

Transforming Theology for Empowering Women

Kamalam Joel¹

The mission of God in the sphere of Theological Education and Ministry of Women in the Church should be unveiled and implemented until the reign of God is fully revealed. We have to keep in mind that we are on a horizontal journey, not a vertical one, because our journey is to bring equality where we can see one another on an equal basis. Our God is not one who is high above, so that we have to climb up a ladder (or pyramid) to know God. Ours is a God who is incarnate that we may see God eye to eye.

The topic entrusted to me is "Broadening Horizon in Theological Education: Transforming Theology for Empowering Women". The purpose is to empower women who will be effective in the church. Although there are women who now occupy high positions in various fields, there are more women who are marginalized and who have no voice even in their homes. Our intention ought to be more focused to reach the latter group of women and make them full persons (self-determining people) while we support the first group to break out new grounds. It should also enlighten everyone and so bring repentance to those who manipulate oppressive systems. For us it ought to be a commitment for the transformation of the church and, thereby, the world.

Women in Theological Education

History/Herstory shows how the women have made a difference in the past few decades in the theological field. But we have to ask a few questions. What were the hindrances and hurdles that the women had to face and overcome? What is our final goal? How are we to achieve it, strategize for it? What are the things we have to be careful about, the pitfalls, etc.? The first mandate for women from the risen Lord was "Go and tell". If we take this mandate seriously, we will be able to broaden our horizon in the theological field.

Sri Lankan policymakers introduced a social policy package of free health and education services and subsidized food, which dramatically improved the women's quality of life. Compared to the rest of South Asia, Sri Lankan women are very well-off, enjoying high life expectancy (74 years), nearly universal literacy, and access to economic opportunities, which are nearly unmatched in the rest of the subcontinent.²

In spite of the achievements that women have got in Sri Lanka, still women are expected to be home bound and to be silent. There are many idioms and cultural bindings that make women silent and home bound. One thing which women in Sri Lanka should break through is "*ladja bhaya*" (in Sinhala) or "*Atcham nanam*" (in Tamil) which says that women must possess shame and fear. I believe that it is the same in Pakistan. If we are to broaden

¹ The Rev. Kamalam Joel <methekj@yahoo.com> is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka. She earned her Master's in Theology from the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

² Country Briefing Paper, "Women in Sri Lanka", Asian Development Bank, Programs Department West, Publication Stock No. 030499, 1999, p. 9.

the horizon in theological education, women must break the chain of shame and fear. Therefore, the brief study on "Go & Tell" can give some light for women to broaden the horizon in theological education.

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and John narrate that women were asked to "Go & Tell". The women went to the tomb to grieve over the death of their loved one; they went to anoint the dead body with spices so they can preserve the body for a longer period; they wanted to lament pouring their grief and be at the tomb as much as the time would permit them. To such women the definite message was to "Go & Tell". Jesus usually asked folks not to tell anyone, but to women, he said, "Go & Tell". What does it mean?

This could mean that women ought to have a lifestyle of going without tarrying in the tomb. They are not to be bound by any sorrowful death experiences, because they have a task of telling the resurrection story. And they have to tell the story just as they would speak to a friend. For this task of telling, one needs no special training, study or eloquence. You relate what you have seen and experienced, just as you always do to a close friend. Thus, our Asian sisters have insisted that women's theology originates from experience. Their approach to theology is from experience to scripture. "Asian women do not start from biblical teachings about what humans and society should be in order to understand their reality. Instead, Asian women theologians start from their own historical situation and ask what relevance the Bible has to questions they have..."³ It might sound like "idle talk"⁴ as the male disciples said when the women told the good news of resurrection, but the women were to tell their story nevertheless. They might stammer or be lost for words, yet they were called to tell their story in the way they could. For them to tell the story they had to leave the tomb and go to the male disciples who were supposed to be the heroes, and who wanted high seats, but now have hidden themselves behind shut doors for fear (something which they should be ashamed of).

Male domination imposes '*ladja bhaya*' on women so that the men's shameful and cowardly stories may not be exposed. The women who are searching for broader horizon in theological education will have to look at their context and make the women tell all their tomb experiences without '*ladja bhaya*' to the shame of the patriarchal order which binds the women. If we look at the teachings and for all that Jesus stood, with open mind we can see Jesus "standing over against the dominant values of his society of his day and promoting alternative set of values"⁵ to fulfil the task of his manifesto which is found in Luke 4:17-19. Jesus allowed women to have full access of his work and never encouraged women to be under the spell of '*ladja bhaya*' which is common to all Asian countries. Jesus gives first hand charge to the women to "Go & Tell" his male comrades. They were to shake away the shame and boldly tell their first hand story. They were to break the culture of silence.

Today we have many tomb stories of women in our societies. It may be rape which tears women apart, wife battering which brings shame to the family or sexual abuse in the work

³ Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 106.

⁴ Luke 24:11.

⁵ M. C. Elliot, *Freedom, Justice & Christian Counter-Culture* (London, SCM Press, 1990) 34.

place which deprives women of a full life. Women are called to do away with '*ladja bhaya*' and "Go & Tell" the world that they are no more in the tomb for Jesus has given them life in its fullness. This will bring justice and liberation to the women in society, church and the world, which is a truly resurrected life. It is the patriarchal hierarchy which sustains and supports the systems that dehumanize women. It does everything in order to maintain status quo and cover up the shame of the system. It will do anything without fear or guilt feeling. It can be in the form of political discrimination, social marginalization, or religious subordination. If women are searching to empower themselves, they must stop weeping and wailing saying, "What to do? This is my lot." Women must leave the place of lamentation and boldly "Go & Tell" without heeding to the culture of '*ladja bhaya*'.

Women must tell their stories boldly so that the fear which has been enforced on them may seize those who manipulate the system to their shame. Women should not be ashamed of their spirituality or theological thinking even if the system would call it hysteria or whatever. Women must tell their stories to articulate a new humanity. Walter Brueggemann argues that "the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant cultures around us".⁶ Therefore, exposing the reality by coming out of bondage to "Go & Tell" will give opportunities to broaden theological thinking and articulations. It gives the search party light and will enlighten them to make strategies to overthrow the dominating powers that dehumanize the weaker ones in society. It also gives clues 'how to be careful' for those who are working for a new horizon in articulating theology to enhance women's thinking capacity and empower the women. Stories will make women understand from many perspectives.

What keeps women from relating or voicing our stories? Undermined eloquence, not knowing all the facts, fear of what others would say or that others would not believe, under the bondage of cultures, etc. Though women take all odd orders from others, when it comes to the theological world or constructive world, our tendency is to decline. We claim that women are co-creators with God but we are reluctant to be creative in our thinking and doing. Who am I? What are my experiences as a child, adult and in old age? What are my experiences in the family as daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunt, grandmother, etc? What are my experiences in the society, church, etc? Margaret Hebblethwaite in her book, *Motherhood and God*, brings out some wonderful thoughts on God as Mother through her experience as a mother.⁷ To broaden the horizon in the field of theology, we should be able to hear all kinds of voices, both positive and negative. The task of broadening the horizon in theological education is embedded in these voices.

1. Silent: We are living in a world where there is full of noise. In this world women are considered as complaining, nagging and gossiping, but the real issues of women are either silent or have been silenced. We have to develop ears to hear them, feel them, empathize with them and articulate the words that make others hear their voice. One example is the story in Judges 19. The woman in this story is totally silent. Many Christians do not know this story. Such is her silence. We do not hear her anger when she left the house or when she

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984).

was at her father's place. When the men of Gibeah mobbed around we do not know how frightened she was. When she was gang raped, we do not know how she wailed in agony. We are told nothing of her cries, her struggles, her terror, her shame. How pathetic it is to note that the woman comes back to the house where she was betrayed without realizing that brutality more severe than that of the mob awaited her. In the end, just because she did not answer, she was counted as dead and with her husband's sharp blade she was further broken apart. The Levite was supposed to be seeking for justice but we know his intention was to cover up his guilt. Though she was the main character she had no voice of her own. We see and hear many such cases around us. What is theological education doing to us to empower women to voice their woes? Joyce Hollyday in her book, *Clothed with the Sun*, relates a story of a woman who was a victim of incest. When the pastor consecrated the Communion bread, she felt one with Jesus and "she had a vision of 're-membering' bringing her parts of the body back into wholeness".⁸

2. Male Voice in Female Characters: In the theological world it is not only that women are being silenced; sometimes women's voices are heard through men's voices. Thus, women's identity, aspiration, etc. are totally denied. The classic example is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her Magnificat shows how vibrant and strong a woman she really was. But the church has presented her as a docile, weak mother. Further the Roman Catholic Church has made her a perpetual virgin as well as immaculate mother, which no other woman on earth can become. Denied of a seat in the church, she has been presented as a dumb figure and for whom many men have tried to be her voice. "Our thinkers and guides for centuries been men without a wife and family and without a home unless it be a monastery."⁹ The protestant churches totally deny her contribution in the mission of God. Mary, a simple country girl who accepted the will of God with wisdom, has no voice of her own in the church and we have to give back her voice.

3. Religions: Suffering is the common lot for all human beings that it takes the central place in all religions. Religions assure that there is hope for a world with no suffering in the future for those who abide by each particular religious teaching. It promises protection and happiness to all believers. "There is nothing theoretical or abstract about it. To talk of suffering is to talk not of an academic problem, but of the sheer bloody agonies of existence, of which all men are aware and most have direct experience. All religions take account of this; some indeed, make it the basis of all they have to say."¹⁰ Though Bowker says that 'all men are aware', I would emphasise that it is the women who are more aware of the agony of suffering than men. However, patriarchal religions have doubly oppressed the women who then suffer more than men. Therefore, it is women who should be able to address the problems of suffering and redeem the religions.

4. Pitfalls: One pitfall is that women who struggle to empower other women have the tendency of falling into the trap of power struggle, because we do not have any models to

⁸ Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 35.

⁹ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 87.

¹⁰ J. Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 2.

follow. The current trend of climbing up the ladder of hierarchy is all around us. Women too are socialized into climbing the ladder rather than making or finding an alternative. A second pitfall is our tendency to simply become like others. We have to affirm our identity and be authentic rather than try to be a duplicate. For example, I am more of a preacher than anything else so I hear constantly some remarks. Am I to be ashamed of this? Being a woman makes me cry and tearful but this is usually counted as weakness. Is it wrong to be a woman when I am seated in the high places? I am taking simple illustrations and many more can be made related to clothing, food, etc. Being creative is something we can start by experimenting with little details.

Conclusion

For women to make a difference in theological education, we must claim our heritage, our voices and our whole being no matter who we are or what our experiences may be. This transformation in theological education should be in relation to other religions, keeping the social realities in mind. This involves social analysis and hermeneutical analysis in connection with women's emerging theology. The voices of women that have been suppressed and silenced in society, workplaces, and religions should be heard. Women in the past have accepted anything that was defined for them as their lot and therefore they have kept silent. Men regarded the silence of women as their license to treat women as they wished, at times in the most gruesome manner, thereby denying God's image and likeness in women. Women's voices of pain and agony were not allowed to be heard by narrators of stories or by commentators. These voices in all religions are coming together to seek a common ground that can present one voice for the purpose of transforming theology. This transformation will echo the needs of women in the community so that a solution can be found for the problems that deny the authenticity of people in general and of women in particular. This demands that men should not silence the women or speak on their behalf, but rather they should allow the women to speak for themselves. When the women were allowed, they were able to transform the perspectives of their religious leaders. Indeed, women can transform theologies with the very voices that were before suppressed and silenced in order to make a difference in churches, temples or other worship places.

Jesus said that he came to give life in its fullness (John 10:10b). Who is the thief who has robbed women of the fullness of life? Women have to get back this life. We cannot underestimate the power of the institutional church. It is like a strong iron pillar. But such pillars near the seaside just crumble because of the salty environment. Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. So we can have confidence that we can crumble the patriarchal church. And Jesus also said, "You are light of the world". Becoming the light we show the sin of the church in denying women participation in the life of the church. Our sisters in the West came up with feminist theology to bring about liberation. The Black American sisters came up with womanist theology in their struggle for survival and full participation. What is our theology? This is the challenge that is before us. The changes that take place in theological thinking and education can equip women and men and empower them to realize the Reign of God, here and now.