

Moumita BISWAS

Various Identities of Hagar

Hagar's story is one of the most tragic stories in the Bible. It is actually a story of multiple oppressions surviving when finding themselves as single mothers abandoned by their families of women, in terms of class, gender and race.

According to Phyllis TRIBLE, such stories of terror mean wrestling with the demons at night, without a compassionate God to save.¹ Though it is a story of stark horror, many scholars argue that this story reveals that God hears the cry of the poor and the oppressed.

Like Hagar in this postmodern world, many women from the South are victims of patriarchal violence precipitated in the form of domestic sexual and psychological violence, which increases in leaps and bounds due to poverty and racism. Many women like Hagar grapple to survive as a single mother abandoned by their family.

Ethical questions need to be raised regarding whether it is right to exploit the womb of a helpless woman to be a surrogate mother. Hagar's story can also be interpreted as a story of a slave woman's pride, which dared to defy violence with dauntless courage.

Hagar dared to challenge her mistress. It can also be interpreted as the story of a desperate, brave, rebellious, and at the same time helpless, woman's attempt to flee into the desert, hoping to seek freedom from bondage, slavery and exploitation.

In this paper an attempt will be made to reflect on the different identities of Hagar and also to highlight various issues like racism, sexual abuse and poverty, and their relevance in today's context.

The Egyptian Slave Woman, the Maid of Sarai

Hagar's story is introduced in Genesis 16. She is an Egyptian slave woman, the maid of Sarai, who was offered as a concubine to Abram by Sarai to atone for her barrenness and to produce an heir for Abram. According to Tikva Frymer KENSKY, in the Islamic tradition Hagar was not a slave woman, but a princess wed to Abram in a dynastic marriage. A Jewish Midrash also relates that Hagar was a princess in the house of the Pharaoh.²

Different people hold different views regarding how Hagar became a slave of Abram. According to Trevor Dennis Hagar was a part of a bride price that the Pharaoh gave to Abram to compensate the loss of his 'sister' Sarai. To justify his claim, DENNIS refers

¹ TRIBLE Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia, 1985. 4.

² KENSKY Tikva Frymer, *The Reading of the Woman in the Bible*. New York, 2002. 227.

Moumita BISWAS is the Associate Executive Secretary of the Commission on Mission, Evangelism and Ecumenism of the National Council of Churches in India. She is also the youth Executive secretary of NCCI. She is the first woman secretary to hold these responsibilities as youth and Mission Secretary of NCCI. She is a theologically trained woman. She did her studies in India, in the USA and in Switzerland (Bossey Ecumenical Institute). She has been involved in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) since the age of thirteen. Her email address is moumi31@yahoo.com.



to Genesis 12, where an Egyptian slave girl was mentioned (Genesis 12:16). DENNIS refers to Sharon JEANSONNE, who suggested that the term 'slave girl' in Genesis 16,1 is used in the same way as in 12,16.¹ She regrets, however, that there is nothing in the text supporting the notion of Hagar's royal blood.²

The bitter ingredient in Hagar's story is the humiliation she faces as a slave at the hands of her mistress. Hagar, being a slave, was supposed to be powerless to rebel against her rich mistress. Sarai must have felt terribly disturbed when the equation of power between her and the slave woman, a person of little status, was shifted.

Pregnancy elevated Hagar's status in the eyes of her mistress. Thus Phyllis TRIBLE rightly points out that Hagar's pregnancy enabled her to perceive Sarai in a new way. In her opinion, the hierarchy between the mistress and slave woman suddenly vanished.³ Hagar demanded equality between herself and her mistress. Besides, as the pregnant concubine of Abram, she threatened and challenged Sarai, who was wife, mistress and manager of Abram's household. Hagar must have challenged her mistress's authority.

Before things could get worse, Sarai, the mistress, had to do something to control the slave woman. She resorted to violence to curb Hagar and torment her. So cruel was Sarai's treatment of Hagar—condoned by her husband as a legitimate means of controlling the slave that she fled to the desert in search of hope (Gen. 16:6).

Hagar's story highlights the issue of racism. According to Beatrix SCHIELE, "Racism seems to be the primitive way of getting rid of competition, and behind it may lurk anxiety about what perhaps might be quite different creativity, different gifts of power."⁴

Kowk PUI-LAN thinks that Hagar's story can be significant to the African-American women in United States, because their ancestors had been enslaved as domestic servants and were exploited by wealthy and powerful owners.⁵ *Dalit* Indian women who worked hard can also identify themselves with Hagar because they are exploited by *Zamindars* (rich landowners) and high caste Brahmin masters.⁶

One of the Women in Abram's Life

Hagar, an Egyptian slave and concubine, acts as a surrogate mother (Gen. 16:1–3). Nowhere in the Old Testament is Hagar referred to as the wife of Abram.⁷ However, she played a very crucial role in Abram's life, being the mother of his firstborn. Various questions can be raised, such as, being the mother of Abram's first child, did she receive any love, sympathy, and respect from her son's father? Does Abram show any compassion to Hagar and tell her to protect herself? The answer is very clear. She did not receive love, kindness, and sympathy from anyone; rather, she was treated just as property, a vessel who nurtured Abram's heir. If Abram was concerned with Hagar, he would not have sanctioned Sarai to treat her badly.

1 DENNIS Trevor, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voice in the Old Testament*. Nashville, 1994. 63.

2 Ibid.

3 TRIBLE, 5.

4 SCHIELE Beatrix, *Violence and Justice. Violence against Women*. London, 1994. 24.

5 PUI-LAN Kwok, *Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation. Searching the Scripture: A Feminist Introduction*. New York, 1993. 105.

6 Indian society is divided into a hierarchical system of castes. It is one of the most oppressive systems on which Hindu society is based, existing for more than 5000 years. In such system, society is divided into four castes according to the color of skin. This is determined by the birth of a person and can never be changed. The Brahmins, or the priestly educated high caste, monopolize all benefits that society provides. The Kshyatrias, or the aristocratic caste, were mainly warriors and kings in the ancient times. The Vaishyas are the business caste. And the last one is the Shudras, or the agricultural caste. Outside these four castes are the outcasts or Dalits, who do all the menial jobs and are exploited by the higher-caste people. Dalit women are the worst victims of such violence. Many of them are forced into temple prostitution.

7 According to the Islamic tradition, she was another wife of Abram.

It is also necessary to comprehend Sarai's insecure feelings of anxiety about losing her husband's love. Thus she could not bear the pride of a blossoming pregnant woman (Gen. 16:4). According to Renita J. WEEMS, pregnancy would awaken the slave woman's self-worth, which was dormant before.¹ Her maid, by conceiving, could achieve what she could not do before. Sarai wanted to punish her husband's concubine. She treated Hagar so cruelly that she fled and took refuge in the desert (Gen. 16:6).

Hagar's story (one of the women in Abram's life) highlights the issue of how patriarchal culture is responsible for the oppression of women and the vulnerable, helpless and poor members of our society. It also draws our attention to the legitimization of sexual violence against women. It reveals to us how two women are caught in a booby trap of vehement hatred for each other, because of competition arising from the need of protecting their sons in an exploitative patriarchal system.

The story also raises the issue of domestic violence, which many women face in a patriarchal society. Hagar was a victim of domestic violence. Her master and his wife forced her into this critical situation. Domestic violence is the most dehumanizing form of violence that happens to a woman. According to Stella BALTAZAR, most women tolerate domestic violence silently. She thinks that only a few women can resist or protest against such injustice; if they do so, they will encounter serious consequences, such as being ostracized or faced with cruel treatment.²

This is very true to Hagar's experience. When she unable to tolerate her suffering, she dared to run away from her master's house. However, it was God who ordered her to go and face oppression (Gen. 16: 6).

God's command to Abraham is to obey Sarah and to banish Hagar and Ishmael, so that they will build a nation (Gen. 21,9–11), which reveals how the patriarchal authors of the Bible have bankrupted religion and God to justify their own selfish motives. It also highlights the issue of how religion can be misused by patriarchal society to curb the power and freedom of women.

According to Kwok PUI-LAN, Hagar's story for African women can be read from the context where polygamy still exists.³ For Anne NAISIMIYU-WASIKE, the stories of the polygamous marriages in the Hebrew Scripture are responsible for rivalries, jealousies, envies, favouritism, quarrels over inheritance, succession feuds, injustices and hatred. In her opinion, these realities are also the experiences of African polygamous families.⁴

Surrogate Mother

Sarai offered Hagar to be her husband's concubine in order to produce an heir. According to Katheryn PFISTERER DARR, though Sarai's proposal may be odious to us, it must be understood in its cultural context.

In her opinion, Sarai's act cannot be called a bold initiative, but rather a common legal practice in ancient Middle East.⁵ In order to strengthen her justification, she refers to the commentary of E. A. SPEISER, who cites a Nuzi (East of Tigris River) document revealing a similar situation:

1 WEEMS Renita J., *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. California, 1998. 5.

2 BALTAZAR Stella, *Domestic Violence in the Indian Perspective. Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*. New York, 1996. 57.

3 PUI-LAN, 106.

4 WASIKE Nasimiyu is quoted in *ibid*.

5 PFISTERER DARR Katheryn, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*. Louisville, 1985. 135.

“If Gilmininu has children, Shennima will not take another wife. However if Gilmininu doesn’t have children, Gilmininu will get for Shennima a woman from the Lulu country [ie. a slave girl] as a concubine. In that case, Gilmininu herself shall have authority over the offspring.”¹

In fact, Rachel also persuaded her husband Jacob to enter into conjugal relations with her maid Bilha (Genesis 30:1–24). This way of using the wombs of slaves and other women to be surrogate mothers is indeed a tragic example of the exploitation of a woman’s body by the patriarchal society.

Dynamic analogical questions would be painful for Hagar and Sarai—questions such as, can a woman be used by her master to atone for the barrenness of his mistress? Or, what woman would willingly become a surrogate mother if she knew that she won’t have the right to bring up her child?

Hagar’s precious womb was exploited to be a vessel to bear an heir for her master. Bearing his child and being a surrogate mother did not elevate her position in any way or make her equal to her mistress. This reveals that patriarchal society reduces women to be merely instruments of bearing male heirs to carry on the lineage.

Though Sarai attributes all the blame to her husband in torturing Hagar, we still have to agree that Sarai also deserves a certain amount of sympathy. If we analyze from a woman’s perspective, the question can be raised, which woman would share her husband with another woman unless she was compelled to do so?

According to Danna Nolan FEWELL and David M. GUNN, one of the most obvious structural features of the Biblical patriarchal family is the location of women within the roles of motherhood or child bearers. The point is that this role is regarded as the primary, if not the only, legitimate place for women; it is the place where women get social identity and approval.²

Moreover, Hagar, the surrogate mother, was threatened by her insecure mistress’s jealousy. After Hagar had become pregnant, the only thing that that Sarai could do was to send away Hagar. Thus she used her power to oppress Hagar. It not only revealed the pain of Hagar, but also the trauma to Sarai, who had to face the roles of patriarchal society. Hagar and Sarai’s story is the first story in the Bible, which reflects a power conflict between two women. Elizabeth HUWILER thus rightly says:

“The concerns of patriarchy in a male-oriented society turn women against each other to urge members of groups labelled ‘other’ to use their limited power against each other instead of against the system which uses both of them. However the tyranny of the system must not be used to excuse Sarah (and those of us who identify with Sarah) in the oppression of those who have less power and fewer options.”³

It enables us to analyze the complex dynamics of why two exploited women are both oppressed by patriarchal society, instead of sharing each other’s pain and becoming good friends.

Hagar’s story raises the issue of the exploitation of the poor, helpless woman’s body as a mere vessel to produce male heirs. Hagar’s story is of importance to the postmodern world of science, biotechnology and genetic technology, which is still creating surrogate mothers.

1 SPEISER E. A. is quoted *ibid*.

2 FEWELL Danna N. – GUNN David M., *Gender Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story*. Nashville, 1993. 68.

3 HUWILER Elizabeth, *Biblical Women: Mirrors, Models and Metaphors*. Cleveland, 1993. 26.

This is a common phenomenon in India and some other countries of the world, where poor women sell their wombs in order to support their family's living. Modern science and technology are beneficial to the rich but have increased exploitation of the poor.

Hence an ethical question can be raised: "Is it right to view a woman's womb as an object?" Moreover, the phenomenon of the surrogate mother can also be used to throw some light on the obscured fact of how much emphasis is given to the patriarchal notion that the fulfilment of a married woman lies in procreating offspring.

A Refugee

Hagar was compelled to flee to the desert because she was unable to bear the torture of her mistress when she was pregnant. For her, the lonely, desolate desert was better than her master and mistress's tent. Hagar preferred the dangerous desert to Sarai's revenge. However, did she find freedom? No, she did not. She was found by God's angel, who called her the 'slave of Sarai' and ordered her to go back to her mistress's tent (Gen. 16,8). Trevor DENNIS points out:

"God's command to Hagar is one of the darkest moments in all Scripture. ... Here, at least it seems to be in favour of the status quo on the side of the oppressor, a defender of interests of the Sarais of this world against its all too vulnerable Hagars."¹

Gerhard VON RAD, in his book *Genesis*, thinks that YHWH will not condone the breaking of regulations.² According to Megan MCKENNA, Hagar is like many women who are refugees, immigrants and illegal aliens, who are persecuted and hunted down.³

Hagar's story reminds me of refugees' misery and agony in today's context. There are thousands of refugees all over the world suffering the same fate as Hagar—who are hunted and persecuted by stronger powers.

For example, every year in Bangladesh, thousands of refugees enter India illegally to escape the bondage of poverty. On their way in search for a better life, they are hunted by pimps and become victims of sexual abuse or maidservants working in rich people's houses.

In Mexico, thousands of women and children are unable to bear the pangs of misery and poverty and try to cross the desert in Arizona, entering the USA to live. Many of them can't cross the desert successfully and are sucked into the jaw of death. Others are hunted by the border patrol police and then sent back home. Only few people are able to enter the USA illegally, but they are soon exploited by multinational corporations (MNC) and used as daily labourers, getting paid minimum wage.

Foreigner

According to Savina J. TEUBAL, the preservation of blood ties was very crucial among the matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. To justify her point, TEUBAL cites the example of Rebecca, who marries a member of her descent group even though she has to leave her homeland to do so.

1 DENNIS, 67.

2 VON RAD Gerhard is quoted in PFISTERER DARR.

3 MCKENNA Megan, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible*. New York, 1994. 181.

Teubal claims that Rebecca wasn't satisfied with Esau because he married a native of Canaan. She insisted that Jacob should choose a wife from among her brother's daughters.¹ This reveals that foreigners were despised by the matriarchs. Even later in Israelite society, seduction by a foreigner or marriage to a foreigner, which might lead to the production of life of another ethnic or national group, had a negative value in society.²

Indeed, Sarai used Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden, to bear a child for her husband. It was a common custom in Mesopotamia. We can also imagine that Hagar's status is merely that of a foreigner and a slave woman in a Hebrew household. Her struggle was a struggle for survival, constant compromise and adjustment. She must have been always treated as an alien (with a different culture and traditions), who was looked down upon, mocked and despised in her master's household.

Katheryn PFISTERER DARR has further revealed to us that as a foreigner, Hagar was also the victim of the legal practice in ancient Middle Eastern Law, which was put into practice in Sarai's homeland. In her opinion, the laws mentioned in the Hammurabi Code said that if a slave woman was her master's concubine who attempted to strive for equal status as his wife, she would be severely penalized.³

The reason that Sarai banished Ishmael is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. But we can speculate that one of the reasons why Sarah banished Ishmael and Hagar is because Sarah did not want the foreigner's son to inherit Abraham's property.

Maybe she feared that Abraham would love his eldest son more. However, TEUBAL enlightens us with another new thought. According to her, Sarah might have felt that Ishmael, the son of a foreign slave, might have been 'mocking' Isaac.

In her opinion, the mocking action might have a religious connotation linked with religious ethics. There was no reason for Sarah to banish Ishmael if she wanted merely to disinherit him from the material wealth. She claims Esau could be easily disinherited. Rather, TEUBAL thinks that Sarah did not want Isaac to be influenced culturally by Ishmael. Thus she banished Hagar and her son.

In TEUBAL's opinion, maybe it was unacceptable for a priestess to tolerate the rite of circumcision conducted on her son Isaac—which was a Mesopotamian, not an Egyptian, custom—and it was being enforced as a new rule of conduct.⁴

As a foreigner, Hagar and her struggle to survive in Hebrew culture can be used to focus on the issue of cultural violence and domination. According to Letty M. RUSSELL, culture is a tool of domination, a social reinforcement of dominant models of behaviour and social structures.⁵ In my opinion, Hagar definitely was a victim of cultural oppression perpetuated by her mistress and her husband.

According to Kwok PUI-LAN, an Asian theologian, the removal of Hagar's own cultural identity and the imposition of the new one throws light on the condition of people suffering from slavery. She thinks that it also reflects the suffering and trauma of the two thirds of the people in the world who lived for centuries under the threats of colonial and neo-colonial powers.⁶

1 TEUBAL Savina J., *Sarah and Hagar: Matriarchs and Missionaries. Feminist Companion to Genesis*. Sheffield, 1973. 236.

2 NEWSOM C. is quoted in BECHTEL Lyn M., *Feminist Companion to the Bible*. London, 1997. 111.

3 PFISTERER DARR, 135.

4 TEUBAL, 236.

5 RUSSEL Letty M., *Spirituality, Struggle and Cultural Violence. Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality of Life*. New York, 1994. 21–22.

6 PUI-LAN, 106.

For example, in Pakistan, India, and many countries in the South, the multinational and transnational corporations play a crucial role in pressuring the government to make policies and laws which are beneficial to them but harmful to the poor and common people. Such laws and policies are very exploitative.

The conflict between Sarai and Hagar may also let us understand the ethnic problem. In fact, the Palestinian problem has its roots in the separation of two brothers. One is Isaac, the son of Sarai the Hebrew (Israeli descendants), and the other is Ishmael, the son of Hagar (Islamic descendants).

The Woman Who Heard God's Messenger Ordering Her to Go Back and Be a Slave

According to Genesis 16, when Hagar ran away to escape the torture of her mistress, she was met by God's angel on the road to Shur (Gen. 16:6–8). The angel asked her where she was going. When she told the angel she was running away from her mistress, the angel ordered her to go back to her mistress. God's angel also blessed her and promised her she would have many descendants (Gen. 16:9–11). The angel told her that she would give birth to a son who should be named Ishmael, which means "God heard the cry of the distressed." (Gen. 16:11).

Certain important theological questions can be raised. Why, when God heard Hagar's cry (Gen. 16:11), did he tell her go back to suffer exploitation? Was that a proper way to treat a runaway slave?

KENSKY tries to give an answer to these questions. According to her, the angel is acting according to Middle Eastern laws (the laws which were followed before the Civil War), in which slave owners have the obligation to require a person who found a runaway slave to return to her or his owner.¹

The Biblical laws are different and require one to help the runaway slave to escape and not go back to the owner (Deut. 23,16–17). She claims that though Hagar's story took place long before Deuteronomy, the angel's action must shock an Israelite reader.² This issue raises certain theological dilemmas, especially when we see it in feminist perspective. Questions can be again raised: Why does this woman worship a patriarchal God who is so oppressive and exploitative?

According to Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, the Bible becomes a weapon when it becomes a miraculous divine book. It not only communicates God's world, but it is also believed to *be* God's world, emphasizing the absolute authority of Bible.³

ELIZABETH SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA rightly states that those texts which do not explicitly condemn such violence cannot claim God's authority. They must be read as a memory of suffering in order to open up the perspective of hope for liberation as a dangerous recollection.⁴

Irmgard FISCHER told us that there are other Biblical texts also attempting to

1 FRYMER KENSKY, 230.

2 Ibid.

3 SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York, 1983. 25.

4 SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA Elisabeth is quoted by FISHER Irmgard, *Go and Suffer Oppression, Said God's Messenger to Hagar*. In SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA Elisabeth – COPELAND Mary Shawn, *Violence against Women*. London, 1994. 76.

legitimate the harassment of women by divine authority (Number 5:11–31). She draws our attention to the fact that some laws legitimate violence against women.

She points out that it is evident that such violence in the divine law and divine verdict is commanded by and for males.¹ Thus we need to re-read and reinterpret the Scripture by using hermeneutical tools to discern which Biblical texts reflect the meaning of a loving, kind, almighty and true God.

Single Parent and Ishmael's Mother

God blessed Hagar with a son, Ishmael. Ishmael in Hebrew means 'God listens. God promised Hagar that he would make a nation out of the descendants of Ishmael. Ishmael lived in the desert and became a skilled archer.

Hagar can be labelled 'the Desert Matriarch'; she started her own community. Hagar was a single parent. She was responsible for her son's well-being and growth. The final note in the story reminds us that Ishmael's future is shaped by Hagar's understanding.

Hagar was also responsible for choosing a wife for Ishmael from her own people (Gen. 21:21). Abraham, her son's biological father, merely named Ishmael but deserted his mother and played no role in his upbringing. (Gen. 16:15).

If we contextualize Hagar's story as the single parent of Ishmael, it highlights the issue of single mothers disposed of by their husbands, consigned to raise their children the tough way. After being banished, Hagar and her son were wandering in the hot, parched desert. They felt hungry, thirsty, tired and shattered.

Her desperate, pathetic agony was revealed when her son was facing death in the desert. She left him under a bush, sitting away two hundred meters, crying to God because she could not bear to see her son die (Gen. 21: 15–16). It reflects many single mothers' struggles and obstacles when they have the same fate as Hagar.

The Liberated Woman

Indeed, Hagar's story is a tragic story of persecution, oppression and humiliation; however, it is also to be interpreted as a story of the liberation of a slave woman. Hagar's banishment indeed highlights injustice; however, the silver lining in the cloud was that she and her son were not sold.

She was no longer the slave woman, the property of her master, but a liberated and proud woman who raised her son alone. She is indeed a courageous woman who shook the status quo of her mistress and challenged the power which exploited her.

Hagar can be regarded as a very special woman in the Bible. According to DARR, she is the only woman in the Bible receiving the promise of innumerable descendants and the only individual in the Bible who dared to name God, "EL *Roi*" (which in Hebrew means "the God of Seeing").²

In Samuel TERRIEN's opinion, Hagar is a theologian; her naming unites the divine and the human encounters.³ She is the first person in the Scripture that the divine messenger visits. According to Jo Ann HACKETT: "This is the only case in Genesis,

1 Ibid., 79.

2 PFISTERER DARR, 146.

3 TERRIEN Samuel is quoted by TRIBLE, 4.

where the typical J-writer¹ promise is given to a woman, rather than a patriarch, so we sit up and take notice² (Gen. 16:10).

According to Elsa TAMEZ, many Latin American women see important parallels in Hagar's story because they have the same suffering. In her opinion, it is true that Hagar's story reveals poverty caused by slavery and the struggle of a single woman who was abandoned by her husband and powerful people trying to erase Hagar from historical memory.

However, the important thing to TAMEZ is that God has instilled hope in her.³ TAMEZ also interprets God as hearing the cry of the oppressed slave woman to reveal how God hears the cry of the victims of injustice.⁴ This notion can give hope and instil strength in many women who are trying to break free from the shackles of bondage and exploitation in the world today.

TEUBAL also enlightens us with another thought: "Hagar's story is not just a record of social change in a cultural system; it is a reevaluation of social values, the ordering of a philosophy of life. The significance of her life is that Hagar was able to obtain social and spiritual freedom."⁵

Hagar is brave enough to face life boldly in the midst of immense suffering. Her faith and her spiritual power must encourage many women who are suffering the same thing. TEUBAL rightly claims: "Above all, her close relationship with divinity and inspiration to forge her own community must not be forgotten."⁶

The Weaver of the Tapestry of Liberation

Hagar can be regarded as the weaver of the tapestry of liberation. Hagar weaves the tapestry of liberation with three basic fibres. These three fibres are the ones of risk, struggle and hope, which all played a crucial role in Hagar's emancipation from bondage and humiliation.

1. Risking one's Life

In fact, life itself is a risk. To people who are suffering from oppression, exploitation and poverty and whose fears are not blanketed by a false sense of materialistic security, risk is not a matter of choice.

Everyone has to take chances and risk their life if they want get liberation. Hagar dared to flee into the wilderness and search for a better option for her life. It is true that the episode of Hagar's attempt to escape can be justified on the grounds that she could not tolerate the torture perpetuated by her mistress, and hence she fled. However, if we think deeply, this episode also reveals to us that a slave woman is brave to risk her life in searching for freedom.

Stella BALTAZAR has pointed out that violence often pushes women to a corner of impasse; they think they have no way to escape. In her opinion, therefore, women couldn't develop retaliatory measures.

1 The book of Genesis in the Bible is based on two sources: the Priestly source and the Jahvist source

2 Ibid., 139.

3 PU-I-LAN, 105.

4 PFISTERER DARR, 135.

5 TEUBAL, 249.

6 Ibid., 250.

This is the reason why many women tolerate violence silently. They feel there is no other way. There are very few who dare to fight back.¹ Hagar is one of them. The courage to risk one's life is one of the essential ingredients necessary to achieve liberation.

2. Hope

Hope is the "safety valve" which enables human beings to survive. Johan DEGENNAR, an Afrikaner and a radical critic of apartheid, said that hope is a creative expectation. According to him:

"Hope is a kind of attitude, which enables us not to become encapsulated within a particular state of affairs, which by claiming finality into our lives, condemns us in action. Hope encounters this enslavement by nature of its being a creative expectation of a future in which justice prevails and which precisely through the disposition of hope, one commits oneself to bringing about."²

God gave hope to Hagar when she was crying, because as a mother she could not bear to see her only son dying due to exhaustion, hunger and thirst. God's promise to her to make a nation out of the descendants of her son bubbled in her dying spirit as a ray of hope, which inspired her to action in quenching the thirst of her son to revive his strength.

It is hope that God is with the oppressed in the midst of suffering that enables the oppressed to struggle and survive as they seek liberation. The hope, which makes Hagar survive in the desert, is one of the important aspects of women's struggle for liberation.

3. Struggles for Justice

Hagar's story is also a story of the struggle for justice. Being a slave and a woman, she had to struggle against racism, sexual abuse, humiliation and domestic violence. Being poor, betrayed and disposed, she had to suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst.

She even had to save her son from the jaws of death. She faced various obstacles; however, her dauntless courage enabled her to fight in bad situation. This story reveals that during the journey of life, seeking emancipation is not easy.

Struggle is an important component. It is interwoven with the concept of liberation. Therefore, the liberation from bondage is actually the alchemy of struggle, hope and risk. Hagar's story bears testimony to this fact.

Women in the South and other oppressed people who are struggling to achieve freedom from bondage and exploitation in today's context can use the three fibres that Hagar used to weave her tapestry of liberation.

The Hagars of the South in the postmodern era are victims of violence. Through their faith, however, God's love gives them power for perseverance and enables them to weave the tapestry of liberation. Their struggle for justice is a product of the alchemy of risk, hope and struggle.

1 BALTHAZAR, 57.

2 DEGENAAR Johan, *Book of Hope*. Cape Town, 1991. 4.

Suggested Reading

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Moumita BISWAS: Les Diverses Identités d'Hagar

L'histoire d'Hagar, l'une des plus tragiques dans la Bible, décrit les multiples oppressions en termes de classe, de genre et de race, dont sont victimes les femmes, mères célibataires, abandonnées par leurs familles. Bien qu'étant une histoire d'une horreur absolue, elle révèle que Dieu entend les cris des pauvres et des opprimées. Aussi maintenant, beaucoup de femmes dans le Sud sont victimes des violences patriarcales sous forme d'abus sexuel et psychologique domestique qui s'accroît avec la pauvreté et le racisme. L'histoire d'Hagar révèle comment elle a souffert non seulement comme la concubine d'Abraham, mais comme une esclave égyptienne, femme, étrangère et réfugiée. Plus que juste son sein était exploité alors qu'elle était obligée d'être une mère porteuse et qu'elle souffrait du traumatisme d'être une mère célibataire chassée par sa maîtresse. L'histoire d'Hagar, cependant, peut aussi être interprétée comme une histoire du courage d'une femme esclave, de défier la violence. Les composantes de la tapisserie de la libération sont persévérance, pouvoir de lutter pour la justice, espoir et courage de défier la violence en risquant sa propre vie.

Moumita BISWAS: Las Variadas Identidades de Hagar

La historia de Hagar, una de las historias más trágicas en la Biblia, es sobre las opresiones múltiples en lo que se refiere a clase, género y raza, de mujeres que sobreviven cuando se encuentran a sí mismas como madres solteras abandonaron por sus familias. Aunque es una historia de horror severo, revela que Dios oye el lamento de los pobres y los oprimidos. También ahora, muchas mujeres del Sur son víctimas de la violencia patriarcal precipitada en el abuso sexual doméstico y psicológico, que aumenta debido a la pobreza y racismo. La historia de Hagar revela cómo ella no sólo sufrió como la concubina de Abraham, pero como una mujer egipcia esclava, una extranjera, una refugiada. Más que sólo su útero fue explotado al ser compelido para ser una madre substituta y sufrió el trauma de ser una madre soltera ahuyentada por su amo. La historia de Hagar, sin embargo, también puede interpretarse como una historia del valor de una mujer esclava para desafiar la violencia. Los componentes del tapiz de liberación son la perseverancia, poder para luchar por la justicia, esperanza y valor para desafiar la violencia arriesgando su propia vida.