

Female Resistance In Spite of Injustice: Human Dignity and the Daughter of Jephthah

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ABSTRACT

The tragic story of the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11) offers a chilling account of the dehumanising effects of patriarchy. Not only does the fact that this young woman has no name attest to how little value she and other women held in a society structured around male honor, but it is through patriarchy's power that Jephthah's daughter loses her life. And yet, one finds in the daughter of Jephthah narrative and its reception hints of female resistance in spite of domination. As part of a larger project on Gender and Human Dignity, I propose that reading this narrative through the lens of human dignity, which draws on insights from gender and postcolonial interpretation, may enhance our understanding of this story. In particular, this paper will focus on female resistance in spite of injustice which points to the incontrovertible and indestructible nature of human dignity. In the narrative of the daughter of Jephthah and its interpretation history, one sees an example of a woman, who even though she finds herself trapped in circumstances that violate their self-worth, resists the indignity that had befallen her. This resistance is frequently limited but, as I will argue in this paper, by no means insignificant.

A PATRIARCHY'S POWER

There probably is no sadder story than that of the daughter of Jephthah. This tragic narrative told in Judg 11 recounts the rash vow a father made to his God in order to secure victory in the war against the Ammonites. Promising that he would sacrifice as a burnt offering the first person that comes to greet him, the story tells of the alarming consequences of this vow when it proves to be Jephthah's daughter who welcomes her victorious father back home.

The daughter of Jephthah narrative offers a chilling account of the dehumanising effects of patriarchy. Not only does the fact that this young woman has no name attest to how little value she and other women held in a society structured around male honor, but it is through patriarchy's power that Jephthah's daughter loses her life.¹ She dies a virgin – her father's selfish actions obliterating any possibilities of a meaningful life for this girl.

¹ Susanne Scholtz, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; 3rd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 120. Scholtz argues that feminist exegetes

It furthermore is troubling to see how the daughter's submission plays into the patriarchal intent of the text. It appears that the young woman does not question her father regarding the injustice committed in God's name that is about to end her life. Rather she emerges, as Esther Fuchs rightly describes her, as the "perfect daughter whose loyalty and submissiveness to her father knows no limits."² Mimicking the official point of view, the daughter proposes that by fulfilling the vow, her father is committing a "just and venerable deed."³ Her conviction that God has indeed defeated the Ammonites in return for Jephthah's vow is suggestive of the fact that she has embraced patriarchal ideology couched in religious terms. Moreover, her act of welcoming her father back home serves as evidence of how women participated in war by celebrating the return of the victorious warriors with song and dance – an act that ironically will be responsible for the daughter's death.⁴

And yet, one finds in the daughter of Jephthah narrative and its reception hints of female resistance in spite of domination. I propose that reading this narrative through the lens of human dignity, which draws on insights from gender interpretation, may enhance our understanding of this story. In particular, this paper will focus on female resistance in spite of injustice which points to the incontrovertible and indestructible nature of human dignity. I propose that ultimately to be human means to resist those forces that seek to assault, violate, or obscure one's human dignity.⁵ In the narrative of the daughter of Jephthah and its interpretation history, one sees an example of a woman, who even though she finds herself trapped in circumstances that violate their self-worth,

"emphasized the literary strategies such as the narrator's point of view, word selection, omissions and repetitions keep Jephthah in the center of the narrative, marginalizing and silencing the daughter. They showed that every literary move of Judges 11 excuses Jephthah's murder, makes the dilemma of his position palpable, and requires his daughter's acquiescence."

² Esther Fuchs notes that not only does the daughter's speech denotes complete "acceptance and submission, it also echoes the very words used by her father." See Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 125-126.

³ Fuchs, "Marginalization," 125.

⁴ Phyllis Trible refers to the example of Miriam, the prophet who lead the people in song and dance after the victory over Pharaoh and his warriors (Exod 15:19-21). Cf. also the women celebrating David's victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6-7). Phyllis Trible, "A Meditation in Mourning: The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah," *USQR* 36 (1981): 62-63.

⁵ Beverly Eileen Mitchell investigates the various ways in which victims of the Holocaust and of slavery in the American South resisted the dehumanising conditions in which they found themselves. See Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2009), 4.

resists the indignity that had befallen her. This resistance is frequently limited but, as I will argue in this paper, by no means insignificant.

B RESISTING INJUSTICE

From the earliest times, we see how the daughter of Jephthah story has inspired resistance from its readers. Even though it is indeed impossible to change the outcome of this terrible story, we nevertheless find how interpreters have tried their utmost best to resist the injustice done to this young woman. This is evident in the number of medieval interpreters who have suggested that the young girl was not really sacrificed but lived out her days in exclusion.⁶ It is as if these interpreters absolutely refused this young woman to die – through their imaginative acts of interpretation willing this horrific act of a father slaying his daughter not to have happened.

One furthermore sees some great examples of rabbinic interpretation that seeks to rectify the lack of resistance within the story. So in *Tanhuma* we find an imaginative account of the daughter resisting dehumanisation when she is depicted as fighting back against her plight:

When he sought to approach her she wept and said to him: "My father, in joy I went out to meet you and you are going to slay me? Did the Holy One of Israel write in his Torah that human beings are to be offered up as sacrifices? It is written in the Torah that when a man sacrifices to God it shall be of the herd (Lev 1) and not a human being!" He said: "My daughter, I have vowed that whatsoever comes out to meet me, I shall offer it up as a burnt offering. Can one who has made a vow not redeem it?" She said: "Jacob our father vowed of everything thou givest me... (Gen 25), and God gave him twelve sons. He did not offer one of them up as a sacrifice to God! And Hannah also vowed and said, If the Lord of Hosts will

⁶ Phyllis Silverman Kramer, "Jephthah's Daughter: A Thematic Approach to the Narrative as seen in Selected Rabbinic Exegesis and in Artwork," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; 2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 74. Kramer notes that there are two opposing traditions regarding how Jephthah fulfilled his vow: first, that he indeed sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering as he had promised (*b. Ta'an* 4a; *Gen. Rab.* 70; Josephus) and secondly, that Jephthah had a special house built for his daughter where she spent the rest of her life in seclusion, dedicated to God (Rambam, Radak, Ralbag, Abravanel). Cf also the article by Anne W. Stewart in that outlines the reception history of the Daughter of Jephthah (Anne W. Stewart, "Jephthah's Daughters and Her Interpreters," in *Women's Bible Commentary* [ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; 3rd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 133-137) as well as the comprehensive reception history in Cees Houtman and Klaas Spronk, *Jefta's Dochter: Tragiek Van Een Vrouwenleven in Theologie En Kunst* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1999).

look... (1Sam 1), and did she offer her son up as a sacrifice to God?" All these things she told him and he did not heed her.⁷

And also in *Tanhuma*, Jephthah's daughter is even said to go down to the Sanhedrin to plead her case when she saw that her father would not change his mind, demonstrating her resolve in protesting the indignity about to befall her.⁸

Underlying these examples of female resistance in the history of interpretation is a strong sense of the injustice that has been done to this girl. Moreover, through these interpretations the young woman gains the autonomy that she is lacking in the narrative itself when she is characterised as an avid debater who knows the law and fights for her dignity to be recognised – even going so far as to appeal to the courts to stop the injustice.

Contemporary (feminist) interpreters have also sought to resist this terrible story by focusing on the glimpse of female resistance found in the text itself. So the daughter's request to spend two months mourning her virginity and the ensuing *hōq* (custom) that developed around it is seen as evidence of a female rite of passage that is suggestive of women's religious experience. For instance, based upon comparative literature in ancient society, Peggy Day proposes that this act of mourning Jephthah's daughter's virginity was a recognised life-cycle ritual that serves as a rite of passage for adolescent girls about to become sexually mature young women, which as we will see later in this paper can be understood as an act of resistance on the part of this young girl.⁹

Also Cheryl Exum highlights this act of agency on the part of the daughter of Jephthah. She argues that the yearly commemoration of the daughter constitutes a linguistic act through which the story of Jephthah's daughter is recounted, so "mak[ing] her live again through words." Exum rightly points out that this act of resistance cannot undo "the wrong done by the

⁷ *Tanhuma*, cited in Schulamit Valler, "The Story of Jephthah's Daughter in the Midrash," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; 2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 59.

⁸ According to Rabbi Zechariah, the fact that the text does not say that Jephthah's daughter is going *up* the mountain, but rather *down* the mountain, suggests that she went to the Sanhedrin to see if a different solution could not be found. Cf. Valler, "Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 61; Kramer, "Jephthah's Daughter," 71.

⁹ Peggy L. Day, "From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 58-74. Cf. also Beth Gerstein, "A Look at Judges 11:40," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading of Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Mieke Bal; Sheffield: Continuum, 1989), 175-193; Mary Ann Beavis, "A Daughter in Israel: Celebrating Bat Jephthah (Judg. 11:39d-40)," *FemTh* 13/1 (2004): 15-18.

word of the father." However, her friends are "prevent[ing] that word from extinguishing memory along with life."¹⁰ And Mieke Bal argues that "using oral history as a cultural means of memorialization, [the daughter of Jephthah] makes her fellow virgins feel that solidarity between daughters is a task, an urgent one, that alone can save them from total oblivion."¹¹

Actually, by focusing on the traces of female resistance in this text, these feminist interpreters join the women who have gathered themselves around the daughter of Jephthah in an act of resisting injustice: commemorating the young woman's life and lamenting the circumstances that have led to her death. Their interpretations are on the one hand rooted in the acknowledgement of the overbearing structures of domination that make up the reality of many women's lives back then as also now, but on the other hand their interpretations attest to the belief that women have power in spite of this oppression.

C POWER AS RESISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY

This focus on female resistance in the daughter of Jephthah narrative outlined above may be enhanced by some reflection on the nature of power that in

¹⁰ Cheryl Exum, "On Judges 11," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 132. Exum conceives of this act of commemoration as a "memorial event that is in some sense a linguistic act, not a silent vigil," 132.

¹¹ Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 68. A good example of this act of memorialization is to be found in the Southern African Nazarite church leader Isaiah Shembe who has memorialized the story of Jephthah's daughter in the Nazarite church's liturgy. In one particular Nazarite ritual, a traditional Nguni puberty rite held for a girl on her first menstruation (called *umgonqo* translated as "seclusion/confinement") is merged with the daughter of Jephthah narrative. Taking the shape of a collective rite between July 25 and September 27 of each year, the virgin girls are called together in a commemoration of daughter of Jephthah who is held up as a model of courage and obedience. For instance, in one hymn sung during this liturgical re-enactment, the daughters sing these words: "O shall go alone, Into the valley of sorrow" to which the chorus replies: "Give me that strength, Of Japhet's daughter," cf. Gerald West, "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla lamaNazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's Daughter," *OTE* 20/2 (2007): 489-509. One should note though that Isaiah Shembe's application of the Daughter of Jephthah account is complex. In particular, the emphasis on the daughter's sacrifice that is held up as an example for other young women to sacrifice themselves for the community is problematic. As Cheryl Exum rightly warns with regard to such an interpretation that "patriarchal ideology here coopts a women's ceremony in order to glorify the victim. The androcentric message of the story . . . is. . . submit to paternal authority. You may have to sacrifice your autonomy; you may lose your life, and even your name, but your sacrifice will be remembered, indeed celebrated for generations to come." See Exum, "On Judges 11," 139.

recent years has marked feminist discussions. In her book *The Power of Feminist Theory*, Amy Allen draws on the work of Michael Foucault, Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt in formulating a feminist conception of power that highlights the interconnected notions of domination, resistance, and solidarity. Allen argues that it is important for a feminist understanding of power to move beyond the dichotomy of victim and victimiser. Even though women indeed have been dominated by men, feminists in recent years have argued for a more complex understanding of domination according to which some women also may dominate others based on factors such as race, class, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation.¹² Moreover, Allen argues that to view power solely in terms of domination causes one to negate the power that women do have. For Allen it is thus important to also consider the notion of empowerment, that is, "the power that women have *in spite of* the power that men exercise over us, the interest in resistance emerges out of the need to understand the power that women exercise specifically *as a response* to such domination."¹³ In light of the work of Judith Butler that considers the way in which people are both constrained by social forces, but at the same time may react against these norms, Allen formulates a definition of resistance that encompasses "the capacity of an agent to act in spite of or in response to the power wielded over her by others." As she argues: "Resistance seems fundamentally to involve asserting one's capacity to act in the face of the domination of another agent."¹⁴ Finally, a feminist understanding of power emphasises the importance of solidarity, namely, how a group of diverse individuals may work together to challenge, subvert, and, ultimately, overturn a system of domination. Employing Hannah Arendt's definition of "power as 'the human ability not just to act but to act in concert,'" Allen considers this notion of power-with in terms of the "collective ability that

¹² Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 122.

¹³ Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 122. Allen notes that Foucault's contribution to feminist conception of power is that "the domination and the empowerment of an individual are complexly intertwined." However, she critiques Foucault for what she calls the "Foucaultian paradox of agency," saying: "If we are always subjects in the sense of being subjected to myriad repressive power relations, then in what sense can we be said to have the capacity to act at all. And, on the flip side, if we are always subjects in the sense of having the capacity to act, then in what sense can we be said to be constrained by social forces?" See Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 119.

¹⁴ Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 125. She writes as follows: "Judith Butler's Foucaultian-feminist conception of power offers a solution to this conventional problem. By integrating the Derridean notion of citationality or iterability into the Foucaultian account of subjection . . . Butler resolves the Foucaultian paradox of agency. In her view, subjects are compelled to cite the sex/gender norms that constrain them. Since the norms must be cited by subjects in order to be reproduced, it cannot be the case that we are completely determined by them; but since we are compelled to cite the norms in some way or another, neither are we completely unconstrained by social forces." See Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 120.

results from the receptivity and reciprocity that characterize the relations among individual members of the collectivity."¹⁵

A helpful concept to illustrate these interrelated notions of power in spite of domination and power as solidarity regards bell hooks' notion of "homeplace." hooks employs "homeplace" to describe the experience of African American women who were largely relegated to the margins of society by the dominant power structures in order to take on the caring and nurturing role associated with domestic work. However, "homeplace" becomes a site of resistance in which its members could learn a communal counter-language that challenges the dominant powers, so serving as a crucial space for survival and resistance.¹⁶ As Vernon Steed Davidson describes this counter-language associated with bell hooks' notion of homeplace in his postcolonial exploration of Jeremiah:

This counter-language serves as a language of resistance, a language of refusal, the speech of the margins. The deliberate choice of marginality exists as a "critical response to domination" that enables the re-creation and maintenance of the subjectivity of the colonized in ways that permit new possibilities for shaping and encountering reality.¹⁷

In terms of the daughter of Jephthah narrative, it is helpful to consider the acts of female resistance in this text in terms of this interrelated

¹⁵ Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 126-127. Allen critiques Butler for being blind to relations of solidarity. She argues that "feminists must be able to think about the kind of power that a diverse group of women can exercise collectively when we work together to define, and strive to achieve, feminist aims. That is we have an interest in theorizing the kind of collective power that can bridge the diversity of individuals who make up the feminist movement. This interest in collective power also arises out of our own need to understand how feminists can build coalitions with other social movements, such as the racial equality movement, the gay rights movement, and /or new labor movements. Moreover, not just any conception of solidarity will do; we shall have to formulate our conception in such a way that it is able to avoid the charge that solidarity is an exclusionary and repressive concept that is always predicated on some inherent sameness or identity." See Allen, *Power of Feminist Theory*, 122-123. It is interesting that since Allen's critique, Butler has dedicated much of her later work to this notion of coalition building, taking up the charge posed by an understanding of power as solidarity. Cf. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 43-49.

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41-50. Cf. also Steed Vernyl Davidson's application of hooks' notion of "homeplace" in his postcolonial reading of the book of Jeremiah: Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Empire and Exile: Postcolonial Readings of the Book of Jeremiah* (LHBOTS 542; London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 99-106.

¹⁷ Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 104 (Citing hooks, *Yearning*, 150).

understanding of power as resistance and power as solidarity. Such a view of power suggests that even amid the terrible injustice done to this young woman, Jephthah's daughter is not completely powerless, but that she has some agency in creating a space where she and her friends can lament her virginity.¹⁸ As Exum writes about the women's act of lamenting together:

[The daughter's] speech that begins "my father" and ends "my companions" transports her to a point of solidarity with her female friends and with other daughters, the daughters of Israel, who refuse to forget. The resultant image cannot be fully controlled by androcentric interests. The (androcentric) text segregates women: the daughter spends two months with female companions, away from her father and the company of men: the ritual of remembrance is conducted by women alone.¹⁹

Engaging in an act of female solidarity, these women create a separate space that stands over against the dominant power structures. Like the wailing women in Jer 9:17-20, who are called to teach their daughters and their neighbours a song of lament, the women surrounding themselves around Jephthah's daughter engage in a communal act of lamentation, something which Weems describes as "mourning tragic foolishness."²⁰ These women's tears serve as a powerful visible expression of the injustice of the situation created by the power structures in which they find themselves, expressing as Weems suggests, "in tears and moans what, in a misogynist society, no doubt was too dangerous to express with words."²¹ Reminiscent of hooks' notion of a counter-language that offers a means of challenging or "talking back" to dominant power, the lamentations of these women offer a sharp contrast to the dominant ideology that embraces war and violence that only leads to further violence with innocent victims caught in the crossfire.²² Mieke Bal says it well: "If the sons of Is-

¹⁸ Mieke Bal argues regarding the daughter of Jephthah, whom she calls Bath ("daughter"), as well as the other female characters in this story as well as elsewhere in the book of Judges: "She cannot protest, neither can Achsah nor Bath's friends. But she can lament." Cf. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 50.

¹⁹ Exum, "On Judges 11," 143. Exum refers to the classic statement by Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 242, that "when women are segregated...they transform such patriarchal restraint into complementarity and redefine it."

²⁰ Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), 58-59.

²¹ Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 58-59. Elsewhere I have argued that the wailing women in ancient society fulfilled an important prophetic role. Cf. L. Juliana Claassens, "Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World," *JFSR* 26/1 (2010): 63-78.

²² hooks, *Yearning*, 145; Davidson, *Empire and Exile* 103. Cf. also Bal's notion of a female counterculture of which ones finds glimpses in the biblical text that presumes

rael make history by fighting wars and going astray, the daughters of Israel recount the price that such a history requires."²³

Even though the laments of the women do not change the outcome of the narrative, the power in spite of domination and power as solidarity recover and maintain the agency of these women. So Renita Weems attests to "the power that comes from crying and the strength that comes from being able to cry."²⁴ And Valerie Cooper who also reads the story of the daughter of Jephthah through a womanist lens writes: "Despite the horror and the lack of a real alternative in her situation, Jephthah's daughter manages to find dignity and solace in her tears and in her comrades' tears."²⁵ We thus see in this communal act of lamentation that resists injustice, how the dignity of this young woman that has been so tragically violated by patriarchal power is restored.²⁶

Finally, feminist scholars like Judith Butler have proposed that a feminist understanding of power as solidarity ought to be extended to other individuals and groups who are suffering victimisation. So Judith Butler proposes that individuals and groups who find themselves in situations of precarity due to unjust power structures should act in solidarity with one another, forming alliances across barriers of race, gender, class and sexual orientation and resisting injustice together.²⁷ For in the midst of unjust structures based upon violence, power and might, no one is safe.

With regard to the Jephthah narrative one should notice that the young woman is not the only victim. In terms of a feminist understanding of power as solidarity, it would be important to extend the focus of injustice in terms of gender to other victims who find themselves in a situation of precarity. So the tragic instance of a father's misspoken vow and his daughter's subsequent loss

something of an oral history – cf. e.g. the Song of Deborah in Judg 5 and the Song of Miriam in Exod 15. See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 67.

²³ Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 67.

²⁴ Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 60.

²⁵ Valerie C. Cooper, "Someplace to Cry: Jephthah's Daughter and the Double Dilemma of Black Women in America," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible* (ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan; Semeia; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 189-190. Cooper illustrates this assertion by using an example from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in which the community of women gather themselves around Sethe, who most tragically had killed her own child rather than seeing him grow up in slavery. They gather to sing and to pray until Sethe no longer is haunted by her violent past.

²⁶ Barbara Bakke Kaiser argues that recognizing "the vitality of the female persona within the Hebrew Bible might be a useful step toward the full and free acknowledgment of women as persons." See Barbara Bakke Kaiser, "Poet as 'Female Impersonator': The Image of Daughter Zion as Speaker in Biblical Poems of Suffering," *JR* 67/2 (1987): 182.

²⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43-49.

of life is set in a context of violence with thousands of men losing their lives – in the conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites, 42000 are killed because of a mispronounced shibboleth. In terms of a postcolonial critique it is evident that in the wars between Israel and its neighbours, language serves as a marker of ethnicity – this clear designation of an in-group and out-group resulting in death. Moreover, if one takes seriously Bledstein's argument that the story of Jephthah's daughter as a whole offers a subtle critique of the wars of men; the folly of the daughter's loss of life due to a misspoken word is coupled with the folly of thousands of men losing their lives in the waste of war.²⁸

D CONTINUING RESISTANCE

Martha Nussbaum writes that painful literary experiences offer us a safe space to explore the truth of our situation.²⁹ So the injustice narrated in the daughter of Jephthah narrative is by no means limited to this tragic story. This story is reflective of the continuing power of patriarchy that persists in many communities till this day. Also in my native South Africa, one finds that patriarchy makes up the reality of many contemporary women. For instance, probably just as foolish as sacrificing a young woman as a result of her father's impulsive vow proved to be, in South Africa today one finds the great folly of a widespread myth that having sex with a virgin daughter may cure one from HIV and AIDS.³⁰ Denise Ackermann furthermore notes that in many countries in Africa, the "condition that carries the highest risk of HIV infection is that of being a married woman."³¹ The daughter of Jephthah narrative that vividly narrates

²⁸ Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men who Play God?" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 47.

²⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum writes: "While the understanding itself is painful in content – for it is always painful to recognize that one is a needy and limited creature – it is on the other hand, a valuable and a pleasant thing to require understanding." See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 244.

³⁰ Isabel Apawo Phiri notes how babies as young as 5 months have been raped due to this mistaken belief that the mystery surrounding virgins absorbs and purify the victim. See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Why Does God Allow Our Husbands to Hurt Us?" *Overcoming Violence Against Women*, *JTSA* 114 (2002): 25.

³¹ Denise M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in *Grant Me Justice!: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (eds. Musa Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 36. Ackermann describes how women have a little agency in marital relations to say no to unprotected sex would they suspect their husbands of infidelity. Cf. also Beverley Haddad who has identified "women's biological susceptibility to the virus, their subordinate position in sexual relationships prescribed by culture, and the high incidence of gender violence" as contributing factors explaining the link between gender and HIV-AIDS. See Beverley Haddad, "Surviving the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa: Women Living and Dying, Theologising and Being Theologised," *JTSA* 131 (2008): 49. Cf. also her essay: Beverley Haddad, "Gender,

how the patriarchal system leads to the dehumanisation and the death of a young girl is thus reminiscent of many other young women who are sacrificed on the altars of patriarchy.

However, as we have seen in this essay, even within instances of overbearing domination such as were depicted in the daughter of Jephthah narrative, there are flickerings of female resistance that point to the power women have in spite of domination. By noticing these traces of female resistance in the text, individuals may be more inclined to contemplate the significance of continuing resistance in their own context. So the twin notions of power as resistance in spite of oppression and power as solidarity that were identified in terms of the daughter of Jephthah narrative are illustrated well by means of two examples of (female) resistance from the African continent:

First, an interesting example of female resistance in spite of domination is narrated by Fulata Moyo who tells of women in her country of Malawi employing menstruation taboos in order to resist the unjust patriarchal structures that have been closely connected to making young women most susceptible to HIV and AIDS.³² In Southern Malawi, Mang'anja, Yao and Lomwe women have the custom of hanging out a string of red beads in their bedrooms as an indication that they are menstruating and hence sexually unavailable. Some women, who suspect that their partners may carry the dreaded disease, will not replace the red beads with white beads that indicate their availability, so taking control of their sexual agency and protecting themselves from unprotected sexual intercourse.³³ Moyo describes these acts of employing traditional African customs for the sake of resisting injustice in terms of James Scott's notion of "hidden transcripts" that captures the subtle forms of power that exist in many communities facing oppression. She argues as follow: "The string of red beads therefore becomes a 'hidden transcript' with which they 'voice' pro-

Violence and HIV and AIDS: A Deadly Silence in the Church," *JTSA* 114 (2001): 93-106.

³² Miranda Pillay notes that even though HIV and AIDS affects all of humanity, "the pandemic is fuelled by the cultural, sexual and economic subordination of women." See Miranda Pillay, "Women in the Church: Toward Developing Community in the Context of HIV and AIDS," in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV* (ed. Ezra Chitando and Nontando Hadebe; Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2009), 102-106.

³³ Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "The Making of Vulnerable, Gyrating and Dangerous Menstruating Women through Chinamwali Socialization," in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV* (ed. Ezra Chitando and Nontando Hadebe; Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2009), 40. Cf. also Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "The Red Beads and White Beads: Malawian Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV and AIDS Era," *JCT* 11/1 (2005): 53-66.

test against the lack of mutuality in their sexual experiences. It also liberates and empowers them to influence the when and how of sex."³⁴

A second example of power as resistance in spite of domination as well as power as solidarity regards the work of South African theologian Denise Ackermann who has written extensively about the importance of lament in resisting injustice. In a series of essays during the 1990's around the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ackermann called upon the broader South African community to join her in lament to resist the injustice of apartheid. For instance, in her essay, "Lamenting Tragedy From 'The Other Side,'" Denise Ackermann writes:

How and where are we to lament? Given the limited mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the understandable constraints imposed by the very nature its mammoth task, the ethical clamor for justice will not go away. Neither will the need to speak the anger, pain, fear, remorse and guilt. There is much to lament—the loss of dear ones, the destruction of young lives, the loss of justice, the loss of our humanity, vision and faith.³⁵

A similar argument can be made with regard to lament as resisting the injustice pertaining to HIV and AIDS, which in South Africa truly is a gendered pandemic with 62% of the 5.3 million people ages fifteen and older who are infected being female – in the age group 20-24, one in four women compared to one in fourteen men in the same age group is infected.³⁶ In her essay, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," Ackermann writes how the church is called to lament the tragedy of HIV and AIDS. In particular, lament challenges patriarchy's power which has been held responsible for making women particularly prone to this terrible disease. Ackermann argues:

³⁴ Moyo, "Making of Vulnerable," 48.

³⁵ Denise Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy From 'The Other Side,'" in *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society* (ed. James. R. Cochrane and Bastienne Klein; Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), 232. Cf. also her essay: Denise Ackermann, "'Take Up a Taunt Song': Women, Lament and Healing in South Africa," in *Reconstruction: The WCC Assembly Harare 1998 and the Churches in Southern Africa* (ed. Leny Lagerwerf; Meinema: Zoetermeer, 1998). Here, she considers how Christian women in the South African context can raise their voices in support of justice and reconciliation. She writes: "Where can we sing our 'taunt song'? What kind of a song will it be? How can our singing effect healing in our communities?" See Ackermann, "'Take up a Taunt Song,'" 135.

³⁶ UNAIDS, "South Africa," n.p. [cited 4 December 2012]. Online: <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/southafrica/>. Cf. also Haddad, "Surviving," 49.

Saying it as it is, is the place to begin. What would it take for the churches to accept responsibility publically for our role in the promotion and maintenance of gender inequality... and when will we make the link between this woeful tradition and the present deadly impact of HIV and AIDS on the lives of women and men.³⁷

Ackermann furthermore writes about the importance of having solidarity with the victims of HIV and AIDS, accepting that there are no clear dividing lines between us and them, but rather we as the church is also infected. As she poignantly expresses: "The Body of Christ has Aids."³⁸ In this regard, Ackermann speaks about the importance of lament in restoring the dignity of the individual, in hearing the stories of the victims. Like the companions of the daughter of Jephthah surrounded her with their laments, hearing her story and sharing their own, the act of hearing and telling stories is responsible for creating an environment of "openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that challenges stigmas, ostracization and loneliness of suffering and hopefully leads to acts of engagement, affirmation and care."³⁹

In a context that is still deeply enmeshed in patriarchal ideology, one should understand that even such very limited acts of agency on the part of those trapped in systems of domination, which in the case of HIV and AIDS may be a death sentence, are of great significance. To raise one's voice in lament, sharing one's story; to use red and white beads to regain one's sexual agency may sound insignificant, yet such acts serve as a source of inspiration and a reminder that another reality that believes in the dignity of both men and women as created in the image of God is possible. As Ackermann writes: "Resistance to the tragedy of suffering finds expression in the hope for healing and wholeness, and in the embracing of actions which express both an understanding of the tragic vision of life and that which counters tragedy."⁴⁰

E CONCLUSION

In her classic book, *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible has argued with regard to narratives such as the Daughter of Jephthah that "sad stories do not have happy endings."⁴¹ It is no surprise then that Susanne Scholtz who outlines feminist scholarship in her recent contribution to the *Woman's Bible Commentary* cannot find anything redemptive in this story.⁴² And yet, the continuing patriarchal reality in many contexts today compels us to keep on wrestling with tragic texts

³⁷ Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 40.

³⁸ Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 51.

³⁹ Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 42.

⁴⁰ Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy," 219.

⁴¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.

⁴² Scholtz, "Judges," 120.

reflecting tragic realities looking for hints of female resistance in the text that may be highlighted and reinforced by the reader.

This act of reading as wrestling with the text is vitally important in a context of narrative ethics. Nussbaum writes about the importance of literature in creating an environment of moral responsibility. She argues that literature shows us "general plausible patterns of actions, 'things such as might happen' in human life." As she argues: "When we grasp the patterns of salience offered by the work, we are also grasping our own possibilities."⁴³

Thus by noticing instances of female resistance in spite of injustice in the tragic story of the daughter of Jephthah, we could imagine the possibility of resistance in contemporary situations of injustice that may inspire us in an act of solidarity, not only among women but among all who care about the plight of those finding themselves in situations of injustice, to keep on working for a world in which dehumanisation and indignity is no more.

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⁴³ Nussbaum, *Upheaval of Thought*, 243.

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