

Gender, Vulnerability and the quest for self realization among women as portrayed in the Book of Ruth: A Kenya African Religious perspective

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ABSTRACT : The arguments presented in this paper are grounded on the experiences of Naomi and Ruth as presented in the Book of Ruth. The question guiding this discussion is what lessons can Kenyan women learn from the experiences of Naomi and Ruth as reflected in the Bible. The paper is underpinned by SM Muriithi's (2008) assertion that Vulnerability can however be both a means and an end insofar as African women's religious orientation is concerned. Among the issues discussed here include: vulnerability among Kenyan women, the vulnerability of Naomi and Ruth as reflected in the Book of Ruth, the relevance of Naomi-Ruth narrative in tackling vulnerability among Kenyan women.

KEY WORDS : *Vulnerability, resilience, pauperization, capability, divine intervention*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability has been defined as a "quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked either physically or emotionally." Muriithi (2008) argues that women in Kenya are subjected to socio-economic suffering due to their (Kenyan women's) comprehensive vulnerability despite their inherent capacity to advance their self-actualization aspirations. She contends that there is need for a theological response to the plight of women in Kenya. Vulnerability among Kenyan women stems from the fact that governmental and other agencies are slow in implementing gender-friendly policies.

Masanya (2020) considers the Naomi-Ruth story as reflective of African Single Women. On his part, J. S. Mbiti (1988) contends that women had an important role to play in the traditional African society, as manifested in myths, legends, prayers and proverbs. So the question we must ask here is to what extent does the Ruthian narrative champion the plight of women within the African continent, and in particular the Kenyan context? This is the question that this paper tries to answer.

II. VULNERABILITY AMONG KENYAN WOMEN

Vulnerability among Kenyan women is a complex issue. And its causes are varied. Among these causes, the most outstanding is the failure of government agencies to implement national and international policies that have been instituted to cushion women against the adverse effects of discriminative and oppressive practices. According to Muriithi, Kabugi and Moywaywa (2017), the factors that contribute to vulnerability among Kenyan women are social, cultural, religious, political and economic in nature. One may also add environmental factors, especially among those living with disability. In social realm, the perception of women by some men as objects for sexual gratification is a commonly cited issue (Akaranga and Ong'ong'a, 2014; Sorokin, 2002; Mbuvi-Beya, 1989; Wachege, 1992). Culturally, women's vulnerability results from perspectives that exclude their lot from the forefront of decision-making organs within society. Kenya is a multi-religious society (Nazareth, 1981; Mbiti, 1974; Mbilah, 2004; Kahumbi, 2009). Despite this variety in religious belief, religious oppression of women is a factor that cuts across this divide. According to Akaranga and Ong'ong'a (2014), religious oppression of women is through the errors of omission and commission that is perpetrated by religious bodies in Kenya. Politically, some communities still consider women as unfit to hold leadership positions, especially in regard to competitive politics. Arising from this reality, the Kenyan government introduced the electoral position of women representative so as to increase the number of women in the legislative organ of parliament. But this move has received criticism from both women and men alike. Women claim that the 47 lots that they get through this arrangement are too few to have the desired outcome of making parliament responsive

to the one third affirmative action rule that requires that all state agencies should have at least a third of either gender in membership. Men criticize this move by asserting that by making this position exclusive for women, the government is propagating open discrimination against their gender. In the economic field, women suffer from practices that restrict property ownership making them susceptible to economic domination by men. As a result of this vulnerability, women in Kenya are subjected to discrimination, oppression, violence, rape and economic marginalization—all of which, together with other vices, lead to ‘comprehensive vulnerability’ (Murithi, 2008). Of course not all women are vulnerable. The following categories of women are likely to exhibit greater levels of susceptibility than others; widows, single mothers, orphans, the homeless and women living with disability. According to Kemi (2020:370), women who fall in these categories encounter greater suffering in situations of conflict. Thus, the death of a husband, as happened in the case of both Naomi and Ruth, is an event that can completely change a woman’s destiny even within the African and Kenyan context.

Vulnerability and susceptibility among Kenyan women is more dramatically and critically demonstrated during times of conflict, such as interethnic or interfaith conflicts. In such times, women and children are the most affected (Diakhate 2020:618). Whenever there are internal conflicts, such as the incessant and sporadic inter-ethnic clashes, the women folk in the affected communities are the ones who suffer the most (Kemi, 2020:372). For instance, during the 2007/2008 post-election clashes, women were the most affected. They not only lost property in the ensuing skirmishes but were also the most affected by internal displacement. It is also the case that during national and natural calamities such as floods, women suffer the most. In the ongoing global challenge of Corona Virus disease or COVID 19, Kenyan women are the most affected due to their higher levels of exposure to socio-economic risks. For example, the pandemic has resulted in the closure of schools, hotels and other workplaces where women make a significant proportion of the workforce, thus being the ones most affected by joblessness. The declaration of a dusk-to-dawn curfew has also crippled most small and medium size businesses most of which are owned or operated by women.

It should be noted that even among the women themselves, the degree of vulnerability varies from one subset to another. The widows, for example, would suffer greater consequences than non-widowed women and so on. Also those living with disability may suffer the most because of their additional vulnerability resulting from stigma. In most instances, the environment is configured in such a manner that disabled people find it difficult to navigate their way around.

III. VULNERABILITY OF RUTH AND NAOMI

Naomi is introduced as the wife of Elimelech, an Ephrathite from the town of Bethlehem in Judah. Her husband is said to have taken her, along with their two sons, into exile in Moab to escape from the biting famine in Judah. Naomi soon takes over the leadership of her family after the death of Elimelech, thus beginning her difficult journey as a widow (Rt. 1:3). Being the head of her family, Naomi steers her two sons into marriage (Rt. 1:4), whereby they each picked Moabite girls as their wives. Her vulnerability grew even more when both her two sons died (Rt. 1:5), leaving behind no one to perpetuate Elimelech’s lineage. And in her state of vulnerability, she is joined by Ruth (Rt. 1:17,19, 2:23e) who eventually proves to be a valuable companion to her (Rt. 2:2, 4:15). Ruth was the widow of Mahlon, Naomi’s foremost son.

It can be argued that Naomi’s susceptibility was the end-result of the famine that was ravaging through the land of Judah, lasting for over ten years. Note that Naomi attributes her stay in Moab to be the root cause of her suffering; “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” (Rt.1:21). If Naomi’s statement were to be interpreted on the basis of its face value, it can easily be dismissed as lack of faith or foresight on her part – since she was with Ruth who had opted to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem. Ruth was later to marry Boaz (Naomi’s kinsman redeemer) and with whom she bore Obed who became one of the men in the lineage of David, Solomon and Jesus. Hence, Naomi’s statement may appear as devoid of foresight or faith. So, it is important that when interpreting that statement, one should immerse himself or herself in the prevailing cultural environment at the time of Naomi. Naomi says that she was full at her point of departure going to Moab. This is probably in reference to the fact that she had her husband and two sons to look upon for security and protection. Now that they had been snatched away from her by death, she felt ‘empty’. It is like her source of protection had been pulled down to the ground and her sense of security disparaged, thus exposing her to the dangers of life. She had Ruth with her, yes. But Ruth was a widow, foreigner and childless. It appears that Naomi was not sure if Ruth would not secure a marriage, given the latter’s foreign identity. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t until Ruth came back from her first day in gleaning with a beautiful testimony about Boaz to the extent that Naomi’s thought about finding a husband for Ruth is ignited in her. For Naomi, this means that the emptiness in her could not be replaced by anything short of the survival of an offspring, directly generating from her and her husband. Elimelech.

Ruth the Moabite and Mahlon's widow, can be said to have shared, in some degree, Naomi's vulnerability. The picture we get from end of chapter one and beginning of chapter two is that both Naomi and Ruth have no definite source of food and thus vulnerable, because they arrived at harvest time. Ruth demonstrates her prowess as a self-initiative and self-driven individual by proposing to Naomi that she should be allowed to go out and glean in the fields so the two could get something to eat. Naomi was apparently excited by Ruth's proposal and was swift in giving her blessings.

The shared experience for Ruth and Naomi is also a pointer that women must learn to work together if they are to succeed in fighting against marginalizing tendencies. Naomi and Ruth stick together and are mutually beneficial despite their differences in nationality. The two illustrate Akamu's (2020:610) observation that State or nation should not be a factor when championing a worthy course.

IV. IDENTITY AND CHARACTER OF RUTH

Not much is said about Ruth's background except that she was a Moabite. Her parents were apparently alive, as is alluded in Boaz's kind words to her (Rt. 2:11). Her husband is Mahlon, presented as Elmerch's foremost son. When Elmerch, his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion migrated from their Ephrathite home in Bethreham of Judah and settled in Moab in search of better living conditions, it was not meant to be a permanent move. They were return on the food situation in Bethreham improved. For the present, the stinging famine in their homeland was enough to cause them seek some refuge in some foreign land, Moab. It appears that living conditions in Moab did not favour Elmerch's family and soon he himself succumbed to death within their few years of settlement in Moab. Upon their father's death, Naomi must have urged her two sons to take wives from the locality since travelling back to Judah was still untenable as the famine was still raging on.

Mahlon picked on Ruth as a wife while Kilion chose Orpha. The two ladies were Moabites. Identity of an individual is of great significance both in the Bible and in African cultural setting. In the African setting, an individual was identified first according to his family lineage, his, village, clan and ethnic affiliation. Sometimes reference could also be made to relations that are based on marriage affiliations especially when these include names of repute. As Mbiti (1986) observes, a homeless or nameless person was alien to African tradition. A person mainly identified himself or herself with a given group of tribe since, in Mbiti's (1990) words, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am". Another important analogy to draw from Ruth's story is the theme of sociality. Whenever there was famine or any other type of trouble that faced a nation, individuals were free to migrate to another foreign land for refuge reasons. These types of migrations of convenience could take place either intercommunally (that is from one part to another within the same community) or inter-communally or migrations across ethnic divide. Some of these migrations could be permanent but mostly they were on a temporary basis, with hope of one day returning home to one's ancestral land. Elmerch's family planned to return home once the food situation in Ephrathah improved.

V. PUBLIC WOMEN'S THEOLOGY AS MODELLED THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF NAOMI AND RUTH

In Ruth chapter one of the text, the nobility of character displayed by Naomi and Ruth is of noteworthy. Ruth's expression of devotion to Naomi is outstanding; for example in Ruth 1:10 (with orphan –while weeping) Ruth declares "we will go back with you to your people". It did not take long before Naomi convinced Orpha to heed her advice and go back to her parents and her people and her gods. But Ruth clung to Naomi. One may call this blind faith. However, it will appear that there was a powerful agent that was pushing Ruth into taking such a step as she took. Unfortunately, no mention is made of her family background. Hence in Ruth 1:16, she declares to Naomi "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

The Ruth narrative, whose author remains unknown, can pass as a highly spiritual one. Evidence is in the fact that God is mentioned 22 times (as God = x2, as the Lord = x18, as almighty = x1). A more significant way of expressing this spirituality is in the way almost everyone featuring in the story appears to recognize the centrality of God in people's lives. Naomi says that God rescues (comes to the aid of his people Rt. 1:5), provides (food 1:6 cf 2:3) for his people; shows kindness to those who show kindness to others (1:8), Provides a spouse (Rt. 1:9) and is the source of blessings (Rt. 2:20). But it is also God who causes bitterness (Rt. 1:20), renders empty (Rt. 1:21), Strikes with misfortunes (Rt. 1:13, 21), brings afflictions (Rt. 1:21).

On her part, Ruth believes that God punishes wrongdoers, is potentially wrathful (Rt. 1:17). Remember that Ruth was not an Israelite but her spirituality seems to blend well with Naomi's. Boaz speaks of God as one who upholds (Rt. 2:4), repays good with good (Rt. 2:12), rewards the righteous (Rt. 2:4) and protects those who take refuge under his wings (Rt. 2:12)

VI. Ways in which the experience of Naomi and Ruth can inspire African women in overcoming vulnerability

Although Ruth was a Moabite, the cultural setting that forms the background of her story is Jewish. Hence this section can be treated as an examination of the relationship between African and Jewish cultures as manifested in the book of Ruth. Since the story focuses on the life of a woman, this paper borrows heavily from John S Mbiti's article, "The Role of Women in African traditional Religion" in which he examines the role and place of women in society. The following section discusses some of the ways in which African religio-cultural practice is reflected in the book of Ruth.

a. Resilience

This is best demonstrated by Naomi. She endured her suffering without despair/ she even reached a point at which, just like Job, she perceives God as having unleashed unproportionately too much wrath on her. She probably wondered why it was happening only to her. Masenya (2020) narrates that if Naomi's experience was shared to an elderly person (especially one whose childhood years were immersed in heavily African traditional framework of upbringing) he or she is likely to proclaim that Naomi was under some spell or that she was bewitched. Indeed the fear for the unknown is one of the problems African women suffer from. Some of the greatest challenges they confront include infertility, quest for a male child, quest for wealth, quest for husband and the need for security. Because of fear for the unknown, such women become vulnerable to those out to exploit them. It is said that women form the majority of those who seek the services of witch doctors. In these places, they are known to make visits in secret to seek solutions on such issues as infertility, unloving husband, persistent ailments, among others. They also become the easiest target for prosperity gospel 'merchants' (Akaranga, 2015). They become easy targets because of their quest for such things as husband, job security, employment, infertility, molestation by evil spirits, separations and persistent ailments, among others. These are the things that feature in majority of those women who testify after joining congregations of such preachers. It is of course suspected that such stories could be fabrications meant to lure more people into joining such congregations.

Naomi, however, does not seem swayed by her myriad of problems to do something outside her line of belief. She does not even try to consult the gods of Moab so as to overturn her misfortunes. The option of remaining and getting lost in Moab to hide away in the face of her many afflictions does not seem to play in her mind. Her resilience is finally rewarded in the birth of Obed, her guardian redeemer (Rt. 4:15).

b. Devotion to family

The theme of devotion and commitment runs across the text of Ruth. But in no other person does it get a better embodiment than it does in Naomi and Ruth. Starting with Naomi, we note that she was devoted first to her husband, then her sons and finally her daughter-in-law. She was eager to see her family build and retain a respectable name, despite the setbacks in her way. When she decided to travel to Moab with her husband, one can conclude that she was ready to provide support to the projects of her spouse. She also single-handedly assists her sons to navigate through the difficult period of youth as they finally picked Moabite women for wives, rather than wait until they had returned to Judah and marry from within their Israelite community. Furthermore, her decision to guide Ruth into picking Boaz as her kinsman redeemer, and her eventual marriage to him also portray Naomi as a woman of strong character and unwavering devotion.

Ruth also demonstrates great devotion when she makes a decision to cling to Naomi (Rt. 1:16) and sticks with it, unlike Orpha who easily gives up. Ruth was kind to her husband Mahlon while the latter lived (Rt. 1:8). She continues to demonstrate her devotion and commitment to Naomi even after they settled in Judah during a difficult period when they had no food (Rt. 2:2, 18, 23; 3:5). She also eventually shows some devotion to Boaz her eventual husband (Rt. 2:23; 3:10, 14; 4:13).

c. Integrity

Both Naomi and Ruth exhibit impeccable character. Although it is not clearly stated, one can allude that part of the reasons why both Ruth and Orpha manifested such love for Naomi has to do with her impeccable character. The women in Bethlehem and Ephrathah give a warm welcome to Naomi and speak well of her (Rt. 1:19; 4:14). Ruth's reputation as a woman of integrity is demonstrated by the fact that some positive things are said to that extend about her. Boaz says, "I have been told all about what you have done to your mother-in-law (Rt. 2:11)" and again "All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character (Rt. 3:11)." The women in town also say this of Ruth as they address Naomi, "for your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons ... (Rt. 4:16)" thus, integrity can assist in overcoming vulnerability as Naomi and Ruth finally attain some renewal in the marriage of Ruth and the eventual birth of a child, Obed.

d. Humility

Humility appears to be the guiding principle for Ruth and Naomi. Naomi submits to her husband's wish for migration to Moab (Rt. 1:1,2). Her proclamation that she should not be viewed positively anymore and even suggested change of name to reflect her afflictions can be interpreted as humility (Rt. 1:20). Ruth is humble

since she makes a decision to follow her mother-in-law thereby foregoing her people and her gods (Rt. 1:16,, 2:11). This enables her to overcome xenophobia while in Judah (Rt. 2:10-11). She decides to go out and glean, which is a degrading thing for a young girl; (2:2ff). It is her humility, perhaps, that attracts blessings from the elders (4:11-12). Most African women wosen their ate of vulnerability by upholding a nonhumble demeanour.

e. Self-sacrifice

This is demonstrated by Naomi's acceptance to be accompanied by Ruth, a Moabite, back to Bethlehem (1:22). Ruth's self-sacrifice manifests in her choice to accompany Naomi and depart from her people and her gods (Rt. 2:11b).

f. A sense of purpose

g. Accountability

h. responsibility

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of Naomi and Ruth contains a variety of aspects or themes that reveal the similarity between Hebrew and African traditional worldviews. This is indicative of the fact that there exists plenty of usable resources within the African traditional society that can benefit modern Christian thought. The apparent close affinity between African and African traditional cultural reality is an affirmation of the validity of all cultures of which Christianity comes only to illuminate but not replace.

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