

NAOMI AND RUTH: Biblical Feminine Paradigms for the Formation of a Just and Compassionate Society

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Abstract: There are some amazing biblical heroines who have accomplished the divine dream for a just and compassionate society through their seemingly irrelevant but vigorous and dynamic lives. This paper deals with Naomi and Ruth, from the biblical book of *Ruth*, whose remarkable story exists as paradigms for resolving the contemporary social issues like immigration, family life, widow-hood, racism, inter-religious relationships, and food. They accomplish the endeavour to be the life-paradigms in the formation of a just and compassionate society through their astute leadership, flawless friendship, covenant faithfulness and more over by their absolute trust in the Lord who rewards the faithful and it is the relevance of this biblical novella of the Hebrew Bible to the present day. The paper deals with the biblical concepts of *hesed* and *ṣedāqāh*, which reveal the mind of God for the formation of a just and compassionate society in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Ruth holds out the practice of *hesed* as the ideal lifestyle for Israel. Naomi shares the leadership role with her daughter-in-law Ruth, and became the catalyst for divine intervention. Their flawless friendship brought forth joy and contentment to the-could-be predicament of two widows.

Keywords: Feminine Face of God, *Hesed*, Indian Feminism, Kingdom of God, Political Emotions, Restorative Justice, Women Friendship.

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1. Introduction

The political and Christian philosophers accentuate the values of compassion and justice in the construction of the society as a remedy for the present day crisis of unrest and chaos. The Bible comprises the revelation of God who ardently desires to establish a just and compassionate society. There are some amazing biblical heroines who have accomplished the divine dream for a just and compassionate society through their seemingly irrelevant but vigorous and dynamic lives. This paper deals with such women, namely, Naomi and Ruth, from the biblical book of *Ruth*, a book which stands as a paradox in the patriarchal biblical tradition. The remarkable stories of Naomi and Ruth exist as paradigms for resolving many of the contemporary social issues.

The first part of the paper deals with the relevance of the theme followed by a critical approach on the feminine aspect of the biblical concept of just and compassionate society. The second part explains how the amazing story portrays the heroines Naomi and Ruth to be the agents in the formation of the just and compassionate society and its implications for the dignity of woman in India. God's supreme *hesed* has been manifested in the feminine images of God of Naomi and Ruth, in the book of *Ruth*, as the thread which connects all events of the story with the claim that women are on the forefront to construct a just and compassionate society. Despite the story began with notes of sorrow and bitterness, it concludes with message of joy and comfort because the son who was born to Ruth was none other than the grandfather of David. The story attains a universal salvific dimension when it is inserted into the genealogy of Jesus, centuries later, albeit it began in a little village with minute significance with the astounding message of women leadership.

2. Relevance of the Paper

In this twenty-first century we live at a time when our planet is rolling under the brutality of cycles of violence and counter-violence at the local, national and global levels. These cycles of conflicts and chaos need to be broken at some point before they

mount into uncontrollable conflicts and wars. In India, the atrocities against women are at the increase with shocking higher percentage than the former times. All these are the signs of the unjust and uncompassionate society which call ardently for the creation of a just and compassionate society where peace may flourish, men and women may live in mutual respect and enjoying equal rights. Political philosophers and social analysts are very observant and vigilant on these issues and to propose solutions and remedies to this ailing world. The current trends among political and Christian philosophers are to propose an appropriate blending of compassion and justice for the construction of a secure society. Notable American woman Philosopher and prolific writer Martha Nussbaum seeks to advocate the role and promotion of the emotions, especially love, in establishing a just society and she would name justice and compassion as political emotions.¹ By positing the relationship between justice and compassion Christian philosophers insinuate antidotes to the broken world over the past decade. Acclaimed Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff holds that justice and love are indeed perfectly compatible, and commonly perceived tension between them reveals something faulty in our understanding of each. True benevolent love is always attentive to justice, and love that wrecks injustice can ever be malformed love.²

In the biblical tradition, the ideology of a just and compassionate society has been symbolised through the notions of Garden of Eden, covenant stipulations, kingdom of God, etc. Though men characters as well as masculine face of God dominate in the Bible, there are some women characters with feminine face of God who become the agents in forming the just

¹Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013, 384, 386.

²Timothy P. Jackson, "Philosophical Reviews, An Electronic Journal, on Nicholas Wolterstorff," in *Justice in Love*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmann's, 2015, <<http://www.ndpr.nd.edu/news/29488/edn1.html>> (21.07.2016).

and compassionate society of the people of God. They include Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam the sister of Moses, Rahab, Queen Esther, Judith, Mary mother of Jesus, etc. Seemingly irrelevant and extraneous, the Old Testament book *Ruth* conveys the story of two heroines, Naomi and Ruth, who courageously contributed for the formation of a just and compassionate society in their apparently curbed situations. Naomi and Ruth are pictured in this story as paradigms who transcend the factors of time, culture and other boundaries.

The biblical scholar David Clines suggests that there is a multiplicity of interpretations regarding the biblical books because the text is open-ended. Thus the reader is able to enter the world of the poem and identify with poem and with the *personae* of the poem, i.e., by assuming one of the several roles presented.³ Thomas Kuhn holds that there are two functions of a paradigm: providing a map and offering a few of the directions necessary for mapmaking.⁴ Naomi and Ruth are paradigms whose *personae* can be identified and modelled in the lives of biblical readers of the present day. The book of *Ruth* exposes the current social issues of immigration, family life, widow-hood, racism, inter-religious relationships, sex, food, etc. and proposes most fitting answers to tackle them through apparently insignificant life-paradigms of Naomi and Ruth. They accomplish the endeavour to be the models of the society by being the instruments in the formation of a just and compassionate society through their astute leadership, flawless friendship, covenant faithfulness and more over by their absolute trust in the Lord who rewards the faithful.

3. Feminine Aspect of a Just and Compassionate Society

Hebrew notion of compassion is denoted mostly by two terms: *hesed* and *rahāmîm*. The English equivalents for *hesed* are unmerited loving kindness, faithfulness, compassion, steadfast

³David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1976, 62.

⁴Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1962, 109.

love, goodness, graciousness and mercy.⁵ In a similar sense, *rhm* or *raḥamîm* expresses the effective and unconditional nature of love as of a mother, which in turn expresses God's parental tenderness and loving concern for humanity. Since the word *raḥamîm* (to have compassion) shows the link with *rhm* (womb), the term can be referred as womb-compassion (*1 Kings* 3:26).⁶ The term very well explains the feminine face of God who shows compassion to humanity as a loving mother. *Hesed* and *raḥamîm* could be considered as complementary biblical terms which are used together to express the aspects of God's essential nature⁷ which has got a feminine aspect. While the term *hesed* communicates the fundamental goodness of God, *rhm* conveys the special favour shown by God in the situations of sin and affliction⁸ which characterises the feminine face of God. This divine nature is well attested in *Exodus* 34:6-7: "...a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."⁹ The Hebrew equivalents for the English word justice, *ṣedāqāh* and *mišpāt*, related with *hesed* in expressing the concept of law and hence to denote that

⁵L. Köhler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed., M. E. J. Richardson, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 336-37. In the Mosaic tradition, it is often associated with the covenant that God established with the people of Israel, his chosen people, upon whom he bestows his blessings by the conditions that they should keep the commandments (*Exodus* 20:5b-6; 34:6; *Deuteronomy* 4:31; *2 Chronicles* 30:9; *Psalms* 6:15; *Daniel* 9:9; *Jonah* 4:2). The term indicates the permanence of divine kindness characterized by constancy and reliability. See H. -J. Zobel, "hesed" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 5, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 44-64.

⁶Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy: Biblical Perspectives and Ecological Challenges*, Publication details, 32.

⁷Joy Philip Kakkanattu, "God of Mercy Preached by the Old Testament Prophets," *Word & Worship* 49, 2 (February 2016), 120-134.

⁸H. Simian-Yofre, "rhm," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 452.

⁹Similar expressions we see in *Hosea* 11:9, *Micah* 7:18-19; *Joel* 2:13 and *Jonah* 4:2.

law as a manifestation of the loving kindness of God,¹⁰ which underscores indirectly the feminine character of God. In fact, the Old Testament employs the male and female images for God in conjunction with one another. For example, *Isaiah* 42:13–15 says about God who shouts like a warrior and who cries like a woman in labour. Yahweh, being the wholeness of both feminine and masculine can be metaphorically portrayed by both types of human biology, though possessing neither.¹¹

In the Biblical tradition, God constantly invites humanity to form a society where justice and compassion flourish. The Garden of Eden symbolises the original plan of God where in man and woman are created with equal dignity in the image of God. God's election of Israel and the covenant made with them were with this purpose in God's mind. The prophets continuously reminded them this intention of God and taught them how to realise it. The blending of justice and compassion is expressed as an ideal characteristic of the covenantal society which is vividly expressed in the prophetic books. The Prophet Micah exhorts: "He has told you o mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with you God?" (6:8). In the same thought pattern, *Zecharia* 7:9 says: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another." God wants his people to do what is right and just (*Amos* 5:7, 24; 6:12) and he also wants them to be just and merciful (*Hosea* 2:19; 12:6). For this reason compassion does not stand in opposition to the message of justice. He holds back his justice and provide people the opportunity for conversion. Thus

¹⁰See W. Baker, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003, 939; also G. Quell, "The Concept of Law in the OT" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 172–78.

¹¹Many such examples are seen in the Bible: *Job* 38:28–29; *Job* 38: 8–9; *Deuteronomy* 32:18; *Psalms* 131:2, etc. In some texts the feminine character predominates: *Isaiah* 49:15; *Isaiah* 66:12a; *Hosea* 11:3–4, etc.

compassion and mercy of God, like that of a mother, is God's creative and fertile justice.¹²

The New Covenant established by Jesus equated the just and compassionate society with the concept of the Kingdom of God.¹³ Kingdom parables of Jesus represent God as the farmer who plants the mustard seed and God as the woman working yeast into lump of dough (*Luke 13:18–21/ Mathew 13:31–33*). Both man's and woman's work point to the activity of Jesus as the agent of the kingdom.¹⁴ Recent study of the well-known parables of Good Samaritan and Prodigal son with insights from social psychology, moral philosophy and legal theory offers fresh reading of these parables and their contribution in the building up of a just and compassionate society. In both parables restorative justice, which prioritizes the values of healing and respect, participation and truth telling, mutual care, reconciliation and peacemaking, and social transformation, predominates.¹⁵ Central to the literary and poetic structure of both parables is compassion, a feminine character, which is the turning point of these parables (*Luke 10:33; 15:20*). Compassion, a basic feminine quality of God is the key ingredient that inspires and enables justice to be done, in the parables. Both parables

¹²Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans., William Madges, New York: Paulist Press, 2013, 54–55.

¹³Christopher D. Marshall, *Compassionate Justice: an Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*, Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012, 188 <<http://www.clarion-journal.com/files/book-review-of-compassionate-justice-1.pdf.html>> (22.07.2016).

¹⁴Apart from the parables, entering into the kingdom is related with birth imagery (*John 3:3–10; James 1:18*); maternal image of God in the person of Jesus (*Luke 13:34*); Christian growth is with nursing (*1 Peter 2:2–3*).

¹⁵Christopher D. Marshall, *Compassionate Justice: an Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*, Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012, 8–10 <<http://googlebooks.com.html>> (22.07.2016).

teach that it is only by "moved with compassion" at the reality of human suffering that we are adequately equipped to understand and achieve what is needed to bring about true justice, a justice that heals, restores, and reconciles and thereby reflects the prodigality of God's mercy.¹⁶

Though, many such biblical texts clearly reflect the feminine face of God, it is seldom recognised by the patriarchal tradition of the Church. Theology done by women has discovered a problem in the Christian tradition, that, Church models God almost exclusively on the male human being. The significance of this kind of tradition can hardly be overestimated. The way a group names its God has critical consequences, for the symbol of the divine shapes every other aspect of a religious system. Since the way a faith community speaks about God indicates what it considers the greatest good and the profound truth, the comprehending notion of God, in turn shapes a community's corporate identity and individual behaviour of its members.¹⁷

If the present human society had failed in making a compassionate society, one of the reasons might be its conception of the one-sided image of God - a male God. As Elizabeth Johnson points out, "the Symbol of God functions; beyond verbal or visual references, it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations very deep and tenacious. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and moulds a community's bedrock convictions and actions."¹⁸ However, the book of *Ruth* stands as a contradiction for the patriarchal biblical tradition and reflects the feminine image of God, as it reveals the story of two frail but successful women who had possessed *hesed*, the feminine characteristic of God. They became catalysts for the making of a contemporaneous, just and compassionate society.

¹⁶Marshall, *Compassionate Justice*, 11–12.

¹⁷Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Female Symbols of God," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1 (2010): 2, 40–57.

¹⁸Johnson, "Female Symbols of God," 41.

4. Naomi and Ruth: Paradigms for the Formation of a Just and Compassionate Society

Beginning with the literary genre of the book of *Ruth*, this part explains a short content of the book, the socio-cultural background of the book and *hesed*, the expressed feminine character of God in the story and practised by the persons who appear in the story. The feminine leadership of Naomi and Ruth in the formation of a just and compassionate Israel is also expounded. This part challenges the contemporary reader to recognise the feminine face of God, reflected in the lives of Naomi and Ruth and thus to be the transformers of society by reflecting it in their lives, as the image of God moulds the convictions of individuals and community.

4.1. An Appealing Novella

In the Jewish tradition, *Ruth* appears in the third division of the Hebrew Bible known as writings, *ketubim*, placing *Ruth* in a presumed chronological order of authorship. In the Christian canon, *Ruth* is placed under the category of historical books, after *Judges* partly because of the influence of a Hellenised canonical tradition and partly because the book is set in the period of the Judges.

The book of *Ruth* belongs to the literary genre of novella or short story. The power of a good story lies in its capacity to speak to the whole person – imagination, memory, affectivity and reason. A story becomes great when it transcends the boundaries of the place and time of its first telling, and proves not to be limited to a particular historical context.¹⁹ The book of *Ruth* is such a one, the only book in the Old Testament canon, named after a non-Israelite woman, a Moabitess who is the heroine of the story.

The classification of genre of a book is significant theologically because to know the genre is to know something of the author's purposes and strategies and something of the way in which the original audience was supposed to respond to it. However, as

¹⁹Katrina J. A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 9.

Fox says no text is wholly pure in genre but rather belongs to a number of overlapping or nesting sets.²⁰ The father of modern *Ruth* studies, Herman Gunkel supports this view, while he clarifies that genres at least begin pure even if they degenerate subsequently.²¹ In the case of the book of *Ruth*, the issue if genre is more complicated on the view that the antecedents of *Ruth* can be sought in very ancient material stemming from the local fertility cults of Canaan and /or Egyptian tales worked over in the reign of Solomon and brought into the present form in the post-exilic period. The book is also said to have similar genre of biblical prose tales such as the story of Tamar in *Genesis* 38, individual story units in *Judges*, *Esther*, *Tobit* or the prose frame of *Job*.²²

In a simple and attractive form of historical narrative, the book of *Ruth* presents us how Ruth the Moabitess, a daughter-in-law of the Bethlehemite Elimelech of the family of Judah, takes refuge under the wings of the God of Israel and how her fidelity (*hesed*) to her nuptial family is being rewarded. Elimelech had immigrated with his wife and his two sons into the land of Moab on account of famine. Naomi, the wife of Elimelech, lost her husband and two sons in this foreign land. Among the two daughters-in-law, Ruth went with Naomi to Judea out of childlike affection to her Israelite mother-in-law. When they were there, as Ruth was gleaning some ears of corn in the fields in her poverty, she came by accident to the field of Boaz, a near relation to Elimelech, and became acquainted with this honourable and benevolent man. In course of time, by the wish of her mother-in-law, Ruth was taken as a wife of Boaz, in all the ordinary legal forms, and bore a son in this marriage, named Obed. This Obed was the grandfather of David, with whose genealogy the book closes.

²⁰For character studies in the Old Testament, see Fox M. V., *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Columbia: University of South Carolina press, 1991.

²¹Cited in Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 10.

²²Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 10–11.

4.2. Socio Cultural Background in the Book of Ruth

In general, the Israelite patriarchal family consisted of three primary units of social organisation that shaped the kinship structures namely the tribe, clan and family household. The tribe is a larger social unit that provided the major geographic and kinship organization for ancient Israel.²³ The clan is a unit of kinship, but of a wider scope than the family, that is, a residential kinship group of several families.²⁴ The clan consists of farm households elated by kinship and marriage; clans were held together by language, economic co-operation, shared traditions of law, custom, ancestral stories, a common religion and an agreed-upon leadership. The family is the third level of kinship in Israel, in which the people's identity was embedded as a group. An individual derived identity from his/her contribution to the survival of the family household. Central to the household system of care for family members was the redeemer (*go'el*) who was a near kinsman or close relative responsible for the justice and well-being of the family. The main duties of the redeemer are to raise up a male heir for a deceased family head and to buy up or buy back property so that it remains in or returns to the social group.²⁵ In the book of *Ruth*, Boaz does the role of *go'el* for Naomi and Ruth. The role of *go'el* is the typical character of a patriarchal society of the biblical times wherein woman is considered as a child bearing instrument for sustaining the name of a deceased man. When

²³Wright C. H. J., "Family" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Freedman, ed., Volume D-G, New York: Double Day, 1992, 761; L. G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish: Summary and Conclusions" in *Families in Ancient Israel: The Family, Religion, and Culture*, Perdue L. G et al. eds., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, 163–222; E. S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament*, Edinburg: Fortress Press, 2002, 20.

²⁴Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish," 177; R. R. Wilson, "Family" in *Harpers Bible Dictionary*, P. J. Achtemeier Et. Al. eds., San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, 302.

²⁵Gottwald N., *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B. C. E.*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979, 261–67.

such ideas appear in the Scripture it has far reaching consequences, because, such ideas express and mould a community's core of convictions and behavioural system. As famous theologian Juan Luis Segundo alerts: "our falsified and in authentic ways of dealing with our fellow human beings are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance."²⁶

4.3. *Hesed* and God's Manifest Providence

The story is concerned with the outworking of God's providence and God's *hesed*, a feminine aspect of God, and assumes explicitly that the divine causality is hidden in the working of normal causality. *Hesed* shown by God, in the form of the providence of God, accompany them as the protecting hands of a mother. The readers read the events aright as they occur even though the characters act as best as they can in faithfulness to God and to another, which turned out as miracles in their lives. Thus the events will show that, faithfulness (*hesed*) of the characters of the story is related to reward from God which in turn catalysis the formation of a just and compassionate society, by doing the right action at right time. Ruth is much more allusive in its handling of the theme of hidden providence and concerned with the right handling of law-based authority.

Naomi's first speech (1:8) introduces the key theological term in the book: *hesed*. Naomi's use of the *hesed*, as the direct object of the verb, *asa* to do/ act/ demonstrate, reflects the fact that the quality is expressed fundamentally in action rather than in word or emotion. Naomi pronounced a blessing on the girls (v.8) for the kindness (*hesed*) they had shown her and their deceased husbands. This active sense is reinforced in Naomi's second use of the word, in 2:20, where she recognizes Yahweh's *hesed* in Ruth's return from Boaz, with an abundant supply of food. Naomi points out that Boaz is the instrument whereby God extended his kindness to Naomi and Ruth and concludes that divine loyalty takes shape in the community and in individual

²⁶Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974, 8.

lives through human actions.²⁷ Naomi also recognizes Yahweh's freedom to act in judgment against a person. In 1:13 she expresses this notion while she commends about the bitter situation of her life: "the Lord's hand has gone out against me."

In her opening speech, Ruth explicitly expresses a theological awareness, and her declarations represent one of the most significant statements in the entire book: "...Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God... May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"(1:16–17). Being a foreigner, Ruth the Moabitess, declares her faith in Yahweh, an act that is truly noteworthy. In keeping with prevailing ancient near Eastern perceptions she recognized that when one transferred ethnic and national allegiance one subjected oneself to the authority of the god of the adopted people.

Boaz's references to God in blessings (2:4, 12a, 12b, 3:10) reflect his recognition of Yahweh as a gracious God who dwells with his people who rewards people for their acts of devotion and kindness (2:11–12). The addition of "the God of Israel" in 2:12 is significant particularly, since he is talking to a Moabite. With the final clause "under whose wings you have come to take refuge" he identifies an important characteristic of Yahweh, that is, as patron of the nation Yahweh offers protection to all who will identify with his people. Like Naomi 2:20, in 3:10 Boaz perceives Yahweh as the source of all blessing.

The characters in the story recognize that God's *hesed* is the first step in imitating the same quality in the lives of the people. In the expressions of the protagonists of the story they identify and praise God's *hesed*. All the blessing enjoyed by Ruth and Naomi at the story's end derives from their firm loyalty. The life style of *hesed* requires extraordinary commitment. In the book, *hesed* is articulated through Naomi's urging her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's home. Certainly her final concern was to secure the future of her daughters-in-law and it would be

²⁷Roberts B. Chisholm Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013, 639.

too burdensome and even dangerous for the girls to remain with her. Naomi's heroic practice of *hesed* is shown in considering others' future more important than one's own, is implied in the term "go and return" (*lekna* and *ssobna* from roots, *halak* and *shuv*) an expression used in four times (1:8, 11, 12, 15) compelling her daughters-in-law to keep safe their future.²⁸ Naomi has been commended by many commentators as a strong woman of faith, enduring through unexplained and undeserved sufferings, unselfishly caring for her daughters-in-law. Bush would write that Naomi is "the virtual en fleshment of *hesed*, that quality of kindness, graciousness and loyalty that goes beyond the call of duty."²⁹

The author continues to stress this idea through two pairs of contrasting characters. First, he juxtaposed the two daughters-in-law, Orpha and Ruth (1:8–17). Without criticism he reported Orpah's return to Moab in obedience to Naomi's commands. She represents the one who does the ordinary, the expected. There is nothing wrong in her conduct, except that it is not *hesed*. By contrast, Ruth represents one who does the extraordinary, the unexpected. She was not content to rejoin her Moabite family, remarry, and live as her contemporaries would. Her commitment was to Naomi's people and God, even in the afterlife is expressed in her moving words: "Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (1:17). Even most important is that she had come to believe in the God of Israel as true God and determined to accept their God as her own. Even in Bethlehem, she refused to seek a husband for her own advantage (3:10). Instead she sought a marriage for Naomi's benefit because she performs every movement of hers in the foreign land as per the instruction of Naomi. Naomi is the one who instructs her to meet Boaz in the threshing floor in the night (3:2–3). In such compassionate devotion she stands out from her equals as one who does *hesed*.

²⁸Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 600–03.

²⁹Frederick W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Dallas: Word, 1996, 42.

Ruth and Boaz exemplify the *hesed* ideal in their actions in threshing floor. Ruth displays surprising courage in venturing out to glean in Bethlehem's fields. The ultimate risk is expressed in her night time visit to the threshing floor. She could not foresee Boaz's reaction to such feminine forwardness. It could be anger or embarrassment or awkwardness or acceptance. She could not even calculate the lost reputation and new accusations to result if she and Boaz could be discovered. Similarly, Ruth and Boaz could have shared sexual pleasure on the dark, isolated, threshing floor. Through sexually evocative language, the narrator certainly implied that (3:4). But in reality, they came out that morning morally intact. Hence, *hesed* required self-denial and self-control. Boaz was agreeable to accept the prior rights of the other relative of Ruth and did it with full consent (3:12–13). Ruth avoided any manoeuvres to circumvent them. In fact, by being simply obeying her mother-in-law and by being ready to marry Boaz for Naomi's sake, Ruth was sacrificing her marital preference for Boaz on the altar of virtuous practices guided by *hesed*. As we have already seen in the section 4.2, the nearest kinsman should marry the young widow in order to preserve the line of the deceased. In the case of Naomi, it was not Boaz, who supposed to act as a *go'el*, the nearest kinsman. After the meeting with Ruth in the threshing floor, Boaz met with the nearest kinsman and before the witness of ten people enquired about him the possibility to act like the *go'el* for Naomi's family. Since the nearest kinsman refused, Boaz pledged to be act like the *go'el* for the family of Naomi and married Ruth. Ruth's amazing transformation of status is due to the discerning eye and generous heart of Boaz, to whom she marvels: "Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" (2:10). When she boldly seeks Boaz's protection through the institution of the levirate marriage (*Ruth* 3:6–9; *Deuteronomy* 4:1–12), he is so impressed by her courage and character that she negotiates with a kinsman for the honour of "redeeming" her (4:1–12).

Such a heroic practice of loyal, compassionate devotion to Yahweh expressed in *hesed*, pleases Him so much that one may

reasonably expect reward in abundance from him. God blesses Naomi and Ruth with a redeemer (*go'el*), Boaz, who engages in marriage with the widow Ruth and also with the fruit of the marriage, a son, Obed. The demands of *hesed* are heavy, as can be seen from the contrast between Orpah and Ruth who is ready to follow Naomi even to death (1:17).³⁰

4.4 Female Friendship and Leadership

The book of *Ruth* begins and ends with stories about women's relationships. The emphasis has been on the principal character of Ruth. Naomi, an Israelite woman and her daughters-in-law from Moab are obviously good friends in spite of their different religious and cultural backgrounds. Accepting the fact that their own Moabite families and gods may be what Ruth and Orpah need most, when their husbands die, Naomi encourages them to go home. However the daughters-in-law go in opposite directions: Orpah returns to her own people and gods: Ruth stays with her mother-in-law. Each receives Naomi's blessing. The story of Ruth's persistent loyalty to Naomi becomes a paradigm for conversion. In turn, Naomi's attitude of tolerance and acceptance toward Orpah is a model for diversity within friendship.

In the Book of *Ruth*, Naomi shares the leadership role with her daughter in law, although Ruth eventually is at the centre of stage, especially by chapter 3. In the book, from 1:6, women are in charge. For example, Naomi is no longer identified in terms of her husband and sons but in her own right. She is now subject of a sentences and the initiator of action.

Boaz's two questions on Ruth's emergence in 2:5 ("To whom does this young woman belong?") and 3:9 ("who are you?") are placed in a nocturnal encounter that reveals Ruth's own identity. The incidents of chapter 2, (Ruth meets Boaz first time) and chapter 3 (Ruth and Boaz in the threshing floor), took place in the women initiatives, and Boaz, when he does intervene, is responding to their initiatives. In 2:1–2 and 3:1–5 Naomi and Ruth plan the day's activities. At the end 2:18–22 and 3:16–18 the

³⁰Katrina, *Ruth and Esther*, 52

two women discuss the result of their plans and Ruth becomes central in executing the plan. Thus the central action is executed by the opening and closing conversation of the women.³¹

The women are the catalyst for divine intervention. Reacting to the limitations for patriarchal society, they shock, provoke, and intimidate. In *Ruth* 2:2, she announces her intention to go gleaning in a field belonging to a person in whose eyes she can find favour. 2:10 reports that she has accomplished just that. Indeed her ingenuity triggers Boaz's recognition of her qualities and her devotion to her mother-in-law. Ruth challenges Boaz to make good his blessing. In 2:12 he prayed that Ruth might receive a full reward from Yahweh under whose wings (*Kenapaim*) she sought refuge. In the nocturnal encounter in 3:9 Ruth asks Boaz to spread his wing (*kanap*), i.e., the corner of his cloak over her. Boaz is thereby challenged to make good his prayer by marrying her.³²

In 3:4, Naomi instructs Ruth what to do at the threshing floor, to observe the place where Boaz would lie down and to uncover his feet and to lie down and he would say what to do. In 3:16 Ruth reports to Naomi all that Boaz has done for her. Ironically it was the outcome of the plans of the two clever women, who wanted to be faithful to the covenant demands. Boaz also shines out as a man who is generous and loyal as the *hesed*, a feminine quality demands. In the litigation at the city gate 4:1–12 males determine the fate of females although females have been the catalysts throughout.³³ In 4:10 Boaz takes Ruth as wife in the intention of raising up a family for Mahlon. Thus the heroine of the story moves from being a Moabite foreigner to a valued member of the community. The women's celebration at the birth of Obed is a corrective indication that the women are the leaders not the men. In 4:17, the women who gathered to celebrate maintain that a son has been born to Naomi, not for Mahlon. In

³¹Phyllis Trible, *A Human Comedy, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality Overtures to Biblical Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, 166–199.

³²E. F. Campbell, *Ruth*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1975, 123.

³³Trible, *A Human Comedy*, 188–196

their opinion Obed restores life to an old but courageous woman rather than to her deceased son. As for Ruth, the women announce that she is worth more than seven sons for Naomi.³⁴

Ruth and her mother-in-law are leaders and catalysts for instigating covenantal responsibility. In their patriarchal society they are concerned with provoking Boaz to live out the consequences of covenant. Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh is only viable when the disenfranchised are provided for. The honour of the nation is reflected in honouring the legally helpless. Though the story comes to a natural conclusion in 4:17, a genealogy is added in 4:18–22 as an anti-climactic which has larger concerns. While this later hand of the redactor anchors David more securely in the history of the people, he may also be suggesting the implications of covenantal living. If Ruth and Naomi had not cajoled Boaz into making good his prayer for Ruth's welfare (2:12) then David would have never been born. The seemingly individual concern of Ruth and Naomi is, after all, a communal concern, of being the great grandparents of the great king in the history of Israel.³⁵

5. Implications for the Dignity of Women in India

Shalini Mulackal reads the book of *Ruth* in a feminist perspective. She commends on Ruth 4:1–12 stating that from a feminist perspective one cannot overlook the patriarchal bias of this text which elaborates the marriage of Ruth, and overestimate her role as an instrument to produce a descendant to her dead husband. Shalini pictures Ruth's marriage as Boaz's *acquiring* of Ruth. She sternly criticises the attitude of the patriarchal dominated biblical writers who see woman as property which a man can own wherein she has no right of inheritance. In this part Ruth is pictured only as an instrument in

³⁴John F. Craghan, "Esther, Judith, and Ruth: Paradigms for Human Liberation" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* XII (1982), 1, 11–19.

³⁵Craghan, "Esther, Judith, and Ruth," 18.

raising children for men so that their name can live on (v.11).³⁶ Since, as the words Elizabeth Johnson, the name and the image of God and the sacred writings are capable of focus to conscious and unconscious ideas of a society and moulds a community's bedrock convictions and actions, the original patriarchal interpretations of the sacred Scripture diminishes the dignity of woman in India as also viewed by Shalini. Since we understand feminism as an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation at any circumstance of their lives and conscious action by people of good will to change this situation and uplift the life of women,³⁷ the patriarchal model interpretations of the Bible threatens Indian feminism. The book amazingly pictures God's feminine quality *hesed*, which inspires every reader to summon God as mother. This feminine image of God is also needed to be rooted deeply in the minds and hearts of the people along with the father figure of God which in turn will help forming conscious and unconscious convictions of the individual and community. Naomi and Ruth, the women protagonists of the book of *Ruth*, and their leadership in establishing justice for them, challenge the Indian culture and Indian women to pursue on their endeavours to uplift the woman dignity. The book also posits challenge to the Indian patriarchal society to maintain equality between man and woman in all areas of life and to promote egalitarian non-hierarchical relationships which are based on mutual respect, understanding, and thus foster mutual growth.

6. Conclusion

The study of the biblical heroines, Naomi and Ruth proves that women are proficient enough to instigate, lead, counsel, prompt for the right action and thus to become the back bones of the society. Yet we live in a society where woman are not considered

³⁶Shalini Mulackal, *Ruth, Esther, and Judith*, Dalit Bible Commentary, Old Testament, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2011, 38.

³⁷Ivy Sing, "Feminism: Various Approaches and Its Values," *Indian Journal of Theology* 31–40 / (1992), 58–67.

as an equal subject with man. The situation is aggravated as atrocities against women body has been increased all parts of India day by day. In this juncture, the book of *Ruth* challenges the Indian society to be aware of the negative impact which would be created by the biblical patriarchal models, namely to refuse the equal dignity of women with man. The book powerfully invites Indian women to fight for their rights, to be catalysts to form an egalitarian, just and compassionate society. It is high time to create a new feminism based on biblical values which promote equality among men and women which in turn generates a just and compassionate society. As Sr Prudence Allen rightly opines,

... a new feminism is needed which rejects all forms of domination; that woman's genius is rooted in her concern for the human being in every situation because of an awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way; that women must lead men to this same recognition of the dignity of every human being; and that this contribution of women is needed for authentic cultural change.³⁸

³⁸Prudence Allen, "*Mulieris Dignitatem* Twenty Years Later: An Overview of the Document and Challenges," *Ave Maria Law Review* 8/1 (Fall 2009), 13– 47.