in-laws. Her sacrifice of her own happiness to remarry at her homeland and her decision to relocate to a foreign land in order to serve her mother-in-law is what is emphasised in most sermons. That “Ruth is a role model not because she is docile and submissive, but because she transcends her gender and her ethnicity to ensure her survival” (Nadar, 2000:81) is least mentioned. Masenya (1998) has also participated in the Ruth discourse, which she says captures her attention as a Sotho woman raised in a patriarchal space where relationships between brides and their mother-in-laws are problematic. Furthermore, she uses the same narrative on Ruth to draw out definitions of what Africans view as worthy womanhood, which she says emerge from various Bible interpretations shaped by different African cultures. For example, in Ruth 3:11, Boaz, the wealthy Judahite man, informs Ruth, the poor foreign (Moabite) widow, that the assembly of Judahite men knows that she is the woman of substance (2010:2). Masenya discusses the images portrayed in the passage in juxtaposition with the definitions of womanhood prescribed in African proverbs, which African women are obliged to exhibit. Thus, as Masenya and other feminist critical scholars have concluded, Christian theology and African cultures are largely entwined.

In contrast, the Christian feminist theology, which Vilakati and others stand for, seeks to liberate theology from a centuries-long pattern of “patriarchal myopia”, where women’s lived experiences of their relationship with God are incorporated in theological discourse (Clifford, 2001:29). This is congruent with the definition of feminism articulated by Oduyoye (1986:121); that feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women’s experiences should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being a human. Christian feminist theology seeks to read the Bible “with African eyes” that would help women to recognise their potential to effect positive social change, whilst developing a greater sense of their human dignity (Rakoczy, 2004:174). This can be effectively facilitated through employing feminist theological hermeneutics, a criterion which looks at whether a particular text promotes male advantage at the expense of women’s dignity or any group of people whose life has been diminished by patriarchy (Clifford, 2004:37). As further noted by Clifford, this feminist approach;

...is interested in more than raising awareness of the manifestations of patriarchy and of constructing a liberating interpretation of biblical revelation and church teachings; it seeks to make a difference in the Christian community and civil society (2001:37).

CONCLUSION

From the seminal works of Vilakati, we see the feminist critical theory used as the framework that premises her engagement with biblical texts. Her theology confirms what other pioneers of the Circle of Concerned Women have ceaselessly proclaimed; that the eradication of all forms of women’s oppression caused by societal, cultural and religious patriarchy, is required (Phiri, 2004). Their theological and methodological frameworks are significant in engaging inequality issues in all social agents. Kanyoro (2001a; 2001b) adds that it is not enough to analyze culture without reference to the people who are beneficiaries and victims of the culture; “here is where the need arises for a gender sensitive cultural hermeneutics because it performs two functions as it addresses issues of culture, while being critical of that culture from a gender perspective”

(2001b:164). Rakoczy (2004:150) highlights the three arguments that underpin feminist hermeneutics. Paraphrased, they are that: the Bible has been used a tool to subjugate women and deplete their personhood; the authority of the Bible has been internalised; and Scriptures must be re-read and re-interpreted. Cultural hermeneutics therefore, is a key to the liberation of women in Africa because it opens the eyes of African women not to blindly succumb to socio-cultural and religious expectations (Kanyoro, 2001a:106). As Hinga (1990:34) has further observed, cultural hermeneutics “is meant not only to counteract the oppressive impact of the Bible, but also to create hope and a will to change oppressive situations and structures”, thus affirming women’s human dignity and personhood. Vasanthakumar (1997:43) drawing on Casalis (1984) posits that hermeneutics has four dimensions:

it translates a divine message into human words; it transposes what was said “at that time” into contemporary categories; it reclaims possession of the text and its meaning from those who have unwarrantedly locked them away; and it revives the past in order to retain its value for the present.

Application of liberative hermeneutics therefore, in socio-cultural and religious contexts like Eswatini would mean re-reading and re-interpreting the biblical narratives which societies use to abuse women and trample on their God-given rights. These dominant readings as West (1995) prefers to call them, have widely accepted interpretations that embody dominant values and beliefs, and they position a reader to favour them. Feminist critical readings, as demonstrated by Vilakati in her works, therefore manifest the injustices against women widely believed to be justified by the bible, whilst at the same time are an empowering force to women in families, church and in the entire society.

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