

BARRENNESS AND FERTILITY OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE- AN ECOTHEOLOGICAL AND ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Changes to the environment caused by globalization and establishment of Multi National Companies have resulted in the loss of livelihood and traditional resource bases, forced displacement and increased impoverishment and led to exploitation of the young, underpaid and disadvantaged women (Gangoli 54). "Ecofeminism states that patriarchal society is relatively new, something developed over the last 2000 years or so and that the matriarchal society was the first society"(Tandon 56). "Men's desire to dominate and conquer... [results] from a deep psychological insecurity stemming from men's inability to give birth to life." (Tandon 146). So one way for men to exercise control over women is to make them remain barren. Barrenness is not only biological, it is a psychological aggression meant on women who have the desire to experience motherhood. "...words can convey meaning by means other than verbal... through other functions, other identities" and "Meaning can be conveyed, perhaps conveyed better through mens other than words" (Chaudhuri 78). Sexual union is therefore a language men and women use to communicate to each other that they respect and need each other. When it is deprived it communicates of one's inability or that one does not value the presence of another in their life. Therefore a biologically fertile women can be psychologically or metaphorically barren. This paper analyses barrenness and fertility from an ecotheological and ecofeminist perspective and shows the impact neglect and sexual abuse has on barren women.

Keywords: *Ecotheology, ecofeminism, barrenness, fertility, exploitation, care, neglect*

Palai during summer is the severest of seasons. The trees are dry and shriveled up. All water sources are dried up and the rugged ways do not provide shelter or sustenance (Selvamony 74). In other words it is a barren land. The female deity of Palai is represented in post-Tholkappiyam literature as korravai. In Pattuppattu and Ettuttokai she appears with nature-based names like kalai (one who is bull-like), mili (one who is strong) and vitalai (one who is a breeder) (108). These deities representing the Palai are powerfully portrayed for they represent the human sub-conscious's will to survive which requires strength and power to face the adverse circumstances of Palai. Again Kannaki's vindication of her husband's innocence in Sillapadikaram reduces "...Maturai to ashes for its complicity in the murder. Such is the power of abandoned

women: they are the scrouge of patriarchy". In his introduction to his translation of *The Cilappatikaram*, Parthasarathy quotes Helene Cixous saying that "...women should write through their bodies... For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been wither annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence (Atikal 13- 14). Just like the description of powerful deities of the palai and the power of abandoned women such as Kannaki, barren women found in the Bible are presented as women who are powerful because of their ability to attract divine intervention from their situation of misery. These are women who are face neglect and abuse and who eventually become fertile due to divine intervention and blessed with the experience of birthing which is considered as an event of great beauty and brightening of one's life (Estes 473).

Hagar is Sarai's maidservant. Her life is that of servitude to her mistress. She is asked by Sarai to sleep with Abram, Sarai's husband in order for her to have a progeny. The exploitation of the lower class by the capitalist is evident here. Just like how the Multi National Companies purchase acres of land to establish their industries, and exploit the resources of the land with little or no benefit to its original inhabitants of the land, so also, the woman's womb is colonized and owned by another woman through the man. This is also typical of a mother-in-law who uses the daughter-in-law as a breeding machine to procure for herself a progeny as her inheritance.

Having loved Sarai, his relationship with Hagar does not have love. Hagar tends to her mistress while having no one to attend to her needs. She is uncared and unloved. It is bad enough that she is asked to sleep with her master; it is even worse when she does not receive any appreciation for becoming pregnant. Despite her economic and emotional insecurity unable to bear the mistreatment of Sarai, Hagar flees. "The victimization of body is deep, distorting and disastrous" (Ravindranath103). Her decision to flee at this time would lead to a disaster. Therefore she is instructed by the angel of the Lord who tells Hagar that God has seen her misery and tells her to go back. She is also given a promise and an inheritance as a blessing. Thus the barren life of a woman who is sexually exploited and who is a castaway becomes fertile by having a son. In the Bible the birth of only a few have been foretold including the birth of Christ. It is therefore an honor that the birth of Hagar's son was foretold and that the name 'Ishmael' was given to him. Hagar then becomes the mother of an entire nation. She calls the name of the place as Beer Lahai Roi which means "I have now seen the One who sees me" (Gen 16: 9-14). Her psychological barrenness is now fertile by divine intervention.

Later in Gen 21: 19 we see that God opened the eyes of Hagar even as she was about to lose her son who was dying due to thirst. Here too God promises her an inheritance which is symbolized by her discovery of fertility in barrenness. At a time when she is forced into a life of emptiness she is blessed with fertility that would eventually make a great nation out of her son. In this way she gains more significance and establishes her identity.

Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, does not have any children to establish her own family because she loses her two husbands, Er and Onan, when God smites them because of their wickedness. Now as per the law, Judah is supposed to get his third son, Shelah to marry Tamar in order to carry the family name of the two brothers. Fearing that he might lose his third son as well he tells his daughter-in-law to wait till his son comes of age and then he would give him in marriage. He does not keep his word. Eventually, there happens a situation wherein he father's Tamar's twin sons. He sleeps with her thinking that she is a shrine prostitute (because she had veiled her face and removed her widow raiment). When it is discovered that Tamar is pregnant, the society decides that she should be burnt. After she produces the proof that Judah is the father of her child, Judah remarks "... She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her my son Shelah" (Gen 38: 26). It is written that after this incident Judah does not sleep with Tamar. Tamar gives birth to twin boys and it is in the line of one of these boys, Perez, that Christ is born. Thus a woman, who was willfully made barren, is blessed with fertility and even becomes the progenitor of the ancestor of Christ. It is clear from these events that women should not only be given reproductive rights but productive rights as well (Spivak 240). For Hagar production is forced upon and for Tamar it is been denied and both are acts of exploitation.

The next example is of a woman who has the status of a wife but who goes through hurt because she is not loved by her husband. This is the story of Jacob who worked for his uncle Laban for seven years in return for his second daughter Rachel whom he loved. On the night of the marriage instead of Rachel, her elder sister Leah who had a squint eye was given to Jacob who realized whom he had been with only the next day morning. Even as he protested, it was told to him that it was not the custom to give the younger daughter when the elder one was not married. Laban tells him to bear with him until the bridal week is over and that he will give him Rachel as his wife if he works for another seven years. The woman here is exploited for the benefit of the father and the societal norms. One can imagine the feelings of Leah during the whole episode. Having known about Jacob's love for her sister it would have been traumatic to be sent in her place. Here is a form of sexual exploitation in the form of an arranged marriage where the woman has no say and has no other choice but to comply. First she was forced by her father to marry the man who did not love her, and then she goes through rejection by that very man. This act of Jacob unable to recognize Leah as Rachel is an act of bagging the head of a woman. "The fantasy of removing or bagging the head of a woman denies the power of the individual, reducing sexuality to pure animality". The bag removes both the cultural and the natural evidence of identity. Both Tamar and Leah have undergone this. They are women who have no personality and no individuality who have become objects rather than subjects (Doniger 231).

After the bridal week Rachel is given to Jacob as his wife. But now he has seven more years to put into service. Thus on the one hand he has work pressure and on the other pressure from his favorite wife who is now barren. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. And then, "... when the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Gen 29: 31). It is only after her fourth son Judah was born that she stops having children for a while. It is implied here that she has finally received love and attention from her husband. Thus a woman who is unloved and goes through a life of pain and emptiness is blessed with fertility to be able to produce many children. Her generosity to give her handmaid Zilpah to her husband (who bears him two sons) enables her to conceive again and she is blessed with two more sons and a daughter. Thus all through the years of Jacob's service, God had made fertile the barren life of the wife he refused to love. Whereas the wife for whom he was serving for seven years remained barren until she was despised by Leah when finally she conceives and gives birth to a son named Joseph. Leah is blessed when she is generous to the barrenness of her handmaid. But when she despises Rachel, God removes Rachel's barrenness. These are again examples of how there is a divine intervention whenever the woman is unloved or uncared.

Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah and Hannah. And in a household with two wives, they seek to expel each other. "The Koran says a man should only practice polygamy if he is sure he can treat each wife equally" (Lindholm and Lindholm 540). But when he performs a sacrifice, he would favor Hannah over Peninnah by giving her a share of double portion while dividing the meat offered as sacrifice "... because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Sam 1:5). This is one instance where the husband loves the wife because she is barren. But her barrenness becomes a reason for Peninnah to provoke her in order to irritate her. Herein is a land that is already barren and it further goes through pain and suffering through provocation. When Hannah's prayer for a child is answered she offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God. In it she says "She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pine away" (1 Sam 2: 5). Thus the barren land is filled and the fertile land languishes.

From all these examples it is evident that barrenness is both biological and psychological. It may be because of sexual exploitation, neglect, injustice or lack of love. A land that is exploited without sustainable development becomes uninhabitable for the future generation. Its ecosystem and natural cycles are disrupted. When God created man, his responsibility was to look after His beautiful creation. When man began to exploit nature he also began to exploit the very essence of nature that is woman. An exploited land becomes barren and unfit for sustaining life. But an exploited woman when is encountered by divine intervention, becomes fertile and repossesses all that she had lost because of her barrenness; her inheritance, her identity, her name and fame and the husband's love. Husband should love the wife "...

as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." (Eph 5: 25), for "He who loves his wife loves himself" (v 28). When men begin to treat women with more dignity and respect and know how to love the wife as their own body then they will also have a responsible attitude towards the environment and towards nature.

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