

**The Portrayal of Women in the Old Testament: A Feminist
Reading of the Books of Susanna, Judith and Ruth**

**A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Addis Ababa
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Addis Ababa University School of Graduate Studies

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DECLARATION

I the undersigned, declare that, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university. All sources used in writing the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Exo.	Exodus
Gen.	Genesis
Jdt.	Judith
JSOT.	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Lev.	Leviticus
NEB	New English Bible
Sus.	Susanna

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abbreviations.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter One	
1.1 The Problem	1
1.2 Objectives of the Study	3
1.3 Methodology	3
1.4 Significance of the Study.....	5
Chapter Two	
Review of Related Literature.....	7
Chapter Three	
3.1 Susanna	21
3.1.1 Summary of the Plot	21
3.1.2 Application of Feminist Theory to the Book of Susanna	22
3.2 Judith	27
3.2.1 Summary of the Plot	27
3.2.2 Application of Feminist Theory to the Book of Judith	28
3.3 Ruth	35
3.3.1 Summary of the Plot	35
3.3.2 Application of Feminist Theory to the Book of Ruth	36
Chapter Four	
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	50

ABSTRACT

The Hebrew Bible, which contains 39 books is usually called the Old Testament by Christians. Appendix to the Old Testament, 14 books are also included. These texts are called the Apocrypha (Greek *apokryptein* 'to hide away'). Among these, we find three books that bear names of women characters (namely, Susanna, Judith and Ruth).

The aim of the present study is to examine and analyze these three women characters by using the feminist literary approach. Even though there are different kinds of feminist approaches, I have tried to apply what is known as 'the feminist critique' - the feminist analysis of male-authored texts.

The paper is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the background, objectives, methodology, and significance of the study. Chapter two presents a review of related literature. In this section I have attempted to give attention to some feminist literary theories and critical studies available in the libraries I visited. The feminist critical studies that deal with different elements of literature, such as novels, short stories, poetry etc., are enormous. So I have tried to limit myself to the studies that focus on the Hebrew Bible only.

In the third chapter an attempt has been made to examine and analyze the selected Biblical narratives according to the framework discussed in the second chapter. Then, the final chapter is the conclusion. In this section a brief summary and some findings would be discussed.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. The Problem

For a long time, religion has governed all human actions. Be it Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism, it has been an all-pervasive force, whether consciously realized or sub-consciously assimilated, in the lives of people everywhere in the world. According to Kraemer (1999), religion was a society's main source of law used for purposes of social control (e.g., the Ten Commandments, Moses's Laws, the Koran, Buddhism's Five Precepts, and the Laws of Manu) and guiding daily life.

When the roles and status of women in society are discussed, the issue of religion and its impact on their position has not been covered sufficiently. "Religion or more specifically, religiosity, folk religion, or popular religion has been used to excuse the prejudicial treatment of women, to degrade them, and to restrict them to endless child-bearing and drudgery" (Kraemer, 1999:52). It is possible, therefore, to say that by studying the characters of women found in the Holy Books (in this case the Bible), we can see the development of the society's attitude towards women. Hence, this paper is committed to showing the portrayal of women characters in the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the Old Testament). I also hope that the paper may contribute to the study of the Bible as "the greatest of all literary works" (Frye, 1982:12). I specifically hope that examining the stories of women in the Bible would show the importance of reading

religious texts in providing insights about gender relations as they are articulated today.

My interest in the subject matter began in my early days as a student in the graduate program. When I found myself reading some critical studies on the Bible, I realized that, although the Bible could be taken as a "literary work" (Frye, 1982), researchers haven't given much attention to study it. Among the studies carried out by students in both the Foreign and Ethiopian Languages and Literature Departments, only few of them dealt with the Bible. I have found only one MA thesis written by Nahusenay Afework (1999) and very few senior essays, one by Awot Kidane (1999) and another by Dereje Bekele (1998) that treat selected books from the Bible. Awot and Dereje presented symbolism in the Gospel of John and figures of speech in Luke respectively. Gezahegn Assefa (1992 E.C.) also presented a paper entitled " የሴቶች ተምሳሌታዊ አሳሳል በብሉይ ኪዳን መጻሕፍት", which deals with the portrayal of women in the Old Testament. Gezahegn tried to describe the female figures by taking the concept of symbolism and wrote that the characters are depicted to symbolize concepts like salvation, curse, etc (Gezahegn, 1992:50). His analysis on the portrayal of women in the Old Testament in general, contains insights that may contribute to an understanding of female characters in the Bible. Nevertheless, a number of cases presented in that senior essay shows that the paper is purely descriptive and not a critical examination of the narratives. I mentioned these papers just to indicate that there are some studies, which deal with the Bible.

So, since the above mentioned papers are not relevant to my study, I haven't included them in the Literature review proper.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The Bible is a collection of sacred writings written in different historical periods (Gabel, 1996). It includes the origins of the world, the history of the ancient Hebrews and their covenant with God, Prophetic writings, religious poetry, the Gospels and the Epistles of the different apostles. According to *The New English Bible* (NEB, 1970:VI), the original texts of the Old and New Testaments were written in Hebrew and Greek, respectively.

The objective of the present paper is to study and analyze three female characters; namely, Susanna, Judith and Ruth, as portrayed in the Old Testament. This paper specifically focuses on these characters, with the purpose of showing how androcentric literature can be used as an instrument of revealing the socio-cultural codes or conventions that are inscribed in the stories.

1.3. Methodology

In the Old Testament, we find no less than 1426 names, of which 1315 are those of men. Thus, only 111 women's names appear, about 7 percent of the total. The enormous gap between the number of women's and men's names signals the male-centered concerns of Biblical literature.

It is obvious that examining each female character found in the Old Testament is a very difficult task. Because of this, I have limited myself to three figures in order to examine the roles women played in the stories. The characters have been chosen because of two reasons. The first one is that they are major characters who gave their names to books produced in the midst of androcentric-oriented literature. My second reason is that the narratives are fuller and more suitable for analysis as compared to the other episodic narratives found in both Old and New Testaments.

Studying and analyzing Biblical narratives, poetry, proverbs and the like by using different kinds of literary approaches, such as feminist, Marxist, formalist etc., provides wider opportunities for understanding the narratives from the perspective of literary discourse. Accordingly, I have opted for analyzing the texts in terms of the character's roles, attitudes and behaviors, which are the reflections of the values of the society, by using the feminist approach.

Therefore, basing myself on some adopted concepts of feminist literary theory, I will try to show how women characters are portrayed in 'androcentric' literature. The term androcentric refers to the "patriarchal language and perspectives that place males at the center of description or analysis" (Kraemer, 1999:20).

In order to bring this aspect to light, I treat the texts as one form of discourse on gender relations reflecting a male-dominant culture. As Carol Mayers (1988) notes, the literary implications of discourse have been developed

recently, extending discussions about the relationship between gender, language and social structure to the narratives. The converse of speech-silence is also equally meaningful, since the literary character who is "denied discourse often experiences narrative expression as well" (Mayers, 1988:23). So, in the main, I use the speeches or silences of the characters as a basis for analyzing the texts. It is also the concern of this study to compare the portrayal of women within these three books and to demonstrate their similarities and differences.

For quotations, the Bible translation used in this paper is *The New English Bible* (1970). I have used it not only because of its lucid language and closer to the original Hebrew but also for containing the Books of Apocrypha.

Since this paper exclusively depends on library work, I found other research methods, such as interviewing and questionnaires unnecessary for my study.

1.4. Significance of the Study

It has been pointed out that the aim of this paper is to focus on the way women are portrayed in the Old Testament. Therefore, it is hoped that what might emerge from analyzing the stories of the characters in the selected texts would provide wider opportunity for understanding Biblical narratives. I also think it would help raise consciousness about the feminist criticism. Since there are very few research papers that deal with the Bible, this study may also initiate students of literature to know more about it in general, and gender portrayal in particular.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1. Review of Related Literature

As K.K. Ruthven (1991) explains, the starting point of feminist criticism is not the given texts but the issues and concerns of feminism as a worldview and as a political enterprise. However, a century ago, the feminist literary criticism exposed strategies so as to find out paternalistic dominance¹ of women that are inscribed in literary texts (1991:12). In doing so, feminist critics applied a variety of approaches encouraging multiple readings, such as Marxism and feminism, Freudianism and feminism, feminism and existentialism, etc.

Feminist literary criticism also concentrates on analyzing the ideas contained in literary texts and showing in detail the ways in which women's lives and voices have in fact been suppressed by texts. It also asks how a woman's voice, if at all articulated, can be discovered in an androcentric text.

Regarding the Bible, there are many different directions that feminist studies have taken. Some commentators, such as Athalya Brenner, have paid attention to what goes on in "the telling of the stories and the singing of songs using literary approaches to shed a new light on metaphors, images, and narrative about women" (Bird:1989). Others, like Carol Mayers, have tried to explore the extent to which even the Biblical writings that pertain to women are shaped by the concerns and perspectives of men and yet how it can still be

¹ The concept 'paternalistic dominance' refers to the family relations developed under patriarchy, in which the father held absolute power over all the members of the household. It is used by the feminists to describe the relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior.

possible at times to discover the presence of women and their own points of view between the lines (Bird, 1989:15). According to Bird, many have struggled with the issue of how women in communities of faith can and should read the Bible in the light of what feminist theories have discovered.

Feminist criticism on the Bible is at least a century old. But only in the last decade or two has the force and radicality of a feminist critique begun to make an impact on professional Biblical scholarship. By now it is being recognized that serious Biblical study is impossible without raising questions about the role of women in the Biblical texts, their place in their societies that produced the Bible, and the ways an androcentric culture has determined the way that women are presented in this literature.

According to Donovan (1992) the first feminist writer on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Her book *The woman's Bible*, which was published in 1895, is considered to be "the original feminist attack on the Bible". She goes on to say that Stanton was influenced into adopting feminist position by "Matilda Joslyn Gape (1826-98) whose *Woman Church and State* (1893) remains one of the most powerful pieces of feminist theory produced in the nineteenth century, one that had fallen into obscurity until it was published in 1980" (Donovan, 1992:36).

The Woman's Bible as Donovan puts it, illustrates the radical purposes to which natural rights doctrine could be put. According to Donovan, Stanton establishes that natural rights principles are "on a higher moral plane are

closer to God than the Bible"(Donovan, 1992:37). She therefore uses natural rights theory to repudiate the validity of Biblical ethics (Donovan, 1992:37).

When stating Stanton's strong feelings towards the Bible rejecting women's equality, Donovan points out that "any code or creed that uniformly defrauds woman of all her natural rights cannot be accepted" (Donovan, 1992:42). With these words, according to Donovan, Stanton dismisses the Ten Commandments as being unworthy of and irrelevant to women. Her overall position as Donovan notes is that the Old Testament is an expression of a "tribal morality" of centuries past and has little or no contemporary ethical relevance. Especially the Pentateuch,¹ must be seen as "emanating from the most obscene minds of a barbarous age" (Donovan, 1992: 38). To elaborate this idea, Donovan takes the following quotation from Stanton's book:

The question naturally suggests itself to any rational mind, why should the customs and opinions of these ignorant people, who lived centuries ago, have any influence in the religious thought of this generation? (Donovan, 1992:39)

According to Donovan, Stanton had come to the conclusion that "it was a mindless reliance on the Bible and its supposed doctrine of women's inferiority that was the central force in perpetuating an ideology of women's subjugation" (Donovan, 1992:40). Such a thesis, according to Donovan, implied that "political rights would not be enough to change women's status; a revolution in social and religious attitudes was necessary" (1992:37).

1. Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible, ascribed to Moses, and called the Torah by Jews.

Donovan also noticed that in *The woman's Bible*, Stanton asserts it is the Bible that is the ultimate source to which antifeminists always refer: "the Bible is used to hold women in the Old and New Testaments" (Donovan, 1992:50). "Creeds, lodes, Scriptures and statutes, are all based" on the patriarchal idea "that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man" (1992:750).

According to Bird 1989, *The Woman's Bible* is built on serious commentaries of Stanton on selected passages of the Bible that concern women. Stanton's strategy in Bird's view is first, to discredit the authority of the Bible where it presents negative ideas about women, to highlight its negative ideas about women and to develop an alternative religious tradition more congenial to women. In Stanton's commentary on Genesis, for example, Bird points out that it includes two "contradictory" stories of the creation (Bird, 1989:7). "Stanton chooses to focus on the first (Gen.1:26-27) and dismisses the second (Gen.2:21-23), in which God made Eve out of Adam's rib, as an expression of the male supremacist ideology of its author"(1989:7). Stanton according to Bird, argues that we return to the first where God created man and woman as equals "in his image". From this Stanton elaborates one of her most important ideas; "Genesis 1:27 implies that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented" (Bird, 1989:11).

Bird explains that the overall idea of Stanton is rejecting patriarchy and advocating the creation of a new society in which mothers will rule, or at least

participate in ruling. Because of their connection with the life-giving force women should be considered "as sacred as the priesthood" (Bird, 1989:15).

According to Donovan (1992), Stanton introduced an important "new vein in feminist theory: the idea that women, and in particular mothers, have special experiences and capabilities that lead them to express a life-affirming, pacifist worldview" (1992:39). Here we can question Stanton's idea of "women's life giving force" because life giving is not an exclusive domain of women. It takes two to tango.

The second feminist criticism of the Bible took quite a long time to be published. According to Bird (1989), Phillis Trible's paper "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" appeared in the *Journal of American Academy of Religion* in 1973. As Bird puts it, the essay increased the awareness of women on how to stand on as an equal footing with men.

Critics like Bird tell us that the gains in feminist interpretation in recent years are immense. The theory has developed to include a broad range of research from other disciplines. This has enabled feminist readers to enrich their understanding of literature, but it has often provided the reader with problems of interpretation and difficulties in applying theory to practice. However, as Bird explains, since the publication of "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality" by Phillis Trible in *Overtures* in 1973, feminist practices and perspectives in Scriptural interpretation have become well established in the midst of more interpretative theories and practices.

A number of recent studies of the role of women characters in the Old Testament have tried to balance the overwhelming evidence of patriarchal domination by citing a few female "heroic" figures who take independent action of one sort or another. In an interpretative book, *Women in the Old Testament* /1988/, Phillis Bird speaks of the role of five female prophets mentioned in the Bible stressing on the positive statements about women in Proverbs. She also praises the erotic richness of female sexuality in the Song of Songs and argues that the Biblical narratives, especially the stories of Deborah (Judges 4 and 5) and Huldana (II kings 22:14-20) lend support to the statement that women are recognized as brave.

But when I examined the narratives very closely, it appeared to me that there are evidences that disprove the arguments she has made. If we take the Song of Songs, it is so difficult to bring into historical perspective that it seems unreasonable to make inferences from it as to the actual status of women; it needs to be treated as a literary creation. Since the identity of the woman in the Song is unproven and highly controversial, it does not seem to me possible to use it as the basis of generalizations about the actual conditions of women in ancient Hebrew society.

It is also difficult to say that Deborah has played a heroic role in the Book of Judges. Because there was a time when Deborah asked the assistance of a man. She sent for Barak and said to him:

"The Lord, the God of Israel, has given you this command: 'Take ten thousand men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zabulun and lead them to Mount Tabor..... I will give you victory over him' ". (4.8)

Barak responds cautiously, "if you will go with me I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go" (4.8). It is unclear whether Barak's response indicates lack of self-confidence or distrust of Deborah's authority. But one can imagine that at Deborah's authority, though well recognized, is hardly a match for the commanding voices of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb.

Andre LaCaeque, in *The Feminine Unconventional* (1990), also presents what he refers to 'subversive' women figures in the Bible, mainly Susanna and Esther, with regard to their roles in the narratives. He argues that their "sharp criticism of ideology" breaks the patriarchally-oriented society. They break the stereotypes of femininity by transcending the male-female polarity. According to his explanation, the women's substitutional self-offering gave salvation to the people they lived with and, therefore, the characters could be taken as 'heroines' of the texts/1990:118/.

It is my opinion that the women's "criticism of ideology" does not come out very clearly in LaCaeque's argument. But even if it did, I don't think it would be acceptable, especially in the case of Susanna because we don't find any concrete speech or action that we can take as a "criticism of ideology" the LaCaeque speaks of. I am going to elaborate this further in Chapter Three.

From the above explanation, both Bird and LaCaeque have tried to show that the patriarchal dominance of society doesn't make the women in the Old

Testament inferior to men. However, in an interpretative book which details various expressions of patriarchal dominance in the Bible, Alice Bach (1997) states that women are economically deemed inferior to men in Biblical narratives and that this reflected the actual conditions in ancient Hebrew society. I agree with Bach's remark since the culture of the Old Testament is predominately patriarchal. Kraemer Rose Shepard (1999) says that the predominant family structure in the Old Testament narratives is the patriarchal family. This could make women characters in the Bible inferior to men, as they have to act according to the situation they are in because they lived in a patriarchal society.

In the Hebrew society, the patriarch had undisputed authority over the members of his family. The wife called her husband "Master". "The wife is listed among a man's possessions, along with his servants, his ox, and his ass" (Exodus 20:17).

All Israelite women were expected to marry and thus passed from the control of fathers and brothers to that of husbands and fathers-in-law. When the husband died before his wife, another male relative assumed to control over her and married her.

In marriage, the wife was expected to produce offspring. Bareness in a wife, which was interpreted to be failure to bear sons, was a disgrace to her and was a cause for divorce in Hebrew society (Kraemer: 1991). Sarah, Leah, and Rachel were in despair when they found themselves barren. So, they offer their

slave women to their husbands in order that the slave women's children could be counted as their own.

A woman may be a sex Object before, during and outside marriage. In this role, as Greda Lerner puts it in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), she is seen as the fulfiller of man's sexual desire, a receptacle for his passions. If she becomes a wife, she assumes the complex role of nurse, friend, and guardian mother of children as well as that of sex Object; if she is raped, she becomes a "fallen" woman and she is discarded as a human garbage (Lerner, 1986:92). This, in my opinion, may work in most stories of the Old Testament. However, there are places where these arguments will not hold water, as I will try to show in the chapter where I analyze the texts.

When analyzing a literary text, we can use different critical approaches. For example, 'authentic realism' is one strategy. This approach views literary texts as an exchange of experiences between author, and reader. As Sara Mills and Lynne Pearce have indicated in *Feminist Readings Feminists Reading* (1996), its proponents believe that women's writing can usefully be discussed in terms of how texts relate to women's experience. From this perspective, literature is seen as a political vehicle for change in women's lives, since it can serve as a catalyst for consciousness raising and as basis for constructing models for other ways of living.

There are several collections of essays, such as *Feminist Literary Criticism* (1975) and *The Authority of Experience* (1977), edited by Josephine Donovan and Arlyn Diamond, respectively, which have been written from this theoretical

position. 'Authentic realists' suggest that feminist works of criticism should be written in such a way that all women would be able to understand them and put them into practice. Complex theoretical terms should not be used, since this type of language and approach to knowledge is typically "patriarchal".

This position arose due to several reasons. At the time when this position was developed, New Criticism and Structuralism were becoming popular, and "critics seemed intent on making literary criticism appear as scientific as possible." (Mills and Pearce, 1996:59). Many women saw this professionalization of English studies as yet another attempt to exclude women from jobs and discussions. Because of this, many feminist writers at this time, as Mills and Pearce put it, "attempt to write feminist criticism in a way which is easily accessible to other women who have no university education" (1996:60). However, it should be remembered that one of the difficulties with this position is that it is sometimes difficult to encourage women to read literary texts in any other way.

The other approach is gynocentrism. It is a term, which refers to the practice of turning away from the analysis of male-authored texts and their specific differences from one another (Mills and Pearce, 1996:306). Elaine Showalter describes gynocentrism as the "psychodynamics of the individual or collective female tradition" ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", 1981:186). Her concern is to identify differences in women's writing" (1981:199) and to seek out a feminine aesthetic or 'essence', which differentiates women's writings from that of men.

The Critics further focus on other aspects of literature: its genre, style, themes, character portrayal and subject matter and so on. Drawing on a variety of gynocentric theories, Showalter classifies them into four groups or 'models of difference': biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural. This kind of approach may be best suited for female-authored texts. I shall however, focus on the third feminist literary approach: 'feminist critique'.

Feminist critique is a feminist analysis of male-authored texts (Showalter, 1981:187). This approach involves posing the feminist as a reader, usually reading male-authored texts, offering different interpretations of the images of women, or questioning misconceptions about women.

In the feminist critique, 'gender' and 'genre' are frequently paired words, and are encountered most often in connection with the complaint that women "have at their disposal far fewer of the traditional literary genres than men have always had and continue to have "(Ruthven: 1991).

Critics such as Ruthven claim that, because most of the writing that has found its way into print is the work of men. This constitutes the "bulk of androcentric (male-centered) literature. Therefore, any attempt to sort it into 'kinds' or genres is "bound to result in the slotting of male-centered works into male-defined categories" (Ruthven:1991). The aim of a feminist critique is, therefore, to reveal masculine bias in the most familiar genres. According to Ruthven, epic poems can even be shown to articulate a "masculine form of aggressive behavior by celebrating the exploits of male warriors in ways repulsive to the women's peace movement" (1991:65).

The 'feminist critique' according to Sara Mills and Lynne Pearce, became a theoretical issue with the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, (1969). The book shows the theory of "patriarchal power relations associated primarily with the analysis of the misogynistic representation of women in male-authored texts" (Mills and Pearce, 1996:25). In this book, as Mills and note, Millett concentrates on discovering sexist assumption in male-authored texts, identifying patriarchy as a source of women's textual mis-representation as well as material oppression (1996:25). In *Sexual Politics*, according to Mills and Pearce, Millett outlines her theory of sexual politics. She begins by defining the term 'politics'. Politics, as she points out, refers to structured power relationships, arrangements whereby a person or group of persons is controlled by another. So, 'sexual politics' has to do with the political, social, cultural, ideological, psychological, etc. oppression of one sex by another (Mills and Pearce, 1996:27).

In the remaining chapters of *Sexual Politics*, "Millett examines several ways in which the theory of 'sexual politics' is both realized and sustained". She mentions "sociology, force, and class as the major ways in which 'sexual politics' operates" (Mills and Pearce, 1996:30).

After the publication of '*Sexual Politics*', the force and radicality of the feminist critique has begun to have its impact on professional Biblical scholarship. So, in order to analyze Biblical narratives, the theorists highly consider the language of the texts. Because as Deborah Cameron states in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1992), the question of language and its

workings should enter into the feminist project of description and explanation because it encodes androcentric attitudes in an androcentric society. This is because they believe that "the patriarchal language places males at the center of description or analysis in the literary texts" (Kraemer, 1999:50).

What is therefore necessary is not just a feminist analysis of Biblical texts but also a critique of the androcentric frameworks adopted by scholarship. Thus, in the remaining review of this chapter, I would like to offer a brief summary of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's critical method of Biblical texts. Because her approach in my opinion provides the ways in which androcentric literature operates in Biblical texts.

According to Fiorenza (1986), the Biblical role of women, not that of men, is problematic because maleness is the norm, while femaleness constitutes a deviation from this norm. He is the Subject, the absolute; she is the other. "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but relative to him. She is not regarded as autonomous being" (42). Therefore, the societal structure defines women as derivative of and secondary to men. This androcentric definition of being human has determined not only the perception of men but also of women.

Fiorenza proposes two major ways of analyzing Biblical characters in androcentric literature. The first one is that we have to see in the narratives whether women are overlooked and framed.

In the narratives, male characters are central to the plot, while the females are either minor characters or ignored completely. Women in the

narratives achieve significance as mothers of sons. Women most of the time are banished from the story. As Fiorenza puts it, a primary struggle for feminist scholars who deal with the Biblical narratives is that "they have no direct means of access to ancient women; they have only literary sources written by men" (Fiorenza, 1986:108). Thus, a close reading of rhetorical features will never bring the woman's story. So, she suggests that we have to deconstruct some of the cultural and ideological codes in order to extract the voice of the women identified in the texts.

The other way of explaining androcentric literature is through the analysis of women characters as an Object of the male gaze. In androcentric literature, pleasure in looking has been split between active male (Subject) and passive female (Object). The determining male gaze, as Fiorenza notes, "projects its phantasy onto the female figure," which is styled accordingly. According to her, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance "coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can connote to-be-looked-at-ness".

Feminist theory has been instrumental in underscoring the importance of the masculine gaze, and I shall rely on most of its findings in the course of my analysis. Women who are Objects of the male gaze reveal the socially established interpretation of sexual difference in ancient Israel.

In androcentric narratives, the woman is formed by the look of the man as an icon, an image, the Object of the gaze. It is the male who also controls the events of the narrative, moving the plot forward. In this manner the narrative

defines woman as an Object to be desired, investigated, pursued, controlled and ultimately possessed by a subject who is masculine.

Naturally, a man can be the Object of a woman's gaze; a woman can be the Object of another woman's gaze, or a man of another man's gaze. What I am emphasizing here is the case that has come to be an important part of the gender code: man as 'voyeur', women as Object of 'voyeurism' (Fiorenza 1986: 106).

CHAPTER THREE

Among the documents in the Bible, the Books of Susanna, Judith and Ruth share unique characteristics. The books speak of heroines, in a patriarchally-oriented Jewish literature. This chapter examines how these women fulfilled their roles and how they were regarded by their society. An attempt has also been made to compare notions of women's beauty, their roles and political leadership. I have also tried to answer the question of how Biblical female characters are portrayed regardless of their social and political status. I shall begin my analysis with the story of Susanna.

3.1 Susanna

3.1.1. Summary of the Plot

The Story of Susanna is set in Babylon. Well-respected Joakim is married to Susanna, a very beautiful, pious woman. Elders of the Babylon Jewish community meet frequently at Joakim's house to settle community disputes. Unseen by Susanna or Joakim, two elders watch Susanna in Joakim's garden day after day. Each secretly develops a passionate desire for sexual intimacy with her. "They lusted for her so they perverted their own minds and averted their eyes, not looking to Heaven or rendering just decisions" (Verses 5-8). One day, in the garden, the men locked the gates and approached her and asked her to make love with them.

In this opening scene, the elders have thought out their plan. They offer Susanna a choice: "have intercourse with us or we will testify against you

saying that a young man was with you" (V.21). But she refuses their offer and she screams. In the second scene, the people of the town gathered to accuse Susanna. The people believe the elders' story and condemn the woman to death. Susanna provides no testimony. She simply prays and God answers her prayer by 'rousing the Holy spirit' (V. 45). Daniel speaks out in her defense and declares the judges guilty of giving false evidence from the start. In the final scene, the judges are sentenced to the fate they planned for Susanna.

3.1.2. Application of feminist Theory to the Book of Susanna

Although set in the Babylonian diaspora, the Book of Susanna does not depict a lamenting community. The Jews possess wealth and autonomous governance. They are comfortable, and the most comfortable of all is the wife of the wealthy Joakim. When we examine the description of Susanna, we learn that she is well-married, very beautiful, pious and educated: "Her parents were righteous, and have taught their daughter according to the Law of Moses" (V.3). And she participates in the life style that accompanies such a social position: free from domestic, juridical and religious responsibilities, her one independent daily activity is to walk in her husband's garden.

Although the setting is Babylon, as indicated in the first verse, neither she nor her family is suffering in exile. Rather than lamenting by the waters of Babylon (Psalms, 137:1), she bathes in them. Each midday Susanna enters her husband's garden and takes walks (V.7). The story reports this daily event, and

then we learn: "The two elders used to look at her each day entering and walking and they desired her" (V. 8).

This habitual event only becomes relevant for the story when Susanna becomes an Object of the elders' gaze; she is not important as the Subject of an action. Taking the story's cue from feminist theory, I can say that the gazing code is gendered. Gender is typically configured in terms of Subject-Object relations, in which masculinity is associated with active role and femininity with passivity. In particular, man is conventionally represented as the Subject of the gaze and woman as the Object. To see is to control; to have one's gaze represents women solely as Objects of others' gaze, which denies women their Subjectivity.

The story of Susanna rests on the definition of femininity as 'to-be-looked-at-ness', Fiorenza (1986), in which female characters are denied subjectivity. She is simultaneously in my opinion held responsible for exciting the desire of male viewers. The story represents men (particularly the elders) as those who see, and Susanna as the one who is seen. Susanna reflects the conventional representation of gender, which considers women the Objects of the male gaze.

In her book on narratology, Mieke Bal (1985) proposes three methodological questions to guide investigation of texts: who acts? who sees? who speaks? It will be helpful to keep each question in mind as analysis of the text proceeds. The answers to the second and third questions give clues about who tells the story. To say that the story of Susanna centers on a female

character is insufficient. We must also note that she is typically the object, not the Subject of perception; the story does not allow us to share her gaze. Nor does Susanna have the reader's opportunity to narrate her own version of what has happened. Instead, the elders' gaze literally dictates the parameters of the story as the story progresses; what they see shapes what the reader sees.

We must also consider Bal's first question: who acts? Susanna acts decisively twice (when she screams to call the servants and when she prays to God), but only in reaction to others' initiatives. The elders are the Subject of the first half of the action and Daniel the subject of the latter half. While the first half of the plot Susanna primarily figures as Object of the elders' desire and action, in the latter half, she barely figures at all. She drops out of the plot. She becomes the pretext for Daniel's ascendancy. She receives no credit for her courageous loyalty to the law, as did Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednego after their brush with death in the fiery furnace (Dan 3:28) and Daniel as he was delivered from the lions (Dan. 6:23).

It seems to me that the story of Susanna can also be compared with the story of Joseph, since both stories bear motifs of a hero falsely accused of sexual activity. Susanna is unable to save herself; Joseph saves himself through his ability to interpret dreams. While God grants that everything prosper under Joseph's hand, no such remarkable assistance is given to Susanna. What Susanna gets is a man of God to rescue her. God rewards the hero Joseph by allowing him to rise to be second chariot to Pharaoh. Susanna is rewarded by returning to her life and husband.

Though seemingly trapped in a situation in which social convention allows men of age and rank to determine her fate, Susanna desperately finds a voice to refuse the elders and to cry out to God. God hears her prayer. But in the end, the narrative overlooks her and credits Daniel. God is praised and Daniel's reputation increases because "she was found innocent of a shameful deed."

The law did not entitle Susanna to speak publicly in her own defense. Only the elders testified (VV. 36-41). Her complaint to God about her unfair condemnation may make her a little braver as we compare her with other Biblical women sexually victimized by patriarchy. Susanna is not without a vice in the face of rape as were Dinah (Genesis 34), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), and Tamar (2 Samuel 13). But still she is unable to save herself as Joseph saves himself through his ability to interpret dreams.

Susanna never shapes the story: the other characters are never invited to share her perspective. We don't see when Susanna recounts her own version of events. She speaks but does not tell her story not to her husband, her parents, her children, her slaves or the court. Because of these reasons, I believe that the narrator minimizes the Subject role of Susanna who finally disappears from the scene. Susanna is the symbol of the honesty of Joakim's household, the Object of the elder's desire, and the reticule of Daniel's rise to prominence, but she does not emerge as a Subject in her own right. To avoid repeating the text's treatment of Susanna as passive Object, we can take her words as the elders assault her:

If I do this, it is my death. If I do not do this, I will not escape your hands. It is better for me not to do this and so fall into your hands than to sin before the Lord (vv. 22-23).

Here, Susanna interprets the situation as a choice between two dire alternatives: to submit to the elders, which she believes is a sin against the lord, or to resist, which will cause the elders to accuse her of the capital crime of adultery (v. 22-23).

Susanna chooses what seems to her the virtuous part and screams, halting the rape, but certainly condemning herself to death. Here I question Susanna's statement and thus the ideological stance of the text- that acting to preserve her life would be a sin against the Lord, since an implicit premise for her statement is that any rape victim is by definition guilty. The event, which exposes Susanna's choices, is not presented as a seduction. Whatever decision Susanna makes leaves her in the hands of the elders.

In other words, the terms in which the narrator frames her alternatives indicate that she perceives herself to have no real choice: the elders' power over her is presented as an inescapable fact of the situation. So, I believe she is depicted as a weak figure who is unable or unwilling to defend her innocence against the elders' accusation.

So, the story of Susanna in my opinion is not about Susanna, but about men who misuse their power and give in to their passions since women's beauty is considered the cause of men's lust.

To conclude my discussion, let me briefly consider what I have said. Representation of gender in the story of Susanna rests on the gendered polarity of the gaze; actively looking defines masculinity and 'to-be-looked-at-ness' defines femininity. There is also a situation where a woman is put into a position in which she cannot defend herself. Her ideology indicates that she perceives herself as having no real choice. Dropping out from the story also indicates the passivity of the character.

3.2. Judith

3.2.1. Summary of the Plot

The story of Judith clearly consists of two parts of almost equal length. Chapters 1-7 constitute what critics, such as Athalya Brenner (1995) and Mieke Bal (1985), have considered a protracted introduction to the story proper. So, the scene is set in the seven chapters. Here, the Assyrian Holoferne wins the surrender of innumerable countries and cities. The sanctuaries of the Jews are destroyed by the Assyrians and they are to worship Nabuchadnezzar as the only God on earth. On his way to Jerusalem, Holoferne arrives at the little Palestinian city of Bethulia, an unknown place, allegedly facing Dothan in Samaria. There the situation is very tense, especially as the Assyrians have cut the water supply to Bethulia. Under the pressure of the population, the council of elders, at the moment when Judith is introduced in chapter 8, has decided to

resist another five days to give more time for God to intervene. After that delay, the city will Surrender. But Judith, a pious widow, scolds the elders for their lack of faith. She takes it upon herself to do what needs to be done. She goes into the camp of the enemy and makes the Assyrian general literally lose his head over her beauty. She beheads him for good.

3.2.2. Application of Feminist Theory to the Book of Judith

Judith is rich and widow (8:7). In the Bible, those two terms are put in tension. On the one hand, her wealth indicates that she is an independent woman and that she is a capable manager like the wise woman praised in Proverbs 31. She is her husband's wealth, and she makes her household rich by her skill. On the other hand, Judith is widowed: thus she belongs to the category of those that she herself claims are close to God, the poor, humble, weak, desperate, hopeless (9:11), that is, those who need protection, especially divine protection. Her widowhood recalls other famous widows in the Bible: Abigail (1 Sam. 25:39,42), Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:26-27) and Ruth. All of these did remarry, and therefore, there must be good reasons why Judith chose not to.

"Upon completing the festivals in Jerusalem, she went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate.... many desired to marry her, but she remained a widow" (16:21-22).

Judith in my opinion remains a widow both because she had nothing to gain by marriage and because no man was worthy of her. The men are weak, stupid or impaired; Holofernes is inappropriate; Bagoas is a eunuch; Achior faints at the sight of Holofernes head Uzziah, who shares Judith's ethnicity and elevated social status, might be able to claim *levirate* privileges. Judith must correct his poor theology, and she stands firm while he wavers in his faith (7:30-31). The only companion for Judith is God, and it is with him she communes in prayer.

In terms of her relationship to the generation of Bethulians, Judith is depicted as wealthy, beautiful and religiosity. Rich, pious and independent, she is particularly distinguished from others of her sex. The women in Bethulia are controlled by the town leaders (7.12). However, Judith is defined as superior to the rest of Bethulia: the "women and young men" are associated first with the "streets of the city and... the passages through the gate" (7:22); she is on her roof (8:5). They are unsheltered and in need of protection. She is in a tent and is, additionally, either unaware of, or unconcerned with, the danger below: she distributes neither her wealth nor her water. Instead, her wealth allows her to enhance her beauty and so further distinguish herself. She has water for bathing while the people are fainting from thirst (7:22). The text then dwells on the material goods available for her adornment.

"She bathed her body with water and anointed herself with precious ointment... and put on a tiara, and decorated herself in her gayest

apparel...and put on anklets and bracelets and rings and earrings and all her ornaments..." (10:3-4).

The enemy soldiers "marveled at her beauty and judged the Israelites by her." Although they mistakenly perceive Judith as representing her contemporaries only Judith possesses such striking beauty-the soldiers judgment supports Judith is identification as a traditional metaphor of Israel.

When we try to see Judith's story according to gender roles, we can say that the basic frame of reference seems androcentric way of narrative. Military conflict dominates the chapters before the appearance of Judith. All the main characters, except Judith, are male; the leaders of the Jewish people, except Judith, are male. Yet the possibility that a female voice is speaking in Judith cannot be ruled out entirely.

Holofernes, the supreme commander of the enemy, is humiliated by the hand of a woman. The phrase "by the hand of a woman" appears three times (9:10,13:15, and 16:5) in the text, and I believe it is a marker of gender roles. Judith's actions are superior to all those of the males in the story. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to investigate the gender aspects of a few passages in the book and see whether we can hear a female voice in them beside the male voice.

The author begins Judith's depiction with a very extensive and extraordinary genealogy. She is portrayed as a representative of more than two tribes of Israel. The names point to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph, Gideon respectively) Issachar (Nathnael), Zebulon (Eliab) and especially to Simeon. Let us compare these data with the reference to Judith's

husband in 8:2. "Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest". The tribe may be Simeon or Levi, or one of the others. Moreover, the husband derives his identity from his wife, not the other way round. This is very unconventional to the Bible and also differs from the introduction of other heroines in Hellenistic Jewish literature. Esther, for example, is called the cousin of Mordecai who adopted her (Esther. 2:7). Esther has no genealogy of her own, unlike Mordecai. In Esther 2:5 we read the following: "Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite". Esther derives her identity from Mordecai, which fits into the conventional mode of tracing genealogy in Biblical narratives about women. The story unfolds from then on. Likewise, Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiah, is introduced as the wife of Joakim in Susanna 1.

If we compare Judith's introduction (8:1-2) with the introduction of women who are considered models for Judith, the atypical introduction of Judith stands out conspicuously. Deborah is characterized as a prophetess and further identified as "wife of Lappidoth" (Judg:4:4). Similarly Jael is introduced as a wife of Heber in Kenite' (Judg. 4-17). In the light of these parallels, Judith. 8: 1-2 is a significant deviation from established patterns of introduction of women in Biblical narratives.

Another characteristic of Judith's story is that Judith does not act on the advice of a man, but takes the initiative independently. After the decision of the elders to turn over the city to the Assyrians, Judith invites them into her house and teaches them a lesson in resistance (8:9-36).

Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right, you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies (8:11).

The leaders do not protest against the sharp reproaches of Judith, but suggest that she pray for rain (8:31). Judith ignores the request of the elders:

Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants...only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do (8: 32-34).

The visit ends with the leaders' blessing of Judith and their return to their posts (8:35-36). From this speech we can say that Judith is not the regular leader of the people, like Moses in Exodus or Moses and Aron in Numbers 20, but acts instead of Uzziah and the elders. She decides independently to intervene and bring the situation to a happy conclusion within the parameters set by the ordinary leaders. She develops her strategy on her own and executes the plan without even informing the leaders before hand as we have already seen.

In the final remark "order the gate of the town to be opened for me so that I may go out and accomplish the things *you have just said to me*" (10:9, emphasis mine), Judith dictates the course of things and acts like a charismatic leader. The reason for the approval of the leaders is not given explicitly, but it can be linked with the wisdom of the extremely pious Judith

(8:29). She is even considered by them a woman of God, as indicated by their suggestion that she should pray for rain on behalf of the people (8:31). So, in my opinion, the sketch of Judith's performance and the phrases associated with it, links up with the image of a judge. This appears from phrases, which characterize Judith's action. This may also indicate that the Book of Judith is an unconventional Jewish writing from the perspective of the reigning gender relations.

The other significant deviation of androcentric pattern which can be observed in the following passages also justify the narrative of Judith as female voice within a dominant male framework. The traditional pattern is that men act as warriors and liberators and women are singers of victory. The Bible contains several scenes of such a victory song (Exod.15: 20-21; Juds. 11.34; 1sam. 18. 6-7). Judith 15-16 corresponds to them since it is the deviation from the usual pattern, which gives reason to assume a female narrative voice. In 1 Sam. 18.6-7, David returned from killing Goliath- the philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments.

In the book of Judith a similar event is being described. All the women from Israel come together, start dancing and singing with tambourines, praising the victor (Jdt. 15:12-14, 16. 1). If one focuses on the role of the leaders, a different picture emerges. In fact, not men but Judith and her maidservant rescue the Jews from the siege of the Assyrians, and they are supported by the Lord. Moreover, it is Judith who gives the orders for the counter-attack of the

Jews (14.1-5). In Jdt. 16:1-17, we find an extensive song of triumph, started by Judith and joined by the rest of the people (15.14). The overture to this song in 15:8-13 is very interesting, as compared to the songs of victory just mentioned. It is like a reversal of gender roles. First Joakim the high priest and the senate come from Jerusalem to Bethulia "to witness the good things that the Lord had done for Israel, and to see Judith and to wish her well" (15-8). They acknowledge that it was Judith who rescued Israel. In this book, it is clear that Judith is the heroine. Therefore, the significant deviation of androcentric pattern which can be observed in the passage seem to justify the female voice within a dominant male framework. We don't see Judith act like the object of the story nor do we see her overlooked by men. There is a male counterpart (Holofernes) in the story. However, he is largely outshined by Judith.

In short, it is my opinion that Judith goes one step further than Susanna. The story of Judith is subversive in that it shows that a woman can take the lead and becomes the model of faith while men recoil in the "holes of their complacency" (Brenner, 1985). She had the authority to summon the elders of the town and to rebuke them. She censured their theological misjudgment and misconduct in the face of the enemy: "Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia ! what you have said to the people today is not right" (8:11).

Intelligence, wisdom, piety, shrewd observation, and faithful dedication to the liberation of her people constitute Judith's unique role. Her enticing beauty and her guileful remarks are highlighted in the story in chapter 11 by the

speech of Holofernes: "You are not only beautiful in appearance but wise in speech" (22-23).

The male enemies walk into her trap because they are deceived by her attractiveness and femininity, but have not the slightest idea of her religious and national self-identity and strength. Also, because they see women as weak and mere sexual Objects to men, they do not recognize that their true foes are not the men of Israel who are characterized as weak and timorous.

Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? Surely not a man of them had better be left a live, for if we let them go they will be able to ensnare the whole world. (10:19)

Holofernes and his servants rightly assume that they will have a major part in the story, but because of their masculine arrogance and blindness, they fail to see the female foe's worth.

To sum up, from what has been discussed so far, one is safe to conclude that the story of Judith does not rest on the definition of femininity as 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Which female characters are denied Subjectivity. Though Judith was being looked at by many people, the gaze is averted from the woman as Object and fixed on the character's role as heroine.

3.3 Ruth

3.3.1. Summary of the plot

During a famine not mentioned in Judges, Elimelech moves his family from Bethlehem (literally, "the house of bread") to Moab. He consequently may be seen as disloyal to his land and his God. Elimelech then dies leaving behind his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, in Moab. The sons then marry local women. The women are still childless when their husbands die ten years later.

Devoid of husbands and without children, and hearing that there was food in Judah, Naomi resolves to return. Her daughters-in-law accompany her, but she urges each to return to her 'mother's house' Orpah kisses Naomi good-bye, but Ruth clings to her and refuses to leave her. Then they return to Bethlehem.

When they came to Bethlehem, food becomes the major issue. So Ruth suggests that she should glean and perhaps find favor in someone's sight. Supporting her plan, Naomi addresses Ruth as "my daughter," but she says nothing more. Then the narrator introduces Boaz who incorporates Ruth into his household.

One midnight when Boaz awakes, he notices a woman next to him. It was Ruth. She told Boaz "what to do". She told him that she is one of his relatives. In the concluding chapter we read that Ruth is married to Boaz, later to become an ancestor of Christ. She gave birth to a son who was the grandfather of King David.

3.3.2. Application of Feminist Theory to the Book of Ruth

As one of the four Biblical books bearing a woman's name, the Book of Ruth has attracted considerable attention from feminist Biblical scholars. Clearly,

Ruth deserves such attention. Unlike Judith and Susanna, Ruth is almost entirely a woman's story. Phillis Tribble (1973), in her discourse on the book of Ruth, starts her discussion by writing:

A man's world tells a woman's story... the book of Ruth represents the aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth as they struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment (1973:40)

Unlike stories that begin with "Once upon a time in a far of land..." the story of Ruth is specific as to time the chaotic and violent period of the judges. The period is after the death of Joshua, the successor of Moses (Judg 1:1), and before the appearance of Samuel (1 Sam 1:20), who anointed David as the future king of Israel (1 Sam 16:11). The meaning of these six introductory words, "*in the days when judges ruled...*" is that violence against women, vengeance, idolatry, death and disintegration were widespread as in the days of the judges.

Naomi and Ruth share the dominant role of the chief heroine or rather are placed in this position interchangeably. Let us follow up this role chapter by chapter. Naomi is undoubtedly the central figure in chapter 1. In her capacity as acting head of the unfortunate family, she is the one who initiates the homecoming. Ruth's loyalty to her is touching; however, this does not elevate Ruth to a superior position. The Bethlehem women make a great fuss over Naomi, while Ruth is neither introduced nor referred to. On the contrary, Naomi states that she is an empty vessel (1:21), a widow without hope. No

mention is made of Ruth as a present or future means of consolation and change.

In chapter two, the situation changes dramatically. Ruth, the more passive and secondary figure, is at the center of the stage: she takes the initiative and starts acting independently. She shares her plans with Naomi, and the latter expresses her consent but remains inactive. Now the views are turned around: Naomi is mentioned only incidentally to Ruth, while Ruth is at center stage (2.6, 11-12). Naomi is not referred to again until the end of the story (V. 18), when Ruth comes back a victorious breadwinner. Even then, Naomi remains no more than an adviser (VV. 19-20). Ruth manages to look after herself and her mother-in-law until the end of the harvest season. Furthermore, Naomi has no part in Boaz's elevation of Ruth to be a 'hand maid', that is, family retainer.

In chapter three however, Naomi continues where she left off (ch.1). Her idea for solving the problem, which is also Ruth's problem, is well thought out. Ruth accepts her guidance and carries out her directives without a murmur, and the seduction scene is executed in a suitably effective manner. Ruth occupies the center of the stage.

One gets the impression that, whenever both women (Naomi and Ruth) are in public together, Naomi's position is more dominant (as befits their family relationship); in private, however, they exchange roles: at times Naomi is the leading figure, at others Ruth. The idea of role reversal is a thing that does happen in reality. A person may either act overtly in order to further his or her

aims, or he or she may choose a covert mode of behavior, for example, to manipulate other people into doing his or her own work for him or her. In both cases actor and acted upon, manipulator and manipulated, may derive equal or similar benefits from the results of their shared action. Hence, they may agree to change roles; either deliberately or else spontaneously, consciously or unconsciously for their mutual benefit. In the narratives this kind of role-exchange has to be not only plausible but also necessary to the advancement of the plot.

Even though Ruth undergoes the role exchange repeatedly, she is the subject and the dominant character as we compare her with Susanna and Esther. Naomi and Ruth function harmoniously as a team. Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power may be, they are in the struggle for survival together and thus cooperate in which, Naomi does her duty by her daughter -in-law. She tries to dissuade her from coming to Bethlehem and later propels her towards Boaz. Ruth, however, goes one step further. She is actually motivated not only by duty and obedience, but also by love for her mother-in-law.

Therefore, we can conclude the idea of role exchange by saying that Naomi and Ruth have shared the role of Subject. Let us summarize this by illustrating the speeches and the acts of the characters in the Book of Ruth.

Number of Speeches per chapter

	Ch 1	Ch 2	Ch 3	Ch 4
Naomi	4	4	2	0
Ruth	2	5	0	0
Boaz	0	5	3	4
Collective Speakers ¹	1	0	0	4

As reflected in the opening and closing of the book, the social background is androcentric. A man determines the movement of the family in the first instance, and the line of male genealogy from Perez to King David concludes the Book. With in the story men hold wealth and power and, the laws are meant to protect male inheritance. However, the thrust of the story's message deviates from the social background. Contrary to the patriarchal convention dictating Biblical narratives, in the Book of Ruth the focus shifts from the men who do not survive to the women who act in order to make survival possible. I now would like to ask a question: are there indications that the Book of Ruth is a 'women's story? or, is it a story in which women characters play a prominent role as Subjects in their own right?

According to Elaine Showalter, women are 'muted' (not wholly contained) by the dominant male group. This means that women are 'muted' in the sense that their voices are not heard or may not be heard at the authoritative 'speech making' level of society. It also implies that women's culture should not be seen

¹Collective speakers' refers to the inhabitants of Bethlehem and the elders and neighbors of Naomi in the last chapter

as a separate world, cut off from the dominant culture, but should rather be seen as forming an invisible background to the dominant culture.

Naomi and Ruth redefine 'reality' from their own perspective. However, since they are also part of the dominant culture that marginalizes them, the language that they speak is often 'double-voiced' (Showalter: 1986). Inspired by Showalter's application of the concept of women's culture,¹ I have tried to take the following criteria from it for indicating female prominence the Book of Ruth.

1. The text should contain traces of an intent which is less than normally androcentric;
2. There should be talk in it of a redefinition of reality from the female perspective; so that
3. The narrative contains definable differences between the views of the male and the female characters.

As for the first criterion, the story of Naomi and Ruth free from the stereotypical Biblical image of women as rivals, as seen in the cases of Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, and Hanna and Peninna. Naomi and Ruth are models of cooperation of mutual respect. They support each other instead of competing and, in this way, they reveal, in an exemplary way, how the cooperation of women can become necessary. So, we might see this as indicating the prominence of female act.

¹As Greda Lerner (1986) notes, women culture refers to women's standing resistance to patriarchal domination and their assertion of their own creativity in shaping society.

In the Book of Ruth, we can't ignore the largely independent action and subversive conduct of the characters. In addition, the role of dialogue in this book may have some relevance to reveal gender. No other book in the Hebrew Bible has higher ratio of dialogue of women than the Book of Ruth¹. The female characters are made to speak for themselves, rather than have their actions described. Certainly this has the effect of directly delineating character. Here, I want to mention one point regarding dialogue. Naomi and Ruth never portrayed as interacting directly even though they clearly know about each other (26, 11, 20; 3.2), may be related to female indirection. She never meets Boaz, and none of the dialogues involves the two of them. The story-teller in my opinion has intentionally kept them apart. This distancing helps to give Ruth prominence.

The second and third criteria in my opinion are also satisfied. At the beginning of the Book of Ruth, when Naomi addresses her daughters-in-law (Ruth, 1:8-13), she defines reality expressly from the perspective of a woman. Her daughters-in-law have to return to their 'mother's house'. The expression 'house of the mother' which is used by Naomi, is quite exceptional in the Bible. Besides Ruth it appears only in the Song of Songs.

Having reviewed some features of the book as a whole that may be indicative of the Subject-role of women, we turn now to the specific use of 'mother's house' and what it means for the return home of Naomi's daughters-in-law as opposed to the far more common 'fathers house'.

Brenner, Athalya. (1985). *The Israelite Women: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

In this context it is particularly unusual since widows normally return to their 'father's house'. We can see for example, Tamar in Gen 38:11, Num. 30.17, Deut 22.21, Judg 1.2,3.

The term 'mother's house' has drawn us into the internal or household setting which circumscribed in the life activities of all Israelite women. Within that setting, women's voices were heard, their presence was valuable and valued, and their deeds had a profound influence on others.

According to Ruth 1.8 the term 'mother's house' indicates that Israelite women had roles equal to, if not greater than those of husbands in arranging marriages of their children, although this is not always easy to discern under the 'andocentric' layering of the texts. Naomi hopes to send Ruth and Orpah home in order that, in their mother's households, they will secure new marriage liaisons. So we may say that its appearance may be startling in an 'androcentric' document such as the Bible, but its existence as a meaningful term in that text should not be unexpected. It may be rare but would not have been so in life as lived at the time.

The Biblical angle of vision rarely lets us view the female role or near the female act. Yet in some instances, as in the survival of 'mother's house' as a counterpart to the usual term for family household as the fundamental unit of society, the wisdom and power of women become fleetingly visible.

When Naomi exhorts her daughters-in-law to return home to their mother's household, she allows us to hear the language of female experience. Ruth 1.8 constitutes powerful evidence for the presence of female Subjectivity.

When we come to the role of Ruth in the narrative, we find Ruth adding a male role, beginning with the role of gleaner, in order to provide Naomi with food (2.2) Levitical regulation specified that all landowners must allow the poor and the foreigners to enter the fields after the harvesting, in order to gather up whatever was missed or dropped by the field laborers (Lev: 19.9-10).

Gleaning provided subsistence for those lowest in social status. In Ruth's story, Ruth takes the role of the provider of her home. She also acts decisively; her speech acts are direct and to the point. Having taken stock of the general situation, Ruth states her determination to address their poverty. First, Ruth must find food: "I would go out to the field and glean among the sheaves". Her method is to find a hospitable landowner "in whose eyes I shall find favor". Ruth does not ask Naomi's permission; she initiates an action in search of solution to their problem.

In the concluding chapter, it is in marriage and motherhood that Ruth fulfils her role, and, by her dedication to these, feminine functions and values respected by the sages, she wins their approval and esteem. They compare her to the matriarchs who built the house of Israel, whose merit derives almost wholly from their fulfillment of the maternal role. In this story, the sages accord great respect to the exemplary women of the Old Testament, more than they might have done to any actual woman of their own tribe. Therefore, Ruth's struggle to restore her status is accomplished.

The images of Ruth in the story are ambivalent. From one perspective Ruth is portrayed as an active perceptive, persistent woman. She violates social

conventions, risking her life, for God's purpose. She perceives the future Messiah in Boaz even though she is a Moabite. But from the other perspective she becomes an instrument by remarrying and bearing a male child, to continue the male line of her deceased former husband. Her figure also is avoided towards the end and Naomi becomes the active figure and nurses the son that is born to Ruth and Boaz.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter, I have included the portrayal of Susanna, the character in the "Addition to the book of Daniel"; Judith, the heroine of an Apocrypha to the Old Testament, and the Biblical feminine figure Ruth. These three major characters gave their names to books produced in the midst of a patriarchally-oriented society.

Most critics, such as Stanton as we have seen in the review literature section believe that women in the Old Testament are seen as secondary. Even though Deuteronomy 29. 9-18 makes it clear that they are a full member of the covenant community, who must assume full responsibility for playing her part in it, we are told that she is placed low down in the order of those who are described as entering the covenant. However, I find this generalization very difficult to believe when I examine and analyze the characters in the books I examined.

It is my opinion that Judith and Ruth break the stereotypes of femininity by transcending the male-female polarity in androcentric culture. Judith inverts gender roles. She enters the public sphere and salvages her people, which the elders of her community were unable to do. In the Book of Judith, there is no figure of an uncle or a newly discovered male relative to guide the character, as we see it happening in the case of Susanna. Judith alone is the heroine, the one who saves through her piety, initiative, and courage. She

fearlessly penetrates into the very heart of the threatening stronghold and confronts the enemy face

Ruth also breaks the stereotypes of femininity. She now becomes the golden link in the generational chain of Messianic line.¹ The people of Israel compared her to the matriarchs who built the house of Israel, whose merit derives almost wholly from their fulfillment of the maternal role. She is praised to a great extent for qualities. The sages themselves ascribe to her, in particular for sexual modesty and for committing herself to the wifely and maternal role.

In the Book of Susanna, we have seen the way women are visualized or perceived by a male gaze. Through the analysis of this text, we can also identify similar aspects in other books of the Bible. As the elders arrange forbidden views of Susanna, David gazes at Bethsheba bathing, Judah looks over his daughter-in-law Tamar. All these male characters who look at women are the Subjects of their stories. So, Susanna in my opinion stands out as a good example of how the female body is demeaned by the male gaze and how powerless women in the face of the male's desire.

. I have noted earlier that liberal feminists and conservative traditionalists share a perception that the Hebrew Bible portrays women as secondary or inferior to men in fundamental ways. This is primarily because the Biblical source itself is largely a product of the 'patriarchal culture'; one can present a literary picture of the objectification of a woman's body. In the Old Testament, the woman is seen from a masculine subject position as an Object to be

desired. These stereotypes of the feminine are defined in terms of the woman's sexuality only.

In some stories like those of Judith and Ruth, however, the above conclusion may not apply. Both give us a clue to a quite different scene and situation in the texts. So, although critics very widely agree that women are portrayed inferior in the Old Testament, the examination of some characters has shown that not all women are treated as Objects in the narratives. I have looked women in the Biblical narratives so deeply repressed in the texts, so well forgotten like Susanna. However, it would be very hard to say that women are oppressed in the Old Testament literature. Even though there are few in number, there are women who break the stereotypes of femininity by transcending the male-female polarity.

Therefore, my conclusion from analyzing these three narratives of women would be as follows: The Book of Judith as it is analyzed is purely feminist. We have seen the portrayal of a wise and strong woman. She was filled with power to perform deeds worthy of men. On the contrary in the Book of Susanna, we have seen a woman who is the Object of the male gaze. We can call the story a clear anti-feminist since the androcentric style dominates the whole narrative.

It is my opinion that the Book of Ruth combines both aspects. We cannot say that the story is purely feminist or anti-feminist. It is somewhat in the middle. On one hand we see Ruth acting like a male provider-strong and brave. On the other hand, she is an object to be desired and persued by male gazer-

Boaz. We also do not see her at the end of the story. She is not an active figure and almost avoided towards the end to become a pretext of Obed's ascendancy.

But why are feminists always see women foremost as victims of a male subjugation? I think it is time our researchers began to imaginatively explore the new feminists reflect the changes in society, especially the changes consciousness permeating society today. Another area the researchers could focus on is the identification of women who challenge patriarchy not just because they have been victims of such a system, but because they wish to assert themselves as constituting an important and indispensable half of humanity.

To sum up, when I began this study, I hoped I might be able to throw some light on the Bible by bringing a literary perspective to bear on it. But I discovered for myself something unanticipated in the course of examining these Biblical texts: that the Bible on its part has a great deal to teach anyone interested in narrative because its seemingly simple, wonderfully complex art offers such splendid illustration. So I think this study may have something to say to readers trying to make sense of the Bible not only as a momentous document of religious history but also as literature. I also think that by providing opportunities for thinking about women and by comparing how they have been represented with how they ought to be, women's self-awareness will be heightened.

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