

LET A WOMAN'S LONGING AND FULFILMENT BE HERS

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Doctrines and models of human longing and fulfilment have been created and protected by every religion and society. Each of these models teaches what a person should look forward to and how s/he can find success and true happiness in life and after life. Questioning such models let alone deviating from their course, is taboo. And longing for the forbidden fruit is sin — original sin indeed for to deviate from pre-established models requires great originality as did Adam and Eve who deviated from the model God gave them.

The doctrines and models of human longing and fulfilment constructed by man (here 'man' is not inclusive of woman) have been rooted in religion and strictly enforced by its incumbents. In turn, these models or doctrines have given rise to systems of beliefs and myths which have been appropriated and internalized by the adepts of religion and members of society. Most of these models ignore or exclude women and whether they bring genuine fulfilment to men is doubtful. Just think of this model "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). It took centuries to deconstruct this model as something not divinely revealed or sanctioned but created to fit the contexts of the times. This model only re-enforced male chauvinistic tendencies. Some of the models invented by the male mindset are calculated insult to women and many doctrines emanating from them are at worst sinful.

After God created woman and man equal and to be companions and partners in His creative design, how could man invent models to shape woman as inferior to himself? How can man expect to fulfil himself in companionship with a being inferior to himself? In fact, true fulfilment in companionship and partnership implies a relationship of equals. Distortion of God's models or moulds denies both man and woman true human fulfilment. Today feminists like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Catherine Mowry Lacugna, Rosemary Radford Ruether and others have cut down to size all misogynistic and androcentric

tric models of human longing and fulfilment. Traditional ways of reading the Scriptures and looking at religion ride rough-shod. Social movements and feminist theologians do not fight shy to be blunt against de-womanizing models of human realization. They have taken out much of the wind from the mainsail of such models, which had enabled man to surf undisturbed for too long.

It is certainly not possible to formulate a universal law to explain human longing and fulfilment. However, as mentioned earlier, human longing and fulfilment have been controlled by two major forces: religion and society. Religion, without exception, places individual fulfilment in the next life or the other side of the world. Whether it is salvation expressed in the principle of the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the Judeo-Christian religion or moksha of Hinduism or nirvana of Buddhism, this goal is found either in the past or in the future. Life fulfilment is, therefore, a struggle or a longing for that golden past "the first heaven and the first earth" (Rev. 21:1) which is projected into the future "where all things will be made new" (Rev. 21:5). Interestingly, religion promises a blissful haven of communion in the next life where there will be neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3:28); where there will be no distinction between the lower and higher classes of people (Bhagavad-Gita 9:32) and where there will be a fusion of the human and the divine. Paradoxically, it also sanctions the oppressive practice of gender, caste and class divisions in this life.

The socio-economic world also creates models of longing and fulfilment that are often more detrimental to women than others. At the home front, we have the Indian caste system. Within this system, people of the different social rungs are taught to behave and live in a particular manner. Those of the lower strata in the order of caste-hierarchy are made to believe that one does not long for any upward mobility in this life if they wish to attain moksha or fulfilment in the next. This hierarchical social system within which a person is expected to find personal fulfilment is believed to be a *sine qua non*, a fundamental social doctrine, but used by the upper caste/class to silence the marginalized groups. The right sort of relationship among human beings is amiss here; even the possibility of such a relationship is denied.

This model also claims that the established social arrangement is based on division of labour necessary for the smooth functioning of the society. But ironically, more services and goods are made to flow from the lower castes to the upper ones, and undoubtedly, always much more from women to men. Nevertheless, it is also true that more "spiritual" merchandise that often oppress the poor is produced by the upper caste group for the former. And women are the greatest consumers and recipients of such merchandise. What a woman is supposed to aspire and accomplish in and after life is pre-determined by this patriarchal system.

On the economic front, the mammon model of globalization is slowly but surely invading every society creating pseudo-longings. It insists that human happiness and fulfilment have their source in material production and creates longing among humans for consumer goods. However, feminist hermeneutical thinking have greatly challenged long standing norms of what humans should desire or deny. Objects of desire change everyday. Longings are manipulated by market forces and profiteers, and often the poor, women in particular who are in search of recognition become easy victims of such forces. Religion appears to be indifferent to or unconcerned with the earthly or human longings and questions. This indifference is exploited by the forces of market economy to create more and more human longings, leading to human experience of despair and emptiness.

Yet, another important model that needs to be looked into is that of the Church. The ecclesial model has more often than not resisted democratic systems and movements whenever it found itself in a comfortable and undisturbed position. In the wake of the proliferation of democratic movements around the globe, the official Catholic Church has often sent out caution-signals' not to interpret the self-understanding of the Church as a democratic community. It argues that the democratic form of Government is not compatible with the founding intentions of Christ. The democratic vision of God's ekklesia as the 'alternative democratic community'¹ stands in conflict with the dominant patriarchal ethos of the then Greco-Roman as well as today's global Church at large.

Democratic values have the potency to upset the status quo that favours the patriarchal hierarchy. Democratic values challenge traditional hierarchical models that refuse to give all its members their rightful place in the Church and life. Certain doctrines and models of thinking in the Church linger subtly as remnants of the medieval era. Traditional theology knew exactly what human longing should be and what human fulfilment consisted in. The Church does not deny the need to fulfil earthly and historical longings like equality, justice, etc. But she does not show clearly how it is actualized in the Church.

The Church has also been inconsistent on its stance with regard to women's place and role in the Church. The positive change and new attitude towards women were reflected in John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and re-enforced at Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* that recognized the new dimension in social relationships "Any type of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design" (GS 29). Nonetheless, the polity of the Church's tradition to exclude women

¹ Fiorenza, (1993), 18-22.

and other marginalized groups in formal ministries and ecclesial government stand in continuity with the hierarchical model of the Church. Its assertion that the woman's essential potential is motherhood and her primary Christian calling is to the family and home in the teachings of Paul VI (*Ministeria Quaedam*, 1972) and of John Paul II "Virginity and motherhood are the two particular dimensions of the fulfilment of the female personality" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 17, cf. *Christifidelis Laici*, 1989) favours the patriarchal-monarchical ecclesial model. On the one hand, certain Church statements affirm that women have "in domestic and in public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person" (*Pacem in Terris* 41). On the other hand, it argues against women's full participation in the leadership of the Church because Christ did not ordain women. The focus on ordained ministry is one of coercive power that suggests distrust of certain members who are envisioned more as children than as responsible adults, rightly states Anne Carr, a feminist theologian.

Many such dogmatic models, primarily patriarchal in nature, continues to survive the storms of social and intellectual revolution. But today, these models are being questioned and even outrightly rejected by the new thinking that is emerging today. This exercise is not a denial of true spiritual values but a correction of models which claim to be 'spiritual' but are in fact less central to the mundane concerns of humanity.

The reality of women's deepest longing

Against the backdrop of different models of longing and fulfilment where women, the least, last and lost of humankind, are either victimized or dehumanized, we shall enter into the woman's world of longing and fulfilment.

How do women look at the question of human longing and fulfilment? Here there isn't a general or universal law either. However, given the fact that Indian women are not fully free beings, considering the various social and religious constraints that control their lives, the fact remains that every woman has a silent longing to be a liberated and empowered woman and fully human. The oppressive unfreedom caused by societal and religious patriarchal control has not only stunted womanhood but also deprived women of fulness or wholeness of life. The domineering patriarchal and hierarchical structure and tradition of the Indian society and the Church have deprived them of human dignity and their rightful status as women. The caste culture of the Indian society with its powerful overtones of patriarchy has also caused a sense of passive dependency and silent submissiveness to be ingrained in the woman's psyche. The depletion of their natural gifts of sensitivity, intuition, foresight, aesthetic sense and homemaking in the exploitative service of the male has

led to the dehumanization of women, lowering of their status, drying up of their wells of innate feminine potentiality and the desertification of all their initiative.²

A woman's deepest longing is restoration of wholeness of her womanhood so that all generations will call her 'blessed'. That all generations will acclaim her as one who is wholly woman and fully human and not a mere female whose status and dignity are determined by religious sanctions of, for instance, the Manusmriti, the Brahmanical law book of Hinduism, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons..." (9:2-3) or of the Holy Bible "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16); "Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife." (Eph. 5:22-23).

A woman's longing for the restoration of wholeness of her womanhood lies first and foremost in discovering who she is and in trusting the strength and power of her womanhood. It also lies in rebuilding her broken body and respecting her womanhood as created in God's image and likeness; in healing her wounded dignity and accepting her as equal to her male partner; in raising her lowered status and recognizing the human worth of her personhood, and in restoring her silenced voice to sing her own song of longing and fulfilment. If women are to sing their song of fulfilment they must first sing, perhaps shout loud and clear, their song of longing to be liberated—women from social and religious forces of oppressive discrimination. A dehumanized life benumbs the woman's sense of who she wants to be as a human being and the reality of who she is. This results in her withdrawal to the pseudo-safety of non-feeling and alienation from herself, other women and men and the God of life. Only a liberated woman can hope to be empowered in order to be a liberator—leader of womankind, and a liberating agent of the wider human and cosmic world. Empowerment will urge women to enter into new forms of gender relationship and of partnership. It will spur women to break through oppressive traditions and cultural practices that bind them to stereotyped gender roles, tasks and images.

Jesus himself used this strategy. He first liberates disempowered women by exposing the reality of who they are and then empowers them with a belief of what they are called to be. We have examples of the Samaritan woman "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" (Jn. 4:29); the prostitute woman "Do you see this woman?" (Lk. 7:44); the polluted woman "Who was it that touched me?" (Lk. 8:45) and the bent woman "Ought not this woman whom Satan bounded for eighteen years be loosed from this bond?" (Lk.

2 Monteiro, (2000),108.

13:16). He restores their brokenness "Your faith has made you whole"(cf. Lk. 7:50; 8:48) and wounded human dignity "Woman, daughter of Abraham (Lk. 13:16); "daughter..." (Lk. 8:48) before entrusting them with respectful roles of being partners in his Kingdom mission: "Go unto peace" (Lk. 7:50; 8:48 cf. Jn. 4:28-29). Jesus affirms the full personhood of women as being created in God's image, a concept that culture, tradition and even religion may deny and cause women to be seen as less than human.³

The Relational Model of longing and fulfilment

Karl Rahner prophetically stated many years ago that it is the task of the women, supported by the message of the Gospel and the power of the Spirit to provide the concrete model, the constructive pattern of life which is necessary for women to be women in the present age.⁴ Taking this cue, contemporary woman theologians in collaboration with feminist biblical scholars have sought to articulate woman's longing and to retrieve woman's power and strength. They reject both androcentrism and the patriarchal structures that follow from it in the home, in society and in the Church. "The project of theological feminism", writes Catherine Mowry LaCugna in *God For Us*, "is to recover women's experience" and integrate it into the experience of the rest of humankind. This project involves a search for the tradition that has contributed to women's subjugation as well as a search for the tradition with liberating elements.⁵

Women's movements for full humanity makes a bold critique of the ethos and practice of gender discrimination and sexism found in patriarchal socio-political and religio-cultural structures and in androcentric thought and language. Women's thought also critiques the philosophy of complementarity of genders and the assumption of anthropology that male experience is normative for human experience. Furthermore, it challenges patriarchy's dissimilarity in gender roles: women's role is one of domestic service and that of men is domestic leadership. Women's thought also questions patriarchy's accompanying stereotypes that women are characterized by intuition, nurturing, receptiveness and compassion and men by rationality, autonomy, strength and initiative.⁶

3 Jin, (1992),201.

4 See Rahner, (1971),75-93.

5 Lacugna, (1991), 267.

6 McBrien, (1994),115.

Feminist theory holds that women and men are equal in dignity and that both alike are to embody the full range of human characteristics. This theory entails "the commitment to promote the full humanity of women and men by critiquing, deconstructing, or reforming institutions or forms of thought that demean human persons", asserts Catherine Mowry LaCugna.⁷

The woman's search for full humanity is essentially relational and communitarian. Her longing to be wholly woman and fully human involves several relationships: with herself and the 'other' (other women, men, cosmos and God). Relatedness is characteristic of the Indian women because interconnectedness with the reality of her self and the other human, cosmic and divine realities is the core of her existence and the path of her fulfilment. A woman's hope for full humanity in and through relationship is basic to her because she is essentially a creature who is endowed with the inherent power to create, bear, nurture and share life. She fulfils herself in giving and receiving. Women desire to use this life-giving power to create, build and foster human communities of partnership of equals.

The relational perspective of woman's longing and fulfilment can be better understood in the light of Asian woman's transformed thinking about God and the inclusive quality of the Godhead. The Hindu religious tradition, for instance, gives us rich insights into this. The Hindu image of Arthanaressvara (the deity in which the masculine Sivam who is the absolute good or love and the feminine Sakti, the absolute power, form a whole in which neither can function without the other) is a positive model of relational partnership for Indian women and men. In fact, Christianity has lost this inclusive and relational quality of the Godhead because it has been wrapped in layers of ponderous patriarchy, Roman imperialism, Greek dualism, European colonialism, and the ethics of morality of the dominant male of the Puritan tradition.

The worship of the female principle runs deep in the psyche of many Indian men and women. India is a land of goddesses where the Sakti or the divine Power plays a vital role in popular religion. Sakti derived from the verbal root 'sak' means 'to be able'. Sakti, a feminine noun, means power, ability, strength, and energy. In popular Hinduism, specially in the tradition of Tantra, Sakti is the supreme female Principle, inseparable from Siva or other male Gods. At the cosmic level, Sakti is the primordial divine energy, personified as a female Divinity and is responsible for the creation and preservation of the universe.⁸

Women's yearning for and rediscovery of this Godhead which contains both male and female traits is the same yearning for full humanity in which

7 Lacugna, (1991), 268.

8 Singh, (2000), 160.

both women and men are fully respected as equal partners. When women see God as an all-embracing reality in themselves and in the other, their experience of God as power and strength empowers them to trust themselves. "Women must cease playing the victim-rescuer game with God", rightly points out Chung Hyun Kyung, the Korean theologian.⁹ They must discover God as a life-giving power within themselves and become aware of the resources God has endowed them with. The power of God evokes in women a power unique to women which has been lost in patriarchal religion and society. It is the power that fosters life rather than death, the power of touching one's own creativity; of claiming one's own history, of working together and of enabling others to realize their full potential as human beings. With this new power women strive to be persons empowered for self-determination. "They dream of a new world where the woman is not the moon which has to change according to the sun. Rather they want to become the sun who shines in its own light out of its burning core of life, fostering life on the earth" writes Kyung.¹⁰

An example of a woman who sees God as life-giving power within herself is Mary who is the symbol of full womanhood and of liberated humanity. Not the deferential and demure Mary of fictional stories depicted by tradition that was rooted and built in a patriarchal framework. But rather the Mary of the Gospels who challenges the radical living out of the Kingdom message and who absorbs the female, sophia or wisdom character of Jesus Christ for both women and men in Christian tradition. The woman who finally also came to represent the human and liberating side of the Church.¹¹

Mary's womanhood, as virgin and mother is a relational reality that expresses her true connectedness to her own self, others and to God. Her virginity is symbolic of her ability to be a self-defining woman who knows who she really is and what she is meant to be. She was a woman who did not lead a derived life as daughter, sister, wife, mother. She was rather a woman who matured to wholeness within herself in faith, freedom and in her openness for others. Jesus himself acclaimed her as 'blessed' — an embodiment of graciousness who "heard the Word and kept it" (Lk. 11:28). Mary gave birth to a new humanity and a new community through her undefeated hope, single-minded determination and revolutionary mission. She claims her power and history as a woman who is deeply conscious of her roots in the heritage and wisdom of the strong women of Israel. Women need women's presence, support and affirmation to dare to dream dreams and to celebrate their power for

9 Kyung, (1990),50.

10 *Ibid.*,51.

11 Carr, (1990),190.

revolution and restoration of life to fullness.¹² This important truth is made manifest when Elizabeth becomes the first audience for Mary's song of longing and fulfilment, the Magnificat.

The Magnificat reflects an original creation of a feminist mind of remarkable inspirational vision. Sadly, it was made into a devotional text excluding the underlying powerful meaning that comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. Unfortunately, the hope of Mary expressed in the Magnificat has remained an exercise of pious or academic value, without any life relevance. Contemporary Mariologies from below and feminist thinkers and activists are systematically liberating 'Mary—the handmaid-of-God' from the centuries-old clutches of the patriarchal Church and society. Even a reading of the Magnificat as a model of God's faithfulness or of Mary as a woman graced with faithfulness — when Mary does not represent the entire womanity — continues to speak for the male-dominating mariologies.

The Magnificat is a song of prophetic revolution for women, without which women find no fulfilment, let alone longing for the highest gifts of God. The Magnificat also expresses the sentiments of a highly fulfilled woman who sees her dreams greatly accomplished. Since the time Mary sang her song of longing and fulfilment to her cousin Elizabeth, God has been accomplishing ever more for the lowly women.

Biblical promises are historical and dialectical. It is historical because what was fulfilled in and for Mary by God had been already promised to her. Mary also announces that what God has done to her, he will do to future generations, specially to the lowly women. It is dialectic not only because the powerful tries to subvert these promises but also because fulfilment is something to be looked forward to. It needs human cooperation. Fulfilment is a long term process. Fulfilment becomes other longings!

Every human person longs for freedom, social acceptance, economic justice, for the "good things" of life. A life devoid of longing for "good things" lacks integral wholeness and there can be no human fulfilment here. Fulfilment is relational: a favour (divine grace) and a longing (human readiness). Mary's humble acknowledgement of human emptiness and in need of the God of graces is an example of that relatedness. Fulfilment means being at times in the limelight of life and always on the centre stage of God. Mary knows for sure that she has her place in history as "all generations will call her blessed" (Lk 1:48). Empowered by the Spirit, she becomes an ambassador of the lowly, specially of women and proclaims that they too have found favour to come out from the peripherals of society and from their oblivious existence to the centre stage of life; not with empty hands but filled with "good things". We

12 Kyung, (1990), 81.

see here a total reversal of order and values; undoubtedly, a radical message for change of mentalities, attitudes and structures. Such a reversal of order entails a continuous process of birth, death and rebirth.

Conclusion

We need to situate the foundation of human longing and fulfilment on a broader canvas. As other liberation theologians, women also interpret 'salvation' as essentially and fundamentally liberation from all kinds of oppression that dehumanise them. They go beyond Bultmann's and Tillich's existentialist analysis of salvation as the transition from inauthentic to authentic existence brought about by healing and participation in the New Being. They argue that spiritualization of salvation as in the tradition of the institutional Church and conventional religions has concealed the radical and revolutionary meaning of the Christian understanding of liberation and preserved the oppressive and unjust socio-economic, religious and political status quo. The relational model of protest and proclamation that expresses the woman's song of longing and fulfilment challenges women and men to see reality different from accustomed ways, to dare to live life free from the encumbered baggage of oppressive stereotypes, to re-write his-story that is inclusive of her-story.. to let a woman's longing and fulfilment be hers.

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