

Reinterpreting Hagar and the Woman of Samaria in the Context of Bangladeshi Women Towards an Understanding of Liberative Mission

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The Bible empowers Bangladeshi Christian women in their campaign for justice in society. When women at *Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro* workshops read texts with a new approach, they find inspiration in the biblical women and see God as one aligning not with patriarchy, but with women in their struggles for justice. This article provides examples of Christian women's rereading of the Bible: four biblical narratives are revisited in order to see what they can contribute to the liberation of Bangladeshi women. These stories are retold here in the historic present tense, in the manner adopted at workshops to facilitate engagement with events of the past.

This article highlights two biblical women: one from the Jewish scriptures, and the other from the gospels. Whereas Susanna and the woman accused of adultery are studied in the next chapter, the chosen story of this chapter is that of Hagar (Gen. 16.1-15 and 21.1-20), a thematic parallel to which is found in the gospel narrative of the woman of Samaria (Jn. 4.3-42). Both Hagar and the Samaritan woman are seen as people at the edge of their societies because of their ethnicity, gender, political, social and economic status. In this chapter they are studied in relation to the context of Bangladeshi women. Hagar is also known among Muslims, and therefore references to Muslim scripture and traditions will be included in the contextual study of the narrative of Hagar.

1. HAGAR: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO MUSLIM TRADITIONS

Ishmael is mentioned in the Qur'an and the story of Ishmael and Hagar is retold in the *Hadith* with variations.¹ In fact, the *Hadith* continues to tell the story beyond its biblical ending. It is assumed that among the people of West Asia different versions of the story of Hagar and Ishmael were known, some of which were written down in the Bible and the *Hadith*. In this study chapters 16 and 21 of Genesis are reread as a single narrative from the perspective of Bangladeshi women. Usually the Genesis texts are read with Sarah and Abraham at the centre and Hagar and Ishmael at the periphery; in this discussion Hagar is at the centre. In Genesis 16 the slave-owning couple is Abram and Sarai and in Genesis 21 they are renamed by God as Abraham and Sarah. It is noteworthy that, although a slave, Hagar too has been given the dignity of a name.

A Gentile Slave Woman

In the narrative the Egyptian Hagar is introduced as Sarai's personal slave who can be used to solve Sarai's problem of barrenness. Sarai advises Abram to sleep with Hagar so that Sarai might gain the honour of motherhood through the child of Hagar. Abram listens to Sarai. What Sarai suggests is completely in accord with her society's cultural norm. The slave is her property and she has total control over her and over her offspring. A child born to the slave belongs not to its biological mother, but to the slave mistress. Scriptural resonances are found in Genesis 30. Rachel gives her maid Billah to Jacob, Rachel's husband, and says, ". . . go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her" (Gen. 30.3). Leah, another wife of Jacob, also gives her maid to her husband to bear children for Leah. Thus a slave-owner can use her slave as a surrogate mother. Unlike surrogate mothers of the present day, who may be paid, Sarai's slave, Hagar, will gain nothing. On the contrary, she will lose her virginity: "The word used in Genesis 16 to describe Hagar is *sipha*, meaning a virgin . . ."².

Bangladeshi women can identify with the sorrow of Sarai's childlessness. At NPK workshops women have revealed the depth of their pain at the injustice they suffer when they are unable to give a child, preferably a son, to their husbands. Before coming to NPK workshops some women never knew that men can also be barren. Because of her barrenness, Sarai's marital status itself, like that of many Bangladeshi women, is precarious. In order to continue his line, Abram is in a position to take another wife. However, Sarai, being a rich woman, has an option which is not open to Bangladeshi women. Surrogacy in today's world continues to be an option not for the poor, but for the rich. Although Bangladeshi women can identify partially with Sarai, their connection with Hagar is more complete.

Hagar's lack of control over her own life is the experience of many Bangladeshi women. A Bangladeshi woman is not a slave in the sense Hagar is, yet her condition is not much better. It has been calculated that a new-born child in a country like Bangladesh "already owes 30 times more than she will earn in her lifetime."³ Because of international debts a Bangladeshi woman is, de facto, like Hagar, in bondage to a foreign power. Even within her own society a Bangladeshi woman is not in control of her life. She can be given away by her parents to a husband of their choosing without her consent.

Hagar is given by Sarai to Abram as a wife, without being asked whether she wants to sleep with Abram or not. Abram has intercourse with Hagar and she becomes pregnant. Abram is Hagar's husband and the unborn child is hers, yet, because of her previous position as a slave, Hagar can claim neither of them as her own. However, at the event of her pregnancy, Hagar's self-esteem is raised and "Her mistress was lowered in her esteem."⁴ Hagar feels liberated from within and the external exploitation loses its power over her. It is implicit that she may claim her rightful position as a wife and a mother. Savina J. Teubal writes about Hagar: "Her first step to autonomy was in claiming her own child."⁵ Leah in Genesis 30.9 and her maid Zilpah, given to Jacob as his wife, can be compared with Sarai and Hagar. However, Leah's position as a wife is not undermined. Zilpha remains Leah's maid and the maid's children are considered Leah's. Even when the maid is given as a wife, all is well for the mistress as long as the maid does not challenge the status quo. Presumably Hagar does, and conflict ensues between Hagar and Sarai.

Two women in conflict is, of course, a favourite motif of discussion for traditional exegetes in Bangladesh. To avoid the responsibility of a thorough analysis of the injustice of a patriarchal culture, attention is diverted from the males to the females. For example, mothers-in-law in Bangladesh are frequently blamed for women's oppression. The conflict between Sarai and Hagar reveals Sarai's own pain of childlessness and helplessness that keeps her from being in solidarity with Hagar. Hagar is physically, but Sarai is both physically and psychologically under the tight control of the patriarchal society. While Hagar dares to break free as she has nothing to lose, Sarai clutches the little authority she has, in the false belief that it is her social system that can finally secure her position.

Although Hagar tries to free herself from a desperate situation, the risk she takes cannot be underestimated. It can be assumed that Hagar knows, "that the law prescribed stringent punishment for slave surrogates who tried to put themselves on an equal basis with the barren wife".⁶ People who struggle for liberation know that their situation will get much worse, before it improves. This risk is an inherent part of gaining autonomy. A scriptural parallel is found in the Exodus story: when Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and demand that he lets the Israelite slaves go, Pharaoh increases the workload of the Israelites. The Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron: "You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Ex. 5.21).

Sarai's position is threatened by Hagar's resistance to the status quo. Sarai begs Abram to take more initiative, to observe Sarai's affliction and to make amends. Abram has been rather passive in the episode so far. First he quietly obeys Sarai and is now completely unaware of the conflict between the two women and of Sarai's plight. When a patriarchal or any other power structure is well established, the people on the top of the hierarchy do not need to do much to run the system. Others like Sarai caught up in the injustice will run it for them. Abram does not align with Hagar, who

is a wife to him, pregnant with his child, but allows Sarai to be harsh to her slave Hagar. Like Pharaoh's taskmasters Sarai becomes the oppressor, making Hagar's life much worse than before. At further risk to herself and to her unborn child, Hagar takes the next step to autonomy: she flees. She risks harsher treatment prescribed for run-away slaves and lack of sustenance for her pregnant self.

Encounter with God at the Well

Hagar is heading for Egypt, her homeland; she has taken the route to Shur. An angel of the Lord meets her in the wilderness by a spring of water. "Most biblical scholarship agrees that in the patriarchal narratives 'there is no distinction between the angel of the Lord and Yahweh himself'".⁷ In this study also Hagar's encounter with the angel is considered to be her meeting with God. It is interesting to note that in the whole episode Sarah and Abraham, who control Hagar's life, do not speak to her once; Hagar does not speak to them either. In Genesis 16, God chooses Hagar, a gentile, and not the "chosen people" as a conversation partner. In Genesis 21, although God speaks to Abraham, Hagar is the only one who speaks to God all through the episode.

When asked what Hagar is doing there in the wilderness, she tells the angel that she is running away from her mistress. The angel of God speaks to Hagar not to encourage her in her actions towards autonomy, but tells her: "Return to your mistress and suffer affliction under her" (Gen. 16.9).⁸ Many scholars find this command of God to Hagar most distressing; this goes against the predominant biblical motif of a just God, who is God of the poor and the oppressed. However, looking at this from the Bangladeshi women's perspective, the order does not look so out of place. At NPK workshops women have used similar language to instruct each other to re-submit themselves to patriarchy. Some women, after naming patriarchal oppression, want immediate remedy, instant liberation, while others point to the harsh reality. They calmly advise their impatient sisters to return to their patriarchal homes, but with open eyes.

Hagar's return to Sarai can also be related to Bangladesh's continual receiving of western aid. When unjust trade relations between the rich and the poor countries exist, the aid keeps the poor in perpetual dependency, yet if aid is cut suddenly, the life of the poor can be severely threatened. Foreign aid to Bangladesh can only be justified as a short term necessity. The re-submission to the exploiter may be tolerated for a short period if the exploited remain free from internalised oppression and work slowly towards the transformation of the unjust situation.⁹ If the situation does not change, at least it provides time for the rebels to grow in maturity. Women at NPK workshops are reminded that the journey to the promised land is a long process through wilderness, encountering sometimes renewed and more vehement oppression.

The next step towards the victory over Hagar's internalised oppression is her new vision of her reality and an experience of transfiguration in the wilderness. Hagar does not return empty handed, but laden with her vision and new experience. After a two-day biblical workshop, organised by NPK in a town in Bangladesh, some women spoke in terms of transfiguration experience. As Hagar encountered God in the wilderness, so here some Bangladeshi women for the first time in their life recognised the God of the powerless. Like Peter after his experience of Jesus' transfiguration, the women at the workshop said, ". . . it is good for us to be here" (Mt. 17.4). As for the disciples of Jesus and Hagar, it was very difficult for NPK women to return to their daily life of injustice. In the biblical narrative, Hagar anticipates the humiliation of a return and the probability of further affliction at the hand of Sarai.

The encounter in the wilderness has been so powerful that Hagar believes that she has seen the God who sees her.¹⁰ "So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi,' for she said, 'have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'" (Gen. 16.13). The whole experience takes place by a well which as a consequence is named by Hagar: Beer-lahai-roi, meaning: "the well of the Living One who sees me". (Gen. 16.7 and 13-14). Hagar comes back to Sarai, bearing promises from God. She has the experience of annunciation: a son will be born to her who will be named by her,

Ishmael, "God hears". The Genesis story records the promise of God to Hagar "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" (Gen. 16.10). The progeny is promised to a woman. About Ishmael God says later in the story: "I will make a great nation of him" (Gen. 21.18). The Beatitudes later re-echo the experience of Hagar: "blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God" (Mt. 5.8); "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" (Mt. 5.5).

Scholars observe how extraordinary Hagar's naming of God is,¹¹ the uniqueness of which cannot be denied. However, re-naming God is one of the first steps for Bangladeshi women towards their liberation. Institutional religions so far have portrayed an unjust God who is partial to the males, the rich and the powerful. For Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh there is no liberation and justice as long as God is named "the almighty male God". Bangladeshi women also re-name their God as the "God who sees" their afflictions and the "God who hears" their cry for freedom. In their re-naming of God, Bangladeshi women stand in the line of the first feminist theologian from below, Hagar. This is the same God who says: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . ." (Ex. 3.7-8).

The angel of the Lord says to Hagar about Ishmael: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen. 16.12). The ass is in scriptural tradition a symbol of peace, contrasted with the horse, which symbolises warfare. The decision of Jesus to enter Jerusalem mounted on an ass is interpreted in these terms.¹² However, Ishmael is likened to a wild ass, one who has not been domesticated. Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as a man of peace who is also the agent of major disturbance:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. (Mt. 10.34-36).

Bangladeshi women understand what is required for there to be peace in an unjust society.¹³ They recognise that subversion, which can be compared with a wild ass or a sword, is involved in resistance to the power structure. Asian women are often depicted by the western media as docile, meek and mild.¹⁴ A more accurate image would be that of the wild ass.

Hagar in the wilderness gains the vision of giving birth to the nations of the marginalised who will resist worldly power structures. With the new vision Hagar returns. On her return, she receives the sustenance needed for the safe delivery of her child in the comfort of a home and the acknowledgement of the paternity of Abram. It is disconcerting for some scholars that not Hagar, but Abram names Ishmael. Phyllis Trible writes: ". . . in reporting that Abram named the son Ishmael, it strips Hagar of the power that God gave her".¹⁵ However, it was to Hagar, not to Abram, that the vision of the birth and naming of Ishmael was given. Abram merely pursues Hagar's perspective in naming their son Ishmael. The naming does not strip Hagar of the power that God gave her.

The Gift of Life-giving Water

Much happens between Genesis chapters 16 and 21. In chapter 21 new names of Sarai and Abram are used: Sarah and Abraham. The God of the Bible hears the cry of poor Hagar and of rich Sarah, both caught up in the rules of the systems of domination. Not only Hagar, but Sarah also is given a son, Isaac, yet the barriers between the two women remain. When Sarah sees Ishmael and Isaac playing together, she wants Hagar and Ishmael cast out of the house. Delores S. Williams sheds some light on this situation:

According to early Hebrew custom, and Assyrian and Nuzi law, the eldest son received a

double portion of his father's wealth. Law forbade the father from showing special privilege to the son of the wife he preferred and thereby protected the firstborn son's inheritance rights.¹⁶

Although Ishmael is not the son of the first wife, the law still applies. Ishmael is the chief inheritor of his father's wealth. Sarah, as a woman, does not inherit, but is taken care of by her son. Hence as long as Ishmael is in the house, the status of both Isaac and Sarah is lowered. In Genesis 16.6, Abram re-confirms that although married to him, Hagar is no more than Sarai's personal slave. Hagar, who has not been elevated to the position of Abraham's second wife, poses no danger to Sarah. The new threat is Ishmael, the first-born son of Abraham. Sarah asks Abraham to drive them out of the house so that her position can be secured. The threat arising for Sarah from the presence of Ishmael is confirmed in the next verse: "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son" (Gen. 21.11). Ishmael is still considered by Abraham to be "his son".

God supports Sarah's suggestion and tells Abraham to obey her, for Abraham's offspring will be named after Isaac and God will make another nation through Ishmael. God talks to Abraham not about "your son" and "your wife" but about "the boy" and "your slave woman". All emotional ties are loosened. It is not clear why God aligns with the oppressors again. Perhaps the poor cannot control their own destiny unless they are separated from the rich. The whole question of the aid dependency of Bangladesh to the West can be related to this incident of the narrative. As long as the relationship between the donors and the receivers is not based on justice, such a connection continues to harm both the poor and the rich.

In Exodus, circumstances force Moses out of the palace of Pharaoh. Likewise Hagar and Ishmael are driven from the home of the rich. However, God not only sends them out, but like a sorrowing mother goes with them. In the Exodus story:

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people (Ex. 13.21-22).

Later, God goes to the wilderness together with the chosen people, the Israelites. It is striking that in the narrative of Hagar God goes to the wilderness together with Hagar, a gentile single mother.

Early in the morning Abraham gives Hagar some bread and water and sends her out with Ishmael. In Genesis 16, in the first wilderness, Hagar meets God, but in Genesis 21, at the time of her departure she does not know what will happen to her and her child in the second wilderness. The little water and the bread that Abraham gave them is finished. The exhaustion of their journey in the heat has completely dehydrated them. They sit down, awaiting imminent death. Hagar, a single mother responsible for the sustenance of her child, has forgotten her own need. She sits away from the child and says to herself: "Do not let me look on the death of the child" (Gen. 21.16). Bangladesh is full of mothers like Hagar, abandoned by their husbands. Some of these mothers are so desperate that they even sell their bodies in prostitution to keep their children alive. Hagar lifts up her voice and weeps. God hears the loud cry of Hagar and the silent cry of Ishmael and comes to their aid. God shows them a well and renews the divine promise to them. Except for a few mentions of the Hagarites and Hagarenes and of Ishmael, the biblical story of Hagar ends with the wilderness scene where Hagar finds water. The narrative states that Ishmael lives long enough to be married.¹⁷

The biblical account of Hagar is set at the beginning of the Jewish community. Abraham and Sarah are seen behaving according to their cultural expectations. God alone in the narrative is setting the ethical standard for them. Yet it is quite extraordinary that "her-story", written from the perspective of a black slave woman, Hagar, occupies such a prominent place in the theological

history of Abraham and Sarah. Hagar and her son are not sent to the wilderness to be forgotten for ever, but to be remembered from generation to generation.

After their own Exodus experience, the Israelites understand the predicament of Hagar in a much deeper way. In the Exodus teachings God speaks clearly against the wrong done to people like Hagar and Ishmael: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn . . ." (Ex. 22.21-24). Nothing is known about whether God's wrath did burn against Sarah and Abraham for mistreating Hagar and Ishmael. This verse forbids abuse, but there are many biblical texts which also urge people to take care of the likes of Hagar and Ishmael:¹⁸

. . . the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God (Deut. 10.17-20).

The Genesis story of Hagar ends with God providing the virtual orphan and the virtual widow with water. The Bible does not state whether the last part of this verse: "You shall also love the stranger", is obeyed by the people of God regarding Hagar and Ishmael.

In Islam, the *Hadith* takes up the story of Hagar where the biblical narrative ends. In the Muslim tradition the Arabs are the people who give asylum to Hagar and Ishmael. According to Yusuf Ali:

Like the Cities of Refuge under the Mosaic Dispensation to which manslayers could flee (Num. 35.6), or the Sanctuaries in Mediaeval Europe to which criminals could not be pursued, Mecca was recognised by Arab custom as inviolable for the pursuit of revenge or violence.¹⁹

The *Hadith* records that Hagar and Ishmael take refuge in Mecca. This may imply that they have fear of being pursued. The Muslims claim Hagar and her child as their "arabised" ancestors and call Hagar the mother of the Muslims.²⁰ The Muslims continue to remember the mother and her child whenever they make their pilgrimage to Mecca. When they say their prayers, all Muslims face Ka'ba which is situated in the part of Mecca where the Muslims believe that Hagar and Ishmael settled. In the biblical narrative, on her first journey, Hagar faces Egypt, but on her second journey she faces the other way. The Bible takes them up to the wilderness of Paran, while the *Hadith* places them further south-east, in Mecca.

The Muslims aim to visit the Ka'ba once in a lifetime. One of the rituals they observe when they go on *hajj*, their pilgrimage, is to walk round the Ka'ba. They then go round the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times, remembering the distressing walk of Hagar. According to the Muslims, God has prescribed the remembrance of Hagar's attempt to find water as an important part of *hajj*. They drink the life-giving water of the well Zamzam which was given to Hagar by God's angel to save the life of Ishmael. Thus the Muslims refuse to forget the story of Hagar.²¹ Muslim tradition confirms that these meek people did indeed inherit the earth.

The Muslims record the fulfilment of God's promise, made possible because the Arabs give asylum to the destitute woman and her fatherless child. They love the strangers as themselves.²² They prove themselves the people of God by naming Hagar the mother of the Muslims.

2 THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY

My study is based on the view that the fourth evangelist uses narrative to portray the nature and

actions of Jesus. The story of the Samaritan woman is not necessarily an exact report of what actually happened, but is the result of the evangelist's collection and selection of information from the Jesus tradition to convey the message of salvation. Just as John saw Jesus from his perspective and interpreted this part of the tradition in the light of his own experience of life, so contemporary Bangladeshi women reread the gospel in the context of their own lives.

The hermeneutic applied to the gospel narrative in NPK workshops sometimes consists of dramatisation and reflection. Thus the story of the Samaritan woman is rewritten in the form of a play, setting it in the context of Bangladesh. The play, depicting Jesus in conversation with a Bangladeshi woman at a well, is then acted out in groups where participants may be Christians and others, men and women. Sometimes these groups consist of workers involved in women's development programmes. Dramatisation of the gospel story in a Bangladeshi context prompts new and liberating reflections on the significance of the narrative.

Encounter with Jesus at the Well

In the gospel narrative Jesus is walking from Judaea to Galilee through Samaria. It is midday and he is tired. Jesus sits by a well, while his disciples go to the city to get some food. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her to give him a drink. The woman is surprised that a Jew asks her for water. The first thing that Bangladeshis immediately notice is the fear of defilement. Jesus can be contaminated by being in close proximity to the Samaritan woman and by using her water pot. Some Jews avoided Samaria to save themselves from being defiled by contact with the Samaritan people. "In practical terms it was not absolutely necessary: it was possible to travel from the lower Jordan to Galilee without climbing into the Samaritan hill country."²³ Between the Jews and the Samaritans there is a separation, an apartheid, in which the Samaritans are considered inferior.

The fear of defilement on the grounds of nationality, class, caste, gender or religion is still prevalent in Bangladesh. Some Bangladeshi women activists observe that in certain primary schools very young boys are taught not to touch girls because of the same fear. Another observation is that often a household belonging to one religion avoids employing a maid or a cook belonging to another religion. A subtle form of the fear of defilement is also found among expatriates who come as development or aid workers, or on various other missions. The international communities usually choose to live in segregated areas, far from ordinary Bengalis. These expatriates come with the aim of improving the quality of life of the poor of Bangladesh, but they avoid contact with the poor.

The fourth chapter of John's gospel provides insights for a development worker whose task is one of uplifting the poorest of the poor, a woman. It is implicit in the narrative that the Samaritan woman is economically poor, for if she were rich, she would have sent somebody else to fetch water. Jesus is not afraid of defilement; he finds the poor Samaritan woman within her own arena. She does not need to come to him, he goes to her. Moreover, he is willing to use the same water jar, although the sharing of vessels is forbidden for the Jews.

Water and fear of defilement are continuing themes in the gospel account. The most significant connection between the narrative and the experience of Bangladeshi women is water. In the gospel story it is the woman who is mainly responsible for bringing water to her family and she walks a long way to carry a mere jar full of water. It is still the same in Bangladesh for poor women.²⁴ In the gospel narrative it is about noon. The time here is significant. It is most probable that the nameless woman of Samaria has to be careful not to be seen. She fails to comply with her society's expectations. She is not from a "normal" family, as she has had more than one husband. Hence she has a bad reputation. It can be assumed that if she had had a choice she would have avoided the hot sun and come earlier with her female friends to fetch water.

This woman is dispossessed in every way possible. She is a "bad woman" in her society. Women in biblical workshops easily relate to the feelings of this ostracised gospel woman. Jesus looks at the woman at the well and sees a person created in the image of God. What St. Paul

observes in the nature of Jesus is apparent in this narrative. To Jesus, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female . . ." (Gal. 3.28). The stereotypical identities bestowed on the Samaritan woman by her society seem invisible to Jesus.

In Bengal water is compared with life. In a tropical country like Bangladesh one understands the intense craving for water and the danger of dehydration after a long walk in the sun. Jesus has asked for water. In the narrative two people are united by the basic human need for water and separated by social apartheid. The biblical woman is caught up in this tension. She is aware that Jesus ought to have noticed at least two aspects of her identity, that is she is a woman and a Samaritan. She is puzzled that Jesus has asked for water. By asking for water Jesus is ignoring the apartheid between them. He is also violating gender restrictions by meeting her alone in a public place.

Jesus is asking for water from one who, in the Bengali sense, is an outcaste. This gospel narrative becomes more powerful when women in Bangladesh recite verses from a dance drama of Rabindranath Tagore based on a Buddhist story similar to this biblical account.²⁵ Excerpts from the dance drama are given below to demonstrate the way in which insights from other Asian religions help women to understand the Asian Jesus. The dance drama is about a girl called Prakriti. She is the daughter of a *chandal* who is traditionally entrusted with the job of execution of the criminals. Hence a *chandal* is of one of the lowest castes in a Hindu society. In the drama, Prakriti is shown as an untouchable. Girls of her age themselves do not come anywhere near her and forbid others to do so. She is very upset and says:

Whoever sent me to the darkness of this humiliation,
I will not, will not and will not worship that God . . .
God has cheated me and has stolen the light
and has kept me in the darkness . . .
What have I done wrong? To whom have I done wrong?
Why is this grave injustice done to the innocent?

Her mother hears her complaint, but believes that this sadness has no real grounds. This is all in her mind. A Buddhist monk arrives when Prakriti is drawing water from a well and asks her to give him some water. Prakriti says:

Forgive me, oh, forgive me—
I am a daughter of a *chandal*,
The water of my well is defiled.
I am a daughter of a *chandal*,

The monk says, "I am the same as you, a human being." He receives water from her and leaves. Prakriti says, "only a drink of water and my well has become the sea. The water is filling my whole life."

Oh what joy, oh what joy, what liberation!
only a drink of water—
Oh, it has washed all the blemishes of my life—
only a drink of water.²⁶

These verses speak eloquently of the sufferings of people who are humiliated not for what they have done, but for who they are. The Samaritan woman is seen as one such person who is healed by Jesus as soon as social barriers are removed and she is respected as a human being. Bangladeshi women see both the Buddhist and the Christian stories as pictures of the oppression of innocent people because of apartheid. Both the Buddhist monk and Jesus stand in the lines of all who refuse

to perpetuate the oppression, but align with the oppressed.

The significance of water in the narrative can be seen from the perspective of a development worker. It is noted that Jesus starts where the gospel woman is. He uses her language, her vocabulary—water—the thought of which occupies a major part of her day. For a while the woman and Jesus talk about water on completely different levels. Many scholars have regarded the teaching Jesus here gives as “largely unintelligible to the hearer . . .”;²⁷ however, Jesus does not see her as unintelligent and inferior but as the other, who has a different world view. Women reading with a new perspective find no reason to doubt the intelligence of the gospel woman whom Jesus, according to the evangelist, has chosen as a conversation partner. This after all is one of the longest and most detailed recorded conversations that Jesus is supposed to have had with another person. Women in Bangladesh mark how quickly the woman at the well reaches the level to which Jesus is leading her.

It is noted from a Bangladeshi perspective that much contemporary development work is not concerned about valuing the poor or transforming the oppressive structure that perpetuates poverty. As a result development and aid agencies continue to create dependency which is always harmful in the long run for both the donor and the receiver. Jesus’ method seems different. He does not dig a well in the woman’s house to solve her problem. She will solve her own. However, unless the oppressive structure of her society stops undermining the Samaritan woman’s efforts she remains helpless. Therefore, Jesus does not merely free an individual, but the structure as well. Neither does he create dependency on himself. Jesus becomes close to her in order to set her free. The work of Jesus is to value her so much that she learns to value herself and in her turn to bring new life to others.

In the next phase Jesus is trying to raise the gospel woman a little above her daily preoccupation. His approach is holistic. He is concerned about the whole person and her material, psychological and spiritual needs. Jesus talks about the living water that quenches all thirst. He started the dialogue with the request to quench his physical thirst. The story does not report whether he ever receives the water to drink. The conversation is already on a different level. Jesus tells her that if she knew about the gift of God and who it is that is asking for water she would have asked him and he would have given her living water. The woman at the well is very eager to have that water as that would solve her problem of fetching water every day. Jesus is talking about the water that does not just fulfil her need, but gives in her “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn. 4.14). This saying of Jesus shows that he is speaking not only of liberation in this life, but also about eternal salvation. Later in the story, by liberating her, Jesus practises what he is elsewhere recorded to have said: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18.18).

There is no dichotomy between the giver and the receiver or between heaven and earth. Everything is interrelated. The liberation of the woman at the well eventually frees both Jesus and the woman together. On the spiritual level Jesus is thirsty as long as the woman is. His own thirst for righteousness is quenched by valuing the Samaritan woman.²⁸ Jesus in the story is in total solidarity with the woman. The words of Lilla Watson, addressed to people who come to help the aboriginals of Australia, express a desire for such solidarity as seen in Jesus’ relationship with the Samaritan woman: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together!”²⁹ Through her interaction with Jesus the woman of the biblical narrative is freed from internalised oppression. Her liberation unleashes the chains on earth and heaven together. A spring of water in her gushes up to eternal life. Later this water overflows to others in her community, releasing them for eternal life.

Anguish Understood

Jesus wants to see the Samaritan woman’s husband. Bangladeshi women’s own experience helps them to note that this gospel woman cannot be liberated in a patriarchal society unless her husband

is also set free. Jesus liberates the woman with the aim of redeeming the structure that dehumanises her. She is bound up with the man she lives with and with her community. The Samaritan woman is already intrigued by this peculiar man, Jesus. This makes her daring enough to be truthful. She says, "I have no husband" (Jn. 4. 17). Jesus says that she is right in saying that, as she already had five husbands and the one she has now is not her husband. The trust between these two people is being built, and the woman is not ashamed to disclose her identity and her experience. Jesus reveals that he already knew about her family life. Once mutual trust is established, both are able to reveal what they had concealed earlier.

Some Christian apologists have emphasised the supernatural and divine qualities of Jesus, for example "His (Jesus') words in 18 may be a purely factual statement about the woman's past and illicit present (he has supernatural knowledge of such matters)" ³⁰ Such interpretations, commonly given by preachers and evangelists in Bangladesh, have served only to obscure Jesus in the minds of many Christians and people of other faiths. NPK has offered a new way of looking at Jesus, primarily centred on his humanity. It is by concentrating on his humanity that women have come to understand Jesus as divine. There is always a risk that Jesus would become just one of the great human figures, but this risk seems worth taking to re-discover the Jesus who has been nearly lost in the obscurity of his divinity. In his life time Jesus was understood firstly as a human being. In consecutive years he needed to be acknowledged primarily as divine. From a Bangladeshi perspective, it seems that the period of knowing Jesus firstly as divine has come full circle. Now it is again time to know first the human Jesus. If people of today cannot know Jesus through the ordinary experiences of life, it is difficult for many to proceed any further.

Women who see new revelations in their scripture understand that "Discernment does not entail esoteric knowledge, but rather the gift of seeing reality as it really is. Nothing is more rare, or more truly revolutionary, than an accurate description of reality". ³¹ Such power of discernment is seen in Jesus, the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and the prophecy in the book of Revelation. The visionaries and the prophets of the Bible are renowned for their supernatural power but even more for seeing reality as it is. The prophets often used supernatural and mysterious figurative speech, but what they spoke about was reality as they saw it. The spiritualising of the story of this gospel woman obscured its liberative significance, as did the emphasis of the traditional interpretations on the supernatural power of Jesus. Almost all the sermons based on John 4 that women of Bangladesh hear, concentrate on salvation by Jesus in the life hereafter, totally missing the implications of salvation for the present. The new interpretation exposes the falsity of the concept of salvation that attempts to ignore the oppressive reality that Jesus is seen redeeming in the gospel account.

Two aspects of the identity of the gospel woman—being a Samaritan and a woman—have already been noted. It was also mentioned before that most probably the woman of Samaria was ostracised in her own community because of her marital status. The woman at the well comes to the realisation that Jesus knew about her past five husbands and the present partner—in other words, her third stereotypical identity, "a bad woman"—and yet continued to give her the respect she had never received in her own society. For contextual study, the story of the Samaritan woman is read in its own cultural context as well as in the light of the situation of women in Bangladesh. In reading it thus, the Samaritan woman is not considered bad anymore. Bangladeshi women suspect that in her own patriarchal culture, the Samaritan woman might not have had the freedom to choose to marry so many husbands or to live in adultery. Bangladeshi women wonder whether like many of them, the Samaritan woman was just passed around from one man to the other. They recognise that like most Bangladeshi women today, a woman of biblical times most probably could not divorce her husband but could be divorced by him. NPK women compare their own situation with the biblical context and find that:

Divorce was easy for Jewish males. The school of Hillel (Gamaliel's grandfather) taught that a

man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his cooking, while Rabbi Akiba said that a man could divorce his wife if he found a woman more beautiful than she (Gittin 9:10). These views won out over the view of the school of Shammai that adultery was the only cause for divorce; so the position of Jewish women was perilous indeed. A woman who appeared in public without a head covering or spoke to men in the street or even spoke too loudly at home was not entitled to a financial settlement at the time of divorce.³²

There is no reason to believe that the condition of Samaritan women regarding divorce was any different from that of their Jewish counterparts. Moreover, for similar reasons as in the above quotation, contemporary Bangladeshi women also get divorced. It is noteworthy that the difference between the world religions remains vast in doctrinal matters, but it is narrower regarding women's affairs. Everything changes faster than a woman's status as prescribed by a religion. When there is progress, technological and scientific development in all areas of life, women's situation remains unchanged or worsens. If today's civilisation is called "the ascent of man", it can also rightly be termed "the descent of woman". Two to four thousand years have passed since biblical times, yet women in Bangladesh can still identify with biblical women.

The Samaritan woman, who can be easily divorced, is such a person with whom Bangladeshi women connect readily. It is noted by NPK women that the woman of Samaria could be left again by her present partner for talking with Jesus, a man, in such a forthright manner in public. This gospel woman obviously fails to conform with the regulations of a male dominated society which prescribes timidity for its women.³³ Women at biblical workshops ponder the fact that many women in their own culture have no rights over their own lives but are blamed by society all the same when their marriages do not work out in the expected manner. They are blamed when their husbands die or if they somehow fail to incur the favour of the husband by being unable to produce him sons, or for any other reason. As a result of any of these misfortunes they could be ostracised and end up in the same position as that of the Samaritan woman, without any fault of their own. For financial support alone such a woman needs male protection.

"Perhaps the (Samaritan) woman, . . . is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her."³⁴ In Bengali language, the husband's younger brother is called *debar* which literally means "the second husband". This shows the Bengali cultural connection with the ancient custom of levirate marriage according to which a woman could be married off to her brothers-in-law serially, after the death of the husband. When a woman's status is largely regulated by her position in a marital home with children, the levirate marriage with its cultural limitations was intended to offer some justice to the widow of the biblical period. She is even given power over the brother-in-law to admonish him publicly, if he refuses to marry her.³⁵

However, in the biblical narratives, cultural superstition often wins over the law of Moses, leaving the woman destitute. If more than one husband dies, the woman is seen as a bad omen. Scriptural references are found in the apocryphal book of Tobit and the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. Sarah in Tobit is reproached, "You are the one who kills your husbands! See, you have already been married to seven husbands and have not borne the name of a single one of them" (Tob. 3.8). After the death of her husband, Tamar is married to her brother-in-law. He also dies and Tamar is sent out of her husband's household for fear that the last brother-in-law, Shelah, would die too if Tamar remains there (Gen. 38.11). Tamar in desperation prostitutes herself to make Judah, her father-in-law, recognise that by sending her away from the husband's home he has deviated from the Mosaic law. The point is made and Judah says: "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen. 38.26).

A widow is a bad omen in many patriarchal cultures, but a serial widow is much worse. A serial widow without a son is a worse omen still. Neither Tamar nor Sarah kill their husbands, but they

become notorious as “husband killers”, unsuitable for re-marriage. Sarah is told, “. . . you have already been married to seven husbands” (Tob. 3.8), and Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “. . . you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband . . .” (Jn. 4.18). It is likely that the anguish of the woman of Samaria is similar to that of Tamar of Genesis and Sarah of the book of Tobit. Perhaps Jesus is reminding her of her plight, rather than her sin as has been presumed by the exegetes traditionally. It is likely that Jesus does not blame her for not being married to her last man. In Tamar’s case, Judah stopped the last man in line from marrying Tamar. Jesus understands the Samaritan woman’s misery because of her sexuality, and she recognises Jesus as a prophet.³⁶

At NPK workshops women reveal that they have always identified with the Samaritan woman and been ashamed of her and of themselves when the preachers from the pulpits humiliate this gospel woman in an attempt to disgrace all women. The Samaritan woman has always been seen as a sinful woman and sexual sinfulness has been alleged to be an inborn trait in a woman. Bangladeshi women in NPK workshops relate a common experience that during sermons based on this story, women cover their heads and bend down to become invisible. They want to hide, run away or just disappear if the male priest goes on any longer.

John Calvin in his commentaries readily lays a heavy sin trip on the woman by speculating that the woman was such a “forward and disobedient wife that she constrained her husbands to divorce her, that she did not cease to sin and prostituted herself for fornication”.³⁷

In the traditional style of exegetical exposition inherited from western missionaries, Jesus is elevated and the biblical woman degraded in such a way that Bangladeshi women cannot reach either of them to find liberation and salvation.³⁸ However, after participating in exegetical analysis from a Bangladeshi woman’s view point they are able to re-image Jesus as coming down from his pedestal and the Samaritan woman standing with her head high. In the re-imaging, the transcendent God is seen as Immanuel who sees the affliction and hears the cries of this biblical woman as well as women of all ages.³⁹ By looking at the Samaritan woman with respect, women reclaiming this gospel narrative begin to honour themselves.

The Gift of Life-giving Water

In the gospel account, the woman chooses to be truthful about her marital status and, instead of condemning her, Jesus compliments her for her truthfulness. The more Jesus honours her, the more the woman at the well starts to respect herself. She discloses more about herself, showing that she is not just preoccupied with the mundane, but is intelligent and eager enough to hold a conversation on a much higher, theological and spiritual level. She immediately speaks of the controversy between Jews and Samaritans regarding the place of worship, Jerusalem or Gerizim. At this point the story provides guidelines for inter-faith dialogue. Jesus in the gospel is not insisting on an adherence to the Jewish practice of worship in Jerusalem. He is attracting the woman to the universal truth at the heart of his religion: God must be worshipped in spirit and truth. Moreover, Jesus says, “salvation is from the Jews” (Jn. 4.22). When different tribes in West Asia believed in tribal gods for each tribe fighting against each other, it was the Jews who found the God of all; especially of the ordinary powerless people:

. . . the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God (Deut. 10.17-20).

The God of the Jews, the “one” God who cares about the marginalised people is the God who can

bring salvation for all.⁴⁰ People of all different religious traditions are capable of responding to this invitation of Jesus to worship such a God in spirit and truth.

Traditional Christians often feel obliged to impose on others the truth that they believe they have received. From the story of Jesus and the woman at the well it is understood that “Truth is not something that we impose on others; it is revealed to us, it is to be recognised, and is to be acted on”.⁴¹ Jesus does not impose anything on the Samaritan woman and that helps her to recognise the truth. She in her turn reveals what she recognises to her people and they believe in Jesus. The new way of doing theology gives a glimpse of the nature of God as reflected in Jesus. It is then left open for the participants to acknowledge that truth and act upon it.

In the gospel narrative the conversation gradually becomes deeply theological and spiritual. “The Talmud records Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion that ‘whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her lasciviousness’ (Sotah 3:4).”⁴² Jesus breaks such restrictions by teaching a woman who is not even related to him. Women in Bangladesh understand the significance of Jesus’ action, as the two cultural contexts have similarities. Many women in Bangladesh continue to be barred from receiving religious education.⁴³ Women at NPK workshops observe how much Jesus has disclosed of himself, of God and many other things to the woman at the well.

Jesus also clears the minds of women who have been taught to see God as a male personality: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4.24). This is very good news for women. It is a point to note here that in the Bengali Bible a male pronoun does not need to be used for God. The pronouns in Bengali do not denote gender. The absence of the male pronoun “him” in the above verse makes it a better reading for Bengalis who are looking for a God who is not gender biased.⁴⁴ Moreover, God seeks such worshippers and not the others who divide people by their doctrinal questions: their controversies over worshipping in Jerusalem or Gerizim.

Jesus speaks of “the hour which is coming and is already here” (Jn. 4.23), words that are, literally, self-contradictory. This part of the narrative provides insight into Jesus’ way of thinking about the kingdom of God.

It (reigning of God) is not described as coming from on high down to earth; it rises quietly and imperceptibly out of the land . . . While others look heavenward for divine intervention, Jesus reports that God’s reigning has already begun, in the very midst of them.⁴⁵

Jesus’ interaction with the gospel woman itself shows that in Jesus the hour—the kingdom or reigning of God or salvation—has already come. The hour, the reign of God, has an earthly status. It is liberative here on earth; yet it is not limited to the earth; it has its eternal dimension. The hour is also yet to come; it is salvific. However, the hour that is coming is related to the hour that is now here. All that Jesus does and says in this interaction makes the woman think of the coming of the Messiah. She says that when he comes, all the things the two have been discussing will be made clear. Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah.

In Bangladesh women have never before looked at this story without the traditional judgmental bias against the woman of Samaria. After contextual study of this gospel story in one of the workshops, some village women with little education suddenly saw themselves and Jesus with new eyes. They went through emotional turmoil. They were angry, sad and very happy at the same time. They were angry and sad because the good news in this gospel account had been hidden from women for so many years. When women in Bangladesh understand how badly the church has represented Jesus, and above all God, to women, they realise the gospel tradition contains truths about God and about human nature that are far deeper than they have ever imagined. Women find this particular story packed full of good news. The more they dig, the more they find treasures in it. They see this woman in their scriptural tradition as a theologian, a preacher and a missionary.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also says: "The dramatic dialogue is probably based on a missionary tradition that ascribed a primary role to a woman missionary in the conversion of the Samaritans".⁴⁶

While Jesus and the woman are involved in deep theological discourse, the disciples come back. In the words of the Bible, the disciples are astonished to see Jesus talking with a woman. It has already been noted that women at biblical workshops understand how Jesus, being a man, breaks the cultural gender boundaries to have such a long, deep dialogue with this woman of disrepute. They know why the disciples of Jesus are surprised. Bangladeshi women are able to recognise their own cultural norm whereby men and women are not supposed to talk in such a manner. Bangladeshi society is as segregated as society was during the time of Jesus when "Men avoided speaking to women in public, even their own women, because the rabbinic tradition taught that a woman's voice was a sexual enticement".⁴⁷ Jesus proves himself to be above patriarchal socialisation.

The spark of new life is noticeable in the woman of the narrative. The tiredness of walking a distance has disappeared. Now she is eager to give what is overflowing in her life. She leaves her water jar either as an indication that she is coming back, or that she has forgotten about what she had been preoccupied with at the beginning of her conversation with Jesus. The Samaritan woman goes to the city to tell her people about Jesus and wonders whether from her description they also recognise him as the Messiah.

Meanwhile the disciples urge Jesus to eat the food they have brought for him. The conversation of Jesus with his disciples is a matter of significance. Jesus tells his followers that he does not need to eat. He has just used his power to free the woman of the narrative, but he himself is understood to be interrelated with this freeing. The same Jesus who said: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4.4), is now well nourished as he has managed to do the will of God in his interaction with this woman. This blessed woman has satisfied Jesus' hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The water that comes from God and is given to the woman through Jesus is already powerful. She is now doubly blessed. First this woman was blessed because of her identity as an innocent victim. She was hungry and thirsty for righteousness or justice as the lack of it directly affected her. Now she is blessed as she is hungry and thirsty for righteousness on behalf of others. She has now become an agent for God's kingdom and righteousness. This woman of disrepute is no longer disregarded by her society. Her own people now see something of the spark of new life in her. They listen to the woman and start to walk towards Jesus.

Jesus goes on to say that his disciples are reaping what other people have sown. The reason for Jesus' using the proverb, "One sows and another reaps" has been interpreted in many different ways. For example, "The present Johannine community reaps the harvest made possible by the missionary endeavours of a woman who initiated the conversion of the Samaritan segment of the community."⁴⁸ The witness of the woman is to be recognised, yet there might be something else that Jesus is pointing to. He seems to be cautioning his disciples. The followers of Jesus are not to take all the credit when, as a result of their missionary activities, people come to recognise Jesus' way leading to God.

Jesus himself does not take the glory, he gives it to God. There were many factors working among the Samaritans to prepare them to recognise the Messiah. Jesus' respect for people of other faiths (also seen in the parable of the good Samaritan in Lk. 10) is noted in this gospel story. Jesus avoids creating a dichotomy between Jewish and non-Jewish people, between the truth revealed by him and the truth that is already inherent among the Samaritans. Jesus' mission is to bring to completion the potential that is present in the Samaritan community. Before Jesus' meeting with the people of Samaria, God's work had already begun among them. Jesus sees himself as one completing the work of God (Jn. 4.34). The fields are ripe for harvesting.

By contrast, in much Christian teaching, such as predominates in Bangladesh, the influence of Hellenistic dualism is prevalent. If Jesus is the right way, others must be wrong, even evil. Many Christian denominations are adamant that God is not at work outside Christian communities. Some

Euro-American missionaries in Bangladesh are known to avoid going to a mosque or temple for fear that the devil may enter them if they set foot there. In this gospel account Jesus is understood to be humbly giving glory to God who has already begun the work which he, Jesus, will complete. The new understanding from this narrative is that the God whom Jesus knew is the same God who continues to work even among people who do not know Jesus. This understanding matches the experience of Christian women who see many godly people outside their own community in Bangladesh. This new perspective helps to remove the barriers between Christians and others created by traditional interpretations. On one occasion the study of the Samaritan woman was undertaken from a new universal perspective in a Christian NGO where people of other faiths also work. After the study, a young Muslim woman came to the NPK facilitator and said,

My parents are very concerned that I might be manipulated to accept Christianity at my work place, for the sake of my job. Some Christians here do try to propagate Christianity by degrading Islam. I also had the idea that Christianity is such a manipulative religion. Now I see Christianity differently and with a lot of respect. I just wish that my parents could hear the exposition of this biblical story today. Please, at least come to my house to persuade my parents that a Christian institution is not a dangerous place for me.

Many Samaritans believe in Jesus because of the woman's testimony. They come to Jesus and request him to stay with them for two days. Many more believe because of the words of Jesus. Possibly John the evangelist was already in a dilemma about putting forward a woman as a missionary. He put these words in the mouth of the Samaritans: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe" (Jn. 4.42). The work is God's work, yet people who become channels for God need to be recognised, especially people like the Samaritan woman, who is easily forgotten because of her low social status.

Some feminist interpreters claim that soon after the death of Jesus, in the Bible itself, there are signs of androcentrism attempting to discredit women. For example, according to Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first to see the resurrected Jesus; John gives a detailed account of how Mary Magdalene was the first one to meet Jesus after his resurrection; whereas Paul in his letter to the Corinthians forgets to mention the names of the women who saw the risen Christ first (1Cor. 15.5-6). In a culture where stories were told and retold, it is rather difficult to believe that such powerful resurrection stories were unknown to Paul. Perhaps Paul's patriarchal socialisation played a part in making him forget women at the resurrection scene.

John may well have been a victim of the same patriarchal conditioning. Alternatively, it may have been not John, but rather the Samaritans themselves who were reluctant to give any permanent recognition to this disreputable woman. Although John fails to record the name of the woman of Samaria, the real harm to the biblical woman is not done by the account itself, but by later misinterpretations. The western church later successfully managed not only to belittle her but to commit a character-assassination of this biblical woman who should have been revered as a missionary or even a saint. However, the eastern orthodox church treated her better and gave her a name: Photina.

"Photina" is the Latinization of the Greek form, "Photeine", which is an adjective meaning "radiant" or "shining", from the noun *phos* (light). Ancient legend . . . ascribes this name to the woman at the well . . .

The legend has always been more widespread in the East, and Photeine is still a name that is common among Greek Orthodox women. The saint is commemorated in their calendar, and their important feast on the fifth Sunday of Easter is centred on this gospel story.⁴⁹

Bangladeshi women have also done some justice to the Samaritan woman by challenging

traditional western interpretations and by reclaiming her to be revered and commemorated.

Although the story of Hagar is very different from that of the Samaritan woman, there are some similarities. Firstly both the narratives are about women who are dispossessed because of their sex, ethnicity, social, political and economic status. Moreover, in patriarchal societies, it is their sexuality that becomes the primary reason for their oppression. An angel of God (Jesus) meets the marginalised woman. Neither of the women calls God or goes to God, but they experience the divine presence in the middle of their harsh reality. People avoid their company, while God (Jesus) has long conversations with them. Although they are not Jews, God (Jesus) considers them as valuable as the Jews. They are both met by the well. Jesus talks of giving water to the Samaritan woman that will gush up to eternal life. The water that is given to Hagar by the angel is still drunk by Muslim pilgrims today.

Both women experience God through the fulfilment of their material needs. Hagar recognises and names God "You are the God who sees me" and the Samaritan woman recognises Jesus and calls him a prophet and the Messiah. Both of them are sent back to the people they were with before. The Samaritans turn to Jesus; whether Hagar's experience changes Abraham and Sarah is not known. However, much later in time the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are profoundly transformed by the example of Hagar; they themselves re-live the same exodus experience.

A Bangladeshi woman can be seen as Hagar and as the Samaritan woman: nationally and internationally dispossessed and marginalised because of her ethnicity, gender, social, political and economic status. In the middle of oppression, injustice and death, they find the source of living water, their God. The same biblical God responds to the cry of both Christian and other women. They also name the divine "God sees", "God hears" and look for a prophet and a messiah to do the will of God. Above all, Bangladeshi Christian women reclaim their biblical sisters, Hagar and the Samaritan woman, who were so long marginalised by Christian exegetes.

Footnotes:

1. See the Qur'an: 2.125-129; 6.86; 19.54-55; 21.85. The *Hadith*: Khan, trans., *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, vol. 4, pp. 372-382.
2. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 17.
3. Jubilee 2000, *Jubilee 2000, A Debt-free Start of a Billion People*, a leaflet (London: Jubilee 2000, n.d.).
4. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 12. Trible cites New Jewish Version (NJV).
5. Savina J. Teubal, "Sarah and Hagar: Matriarchs and Visionaries", in Brenner, ed. (1993), op. cit., p. 249.
6. Williams, op. cit., p. 17.
7. Ibid., p. 20. Williams cites Gerhard von Rad, in John H. Marks, trans., *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 188,
8. Trible, op. cit., p. 16. Trible's own translation.
9. For Bengali understanding of internalised oppression see Chapter 2, pp. 87-88.
10. Gen. 16.13 (NIV).
11. See Trible, op. cit., p. 18; Williams, op. cit., pp. 23-26; and Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 71.
12. See Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew", in Raymond E. Brown, et. al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), p. 664: About Jesus Matthew writes: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Mt. 21.5). "Matthew shapes the quotation to stress the humility and peacefulness of the king".
13. See Chapter 5, pp. 172-173.
14. See Chapter 1, p. 54.
15. See Williams, op. cit., p. 26; Dennis, op. cit., p. 73; and especially Trible, op. cit., p. 19.
16. See Williams, op. cit., pp. 27-28. Williams cites Roland de Vaux, in John McHugh, trans., *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), p 53.
17. Further biblical references to Hagar and Ishmael: (a) Ishmael: Gen. 25.9, 12-17; 28.9 and 36.3. (b) Hagar: Gal. 4. 21-31. Paul's allegory is unhelpful and prejudicial. God's promise of the birth of Ishmael is completely ignored in verse 23. (c) Hagarenes: Ps. 83.6. (d) Hagarites: 1 Chr. 5. 10,

19, 20.

It is possible that the Hagarites and the Hagarenes were named after Hagar. See Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 33. Williams cites Lee Ann Starr, *The Bible Status of Woman* (New York and London: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1926), p. 67: "No one questions the claim that Dan was the ancestor of the Danites; Reuben of the Reubenites; Ephraim of the Ephraimites; Edom of the Edomites; Moab of the Moabites; Ammon of the Ammonites; Midian of the Midianites, etc. Why should we deviate from the common rule when we come to the Hagarites and Hagarenes?"

18. For example: Lev. 19.34; Deut. 14.29; 16.11-14; 24.14, 17, 19, 20-21; 26.12-13; 27.19 and many others.
19. Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 52.
20. See H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 179: "Ismail is also considered the ancestor of the North Arabian tribes. In the Arab genealogies, the Arabs are divided into three groups: *al-ba'ida* (those who have disappeared), *al-ariba* (the indigenous) and *al-mustariba* (the arabicised)".
21. For Hadith references see above, n. 1.
22. See above, p. 193.
23. A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible Companion to the Gospels* (Oxford/Cambridge: The University Printing House, 1972), p. 319.
24. See Chapter 1, pp. 32 and 36.
25. Rudolf Bultmann, in G.R. Beasley-Murray, trans., *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Oxford: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1971), p. 179. Bultmann writes: "We can get some idea of what it might mean from a Buddhist parallel, which can be traced in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. Buddha's favourite disciple Ananda, tired after a long journey, asks a girl of the Candala caste who is drawing water at a well for a drink. When she warns him not to contaminate himself, he replies; 'My sister, I do not ask what your caste or your family is. I am only asking you for water, if you can give it to me.'"
26. Rabindranath Tagore, "Chandalika", in *Gitabitan*, Vol. 3 (Calcutta: Vishvabharati, 1973), pp. 712-714.
27. R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel, A Commentary* (Oxford: University Press, 1960), p. 124.
28. See Chapter 8. pp. 269-270.
29. Cited in World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA), *Breaking Through—In a World of Prejudice and Discrimination* (Switzerland: World YWCA and World YMCA, 1990), p. 2.
30. C. K. Barrett, "John", in Matthew Black & H.H. Rowley, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London & Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1962), p. 849.

31. Wink, op. cit., p. 89.
32. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Tennessee: Parthenon Press at Nashville, 1977), p. 11.
33. A timid woman is the ideal woman in Bangladesh: see Chapter 1, pp. 36-38. A woman like Susanna who is not timid can stand up against patriarchal oppression: see Chapter 7, p. 224.
34. Gail R. O'Day, "John", in Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 296.
35. See Deut. 25.5-10: "If he persists saying, 'I have no desire to marry her', then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, 'This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house'."
36. See above, n. 31.
37. Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman*, Revised edn. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 87. Wahlberg cites John Calvin, in William Pringle, trans., *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949).
38. See Chapter 7, n. 4.
39. God of the poor sees and hears: see above, pp. 187-188.
40. See Chapter 8, pp. 266-268.
41. General Synod of the Church of England, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: The Synod Debate, 11 November 1992* (London: Church House Publishing, 1993), p. 8.
42. Mollenkott (1977), op. cit., p. 11.
43. See Chapter 4, p. 149 and Chapter 5, pp. 175-176.
44. See Chapter 5, pp. 168-169.
45. Wink, op. cit., p. 115. See Lk. 17.20-21.
46. Fiorenza, op. cit., p. 327.
47. Mollenkott (1977), op. cit., p. 10. Mollenkott cites Berachoth 24a in the Talmud.
48. Fiorenza, op. cit., p. 327.
49. Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Six New Gospels* (London; Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), pp. 54-55.