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**“Resisting Bodies” as a Hermeneutical Tool for a Critical  
Feminist Christology of Liberation and Transformation**

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**“Resisting Bodies” as a Hermeneutical Tool for a Critical Feminist  
Christology of Liberation and Transformation**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of  
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University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg**

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**10 December 2010**

## DECLARATION

I declare that. . . . .

““Resisting Bodies” as a Hermeneutical Tool for a Critical Feminist Christology of Liberation and Transformation,” unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been clearly indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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December 2010



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Prof. Sarojini Nadar

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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to:

My co-strugglers and co-resistors in **Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC)** who have journeyed with me and helped me grow.

And especially to:

**Yong Ting Jin and Chan Wing Hon** with whom I began my journey, who mentored, guided and journeyed with me in my journey to be a subject-self and who continue to interrogate and inspire me in the journey to be reflexively critical.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study is positioned in a context where the ideologies of communities, creeds and genders are marked in violent ways on women's bodies. It is also located in a context where Christian women, by and large, internalize their subordinate status as God-ordained and accept the violence perpetrated on them as normal and natural.

In such a context, the christological understanding of Jesus as the "Suffering Servant" serves to reinforce the submissive, docile and subordinate position of women and legitimize the various forms of suffering that are inscribed on them as normal and even as ways to salvation.

This study analyses the experiences of women who, in the midst of oppressive regimes, structures and forces, have refused to accept the inscriptions of gender, power and violence thrust on them. They have created an alternate way of speaking with their bodies in order to challenge gender stereotypes, oppressive powers and the denial of life and subjectivity imposed on them and their communities.

Using the analysis of women's resisting bodies, this study argues for an interpretation of christology that is centered on the motifs of struggle, resistance and protest, as evidenced in women's resisting bodies and in the story of Jesus. Women's resisting bodies and Jesus' resistance are paralleled to reconstruct christology as resistance and protest and the resurrection as the continued and ongoing struggle for life amidst continued violence and oppression.

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# CHAPTER 1:

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The way we think and feel about ourselves as bodies will always find expression in the way we think and feel about the world and about God.”<sup>1</sup>

“A theology that matters is a theology that is embodied. And a theology that is embodied is sound theology”<sup>2</sup>.

Our bodies are not mere coverings of our ‘real’ personhood, but are integral to our personhood.<sup>3</sup> The body is not a vessel but the being itself. The mind and spirit are not higher forms of the body, but methods of the body’s workings<sup>4</sup>. Our bodies are basic to our knowing and our understanding of salvation<sup>5</sup>.

The social strictures on a woman’s body mediate to her the way her identity should be formed to be socially acceptable. The negative ways bodies have been inscribed upon by society has inhibited our soteriological understandings<sup>6</sup>. ‘Body’ is therefore an important hermeneutical tool for building a critical feminist christology that is liberative and transformative. In this light “resisting bodies” or experiences of “bodies in protest” become potent hermeneutical tools to unlock and critically examine both the “body” and

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<sup>1</sup> James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1978, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon A. Bong, “The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body” in Kwok Pui-lan (ed), *Hope Abundant – Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 2010, p.191

<sup>3</sup> David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 378

<sup>4</sup> Stephen David Ross, *Perspectives in Whitehead’s Metaphysics*, Albany: State University of New York, 1983, p. 93-96, 103-107. See also Errol E. Harris, *Salvation from Despair – A Reappraisal of Spinoza’s Philosophy*, International Archives of the History of Ideas, Vol. 59, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, p.77-93

<sup>5</sup> Sallie McFague, *The World as God’s Body*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=56> Accessed 24 Feb2011, 11.18am IST. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, July 20-27, 1998, pp. 671-673. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. This article was prepared for Religion Online by John R. Bushell.

<sup>6</sup> Tina Beattie, *A Culture of Life: Women’s Theology and Social Liberation*, London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 2000, p. 3-38.

“christology.” In this study I explore how female embodiment can be a liberating hermeneutical tool of agency, protest and resistance that can inform our christological understandings.

## **1.1. MAIN OBJECTIVES**

The **main objectives** of this research are:

- To show how women’s bodies that are inscribed upon in oppressive ways; and the “commonsense” christological understanding of Suffering Servant parallel each other.
- To show how women’s bodies can also act as points of protest and resistance that can inform our understanding of Christ’s protest and resistance and the idea of resurrection.

The **main research question** that I would like to address is: Can women’s bodies be a lens to understand christology in a liberative way that does not glorify suffering as voluntary and salvific?

**The hypothesis** of this research is that “Resisting” women’s bodies offer lenses to understand christology as protest and resistance that paves the way for resurrection.

## **1.2. THE SUB-QUESTIONS**

- 1) How are women’s bodies inscribed and acted upon in oppressive and punitive ways that glorify suffering as natural, voluntary, virtuous and salvific?
- 2) How can resisting women’s bodies become a challenge and protest to the oppression inscribed on them?
- 3) How does **the “common sense”<sup>7</sup> christological understanding** of Christ as “Suffering Servant” provide a basis for women’s oppression through its glorification of suffering as voluntary and salvific?

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam’s Child Sophia’s Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* NY: Continuum, 1995, p.25-31. Fiorenza uses this term “common sense” understanding widely in this book. I attempt to explain the term here following Fiorenza’s explanation/words: Fiorenza builds on Rosemary Hennessy’s work on Althusser’s notion of ideology and Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Althusser’s theory of language understands language as “social action” and as the means through which subjects are fashioned. Language and ideology produce what counts as socially determined reality. Thus reality is always ideological-rhetorical constructs shaped by language and

4) How does Christ offer resistance to such a common sense christological understanding by his resistance to brutalizing forces? How does Christ's protest against oppression breed resurrection?

5) How do resisting women's bodies and bodies in protest foreshadow the power of Christ's resurrection?

### **1.3. NECESSITY OF THIS RESEARCH:**

The core of my being and my identity is based on the fact that I am an embodied female. As a South Indian Christian woman living in a predominantly patriarchal and plural ethos my understanding and appropriation of life, leadership, power, symbols, concepts and faith traditions has been influenced, curtailed and inhibited and sharpened by how my body has been taught and trained to behave and how it has learnt to become critical. It has been a painful journey to unlearn the negativities and try to become a subject of my own life. It is therefore important for me to explore how the understanding of our bodies and our appropriation of stories of salvation are linked. I am convinced along with Sharon Bong therefore, that:

“a theology that necessitates the politics of difference and the politics of identity premised on the socially determinate lives of its knowing subjects – the bodies that suffer, resist and are healed”<sup>8</sup>,

is the fundamental basis of “Asian theology and spirituality.”

A woman's embodiment is curtailed by the oppressive strictures of culture on her body. The ways in which her body is controlled and gendered, and the way in which she forms and understands her own notion of body as being

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theoretical frameworks of particular historical moments. Gramsci saw ideology in terms of the concept of hegemony. Hegemony here is understood as the process by which a ruling group comes to dominate by establishing the cultural “common sense” both through a top down process and a process of discursive articulation. Fiorenza builds on this and interprets cultural and religious “common sense” as giving rise to a process in which those in power establish and maintain their rule and domination. She sees cultural “common sense” patriarchal religion and mainstream democracy as being exclusive of women. Thus Fiorenza asserts that hegemonic narratives of “how the world of early Christianity really was” are easily accepted by readers as “common sense” or as “objective” although they are as much “constructions” as feminist accounts are. The “politics of meaning” mystifies doctrines and reinscribes dualistic kyriarchal order and law into Christian self-understanding as “common sense”, “revealed”, and “given” truth of “how the world is”. Fiorenza points out that using a hermeneutics of suspicion can help critically assess kyriarchal effects of such hegemonic “common sense” Christological discourse on women.

<sup>8</sup> Sharon A. Bong, “The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body” in Kwok Pui-lan (ed), *Hope Abundant – Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 2010, p.191

'beautiful,' 'ugly,' 'attractive,' 'provocative' or 'shameful' is socially constructed. The ways in which a woman's body is inscribed upon is how she imbibes her notion of gender – of being a female body that has to be 'feminine.' 'Meaning' is created in the interaction between signs/ symbols, concepts and a particular cultural-social-religious space. The cultural-social-religious space that creates and understands the 'feminine' is also the space that makes it possible for oppressive, dominating christologies to make meaning and function<sup>9</sup>. So this space that creates what it means to be a female body needs to be critically examined so that oppressive christologies can be destabilized and deconstructed.

A woman has to unlearn all the social strictures imposed on her and learn anew the method of being reflexively critical in order to re-define her own body. In doing so she learns to become a 'subject-self' whose knowledge of her body can be used as an instrument of protest, resistance and transformation. These are important resources that can be used to interpret christology in ways that are liberative.

However, women's experiences as liberative resources can be constructed, I would suggest, only from a critical feminist perspective/ approach that seeks liberation and transformation, with a proper appreciation for the multiple spaces/identities and intersections that women find ourselves in, and without falling into the trap of gendered, 'feminine' stereotypes.

This research is necessary because the links between body and christology have been neglected as experiential starting points for theologizing even within feminist theology. Some feminist theologians have raised ideas for how a possible critical feminist christology can be formulated and research is necessary in order to further these ideas and try it out in a particular hermeneutical space. This study hopes to do that choosing the hermeneutical space of resisting bodies as a test case. As Virginia Fabella says, 'not so much

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<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.24

to say something new'<sup>10</sup>, but to build using building blocks suggested by feminist foremothers, this research is worthwhile.

#### **1.4. SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

The problem that this study would like to address is that “commonsense” christological understandings of the Suffering Servant tends to give basis for, and perpetuate women’s oppression, suffering and exploitation, through its glorifying of suffering. The “Suffering Servant” christological understanding that “Christ came into this world to suffer and die on the cross as Saviour to save sinners” will be used for analysis. This understanding derives from the penal theories of atonement as put forward by Origen, Anselm and Abelard<sup>11</sup>. This penal theory of atonement can be considered a ‘commonsense understanding’ as it shapes and is the basis of our identity as Christians in Asia i.e. as ‘sinners’ in need of a ‘Saviour’ and that suffering is part of being Christ-like. Every theory of atonement recommends suffering to the believer<sup>12</sup>. The belief that it is “only in self-giving love, through the cross of suffering on behalf of others that one can be saved<sup>13</sup>,” is a fundamental identity-constructer for Indian Christian women<sup>14</sup> – a group category to which I belong. When existing christologies that are identity-forming tend to reproduce stereo typical and oppressive gender concepts<sup>15</sup> these christologies in turn form the body images of women and their identities in negative ways.

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<sup>10</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Asian Women & Christology”, *In God’s Image*, Singapore: September 1987, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> See later under 1.6.4.2 of this thesis for a detailed description

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Garnder, *Where is God when we suffer? What the Bible says about Suffering*, Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 2007, p.117-119. See also Michael Dauphinas, Matthew Levering eds. *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, Michigan: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005, p.89-91. See also M. Douglas Meeks, “Introduction”, in Jurgen Moltmann & Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Passion For God: Theology in Two Voices*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 6-8

<sup>14</sup> Out of five women in the Researcher’s family & extended family (educated, middle class women) who were asked what defines Christian character, all five listed suffering along with patience, humility and generosity and hope. The ages of the five women questioned were between 30 and 65.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam’s Child Sophia’s Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995, p.38, 102. See also Elizabeth Dreyer ed. *The Cross in Christian Tradition: From Paul to Bonaventure*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000, p. 250

This research will use for analysis three events from India to show how body experiences of women are circumscribed by culture, society, religion, class and caste. The events include an incident from the Godhra riots at Gujarat in 2002, a protest by Manipuri women in North East India (NEI) in 2004, and the protest by Irom Sharmila Chanu also from Manipur since 2000 till date (2010) I will also use one short story titled *Draupadi* by an Indian author.

The critical questions to be asked are: can the experience of 'body as struggle' be transformed into a wisdom and means of protest against negative oppressive messages inscribed on women? How can this wisdom become a reconstructive hermeneutical tool to reconstruct a christology that is not oppressive but liberative and transformative? Can the phenomenon of critical 'Resisting Bodies' open up a dialogical/ hermeneutical space that can challenge traditional or "commonsense" christologies?

This research will be a conceptual, philosophical analysis of christology and will attempt theory building around "body- experiences" of women. It will depend on literature review to evaluate select christological articulations. This research will use one fictional short story and recent events in India both to problematize the body, and to look at the body reconstructively. The Indian context is the main backdrop as I am an Indian national and this is the context and experience based on which I can theologize in an informed and effective manner.

The scope of this research does not allow for any in-depth evaluations of christological positions throughout history to the present. The Eucharistic understanding of the Body of Christ, though an important biblical theological concept, will not be used in this thesis. This is because I feel the Eucharistic understanding of the Body of Christ has been built owing too much to philosophical and spiritualized, ritualistic bases<sup>16</sup> and is not based on actual

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<sup>16</sup> Shane Rosenthal, *Radbertus and Ratramnus: A Ninth Century Debate over the Lord's Supper*, <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/srratramnus.htm> Accessed 24 Feb 2011, 1.12pm IST. See also Marcellino D'Ambrosio *The Eucharist: The Body of Christ?* [http://www.silk.net/RelEd/eucharist\\_ambrosio1.htm](http://www.silk.net/RelEd/eucharist_ambrosio1.htm) Accessed 24 Feb 2011, 1.15pm IST

physical-body experiences or embodiment. The Body of Christ as a spiritualized concept will not be used.

## **1.5. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This research will follow the 'Critical, Feminist, Systemic Analytical Hermeneutical 'Dance' Steps' outlined by Schüssler Fiorenza in "*Wisdom Ways*" as its theoretical framework<sup>17</sup>. This framework/ Dance outlines seven steps for analysis, reconstruction and liberative interpretation. They are: Hermeneutics of Experience; Hermeneutics of Domination & Social Location; Hermeneutics of Suspicion; Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation; Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination; Hermeneutics of Re-membering & Reconstruction & Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change.

This method will also be applied to evaluate "commonsense" christological understandings of "Suffering Servant" and some existing feminist christological articulations. Further, this method will be applied to three events from India to show how body experiences of women are circumscribed by culture, society, religion, class and caste. The events include an incident from the Godhra riots at Gujarat in 2002, a protest by Manipuri women in NEI in 2004, and the protest by Irom Sharmila Chanu also from Manipur since 2000. The latter two events will form a basis for looking at the 'body' reconstructively as "Resisting Bodies."

Schüssler Fiorenza's 'Critical, Feminist, Systemic Analytical Hermeneutical 'Dance' steps are analytical tools that will be helpful to problematize and evaluate the body and common sense christological formulations as being socially constructed, gendered, and oppressive. It is also a helpful tool to be able to reconstructively and imaginatively look at the body and christology as having potential for fostering resistance, protest and liberation. Most importantly it is a framework that helps us to move forward with its final step of transformative action which will assist us to arrive at a christological formulation that is liberative and transformative and grounded in the body experiences of wo/men.

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<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.165-190



### 1.5.1. General Observations About Schüssler Fiorenza's Framework of Analysis

Schüssler Fiorenza's framework of analysis is an "emancipatory model." It provides a tool that not only helps understand women's experiences and theological formulations, but it also helps provide a space "for transforming both wo/men's self-understanding, self-perception and self-alienation"<sup>18</sup>. I find this framework suitable for my analysis of women's body experiences because the stories of the women in my analysis and christological formulations - both stand in need of being understood and critiqued. This will reveal the roots of internalized socialization that leads to self-alienation (especially in terms of their body experiences). It will also reveal how traditional christology forms and impacts these perceptions and alienation.

Schüssler Fiorenza's emancipatory model of interpretation/analysis calls for "a critical hermeneutical self-consciousness" that makes visible the hermeneutical lenses with which one approaches the text/ theological formulation/ experiences for analysis<sup>19</sup>. This aspect is also important for this research as the events I want to analyse, the commonsense christological understandings and my own experiences as a woman, colour all that I will say in this research and so all of it needs to be interpreted with a critical hermeneutical self-consciousness that is very clear about which lens one is using to approach each story/theological formulation. Schüssler Fiorenza's emancipatory model of interpretation openly declares that its lens and purpose is for conscientization<sup>20</sup>.

Schüssler Fiorenza calls her framework or proposal of seven hermeneutical moves or strategies or dance steps a **critical feminist hermeneutical spiral** (as opposed to the classic hermeneutical circle that seems closed) to highlight that feminist biblical interpretation is ever moving and ongoing and that it cannot be done once for all, but is "repeated differently in different situations and from different perspectives"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.165

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.165

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.166

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.167

Schüssler Fiorenza explains interpretation by the seven dance steps as working on two different levels:

- “the language-systems, ideological frameworks, and socio-political-religious locations of contemporary interpreters living in kyriarchal<sup>22</sup> systems of domination, and
- the linguistic and socio-historical systems of biblical texts and their effective histories of interpretation.”<sup>23</sup>

In this research, I wish to retain these two levels of interpretation through the seven dance steps. I will interpret the language-systems, ideological frameworks and socio-political-religious locations of the contemporary characters I have chosen to study, as their stories unfold in the midst of kyriarchal systems of domination. I would also like to look at the systems under-girding “common sense” understandings of christology and the salvation story and how their histories of interpretation have impacted women’s understanding of being embodied in the female body.

In keeping with Schüssler Fiorenza’s theoretical framework that understands religious texts as “produced by particular historical debates and struggles”<sup>24</sup>, I would like to view christology too as being produced by historical debates and struggles. Following Schüssler Fiorenza’s understanding that the dance steps “commence not by focusing on malestream texts and traditions but by placing wo/men as biblical interpreters and readers in the center of its movement”<sup>25</sup>, this research too will commence by focusing on women’s experiences first and use them as the interpreters and readers of christology in an effort to deconstruct and reconstruct christology in ways that are liberative for women.

The seven hermeneutical moves or strategies or dance steps are:

1. Hermeneutics of Experience
2. Hermeneutics of Domination & Social Location

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<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam’s Child Sophia’s Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* NY: Continuum, 1995, p.14

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.168

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.168

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.168

3. Hermeneutics of Suspicion
4. Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation
5. Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination
6. Hermeneutics of Re-membering & Reconstruction
7. Hermeneutics of Transformative Action for Change

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that these are not successive, independent steps of enquiry but rather that they are interpretive moves that interact and dialogue with each other in a process of “making meaning” out of a particular biblical or cultural text<sup>26</sup>.

## **1.5.2. Hermeneutics of experience**

### **1.5.2.1. Experience as norm - disclaimers**

From the beginning of feminist theologizing “women’s experience” was norm or the central category. In this approach, the nuances in women’s experiences caused by many elements such as caste, class, race, age and ethnicity are not taken into account because women’s experience was understood in universalist terms. Looking at female experiences as “feminine” posits a universal understanding of what “feminine” means. So simply using “women’s experience” without qualifiers to read/interpret, reinforces wo/men’s experiences of inferiority and second-class citizenship as divine revelation.

### **1.5.2.2. Qualifiers for Women’s Experience As Norm in a Critical Feminist Liberationist Analysis**

According to Schüssler Fiorenza there are significant qualifiers that condition which women’s experience qualifies as central category, starting point and focus for analysis in the **Critical feminist systemic liberationist transformative (CFSLT)** analysis.

a) Wo/men’s experience as central criterion must be qualified with the concept of “*feminist experience*.” Feminist experience begins with a breakthrough or experience of “cognitive dissonance”<sup>27</sup>. We become aware “how our

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<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.167

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.170

experience is determined by and yet also differs from the cultural-religious standard of what is 'normal' or 'common sense'<sup>28</sup>.

b) It is not just any and every women's experience but "*women's experience and agency*" that is central.

c) Thus the objective of feminist interpretation becomes not just better understanding but "conscientization" that makes conscious the commonsense patterns of domination.

d) The starting point of feminist experience begins with the socio-cultural-religious *experiences of women excluded* from interpreting or formulating theology and our own communal Christian self-understanding. This means that we are starting from those at the bottom of the ladder/pyramid and laying bare the fulcrum of oppression and dehumanization threatening every wo/man<sup>29</sup>.

e) CFSLT analysis *does not begin with individualized and privatized experience* but with critical reflection on "how experience with the biblical text is shaped by our socio-political location."<sup>30</sup> For purposes of this research this means that our experience with christology/body is shaped by our socio-political-religious-cultural location.

These qualifiers take into account that women's experience is socially constructed and coded in kyriocentric language and shaped by experiences of race, class, culture, caste, age and ethnicity. Women's experiences from certain recent events in India that this study will analyse, also show how women are shaped by, and yet try to be different from the cultural-religious standard.

### **1.5.2.3. Four Components of the Feminist Category of Experience<sup>31</sup>**

a) Experience is mediated through language and culture, so there is no pure experience, free from its kyriocentric contexts and texts.

b) Personal experience is political (not private) i.e. it is socially constructed in and through race, gender, class, (hetero) sexuality, ethnicity, (caste), age and religion.

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<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.. p.170

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.170

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.171

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.171

c) Therefore personal experience demands critical analysis and reflection that can explore the social location of experience.

d) Only certain experiences- “of struggle and liberation for justice and radical equality can be articulated as feminist norms.”

#### **1.5.2.4. Hermeneutics of Experience Explained**

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, a hermeneutics of experience problematizes

“the social-religious and intellectual locations not only of the biblical interpreters but also of biblical texts and it does so in relation to global struggles for survival and well-being.”<sup>32</sup>

For the purposes of this research therefore the hermeneutics of experience problematizes the social-religious and intellectual locations of those who formulated christological doctrine – biblical writers, church fathers, church; it also renders problematic the story of salvation through “suffering and death on the cross.” A hermeneutics of experience brings this out when we look at the oppressive nature of such soteriology in the context of the global phenomenon of suffering, pain, discrimination, violence and low status that women all over face and when we look at how the body of the woman has always been proscribed and rendered up for sacrifice in various way as a result of such a salvation story.

A hermeneutics of experience asks body/christology related questions to deconstruct christology and explore what has been negative oppressive and self-alienating about christology? We ask these questions about body experiences and christology also to explore if it has helped women’s self-affirmation and struggle for liberation.

The hermeneutics of experience encourages us to analyse body experiences vis-à-vis salvation to explore what women experience as alienating/ liberating? What emotions are evoked when one thinks of women’s bodies as a lens to approach salvation? What experiences stand in the center or is ruled out or silenced when we talk of the suffering of Christ as salvific? How are women’s bodies constructed in the light of such kyriocentric christological common sense

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<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.171

understandings? Such questions will help us identify our body experiences when interpreting christology and also discover what body experiences are inscribed in christology itself.

By engaging body experiences and traditional christology, it is hoped, we may arrive at a reconciliation between our experiences of self and self-alienation in terms of our body-identities and in terms of our understanding of salvation.

### **1.5.3. Hermeneutics of domination and social location**

A critical feminist systemic analytic for liberation does not only deal with women's experience vis-à-vis a particular theological formulation and its interpretation. It must reflect on "how social, cultural and religious location has shaped our experience"<sup>33</sup> of our body, christology and our reactions to both. So for purposes of this research this hermeneutical step will help us look at how women's body and 'self' have been shaped reflecting our social, cultural and religious location and how these have in turn shaped our understanding of christology.

Schüssler Fiorenza warns that to be emancipatory, a feminist liberation approach cannot privilege "cultural femininity, the religious text itself or other malestream doctrinal, theological, spiritual, or theoretical frameworks as hermeneutical frameworks from which to read"<sup>34</sup>. This study tries to expose "cultural femininity" by examining how some characters in stories that will be part of this analysis are shaped by this definition of cultural femininity. This study will also resist using the malestream christological doctrine as a framework from which to read women's bodies and women's identity as 'selves.' Instead, like Schüssler Fiorenza says, we will try to prioritize women's body experiences and experiences of resistance in an attempt to be selves with agency, as the framework from which to interpret christology. Schüssler Fiorenza affirms that such an interpretation must take seriously the analytics of domination.

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.172

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.172

### **1.5.3.1 Functions of a Systemic Analysis of Socio-cultural & Political-religious Structures of Domination**

As Schüssler Fiorenza says, such an analysis must perform the following functions with regard to this research<sup>35</sup>:

a) Expose the ideological, religious-theological, functions of biblical texts (in this case of christology) in inculcating and legitimizing a kyriarchal order (in this case, in terms of the body and women's experiences of selves and self-affirmation).

b) Highlight and explain the potential of biblical texts (in this case critical feminist christology) for fostering justice and liberation in the radical space of the *ekklesia*.

c) Identify contemporary situations of domination (in this case contemporary situations where bodies of women are culturally proscribed, physically and emotionally conditioned, gendered, devalued and commercialized) and also identify the domination inscribed in the biblical texts (in this case the domination inscribed in christological understandings of suffering and body).

### **1.5.3.2. Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location Explained**

A hermeneutics of domination approaches the study of body and christology by posing questions about the truth claims and assumptions of christological doctrine and of soteriology. What is considered truth and knowledge in christology? Who and what validates the assumption that humans are basically sinful and "in need of saving"? How does the truth claim that Jesus' blood and suffering are salvific really speak to the reality of women's lives and body experiences? Does christology function in a way that provides moral authority for a liberating practice that helps women to struggle and search for justice by resisting oppressive power relations and theologies that validate kyriarchy and devalues women's bodies and their everyday wisdom?

A critical feminist hermeneutics of social location helps us to question our own social locations and our participation in power relations that are pyramidal

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<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.172

and oppressive. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, a critical feminist analytic of social location makes us,

“conscious of how your experiences are constructed by and you yourself, construct your self-identity in terms of gender, race, class, religion, or nationalism.”<sup>36</sup>

This consciousness will become obvious when we analyse the story of the Godhra violence in India.

Schüssler Fiorenza warns that social location however is not an identity category but a group category. She explains that women are usually assigned into group categories and that such *group categories then assign identity* to those in that group. Schüssler Fiorenza notes that the individual identity with which one understands oneself, depends on which group status is central in one’s life and which decides the “structural subject positions” into which we are born and are part of. Thus,

“our individual identities are always constructed and pressures are exerted on us to identify with such social markers. If we refuse to do so, social censure and punishment will follow.”<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that women find ourselves as members of a gender group that we experience as a “given.” Schüssler Fiorenza makes an important observation here that,

“individuals cannot simply opt out of group identities because social constructs such as sex, gender, race, class or ethnicity are ‘common sense,’ ‘naturalized,’ and inscribed on the body.”<sup>38</sup>

Korean theologian Hyunju Bae makes a similar point about such ‘common sense’ understandings coded in our psyches and minds when she calls these “habit of the mind”<sup>39</sup> It is important in terms of this research to note that such group identities are inscribed on the body and these have to be exposed, studied and understood.

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<sup>36</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.173

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p.174

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.173

<sup>39</sup> Hyunju Bae, “Women’s Leadership and Authority in Pauline Christianity” AWRC History Workshop Jan 17, 2006, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, Researcher’s personal notes on the lecture



Schüssler Fiorenza sees social location not as a monolithic or a binary construct. It is best conceptualized by understanding social groups as located within relations of domination and by realizing that each group category mutually constructs and multiplies the other. She calls this the “intersectionality of the structures of domination.” Intersectionality of domination and categories is a framework that helps us understand how categories like gender, caste, class, sexuality and religion shape a group’s experiences in specific contexts. Depending on one’s social location in the overall economic, political, and ideological pyramid, each one experiences these group categories of domination differently.

A hermeneutics of domination helps us critically reflect on how group categories that assign individual identities - both offer the range of options within a group category and identity that individual women then choose from to construct their own unique identities as individuals. A hermeneutics of domination helps us see how we negotiate our experiences in specific situations and how we approach cultural-religious knowledge like christology to arrive at our “individual expressions of self within socially defined categories.” Such expressions of self and our group identities – both influence the way we interpret and make meaning from texts and doctrines. In this way this hermeneutical step helps us look for possible ways of transforming the socially defined categories of domination that we inhabit, are involved in, are oppressed by, seek to resist and yearn to transform.

#### **1.5.4. Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

Many Christians, especially women have internalized that biblical authority, church doctrines and theological formulations are unquestionable. Many Christian women may not find it necessary to question biblical authority or doctrinal authority because we have found these to be positive and edifying for ourselves. We therefore usually follow what Schüssler Fiorenza calls the hermeneutics of appreciation and consent. Schüssler Fiorenza however asks Christian feminists to reflect on what stake we have in upholding such a

hermeneutics. Only when we have answered this honestly can we enter the step of hermeneutics of suspicion.

A hermeneutics of suspicion does not accept wholesale the divine authority ascribed to texts and doctrines but analyses what are its ideological functions in the interest of domination<sup>40</sup>. In doing so, such a hermeneutics of suspicion challenges the structures of domination contained in such texts/doctrines and in the contemporary interpretation of these.

Schüssler Fiorenza warns that a hermeneutics of suspicion does not seek simply to peel away layers that the structures of domination wear, to arrive at a pure reality/pure doctrine. She argues that the layers themselves or the language used to express such domination in these texts/doctrines are itself tools that construct reality in a certain way and make them into, “common sense understandings” or “habits of the mind.” A hermeneutics of suspicion tries to reveal the way in which

“women’s actual presences and practices are constructed and represented in and through kyriocentric language and media”<sup>41</sup>.

Schüssler Fiorenza affirms that language, arts, and theology – all reproduce the “invisibility and marginality of women” as ‘given’ and as ‘common sense reality.’ In so doing, language, arts and theology all collude in constructing reality in the service of domination. Thus a hermeneutics of suspicion does not peel away the layers to arrive at mystical deeper truth but is a way of investigating, deconstructing and demystifying language, cultural practices and theology to reveal their moorings in the service of domination. A hermeneutics of suspicion helps us analyse the perspective from which a particular story is viewed and reveal the ideological purpose behind the story and the way it represents women characters.

A hermeneutics of suspicion will help in this study by raising questions about the ideological function of common sense christological doctrine’s understandings regarding body, pain, suffering and its relation to salvation. It will help question the perspective from which christology is constructed; the

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<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.176

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 176

ideological aim of the salvation narrative and its representation of women; and the popular interpretations of christology and its implications. It will also help us question our own christological assumptions as women – our baggage, pre-understandings, prejudices and value systems. A hermeneutics of suspicion will help us reflexively reflect on and critique our own frameworks of understandings and our motivations for interpretation.

This hermeneutical step will make us aware of and critically reflect on the many methods of “meaning-making” used in the service of domination in relation to our bodies, our self-understanding, our understanding of salvation and our appropriation of the christological story. The binaries or polarizations inherent in texts and doctrines, roles and values will also come to light through this hermeneutics of suspicion. By elaborating on the ideological strategies that are at play in the circumscription of the body in selected stories and the ideological strategies underlying assumptions about christology, a hermeneutics of suspicion will seek to clarify how cultural value systems interact with all of these.

### **1.5.5. Hermeneutics of Critical Evaluation**

Most of us have internalized some of the justifications of kyriarchy – culturally and in religious terms<sup>42</sup>. A hermeneutics of evaluation helps us explore the values and visions buried in some alternatives to the biblical text. A hermeneutics of evaluation accepts the authority only of those texts and formulations that have passed through a critical hermeneutics of suspicion and have been found to be emancipatory in function. According to Schüssler Fiorenza a feminist scale of values need not necessarily be derived from the Bible alone<sup>43</sup>. She says that if kyriocentric values in the Bible perpetuate suffering and abuse they must be exposed and judged for the abuse they could perpetuate<sup>44</sup>. In this way a hermeneutics of evaluation tries to assess the “oppressive tendencies as well as the liberating possibilities”<sup>45</sup> in biblical texts and theological formulations and their

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<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 178

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.177

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.177

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.177

potential to support and resonate with women's experience<sup>46</sup>. This evaluation is not a one-time event, but must be done "again and again in particular social locations and situations" as texts and formulations function differently in different contexts<sup>47</sup>.

#### **1.5.5.1 Two Reference Points of a Hermeneutics of Evaluation**

According to Schüssler Fiorenza a hermeneutics of evaluation has a double reference point: a) cultural–ideological and b) religious–theological.

a) **cultural–ideological**: She sees language possessing an ideological function. It is not just a system of communication but possesses performative power that helps legitimize, challenge, naturalize or interrupt hegemonic worldviews or dominant values or to inculcate emancipatory values<sup>48</sup>. The question this hermeneutics of evaluation encourages us to ask is, "What does a text do to those of us who submit to its world of vision and values?"<sup>49</sup> Answering this reveals how much a text encodes and reinforces oppression or articulates values and visions that promote liberation. To make such an assessment, we must first clearly express values and visions that are liberating and which "can but need not be derived from the Bible"<sup>50</sup>. The milieu in which such liberating values can be created is from within "the emancipatory struggles to survive and change kyriarchal structures"<sup>51</sup>

b) **religious–theological**: Schüssler Fiorenza explains that when one submits to the logic of canonization one is compelled to make sense of texts that are assigned to make them submit, accept and consent to them. This fosters a kyriarchal identity that necessarily entails the villification of the other. This happens when canon is understood as the authoritative norm to be obeyed and not evaluated. However Schüssler Fiorenza says that when canonical authority is understood as "radical democratic creative authority" that understands authorship as plurality of meaning and truth, and sees canonical authority as

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<sup>46</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 177

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.177

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.178

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.178

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p.178

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.178

augmenting/enhancing and not as authority, then this invites debate, risk, vision and empowerment and transformation rather than obedience and submission.

In terms of this research, from the stories and subjects chosen for study, the scale of values will be that: the knowledge derived from embodied experiences is to be used to “resist evil.” Evil here is not meant or understood in the usual binary terms of “good” against “evil” but in terms of oppressive, kyriarchal, limiting and restrictive forces that collude to keep people in mental and physical subjugation and subordination. The vision in terms of this research will be two fold: 1) to be able to conceptualize how body experiences can be liberating and transformative 2) to understand christology in such a way that its central message is that “through protest and resistance to oppressive powers, the struggle lives on” and it is belief in this struggle that gives us strength to resist

### **1.5.6. Hermeneutics of Creative Imagination**

What we cannot imagine cannot take place<sup>52</sup>. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that as humans we have the ability to enter into the shoes of others and their struggles<sup>53</sup>. We are able to see the connections with struggles of women in the past and our own through what she calls “historical imagination”<sup>54</sup>. It is this ability that helps us see history in a different light, imagine and believe in change and makes us determined to seek alternatives to existing situations of domination<sup>55</sup>. According to Schüssler Fiorenza,

“Imagination enables us to fill in the gaps and silences and thereby to make sense out of a text. Imagination mines the unconscious as a store of feelings and experiences as well as a depository of common sense practices and codes. These unconscious presuppositions determine scientific thought and decide how we read texts, reconstruct history and imagine the past.”<sup>56</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza sees this hermeneutics of creative imagination taking many forms and methods such as storytelling, role-play, poems, song, etc<sup>57</sup>. But

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<sup>52</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 179

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.179

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.179

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.179

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.180-181

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.181-182

she believes that even our imagination and vision are “both informed and deformed” by our past experiences and present socio-political locations<sup>58</sup>. So even these forms and methods must be critically reflected on and discussed with the hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation, so that they do not re-establish and historicize the kyriarchal identity inscribed in the characters they role-play<sup>59</sup>. The danger of women identifying with the characters and feeling more self-alienated is ever present. So the characters being imaginatively role-played or poetically reconstructed must also be approached with the hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation before they can be re-imagined creatively and liberatively<sup>60</sup>. Only when this is done can retelling and reimagining become a catalytic process liberating us from false images<sup>61</sup>.

This research will try to approach the stories/incidents chosen for this research, first with the hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation and then reimagine them in a radical and democratic way.

### **1.5.7. Hermeneutics of Re-Membering And Reconstruction**

The hermeneutics of historical reconstruction questions the gap between the contemporary readers and the biblical text<sup>62</sup>. It also tries to relocate the kyriarchal dynamic of the text and make visible and audible the arguments of the subordinated and marginalized in the text<sup>63</sup>. In this way Schüssler Fiorenza sees the memory of women’s religious history, victimization, struggle and accomplishments<sup>64</sup> as ways to make visible and audible the hegemony and kyriarchal biases of the historical times and contexts inscribed in the texts/stories studied.

This study sees the memories of women’s conditioning and subordination, their struggle in daring to question their conditioning and their subordination, and their commitment to their own individual and collective struggles “to be,” “to

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<sup>58</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 182

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.182

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.182

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p.183

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p.183

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.183

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p.183

resist” as ways to make visible and audible these women and their stories in a way that it can be a resource for liberation and transformation.

Schüssler Fiorenza sees the purpose of such historical reconstruction as two fold: 1) historical retrieval and 2) religious reconstitution of the world<sup>65</sup>. However critical reconstruction does not see texts and historical sources as “objective data” of how things really were or of what really happened or as descriptions of reality<sup>66</sup>. For Schüssler Fiorenza, documentary research, explanation and writing should be rooted in the three hermeneutical steps described above (suspicion, evaluation, historical imagination)<sup>67</sup>. This assumes that when one tells one’s own story, it is not necessarily a record of what actually happened, but a “remaking and retelling” of their reality<sup>68</sup>.

So in this research too, the story of the Godhra riots, the story of the Manipuri women’s naked protest and the story of Irom Sharmila’s fast and a short story titled *Draupadi* – will all be seen in this light i.e. not really as windows into what happened, but as remaking and retelling of our realities in an effort to make sense of them and make them heuristic keys to analyse and interrogate christological doctrines that are restrictive and oppressive. Such historical reconstruction and re-membering should also always be subject to suspicion and critical evaluation.

In this step, Schüssler Fiorenza sees historiography as involving “selection, weighing, interpretation, and validation of documents”<sup>69</sup> and history writing as depending on “style, intention and composition”<sup>70</sup>. She sees history therefore as “the possible and the probable”<sup>71</sup> and historians as the “‘history makers’ who write history in terms of their experience and vision of the real”<sup>72</sup>. .

With such an understanding of history, history writing, and historical reconstruction in mind, Schüssler Fiorenza feels it is important to recognise

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<sup>65</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.183

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p.183

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.184

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.184

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p.184

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.184

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p.184

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p.184

which reconstructive model under-girds one's understanding of early Christian beginnings. Our understanding of this historical knowledge will also impact our experience and how we interact with this understanding to build our visions and values.

This study clarifies that it sees the centrality of the christology story not in Christ's "voluntary suffering" on the cross but the understanding that Jesus was killed; murdered for what he believed in and fought against – the powers and principalities of those times. The centrality of the christology story is not in the christological doctrine that Jesus "died" to "save our sins." The central message of the christology story is that despite all attempts to kill it, the struggle against powers and principalities lives on – this is the miracle of salvation and resurrection. Our justification for struggle is the struggle itself. The miracle of resurrection is that if one is committed to the struggle for liberation and transformation based on "resistance" to kyriarchy and every force that tries to oppress and subordinate, that struggle will go on even after we are no more.

With this understanding of the early Christian origins and of history-making, this research tries to use the body as a key to open up ways to envision alternatives to women's past experiences that have been conditioned and proscribed and to use their struggles using body to resist as values for transformation and change.

### **1.5.8. Hermeneutics of Transformative Action For Change**

Our understanding of the past determines how we understand our present experiences. And when we dream a future vision, we base that on our analysis and reflection on both past and present. So according to Schüssler Fiorenza,

"Only if we are committed to work for a different, more just future, will our imagination be able to transform the past and present limitations of our vision."<sup>73</sup>

And according to Toni Morrison, the only grace that we can have is the grace we can imagine.<sup>74</sup> So our ability to envision or imagine a vision that seeks

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<sup>73</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.186

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p.187



transformation and change will depend on how we analyse our past and present and what we are committed to and believe in the present.

In terms of this study, for a paradigm shift in the understanding of christology we may need to move from a passive, submissive and subordinated, suffering-leading-to-being-saved kind of understanding of christology. Such a shift entails problematizing such christological understandings and its socio-political locations and functions in the interests of domination. Christology must be fueled by reflections on issues of women's confrontations with injustice which must inform what christology meant in the times of Christian origins and what it means for us today. For such a shift in our understanding, we need to be freed from the dogma of the christological doctrines so that we can ask central ethical-political and theological questions.

We need be freed to ask what kind of values and visions does christology, and its doctrinal and contemporary interpretations advocate? Does christology reinforce languages of domination, subordination and hate as theological? In order to transform our understanding of christology we need to:

- a) be able to take authority to understand ourselves as subjects in reading/understanding christology; be able to formulate what is liberating and what is oppressive based on our experiences.
- b) be able to resist the pressure to derive all decisions from the experts' /church legitimized interpretation of christology that is handed to us or from the contemporary christological articulations that seek domination by stressing that we are sinners, in need of salvation and should therefore emulate a Saviour who voluntarily took on suffering and gave up his life "for others."
- c) be able to overcome our ambiguity about certain christological interpretations and resist the urge to accept oppressive understandings of christology by nourishing ourselves with: the liberating and challenging aspects of the story of Jesus' resistance and struggle against principalities and powers of his time even when threatened by death, even when he was killed for it; and in the guarantee that just as

the resurrection meant that his struggle lived on in and through the Jesus community that followed and continues to follow his example, so will resurrection happen each time we keep struggling against domination, exploitation and injustice.

- d) be able to legitimize our understanding of christology based on what contributes to the liberation and life in fullness for the most disadvantaged persons.

Schüssler Fiorenza, along with Patricia Hill Collins, calls such praxis for change and transformation “visionary pragmatism”:

“Feminist visionary pragmatism points to an alternative vision of the world but does not prescribe a fixed goal and end-point for which it then claims universal truth”<sup>75</sup>.

This study too tries to formulate an alternative vision or understanding of christology but does not claim universal truth for this as the only liberative understanding.

I feel that the struggle to reinterpret christology from body experiences of women is itself a validation of the process of visionary pragmatism. This attempt is itself part of a larger struggle. I believe, along with Schüssler Fiorenza that such

“ethical and truthful visions of self-affirmation and community cannot be separated from the struggles on their behalf. One takes a stand by constructing new knowledge and new interpretations. While vision can be conjured up in the historical imagination, pragmatic action requires that one remain responsive to the injustices of everyday life.”<sup>76</sup>

The stories arising from our bodies, its prohibitions and proscriptions, the inscriptions and identity-constructions built on them and the struggles we indulge in with our bodies, and for it, how we resolve these struggles with our bodies – all these give us clues about how we appropriate the Jesus story and the story of salvation in ways that are damaging to us. They also give us heuristic keys to reflect on and reinterpret christology and our sexuality. I hope that this attempt to rearticulate christology from the embodied experiences of women will inspire visionary pragmatism. Visionary pragmatism that can be used in the everyday

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<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.188

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.188

struggles for justice and well-being for all who are exploited by oppressive religious doctrines that prevent them from liberation and living life in all its fullness.

## **1.6. Literature Review**

### **1.6.1. Feminist Christologies**

Many theologians have reflected on christology from a feminist perspective. Each has used a different approach/starting point to arrive at different articulations of feminist christology. We therefore have feminist christologies in the plural, and any effort to talk of 'a feminist christology' is to miss the necessity of this plurality. Asian feminist theologian Virginia Fabella points out that the common methodology behind the efforts of Asian women to formulate a 'contextual' feminist christology is perhaps the unifying factor amidst the many emerging diverse christologies.<sup>77</sup> For Fabella, Asian christology is not so much about saying something new about it, but that we are discovering Jesus for ourselves, and giving answers that reflect not only "what we encounter in the scriptures but also our reality and experience as Asian women"<sup>78</sup>.

### **1.6.2 Feminist Critique of traditional Christological positions**

Schüssler Fiorenza notes that very early in the feminist movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, striking at the very heart of soteriology, pointed out that biblical researchers never touched the position of women because taking out the snake, the fruit tree and the woman from the story meant no fall, no judge, no inferno, no everlasting punishment and hence no need of a Saviour<sup>79</sup>. Korean theologian Choi, Manja sees traditional christology as being defined by masculine symbolism – language, characteristics etc and asserts that it justifies male dominance and the subordinate position of women.<sup>80</sup> Fabella critiques classical

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<sup>77</sup> Virginia Fabella, "Asian Women & Christology", *In God's Image*, Singapore: September 1987, p. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Virginia Fabella, "Christology from an Asian Women's Perspective", *Asian faces of Jesus*, R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. London:1993. p. 211.

<sup>79</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995. p. 44

<sup>80</sup> *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from Singapore Conference*, Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology, 1989. 174

christological themes and their impact on Asian women.<sup>81</sup> Rose Wu, feminist theologian from Hong Kong, sees the triumphalistic christology of the exclusive Lord of the universe, as an illustration of the “Western captivity” element of Christianity and points out that such a christology serves only those holding social, political and ecclesial power.<sup>82</sup> According to her, Asian women must resist the colonised Christ and embrace the incarnate God who empowers. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar stresses that women have been most affected by the interpretations of the cross and suffering<sup>83</sup>.

### **1.6.3. Some feminist critique and reconstructive trajectories: continuities and gaps**

Much christological research has revolved around locating and delineating the “historical Jesus.” Mary Daly analyses the historical roots of the whole christological debate that situates the masculinity of Jesus as the central feminist christological problem in christological reflection in “*Beyond God the Father*.”<sup>84</sup> Fabella posits as pertinent to her christology that the gender of Jesus was not essential but functional. Yet for Fabella the historical Jesus is still a touch stone to test the authenticity of her Jesus images.<sup>85</sup> Monica Melanchthon argues for a new direction of enquiry in christology to understand the relationship of the historical Jesus of Nazareth to the risen Christ of faith and asserts that the maleness of the historical Jesus does not mean that the resurrected Christ in the redeemed order of creation is identified with the male principle. She warns that such an assertion linking redemption and the male principle is a threat to women as it implies that salvation is only for men through Jesus the male.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (NY: Continuum, 1995) 43-44

<sup>82</sup> Rose Wu, “The Colonised Christ and the Liberation of Asian Women”, *In God's Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 20.

<sup>83</sup> Evangeline Anderson, “Asian Feminist Christology”, *In God's Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 8.

<sup>84</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (NY: Continuum, 1995) 43-44.

<sup>85</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Christology from an Asian Women's Perspective”, *Asian faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, London: 1993, p. 213.

<sup>86</sup> *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from Singapore Conference*, Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture & Theology, 1989. 183.

Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk* warns against the danger of equating Christian identity as male identity. Ruether articulates the central problem of feminist christology in the classic question “Can a male Saviour save women?” and her constructive answer relies on an understanding of the historical Jesus as a prophet, liberator & representative of liberated humanity. She emphasizes “redemptive humanity” without limiting it to the historical Jesus. Monica Melanchthon echoes this sentiment when she envisages Jesus as the “representative human being – a category which includes female human beings”<sup>87</sup>

Aotearoan feminist theologian Nicola Watkin sees the Pauline concept of being “in Christ” as a possible starting point for a feminist christology stressing that women too are fully ‘in Christ’ as men and there is no need to deny Christ as women (because of his gender) but that there is a need to rethink and critique our christology, and “remove christology from its patriarchal home”<sup>88</sup>

These positions point to the danger of masculinity or gender paradigm/roles/assignments being linked to redemption. However the biological embodiedness of masculinity or femininity is not the point of discussion or basis of articulation. Rather the maleness of Jesus here is a gendered notion and not an embodied one. Counter positions put forward of “redemptive humanity” and “representative human being” as generic identities fail to appreciate the embodiedness and body experiences that contribute to the formation of identities. Body experiences as an arena of struggle have not been highlighted in these articulations. Hence in this study I would like to focus on body and identity formation and how struggle and resistance contribute to this, making it (body and identity) a hermeneutical tool to reconstruct christology.

Schüssler Fiorenza helpfully summarises the christologies proposed by women/feminists from around the world. Below, I will share some of her findings

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<sup>87</sup> *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from Singapore Conference*, Hong Kong: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture & Theology, 1989. 184.

<sup>88</sup> Nicola Watkin, “Beginning a Feminist Christology”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.12, No.2 (Seoul: AWRC, 1993) 21.

and intersperse it with some of my own summaries and critique of christologies proposed by feminists in Asia.

African American theologian Jacquelyn Grant argues for a feminist christology that must emerge from the experience and situation of the 'least'<sup>89</sup>. [*White Woman's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*]. In a similar vein, based on the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, Korean feminist theologian Chung, Sook Ja sees the possibility of all of us becoming small christs today when we are able to break divisions, lower ourselves, overcome our own thirst and go into the hearts of marginalized people like the migrant workers. She pushes Letty Russell's humanness sentiment a bit further when she says that when we are in the process to become human we are becoming Christ as well.<sup>90</sup> These positions calling for solidarity with experiences of marginalization are good starting points and do uplift the aspect of 'struggle' but they do not specifically link struggle with embodiment or experiences of the body.

Some feminist theologians have formulated christological constructions focusing on right relation, connectedness and mutuality. Isabel Carter Heyward challenges the rootedness of christology in dualistic oppositions of either "from below" or "from above," and proposes that christology be done "with Jesus" in order to establish right relationships<sup>91</sup> [*Speaking of Christ: A Lesbian Feminist Voice*] Rita Nakashima Brock's<sup>92</sup> relational christology uses the central metaphor of "broken-heartedness" challenging Ruether's christological focus on Jesus the heroic individual and liberator and proposing that the focus instead shift to the Christa community. She sees a "christology of erotic power in the Markan miracle stories, in exorcism and the healing of broken-heartedness in the Christa community of erotic power"<sup>93</sup> [*Journeys by heart: A christology of Erotic Power*].

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<sup>89</sup> Jacquelyn Grant as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, (NY: Continuum, 1995) p. 48.

<sup>90</sup> Chung, Sook Ja, "Becoming Christ: A Woman's Vision", *In God's Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 18.

<sup>91</sup> Isabel Carter Heyward as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995. p. 50.

<sup>92</sup> Brock as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* NY: Continuum, 1995. p. 51-52.

<sup>93</sup> Brock as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* NY: Continuum, 1995. p 51

“Mary Grey proposes to reweave the metaphor of “at-one-ment” in terms of “the dynamic energy of mutuality and the making of right relation.”<sup>94</sup> Mary Grey talks of a christology of connectedness and focuses on “being human-in relation” over difference, otherness and conflict and also calls this “redemptive mutuality”<sup>95</sup> [*Feminism, Redemption and the Christian Tradition*]. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel qualifies relationality as “female/feminine” relationality and proposes it as a key to a feminist biblical christology, stressing that female self-understanding adds a third dimension of “relationship” to the male self-understanding that stresses only “person and work.” Therefore she says women have a special contribution to make to christology.<sup>96</sup> [*Christology and Context: The Confrontation between Gospel & Culture*].

Like Isabel Carter Heyward, Nicola Watkin too stresses that christology must “proceed from the historical one who is the biblical Christ, who encounters us in the present,”<sup>97</sup> and says that christology cannot be separated from a relational experience with the Christ. These relational christological positions do not sufficiently address struggle and resistance as integral aspects of relationality. They also still work within the gender paradigm in that feminine mutuality is uplifted as against the masculine.

Some feminist theologians like Mary Grey and Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel have tried to retrieve the cross and find meaning in it in ways that are positive to women. Grey calls for a reimagining of the cross as “creative birth-giving”<sup>98</sup>. Grey however sees the cross, a symbol of suffering and sacrifice, as acceptable only in a post-patriarchal/kyriarchal context of “flourishing”/ fullness of life. She says we can rethink forgiveness and reconciliation as feminists when we

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<sup>94</sup> Hilkert, Mary Catherine, Feminist theology--Key religious symbols: Christ and God. Source Theological Studies. 56(2):341-352. 1995 Jun. [References];

<http://www.womenreligious.org/~education/FemTheol/Readings/Hilkert.htm>

<sup>95</sup> Mary Grey as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* NY: Continuum, 1995. p.53

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (NY: Continuum, 1995. p.77.

<sup>97</sup> Nicola Watkin, “Beginning a Feminist Christology”, *In God's Image*, Vol.12, No.2 (Seoul: AWRC, 1993) p, 22-23

<sup>98</sup> Hilkert, Mary Catherine, Feminist theology--Key religious symbols: Christ and God. Source Theological Studies. 56(2):341-352. 1995 Jun. [References];

<http://www.womenreligious.org/~education/FemTheol/Readings/Hilkert.htm>

understand Jesus as being the “willing victim” in the context of struggling against injustice<sup>99</sup>. There is a problem in perceiving Jesus’ submission to the cross as “willing victim” as Grey does, even when she qualifies it as being in the context of struggle against injustice. This perception does not uplift “agency,” but reinforces the “victim” position of Jesus and consequently for women. Wendel argues that “in the context of Jesus’ life, ministry, and relationships (especially with women), the cross can be retrieved as a symbol not only of “the guillotine or the gallows” but also of “wholeness and life”<sup>100</sup>. While appreciating that the cross has been and continues to be an important symbol and identity-marker for us as Christian women, I cannot fully agree that attempts to retrieve redemptive understandings of the cross do not in some way contribute to perpetuating further suffering and harm for women.

In the 1980s Asian women articulated their understanding of Jesus as “a prophetic Messiah whose identity is that of Suffering Servant who gives himself a ransom for many.”<sup>101</sup> Their study of christology began with the question “Who is Jesus?” and in answering this question, they reflected on the work of Jesus and concluded that

*“the mission of Jesus was not to rule but to serve; not to possess glory but to undergo suffering. Jesus’ order was different from that of the order of the religious leaders or political hierarchies of his time. Jesus’ suffering was the praxis to fulfil the time when structures of domination will be overcome.”<sup>102</sup>*

But of late, more and more Asian feminists have distanced themselves from the aspect of “suffering” in christology as a redemptive factor. Many Asian feminist theologians have increasingly articulated how incongruous it is to believe in

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<sup>99</sup> Mary Grey, *Struggling with Reconciling Hearts and Holding Fast to Our Dreams*, *Feminist Theology* 2009 17: 339, DOI: 10.1177/0966735009102363. The online version of this article can be found at: <http://fth.sagepub.com/content/17/3/339>

<sup>100</sup> Hilkert, Mary Catherine, *Feminist theology--Key religious symbols: Christ and God*. Source *Theological Studies*. 56(2):341-352. 1995 Jun. [References]; <http://www.womenreligious.org/~education/FemTheol/Readings/Hilkert.htm>

<sup>101</sup> *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from Singapore Conference*, Hong Kong: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture & Theology, 1989. p.165.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 166



Christ as the Suffering Servant when this concept is used to justify the terrible suffering that women are expected to bear.

As Hope Antone points out, Asian women are reviewing and challenging “the traditional doctrines of atonement and salvation, the irony of the cross and the role of the church in promoting such traditional teachings.”<sup>103</sup> Rotuman (pacific islander) theologian Seforosa A. Carroll writes that she felt the need for another way of experiencing and imaging Christ, because the traditional themes either did not fit or added to and validated her own suffering.<sup>104</sup>

#### **1.6.4. Assumptions under-girding traditional Christological positions: Feminist critique**

##### **1.6.4.1. The “suffering servant” Christological understanding and its location in the larger range of Christological formulations.**

To expose the driving principles behind christological formulations for purposes of this study, I find helpful, a term – “controlling christologies” – that Douglas Buckwalter uses while discussing the christological formulation in Luke and Acts. He explains “controlling christologies” as a christological portrait or description that centrally affects or controls what one says christologically throughout one’s writing (in the case of Buckwalter he is analysing Luke-Acts) and that other christological descriptions and portraits in their writing should be understood in light of these controlling christological principles<sup>105</sup>. Buckwalter summarises the controlling christological principles in Luke and Acts into four categories. I feel this categorization is also helpful in categorizing the range of christological positions that church fathers and biblical scholars down the ages have put forward and disseminated. Buckwalter identifies four categories<sup>106</sup>: 1) christologies emphasizing Jesus’ humanity, 2) christologies emphasizing Jesus’

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<sup>103</sup> Hope Antone, Editorial, “Christ for Asian Women”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.22, No.4 (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 1

<sup>104</sup> Seforosa A. Carroll, “Who is Jesus Christ for me in Australia? A Reflection on Virginia Fabella’s Christology from An Asian Woman’s Perspective”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.19, No.1 (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2000) 62

<sup>105</sup> H. Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke’s Christology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p.6.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1-24

subordinate relation to God, 3) christologies emphasizing Jesus' function as Saviour, 4) christologies emphasizing Jesus' authoritative status.

Under the third rubric in this categorization (Jesus' function as Saviour) Buckwalter lists four different types of christological formulations: Saviour christology, Redeemer christology, Suffering Servant christology and christology of the cross<sup>107</sup>. I feel these four formulations emphasizing Jesus' function as Saviour have influenced the development of atonement theories as detailed in the next section on Traditional christologies.

Buckwalter summarises Joel B. Green's view of Luke's suffering servant christology. Green sees Luke's Suffering Servant christology as embracing the whole of Jesus' ministry, but pertaining especially to his death and exaltation<sup>108</sup>. Isaiah 53:11 is the main supporting passage to substantiate this understanding in Luke. "The humiliation and vindication of the servant envisages for Luke the central meaning of Jesus' servanthood"<sup>109</sup>. The suffering servant christology thus understands Jesus as the humble Servant of Yahweh who accomplishes God's plan by obediently giving up his life on the cross, after which he is exalted thereby making available salvation to all people, and so provides the model of true discipleship for his followers<sup>110</sup>.

#### **1.6.4.2. Traditional Christologies: A summary**

"Jesus suffered and died on the cross to save us from sin" is the underlying assumption of the penal theory of atonement<sup>111</sup>. This is the "common sense" understanding of traditional theology and christological orientation that this thesis would like to analyse and critique.

Brown and Parker point out that "there is no classical theory of the atonement that questions the necessity of Jesus' suffering."<sup>112</sup> Brown and Parker

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<sup>107</sup> H. Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke's Christology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 12-15

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 14

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p. 14

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p.14

<sup>111</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved The World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

identify three strands of tradition as being at the core of the classical views of the atonement<sup>113</sup>:

- **Christus Victor Tradition:** Jesus' death is a confrontation with powers of evil and represents the victory of good over evil. But Jesus' resurrection shows that God is greater than the evil power and his purpose will prevail<sup>114</sup>. Through Christ's victory over evil, humanity is liberated from evil. This tradition dominated the early church for the first millennium in one form or other<sup>115</sup>. A more defined form of this theory is also called the Ransom Theory in which Jesus is seen as the ransom by which God redeemed humanity from Satan's power<sup>116</sup>. Jesus' innocent life becomes a ransom acceptable to Satan for redeeming humanity<sup>117</sup>. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Rufinus of Aquileia were early proponents of this theory<sup>118</sup>.
- **Satisfaction Theory:** Jesus dies in our place, paying the price and bearing the punishment for human sin to satisfy God's sense of justice. Hence God's character of justice and honour that requires that a sinner should suffer are satisfied. Jesus' death becomes the sacrifice and payment to God and the barrier between God and sinful humanity is removed. Dorothee Soelle sums up traditional or orthodox perspectives of christology using Anselm's theory of satisfaction that "Christ as the innocent victim submits to the will of the Father and thus reconciles the Father with us."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved The World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

<sup>115</sup> William A. Dryness & Velli-Matti Karkainen, *Global Dictionary of Theology* Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008. p.85-86

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 86

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p.86

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p. 86

<sup>119</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, "Christ in the World" in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003, p. 118

- **Moral Influence Theory:** Abelard saw the barrier between God and humans as resting with humans and not with God<sup>120</sup>. Human hearts are hardened to God's mercy and so we are unable to see it. Jesus' death shows the largesse of God's mercy. By seeing the cross and that God is even willing to die for us, we are to be morally persuaded to accept God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to obedience to God's will.

Each of these theories of atonement have something to say about suffering. The Christus Victor tradition sees suffering as a necessary pre-requisite and a phase one has to undergo before one triumphs<sup>121</sup>. So a believer is "persuaded to endure suffering as a prelude to new life"<sup>122</sup>. The satisfaction theory implies that the justice of God is satisfied by the innocent suffering of Jesus who is rewarded because of his perfect obedience to his father's will. This sees God as sanctioning innocent suffering as a way to sanctify the victims through their suffering<sup>123</sup> - a way to free others and even God. The moral influence theory sees the innocent suffering victim as the only way that humanity can be confronted with guilt that can move us to a new life. Jesus' victimization is seen as for our moral edification. This implies that the purpose of the victimization and suffering of the innocent is for the edification of the powerful, unrepentant oppressors<sup>124</sup>.

Brown and Parker also summarise three strands in the twentieth century critique of classical atonement theories<sup>125</sup>: 1) Critiques God as impassive and asserts God suffers with us 2) sees suffering as essential and inevitable part of the struggle for liberation and 3) critiques suffering as redemptive but retains the cross as a symbol of liberation.

Traces of these three trends are also found in feminist critique of Traditional christologies.

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<sup>120</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved The World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. pp.1-30

### **1.6.4.3 Feminist Critique of traditional Christologies:**

Womanist theologian Delores Williams shakes the very basis of christological presumptions when she asks whether it is necessary to begin with the assumption that Jesus Christ came to suffer. She sees Jesus' death as an example of how acts of justice and struggle are resisted and punished. For her Jesus does not conquer sin through death on the cross but in life when "he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relation between the material and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it."<sup>126</sup> Indian feminist theologian Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar underscores Womanist theologian Delores Williams' position and sees Jesus' death on the cross as a price Jesus paid for resisting power structures and for "demythologizing" the power of the powerful by making them seem ordinary. She asserts that "there is no place for vicarious suffering or passive suffering as the will of God for humanity. Suffering due to injustices is evil and it ought to be condemned."<sup>127</sup> Along with Delores Williams I too question the fundamental assumption of traditional christology that Jesus came to suffer and that suffering is redemptive. I would like to go a bit further and also explore the personalized assumption of a need for a 'Saviour' in order 'to be saved.' This question will be analysed with a critique of the view that 'body' is inherently sinful and in need of a Saviour and will try to show that embodiment resisting exploitative and discriminatory forces is a form of salvation.

### **1.6.5. Schüssler Fiorenza's model of Struggle to reformulate Christology**

Schüssler Fiorenza uses the historical model of struggle as a point of reference to formulate a christology that understands the Jesus of history in the light of the movement that kept alive his memory of opposition against domination and oppression. She sees the Jesus movement as part of other popular cultural, political and religious resistance prevalent at that point in history. Schüssler

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<sup>126</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenges of Womanist God-Talk*, New York: Orbis Books 1995, p. 166.

<sup>127</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, "Asian Feminist Christology", *In God's Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 8-9.

Fiorenza argues for a shift of attention in christology from “the question of ‘who’ crucified Jesus to the question of ‘what’ killed him”<sup>128</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza points out that biblical christology participates in cultural and religious identity formation which must be critically reflected upon. She calls for critical examination of whether christology and historical reconstructions of socio-political contexts are oppressive or liberating.

Filipina feminist theologian Mary John Mananzan observes that theologians who wrote in the context of struggle understood Christ to be a liberating figure and bases her christological reflection on her own personal relationship with Christ which evolved as she became involved in people’s struggles.<sup>129</sup> I agree with Schüssler Fiorenza that christology contributes to identity formation and therefore this needs to be critiqued. Hence I will use Schüssler Fiorenza’s idea that ‘struggle’ be the starting point to formulate christology. With ‘struggle’ as the heuristic tool, I will focus on the ‘resisting body’ aspect of women’s body experiences and parallel it with Jesus’ resistance to domination and oppression.

Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar suggests that christology can be re-articulated in the light of women’s experiences as the continuous work of God in history “to bring back to life (resurrect) all that has been crushed and marginalized as lifeless and useless in society.”<sup>130</sup> She asserts that the starting point of Asian feminist christology lies in acknowledging violence, “not as a given reality that has to be faced, but as something that has to be critiqued and rejected as a dehumanizing force.”<sup>131</sup> I agree with Anderson-Rajkumar for the need to critique and reconstruct both christology and resurrection. In doing so I hope to use much of the resources from Schüssler Fiorenza’s reconstruction of the anointing of Jesus by the unnamed woman to understand resurrection as a realization that despite being murdered, the ‘struggle’ will still go on.

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<sup>128</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam’s Child Sophia’s Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995, p. 92.

<sup>129</sup> Mary John Mananzan, “Who is Jesus Christ? Responses from the Philippines”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.12, No.3, (Seoul: AWRC, 1993) 40.

<sup>130</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Asian Feminist Christology”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) 9.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p.12

### **1.6.6. Summary**

In this opening Chapter I have laid out the main objective and sub-questions related to this research. I have also tried to explain Schüssler Fiorenza's framework of analysis with which I hope to interrogate the stories and incidents and the "common sense" christological articulations that I have chosen to analyse in order to arrive at my main objective. In the next Chapter I will use Schüssler Fiorenza's framework to analyse the gendered inscriptions and other identity inscriptions mapped on the bodies of women.

## CHAPTER 2: GENDERED AND INSCRIBED BODIES

This Chapter will try to explore how women's bodies are inscribed and acted upon in oppressive and punitive ways that glorify suffering as natural, voluntary, virtuous and salvific. The ways in which identity politics and gender converge to create oppressive inscriptions on women's bodies will be broadly explored by looking at an incident of communal violence in India. The "common sense" notions of femininity and how these glorify submission and suffering as natural, formative and normative in terms of woman's identity, role and behaviour will be explored by looking at three stories from India as case studies. The hermeneutics of experience, social location and domination, suspicion and the hermeneutics of critical evaluation will be used in this analysis.

### 2.1. COMMUNAL IDENTITY AND ITS INSCRIPTIONS ON WOMEN'S BODIES

In 2002 in Gujarat, India, the worst communal riots in recent history took place. At a place called Godhra, a train carrying a compartment full of Hindu "kar sevaks"<sup>132</sup> was burnt. It was reported in the media at the time that Muslims were responsible for the burning of the train at Godhra. Riots broke out all over Gujarat. Muslims all over Ahmedabad city were found and killed in brutal and savage ways by armed Hindu mobs. This pogrom took place with the collusion of the State machinery and law enforcement agencies.

In almost all reports of eye witnesses and survivors of the riots, the sexual nature of the violence inflicted on women during these riots was reported. The pattern was the same: women were surrounded by mobs, assaulted, raped and then burnt. Flavia Agnes notes with anguish about the Godhra riots,

The woman's body was a site of almost inexhaustible violence, with infinitely plural and innovative forms of torture, their sexual and reproductive organs were attacked with a special savagery, their children born and unborn, shared the attacks and were killed before their eyes.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> A Kar Sevak is someone who offers services for free (that is, a volunteer) to a religious cause. It originates from the Sanskrit words *kar* (hand) and *sevak* (helper).

<sup>133</sup> Flavia Agnes, "From *Shahbano* to *Kausar Bano* – Contextualizing the 'Muslim Woman' within a communalised polity", Paper presented in "Workshop on 'Subaltern Citizens and their Histories'", Emory University, October 13-14, 2006. <http://www.icis.emory.edu/subalterndocs/Agnes.pdf> [Accessed 7 Nov 2010; 12.25pm IST]



One gruesome story that happened at a place called Naroda-Patia later became a symbol of the sexualized nature of the violence perpetrated on Muslim women during the carnage at Gujarat.

### **2.1.1. Kausar Bano**

This is the story of Kausar Bano as narrated by her husband Firoz bhai Khajamonuddin Sheikh in an affidavit filed before the Commission of Enquiry (*Shah & Nanavati Commission*) in Ahmedabad: .

On 28th February, 2002, at about 10.30 A.M., a mob of about 3000 men surrounded our Chali. They were shouting slogans . . . "Jai Shri Ram." They were carrying swords, lathis, chains, pipes and some were carrying cans of what looked like petrol. They were wearing shorts and had "pattis" on their head. They had come running from the direction of Noorani Masjid. People started running for their lives. My wife was pregnant. She could not run so I carried her in my arms and was running through a lane going towards the Teesra Kuwa. Behind me the mob was setting the houses on fire, killing people, setting them ablaze. Near the Teesra Kuwa, I put my wife down and we were both running when about 20 to 25 persons caught up with us. They pulled my wife out of my arms. . . . Then they slit her stomach with a sword, pulled out our child from her stomach and paraded the baby on the tip of a sword. I think I heard my child cry. Then they poured petrol on both of them and lit them. I hid behind a five feet wall, which is the boundary wall of a maidan (open ground) and witnessed what happened to my wife and child. Then I ran for fear of my life.<sup>134</sup>

### **2.1.2. Analysis**

In most cultures in India, the markers of a community's identity are located on the woman – the way she dresses, the spaces she is allowed to inhabit and in the ways she is treated and judged by society. If the woman refuses to carry these markers of her affiliations, she is seen as dishonouring the community. The external markers of a woman are a political statement declaring her identity. Her cultural, socio, political and religious locations determine the way she can use

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<sup>134</sup> Flavia Agnes, "From *Shahbano* to *Kausar Bano* – Contextualizing the 'Muslim Woman' within a communalised polity", Paper presented in "Workshop on 'Subaltern Citizens and their Histories'", Emory University, October 13-14, 2006. <http://www.icis.emory.edu/subalterndocs/Agnes.pdf> [Accessed 7 Nov 2010; 12.25pm IST]

her body and also the way others will treat her body. The woman's body bears the markers of her own community as well as the fears and suspicions against her community. Her identity determines how her body will be restricted and curtailed by her own community and also determines how she will be targeted when the 'other' community wants to teach her community a lesson. In both instances the statements the body is used to make is not in the woman's control. Her body is used to make statements about her caste, class and communal honour. The name or shame of a community is seen as resting on the woman. Paradoxically, though the man is considered the Lord of the house, the honour of a family is perceived as resting upon the woman, her modesty and chastity!

In a patriarchal, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual country like India, the ways in which identities are constructed is a complex combination of many factors including religion, gender, class and caste. Most of the time the projection of all these identities— religious, cultural, communal—converge on the body of a woman. Schüssler Fiorenza makes an important observation that

“individuals cannot simply opt out of group identities because social constructs such as sex, gender, race, class or ethnicity are ‘common sense,’ ‘naturalized,’ and inscribed on the body.”<sup>135</sup>

For example the church by asking women to veil themselves in church or during Holy Communion or insisting on the cloistering of nuns as symbols of Christian and Roman Catholic identity, Islam asserting the veil as basic to Islamic religious identity, Hinduism insisting on the vermilion, *mangal sutra*, bangles and coloured and white *saree* as signs of their cultural Hindu identity of married and unmarried women - all of this assert and maintain patriarchal and Lordship power by disciplining women's bodies and controlling their lives in the guise of it being the religious, cultural or national identity.

“By stressing bodily symbols of women's subordination, patriarchal feminine inscriptions aim to produce a distinct cultural, national and religious identity in ‘feminine’ terms that invites men to protect the ‘feminine body of the people’<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.173

<sup>136</sup> Sandhya Mulchandani, *Slim shady please stand up*, OUTLOOK, May 6, 2002, p.46.

It is this underlying principle that is aggravated during times of conflict. This is the main reason why brutalization and rape of a woman in times of war or conflict becomes a symbolic act by the males in warring/conflicting groups to insult the honour of the man/ clan/ religion that a woman belongs to.

“The whole notion of the man as the security giver of the household, and of the man being the protector of the honour and sexuality of a woman who has been raped and violated, is brought into question through the weapon of rape. Rape, sexual and bodily violation of a woman in conflict situations primarily serves as a form of communication between warring conflicting groups to convey the message - ‘I have violated what is yours! You are therefore a nobody; you are powerless; you are not a ‘man’!”<sup>137</sup>.

As Philip Peacock points out about Godhra,

“Hindutva ideologues and activists could temporarily forge a single identity and as ‘One Man’ choose to rape women; burn the pregnant woman, Kausar Bano, a Muslim; and imagine that they were robbing the ‘honour’ of One Male Muslim”<sup>138</sup>.

Evangeline Anderson calls this the “masculinization of ideology” which she explains as

“legitimization of an act, a command, a practice, or a value that defies the norms of ‘common good,’ ethics and morality . . . and attacks the vulnerable, especially those who do not abide by the expectations of the dominant”<sup>139</sup>.

She also notes that “masculinized communities can become ‘masculinized individual’ and act as ‘One Man.’”<sup>140</sup>

The rape of female prisoners of war in almost every war the world has seen<sup>141</sup> attests that the underlying fear and hatred that causes any conflict gets projected on the bodies of women<sup>142</sup>. To shame the men of a community and to illustrate their weakness, men on both sides of a conflict cause injury, sexually

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<sup>137</sup> Jessica Richard, “Women, Violence & Religion” in *Stree* (November 2006), An occasional Magazine of the All India Council of Christian Women (AICCW), p.23.

<sup>138</sup> Philip Vinod Peacock., 2004, “Women and Communal Violence”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 23. No. 3. p. 44-48, as quoted by Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.206

<sup>139</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Turning Bodies Inside Out: Contours of Womanist Theology in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010,p.204-5

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 205

<sup>141</sup> Kelly Dawn Askin, *War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunals*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997. p.334

<sup>142</sup> Maja Kirilov Eriksson, *Reproductive Freedom: In the Context of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000, p. 380-381.

assault and brutalize the women of the other community or nation<sup>143</sup> – to show their men how incapable they are of protecting their women and to shame them. On both sides of a conflict, women bear on their bodies the inadequacies, suspicions, fears and hatred of communities who perceive their communities as the “other.” Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar observes that “‘Othering the Other’ was necessary to construct a positive image for oneself . . . Once the body is feminized, once it is ‘othered,’ there is no need to fuss over the issue”<sup>144</sup>

Evangeline Anderson further observes,

“ . . . there is a process of converting that space (communal issues) into the ‘feminine, negative, hated body of the other and looking upon the same as a battlefield on which masculine ideological wars can be fought to retain the nodes and dynamics of power . . . Feminizing them means claiming the right to overpower, abuse, exploit and ‘rape’ to satiate the masculinized ego of the society”<sup>145</sup>.

National and personal power is manifested through violence against women’s bodies as they are considered as denoting all that is weak. Violence against women’s bodies takes place to satisfy sexual needs of men in some instances. But when it takes place in the context of a religious riot, its function is to satisfy a need that is non- sexual in nature i.e. the need to feel powerful, to humiliate, to assert oneself. The need for men to control, protect and dominate has, down the ages, made women internalize that they must be protected by men. When this same logic is used, during conflict, by other men to humiliate and insult their men, women are not equipped to defend themselves. The women at Godhra were punished simply for carrying the marks of religious/communal identity on their bodies.

In a male dominated society, only the strong are capable of retaliation. The weak simply submit. Women are expected to submit to the images and boundaries set by the cultural, communal and religious markers on their bodies in

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<sup>143</sup> Maja Kirilov Eriksson, *Reproductive Freedom: In the Context of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000, p. 380-381.

<sup>144</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Turning Bodies Inside Out: Contours of Womanist Theology in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.207

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208

silence<sup>146</sup>. When they break the silence and voice themselves, there are myriad ways in which women are punished and controlled – through social censure, physical abuse, emotional and psychological torture, deprivation and curtailing of space and mobility<sup>147</sup>.

## 2.2. “FEMININITY” AND ITS INSCRIPTIONS ON WOMEN’S BODIES

I have argued in one of my articles that

“‘Conditioning’ dehumanizes us without us ever knowing or recognising that it is happening, and that is why it is more evil than so-called ‘immorality.’”<sup>148</sup>

Some real stories of women I know shows how insidiously conditioning and socialization into gendered roles and behaviour related to femininity eats at the sheer essence and wholeness of a person:

### 2.2.1. Tanya

Tanya<sup>149</sup> is a five year old. She is a happy child. She has a younger brother who is three. She is told she has to ‘give’ (not ‘share’) all that she has that her brother takes a fancy to, because he is younger and she should not make him cry. At first she gives him toys she has outgrown. But soon it becomes a habit that he takes a fancy to anything that is bought for Tanya, and so she slowly begins to give him everything that is dear to her. When Tanya is 7, she now knows that nothing that is ‘hers’ is really “hers.” She also knows that she has to play quietly, behave like a girl, not talkback to elders, and that she should never voice her needs, wants or opinions.

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<sup>146</sup> Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, “Divided Homelands, Hostile Homes: Partition, Women and Homelessness” in *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, Malashri Lal & Sukrita Paul Kumar. eds. Delhi: Dorling Kindersley India Pvt. Ltd.: 2007, p. 9-14. See also Linda B. Arthur, *Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women’s Bodies in a Mennonite Community*, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4316579> [Accessed 24 Feb 2011, 3.47pm IST]

<sup>147</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Report on “Violence Against Women in South Asia”, New York: United Nations Publication, 2000. <http://www.unescap.org/esid/gad/Publication/Violence.pdf> ; See also “Multifaceted violence against women in India”, <http://hubpages.com/hub/Violence-against-women-in-India> [Accessed 24 Feb 2011, 4.50pm IST]

<sup>148</sup> Jessica Richard, “Reaching out Towards Wholeness”, in *In God’s Image* Vol. 22, No.2, June 2003. (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology) 43-48.

<sup>149</sup> Real name changed; Adapted from Jessica Richard, “Reaching out Towards Wholeness”, in *In God’s Image* Vol. 22, No.2, June 2003. (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology) 43-44.

### 2.2.2. Tabitha

Tabitha<sup>150</sup> is a bright, young graduate who has a plum job and a great career ahead of her at one of the leading banks of the nation. She is the sole breadwinner of the family, but she never makes her parents feel that in any way. She takes time and effort to do things that will please her parents. She also takes considerable efforts to make sure that they do not hear of her 'escapades' – harmless relaxations of people her age – to a disco, or a movie or a pub, lest the family 'name' and 'honour' be affected. Her father however has a habit. He regularly gets into trouble that takes the family 'name' and 'honour' to the pits, to the races, and even the courts. Tabitha and her mother bail him out of each mess. An otherwise outspoken girl, Tabitha however believes that as he is her father, there are some things that she cannot openly confront him with because she 'has to' respect him as her father. Her mother believes that for the one mistake she made of marrying this man against her parents,' family's, and religion's approval, she for the rest of her life, 'has to' put up with all that the man she married does.

### 2.2.3. Shiamala

After the first week of marriage, Shiamala's<sup>151</sup> marital home turned into a Coliseum where she was daily tortured by her husband and his widowed mother. Shiamala's dreams for a successful married life and happy home was crushed under their feet daily. For the first time she understood that the "Thalli" chain, a so-called symbol for this holy union was really very oppressive. He used to assert his right over her body by pulling out the Thalli chain and pointing to it, shouting, "See this Thalli is tied by me around your neck. You are mine. None can interfere in my affairs with you. I will beat you. I will kill you, no one can question my action, not even your parents." Brought up in a male dominated atmosphere, Shiamala knew she had to 'adjust' with this monstrous life in order to keep the prestige of her parents and family in society. She had neither the strength to cry nor the guts to ask her husband why he was beating her. After a spiritual and emotional journey of 10 years, when, Shiamala realized God's presence with her and was helped by her brother to understand that she needed to be liberated and that was the will of God for her, Shiamala finally got out of her marriage.

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<sup>150</sup> Jessica Richard, "Reaching out Towards Wholeness", in *In God's Image* Vol. 22, No.2, June 2003. (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology) 44.

<sup>151</sup> M. Shiamala Baby, "My Exodus from Oppression to Liberation", *In God's Image*, Vol. 26, No. 4, December 2007, (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology) 26

## 2.2.4. Analysis

### 2.2.4.1. Hermeneutics of Domination and Social Location

This hermeneutical step will help us look at how women's body and 'self' have been shaped reflecting our social, cultural and religious location and how these have in turn shaped our understanding of christology.

Women have internalized that 'submission' is 'natural' and even God-ordained<sup>152</sup>. Women have been socialized in many ways – cultural, religious and social – to accept submission as their destiny and as part of "being feminine"<sup>153</sup>. Women are also taught that submissiveness is a virtue and is part of the arsenal of what constitutes a "good woman"<sup>154</sup>.

"It is a wide spread notion that to be masculine is to be macho; to be in control; to be in charge; to be in power; to dominate; to take pleasure; to be respected; to be physically stronger. What then does it mean to be "feminine"? As corollary to the above ("common sense") definition of masculinity it follows that a woman must be submissive, respectful, obey decisions that are taken by the man/ elders, be in subordination, give pleasure and be physically and intellectually inferior to men"<sup>155</sup>.

Sharon Bong says,

"It is the inscription of women's bodies as lesser that is the foundational premise of son-preference endemic in Asian cultures and, contentiously in the church. This predisposes a girl child to a life of gender-based violence, in particular early marriage and sexual exploitation, and of deprivation in terms of adequate access to food, health, education, and love"<sup>156</sup>.

From childhood through puberty, there are ways in which a woman's body is taught how to behave in order to be considered feminine – In terms of posture, way of walking, position of the head, and ways of being seated. A posture that

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<sup>152</sup> Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. California: University of California Press, 1997. p.183-184.

<sup>153</sup> Carole Pateman, "Defending Prostitution: Charges against Ericsson" in D.Kelly Weisberg, *Application of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives: Sex, Violence, Work and Reproduction*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. p. 220; See also Maria J. Falco, *Feminist Interpretations of Niccolo Machiavelli*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2004. p. 326.

<sup>154</sup> Gillian Cloke, *This female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350-450*. London: Routledge, 1995. p.216

<sup>155</sup> Jessica Richard, "Women, Violence & Religion" in *Stree* (November 2006), An occasional Magazine of the All India Council of Christian Women (AICCW), Nagpur: AICCW, p.22.

<sup>156</sup> Sharon A. Bong, "The Suffering Christ and the Asian Body" in Kwok Pui-lan. ed. *Hope Abundant – Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 2010, p.188.

doesn't call attention to itself, small mincing steps, bowed head and sitting with legs together and never apart – these are ingrained in a girl child, a youngster and a grown woman as being the feminine and cultured behaviour in order to be socially acceptable as female. The sacrificial attitude of giving away all that is hers and being unquestioning of lines of control and authority in the family is also ingrained into a girl child and woman.

Femininity is constructed in cultural and religious terms as “docile feminine bodies and subservient feminine selves.”<sup>157</sup> Most of our religious traditions also legitimize that the submission of a woman is necessary for the happiness and well-being of a family and a household. In this task the woman is expected to submit and to “suffer” any extent of abuse in order to keep the marriage even though love and trust no longer form the basis of the relationship. A Christian woman cannot see ‘divorce’ as an option because the Christian church asserts that a marriage should not be broken. The freedom to move out of an oppressive marriage is not open to a Christian woman as when the woman would be better off separated than yoked to domestic violence, emotional and mental torture and psychological trauma, this is not a choice a Christian woman can opt for because of the stigma and religious disapproval stamped on it.<sup>158</sup> In such cases the Christian faith forces married women to accept their state of exploitation by hallowing the marriage relationship as a “sacrament”<sup>159</sup>. Roja Singh notes through a study of Dalit<sup>160</sup> woman writer Bama's writings, that,

“Religion also domesticated the Dalit woman through bodily discipline. Women are not expected to vocally express their battered emotions caused by physical and emotional

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<sup>157</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Introduction* to issue on *Violence against Women*, CONCILIUM, London: SCM Press, 1994/1, p.x

<sup>158</sup> Al Miles, *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. p.62; See also pp. 52-81; Also Aimee K. Cassiday-Shaw, *Family Abuse and the Bible*, New York: The Hawthorn Press, 2002. p.55

<sup>159</sup> Roja Singh, “Bama's Critical-Constructive Narratives: Interweaving Resisting Visible Bodies and Emancipatory Audacious Voice as TEXTure for Dalit Women's Freedom” in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.224-25

<sup>160</sup> *Dalit*, also called Outcaste, refers to a group of people traditionally regarded as of Untouchables and as the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups and sub-caste groups all over South Asia, and speak various languages. There is still discrimination and prejudice against Dalits in South Asia despite significant steps taken by government to provide opportunities in jobs and education.



humiliation. Yelling and crying were frowned upon while Catechism instilled modesty, silence and moderation as ideals to be emulated by the women. Such church-enforced constrictions silence the Dalit woman's expression of her true self. Religious sanctions of bodily comportment deprive her of the means to live out her joys and pains."<sup>161</sup>

Women who bear on their bodies the markers of cultural, communal and religious identity as well as that of the protracted gender identity of "femininity" are manipulated to believe that all of this being inscribed on their bodies makes them virtuous. We are somehow expected to feel more worthy than we deserve to be because the honour of clan, caste, community rests on us. We are also expected to find our own honour and salvation in carrying these inscriptions— of caste, creed and gender – on our bodies willingly in the best way we can. In essence women are expected to be "willing victims" who accept their "learned helplessness." This conditioning when coupled with the Indian ethos that believes in fate and karma, means that women internalize that they are born to suffer, that they deserve to suffer and that suffering is their destiny or *thalaiezhuthu (Tamil)* i.e. "what is written on our foreheads by the gods." "What the body receives as punishment for no crime, the self silently appropriates in life."<sup>162</sup>

The woman who patiently endures and willingly bears all the inscriptions on her body; is docile, submissive and long suffering, is held up as the ideal woman<sup>163</sup>. The forms of suffering women learn to accept under the guise of it being the ideal they should strive for are many. From the blatant physical assault, abuse and rape to the silent giving up of all their dreams "for the good of the family"<sup>164</sup> and for "love"; from the censure of the society if they deviate<sup>165</sup> from

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<sup>161</sup> Roja Singh, "Bama's Critical-Constructive Narratives: Interweaving Resisting Visible Bodies and Emancipatory Audacious Voice as TEXTure for Dalit Women's Freedom" in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010 p.225

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p224

<sup>163</sup> Perry Johansson, "Selling the 'Modern Woman': Consumer Culture and Chinese Gender Politics", in Shoma Munshi (ed), *Images of the 'modern woman' in Asia: global media, local meanings*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001. p.109.

<sup>164</sup> Myra Marx Ferree "The View from Below: Women's Employment and Gender Equality in Working Class Families", in Beth B. Hess, Marvin B. Sussman (eds) *Women and the family: Two Decades of Change*. New York: Haworth Press, 1984. p. 57-77.

<sup>165</sup> Valerie Hudson, Alma Don Sorenson, "Women in the World", Valerie Hudson, Alma Don Sorenson, eds. *Women in Eternity, Women in Zion*. Springville: Cedar Fort Inc, 2004. p,118.

even one of the markers they are called to bear<sup>166</sup>, to the emotional and mental torture of a suspicious husband and in-laws<sup>167</sup> – there are many forms of suffering that women “learn to accept.” They also accept that this is “the way things are meant to be”; that this is how God meant women to be<sup>168</sup>; and that they cannot help themselves out of such a situation because their “femininity” implies helplessness and that they should “be protected”<sup>169</sup>. Women imbibe that we should “be protected” because we are “weak” and that we are not capable of protecting ourselves<sup>170</sup>. Even though the honour of our communities is seen as resting on the protection of our bodies from violation, yet when our bodies are violated, women are sometimes seen as the cause for their own violation. The blaming of the “victim”<sup>171</sup> who is actually the perpetrated and not the perpetrator of the crime is the most warped and widely accepted logic in our societies.

The theology of suffering in common sense theological and christological discourse has had both causal and resultant effects in the legitimization of women’s suffering. Stress on teachings like the father chastises and disciplines for our good, that servants must be subordinate to even their unjust masters and that this kind of suffering is what we are called to, are teachings that have been misused to keep women from questioning their victimization<sup>172</sup>. It has also been used to hold up suffering not just as virtuous, but even as salvific. That Christ suffered bodily pain and torture, shed blood on the cross for the sake of others and that this makes his suffering salvific<sup>173</sup> is a basic tenet that is oppressive in

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<sup>166</sup> Meg Lota Brown, Kari Boyd McBride (eds) *Women's roles in the Renaissance* West Port, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group: 2005. p.80-81, 83.

<sup>167</sup> M. Shiamala Baby, “My Exodus from Oppression to Liberation”, *In God's Image*, Vol. 26, No. 4, December 2007 (Kuala Lumpur: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology) 26

<sup>168</sup> Al Miles, *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. p.62; See also pp. 52-81; See also Aimee K. Cassiday-Shaw, *Family Abuse and the Bible*, New York: The Hawthorn Press, 2002. p.55

<sup>169</sup> Karin Wurst, “Gender and Identity in Lessing’s Dramas”, in Karin Barbara Fischer, Thomas C. Fox , *A Companion to the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, New York: Camden House, 2005, p.245

<sup>170</sup> Herb Goldberg, *The New Male Female Relationship*, Gretna: Wellness Institute Inc, 1983. p.19-28.

<sup>171</sup> Marian Meyers, *News Coverage of Violence Against Women: Engendering Blame*, California: Sage Publications, 1997. p.61-68; See also Rosemarie Skaine, *Power and gender: issues in sexual dominance and harassment*, North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc Publishers: 1996. p.91-99

<sup>172</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995. p. 105-106.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p. 106

terms of what it means for women who suffer many inscriptions on their bodies for the sake of others – for family, community, nation and religion. It is a trap that leaves the suffering woman no windows of hope to get out of her oppressive situation. She is forced to accept that her suffering is what she deserves and that if she learns to bear it well, that will be her salvation. The woman's body is seen as an "object" – to be inscribed and marked upon with markers of communal, national and religious identity, to be docile, submissive, to be violated and trespassed by and for the sake of others. This coupled with the notion of femininity that is seen as synonymous with "being protected" causes women to seek and wait for a "protector" or a "Saviour" outside of themselves who will "allow" them to be saved or be the mode through whom they will "be saved" from all that binds and controls them. The endemic ideology of suffering breeds dependence and begets the alienation of a woman's body and self from any power to be self-empowering.

### **2.2.5. Conclusion**

That the woman's body becomes the site for marking religious, cultural, communal and gender identity has been revealed in the analysis of this Chapter. Underlying all of these markings is a tendency to own, objectify, control and subordinate the woman's body. Holding all of this together is also the thread of 'submission-suffering' that is seen as deserved, virtuous and salvific for a woman. In the next chapter I will try to look at instances in which women have resisted such identities and tendencies to objectify, shame and subordinate women's bodies. The next chapter will try to analyse if the motif of resistance makes it possible for women to challenge powers, forces and structures that try to oppress them and keep them in subordination.

## CHAPTER 3: RECONSTRUCTING BODIES AS RESISTING AND PROTESTING BODIES

### 3.1. Introduction

Chapter two has shown us the ways in which a woman's body is inscribed upon and gendered, and the way in which she forms and understands notions of femininity and how all of this is socially constructed and internalized.

A woman has to unlearn this conditioning and learn anew the method of being reflexively critical in order to re-define her own body. In doing so she learns to become a 'subject-self' whose knowledge of her body can be used as an instrument for resistance, protest and transformation.

This chapter will use a fictional short story titled "Draupadi" by an Indian writer Mahasweta Devi, and two real life stories that happened/continue to happen in India for analysis. One is the story of the epic fast unto death undertaken by Irom Sharmila Channu, a woman from Manipur in NEI since 2000 till date. The second story is the naked protest of Manipuri women in NEI in 2004. These three stories poignantly manifest how body can function as an unarmed instrument of resistance against brutality and the inscriptions of gender and also how the body can function as a tool of peaceful protest for a just cause resisting injustice.

### 3.2. DRAUPADI – A SHORT STORY BY MAHASWETA DEVI<sup>174</sup>

In 1967 in West Bengal there was a successful peasant rebellion in the northern part of West Bengal. This story is set in the background of this naxal movement. Draupadi Mehjen and her husband Dulna Mehjen are part of this movement against landlords, corrupt police and army officials. Draupadi is called Dopdi in this story as she is a tribal woman who cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name, Draupadi. Dulna and Dopdi along with others in the movement are on the run from the army that is combing the area to find them for the murder of a landlord and for the burning of police stations. The army official tasked with apprehending them is called Senanayak and he has spent some years

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<sup>174</sup> Summarised from the rendition of Mahasweta Devi's story by Gayatri Spivak in Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories* – Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Calcutta: Seagull Boks, 2002. p. 19-38.

analysing the guerrilla warfare of this group that Dopdi belonged to and scheming ways to apprehend them. While on the run in the forest, Dulna is shot by the army who find him drinking water from a river. Senanayak leaves Dulna's corpse as bait to lure Dopdi. But Dopdi is not lured. She and the other fugitives are still on the run. Dopdi on her return to the forest camp from the town where she'd gone to collect information about the army activities from her informant, is trapped and captured by the army. She is taken to the army camp and questioned. When Senanayak's dinner time approaches he leaves after saying, "Make her. Do the needful"

When she regains consciousness, Draupadi Mehjen felt her arms and legs tied to four posts. Her own blood stuck under her ass and waist. Her vagina is bleeding. Shaming her, a tear trickles down. She looks down at herself and sees her breasts and understands that she has been "made up" right. Her breasts were bitten raw, the nipples torn. She tries to remember how many had "made her" but only remembers that after counting seven rapists she had passed out. But it doesn't stop. A guard leers at her and the process of "making her" starts over again - All night she is a compelled, spread-eagled still body.

In the morning a guard asks her to wash up and go to Senanayak's tent and gives her a cloth to cover herself. She pushes away the water and tears the cloth. She goes out of the tent as she was to meet Senanayak. She walks toward him, naked in the bright sunlight with her head held high. The nervous guards trail behind. She stands before Senanayak naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts two wounds. She comes closer. Stands with hands on her hips, laughs and says, "The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me, don't you want to see how they made me?"

He asks, "where are her clothes" and the guard answers "Won't put them on sir." Draupadi's black body comes even closer. She shakes with an indomitable laughter that he cannot understand. Her lips bleed as she laughs. She asks in a voice that is as terrifying and sharp, "What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" She spits a bloody gob at him and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, 'kounter' me, come on, 'kounter' me. Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

### **3.3. Analysis**

#### **3.3.1. Hermeneutics of Domination; social location & Suspicion**

By using the hermeneutics of domination and social location which warns us not to privilege “cultural femininity,” this analysis will try to challenge this ideology of “femininity” as a hermeneutical framework from which to interpret our realities. A hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to challenge the ideologies inherent in religious texts as well as in socio-cultural realities. It seeks to expose the ideological functions in the interest of domination. In doing so, such a hermeneutics of suspicion challenges the structures of domination contained in commonsense acceptance of such ideologies. Both these hermeneutical threads will be used in this analysis.

Economics, class, and in Dopdi’s case, her gender – all these structures of domination intersect in the context Dulna and Dopdi lived in. Their resorting to violent means to show their anger and seek justice and dignity for themselves shows the extent of their desperation and evidences the complete break down of existing structural options for redressal. Their targeting of police stations was a message that their movement was sending to those in power and those who had plans to exploit them because the law was on their side. Money lenders, landlords, grain brokers, anonymous brothel keepers and ex-informants were terrified because the law that they’d bought over to protect them was now itself vulnerable to attacks. This was the power of the movement Dopdi and Dulna belonged to. The message was clear: though they may be hungry and naked, they were still defiant and irrepressible.

Dopdi was an illiterate tribal woman, a field hand. Why was it so essential for the Army Chief Senanayak to “apprehend” Dopdi. Though Dopdi practiced what the Army Handbook called repulsive type of fighting, the truth which Senanayak well knew was that she was a veteran fighter. She could keep many fugitives alive with her knowledge of the forest. Dopdi and Dulna had made a choice when they fled after the murder of a landlord. They could have settled down and had a family and children and been enslaved to the landlords or they could choose not to have a family and children but instead fight against the

unjust landlords, money lenders and police and see that they were wiped out. Dulna and Dopdi had chosen the latter as the best way to live their lives.

We must note that this choice to join the struggle and fight did not have consequences of the same proportion for everyone who made that choice. Dulna or Arijit (one of Dopdi's comrades) if caught would have faced torture but not necessarily of a sexual nature but for Dopdi that was the first resort after brief polite questioning. The consequences of the choice was different in the degree, but in a sense the common factor was that all of them – Dulna, Arijit and Dopdi – believed that the battle they were fighting was necessary and important so that those around them could live with dignity.

### **3.3.2. Creative imagination**

Schüssler Fiorenza believes that as humans we have the ability to enter into the shoes of others and their struggles. It is this ability that helps us see history in a different light, imagine and believe in change and makes us determined to seek alternatives to existing situations of domination. This hermeneutical step of creative imagination helps us fill the gaps and make sense of a text for us.

Dopdi did not look for a male Saviour or male comrade to come to her rescue. All her comrade Arijit's tutoring of what they must do if caught becomes a zero as he could not have tutored her for what she went through. In the part of the story where she comes through as showing the most "subjecthood" is when she has to deal with what has happened to her – as it can only happen to a woman in a woman's body. It is here she becomes most powerful - her body is a tool, a weapon, she becomes the unarmed target that frightens the one who is armed.

### **3.3.3. Re-membering and reconstruction**

In this hermeneutical step the memory of women's victimization, struggle and accomplishments are seen as ways to make visible and audible the hegemony and kyriarchal biases of the historical times and contexts inscribed in the texts/stories studied. This hermeneutical step will help relocate the kyriarchal

dynamic of the text and make visible and audible the arguments of the subordinated and marginalized in the story.

Rape is not just about sexual gratification, it is in essence about power and an expression of aggression<sup>175</sup>. Losing one's hymen before it is "legitimately" perforated by a partner in legitimate marriage is considered unacceptable in Indian culture<sup>176</sup>. Women are socialized to internalize this. Rape victims are consequently primarily seen as "victims". The shame and stigma surrounding rape is often internalized by the raped. It is seen as the end of a woman's life<sup>177</sup>.

For Dopdi, it is not that she did not feel pain and fear after her rape – her few tears when she becomes conscious shames her – because she felt they were a sign that she'd given in to her fear. But her fear does not define her reaction to her rape. For Dopdi her horizons were different. She had always known that this could happen – though that couldn't have necessarily prepared her for the actual event in any way. She however refused to be shamed by it. She refused to see herself as a victim. She did not let rape break her body or spirit. She believed her body was as perfect after the rape as it was before it. Her resistance to give in to the usual internalizations that she must be ashamed helped her transform her state of victimhood.

For her the rape makes her body a weapon – she was unarmed yet Senanayak was afraid of her naked body that refused to be clothed; She becomes the aggressor – refusing to be clothed; refusing to give her perpetrators the power over her that they hoped they would have over a woman who had been raped all night. She challenges the very core of their masculine (gendered) identities by saying not one of them was a man that she should feel ashamed.

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<sup>175</sup> Robert N. Golden, Fred L. Peterson, Ph.D., Kathryn Hilgenkamp, Judith Harper, Elizabeth Boskey. eds. *The Truth about Rape*, New York: Facts on File Publishing, 2010. p. 8 -10.

<sup>176</sup> This is revealed in the "commonsense" understanding of one of the characters in a novel who warns her daughter against going out at night: See Anita Nair *Ladies Coupe*, India: Penguin Books, 2001. p.52

<sup>177</sup> Robert N. Golden, Fred L. Peterson, Ph.D., Kathryn Hilgenkamp, Judith Harper, Elizabeth Boskey eds. *The Truth about Rape*, New York: Facts on File Publishing, 2010. p.1-4



### 3.3.4. Transformation

From the time she and Dulna made their choice to fight for an end to oppression rather than settle down with a family, Dopdi knew she would one day be “kountered<sup>178</sup>” (or “encountered”).

However, this did not mean she would give up and “voluntarily” surrender. She was hunted, found, apprehended, raped and they hoped, broken. When Dopdi was already prepared to be “kountered,” attempting to break her body was nothing to her in comparison. Even after she is apprehended and “made up,” she refuses to accede defeat by giving up her cause and her comrades. Dopdi knew that even if she was killed, the struggle will go on – as Dulna had said – one day the money lenders, landlords and corrupt laws and law enforcers would end, if her comrades could go on. She made sure that the struggle will go on – as soon as she was captured, she had signaled her friends so they understood they must move to the next plan.

Her resistance to fall into the “‘victim, martyr’ who voluntarily dies for others” trap, is what marks Dopdi as a hermeneutical tool for encountering christology on a different level. She had a cause to fight for, but she did not voluntarily give herself up – she was taken, apprehended, raped; As was Christ – he was hunted, betrayed, found, tortured and murdered on the cross . Dopdi did not go and spread-eagle herself voluntarily and ask to be raped by more men than she could count just because this was for a cause. Just as Jesus did not go and climb on to the cross to happily die for others. He questioned the excesses of his times, he fought for the poor and challenged the powers of his time. For this he was tried, tortured, murdered by being nailed to a cross.

Dopdi refuses to let her body be clothed again. She transforms the definition of a “man” and masculinity. She asks,

“Are you a man? You can strip me but how can you clothe me again?”<sup>179</sup>

She questions the notion of masculinity that sees the man as protector and provider who makes provision so that a woman can be clothed, covered and

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<sup>178</sup> Mahasweta Devi explains this as an abbreviation for “killed by police in an encounter”

<sup>179</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories – Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002. p. 36

protected. She also questions his power when she says that they as men could easily strip her, but if she chose not to be clothed again, they could do nothing about it. She destroys the authority of the Army Chief when she challenges him to look at “the object of your search” and asks why he doesn’t want to see how his orders for her to be “made up” have been carried through.

Though raped – she is not the one ashamed. Though “made up” - she is not the one broken. Though bleeding and torn – she is not the one frightened. The armed apprehenders do not call the shots; the rapists are not in power. She is.

### **3.3.5. Conclusion**

Body here is a site of resistance though it may appear to be physically and psychologically torn. Body is a weapon of resistance and protest. Why could an illiterate tribal woman use her body this way? What was her strength?

She had a cause that lay beyond gendered horizons and stereotypical roles. She knew her cause and her struggle would go on beyond her and without her. Yet she also knew the significance of her part in history to make the struggle go on. There is a similarity here between Draupadi’s motivation for struggle, her understanding of her resistance and what Jesus did. Jesus resisted the powers and principalities of injustice during his time. Just as Jesus’ body was torn and tortured and killed, yet his struggle went on beyond him, because it was a struggle against injustice and powers and principalities, Draupadi was conscious that her struggle too will go on.

### **3.4. IROM SHARMILA CHANU<sup>180</sup>**

A frail, fair woman sits on a hospital bed, and says in a halting, haunting voice. “It is my bounden duty to make my voice heard in the most reasonable and peaceful way.”

For young Irom Sharmila, things came to a head on November 2, 2000. A day earlier, an insurgent group had bombed an Army column. Enraged, the 8<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles retaliated by gunning down ten innocent civilians at a bus-stand in Malom. The local papers published pictures of the bodies the next day, including one of a 62-year old

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<sup>180</sup> The entire story is paraphrased and abbreviated from an account of Irom’s struggle by Shoma Chaudhury, “Irom and the Iron in India’s Soul”, *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 6, Issue 48, December 05, 2009

woman, Leisangbam Ibetomi, and 18-year old Sinam Chandramani, a 1988 National Child Bravery Award winner.

Extraordinarily stirred, on November 4, 2000, Irom (then 28) began her fast protesting the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)(AFSPA) that has been imposed in Manipur and most of the Northeast since 1980. The AFSPA allows the Army to use force, shoot, or arrest anyone without warrant, on the mere suspicion that someone has committed or was about to commit a cognizable offence. The Act further prohibits any legal or judicial proceeding against Army personnel without the previous sanction of the Central Government of India. Irom says, "I was shocked by the dead bodies of Malom on the front page, I was on my way to a peace rally but I realized there was no means to stop further violations by the armed forces. So I decided to fast."

For six years, Sharmila was under arrest, isolated in a single room in JN Hospital in Imphal, Manipur, and force fed through a nose tube. Each time she was released, she would yank the tube out of her nose and continue her fast. Three days later, on the verge of death, she would be arrested again for attempting suicide. And the cycle would begin again. But six years of jail and fasting and forced nasal feeds had yielded little in Manipur. The war needed to be shifted to Delhi.

Singhajit, her brother, managed to smuggle Sharmila out of Manipur with the help of two activist friends. Arriving in Delhi on October 3, 2006, brother and sister camped in Jantar Mantar for three days. The media responded with cynical disinterest. Then the State swooped down in a midnight raid and arrested her for attempting suicide and whisked her off to AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences). She wrote three passionate letters to the Prime Minister, President, and Home Minister. She got no answer.

"We are in the middle of the battle now," says her brother Singhajit . "We have to face trouble, we have to fight to the end even if it means my sister's death. But if she had told me before she began, I would never have let her start on this fast. I would never have let her do this to her body. We had to learn so much first. How to talk; how to negotiate – we knew nothing. We were just poor people."

She is called Menghaobi, "The Fair One" by the people of Manipur. Youngest daughter of an illiterate Grade IV worker in a veterinary hospital in Imphal, Irom was always a solitary child, the backbencher, the listener.

Eight siblings had come before her. By the time she was born, her mother Irom Shakhi, 44, was dry. As dusk fell Irom used to cry in hunger. Her mother Shakhi had to tend to their tiny provision store, so her brother Singhajit would cradle his baby sister in his arms and take her to any mother he could find to suckle her. "She has always had

extraordinary will. Maybe that is what made her different,” Singhajit says. “Maybe this is her service to all her mothers.”

On November 4, 2000, Sharmila had sought her mother, Irom Shakhi’s blessing. “You will win your goal,” Shakhi had said, then stoically turned away. Since then, though Sharmila has been incarcerated in Imphal within walking distance of her mother, the two have never met. “I have decided that until her wish is fulfilled, I won’t meet her because that will weaken her resolve . . . If we don’t get food, how we toss and turn in bed, unable to sleep. With the little fluid they inject into her, how hard must her days and nights be . . . If this Act could just be removed even for five days, I would feed her rice water spoon by spoon. After that, even if she dies, we will be content, for my Sharmila will have fulfilled her wish.” When asked how hard it is for Irom not to meet her mother she says, “Not very hard,” and pauses. “Because, how shall I explain it, we all come here with a task to do. And we come here alone.”

Irom Sharmila now 38, has not eaten anything, or drunk a single drop of water for ten years. Ten years! She has been forcibly kept alive by a drip thrust down her nose by the Indian State. She cleans her teeth with dry cotton and her lips with dry spirit so she will not sully her fast. Her body is wasted inside. Her menstrual cycles have stopped. Yet she is resolute. Whenever she can, she removes the tube from her nose.

She practices four to five hours of Yoga a day – self-taught – “to help maintain the balance between my body and mind.” But Sharmila never concedes any bodily discomfort. “I am normal. I am normal,” she smiles. “I am not inflicting anything on my body. It is not a punishment. It is my bounden duty. I don’t know what lies in my future; that is God’s will. I have only learnt from my experience that punctuality, discipline and great enthusiasm can make you achieve a lot.”

As Sharmila enters the tenth year of her fast, she still lies incarcerated like some petty criminal in a filthy room in an Imphal hospital. The State allows her no casual visitors, except occasionally, her brother – even though there is no legal rationale for this. Yet, her great – almost inhuman – hope and optimism continues undiminished. Her plea is simple: repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. It is unworthy of the idea of the Indian State the founding fathers bequeathed us. It is anti-human.

But unfortunately, most of India continues to be oblivious of the young woman who responded to extreme violence with extreme peace. It is a parable for our times. A story of Irom Sharmila is a story of extraordinariness. Extraordinary will. Extraordinary simplicity. Extraordinary hope.

### 3.5. MANIPUR WOMEN'S PROTEST<sup>181</sup>

Irom Sharmila's historic *satyagraha*<sup>182</sup> had been on for four years when on July 10, 2004, the Assam Rifles arrested Thangjam Manorama Devi, a 32-year old woman, allegedly a member of the banned People's Liberation Army. Her body was found dumped in Imphal a day later, marked with terrible signs of torture and rape.

Five days later, on July 15, 2004, pushing the boundaries of human expression, 30 ordinary women, ordinary mothers and grand mothers who eked out a hard life, demonstrated naked in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters at Kangla Fort. They stripped, let loose their hair and walked through the capital city, Imphal, to the Army headquarters. "Indian Army, rape us too," their banners screamed. The State responded by jailing all of them for three months.

Every commission set up by the government since then has added to these injuries. The report of the Justice Upendra Commission, instituted after the Manorama killing, was never made public. In November 2004, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up the Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee to review the AFSPA. Its recommendations came in a dangerously forked tongue. While it suggested the repeal of the AFSPA, it also suggested transferring its most draconian powers to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Every official response is marked with this determination to be uncreative. The then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee had rejected the withdrawal or significant dilution of the Act on the grounds that "it is not possible for the armed forces to function" in "disturbed areas" without such powers.

Yet six years later (2010), nothing has changed. After the boundless, despairing anger of the 'Manorama Mothers,' the government did roll back the AFSPA from some districts of Imphal city. But the virus has transmitted itself elsewhere. Today, the Manipur police commandoes have taken off where the army left off: the brutal provisions of AFSPA have become accepted State culture: "the culture of impunity."

### 3.6. Analysis

#### 3.6.1. Domination and social location

A critical feminist Systemic analytic for liberation does not only deal with women's experience vis-à-vis a particular theological formulation and its interpretation. It must reflect on "how social, cultural and religious location has shaped our

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<sup>181</sup> Shoma Chaudhury, "Irom and the Iron in India's Soul" *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 6, Issue 48, December 05, 2009 [Accessed 15 Nov 2010]

<sup>182</sup> A philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance developed by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (also known as "Mahatma" Gandhi) of India.

experience”<sup>183</sup> of our body. This hermeneutical step does not only focus on exposing the ideological, religious-theological, functions of biblical texts, but also identifies contemporary situations of domination. This hermeneutical step will help us look at how women’s body and ‘self’ have been critically and reflexively shaped as a challenge to social, cultural and religious location.

The AFSPA has been imposed in Manipur and most of the other North Eastern states of India namely, Nagaland and Mizoram, since 1980. The powers of the act have been explained in the story above. No one can question or investigate the excesses of the Army, not even the State government. The purported purpose of this act is “to maintain order” but it has become one of the most important factors that have caused resentment, alienation and agitations in Manipur and the rest of NEI for many decades. The violations of basic rights under this act have been documented by many human rights groups.

The people of NEI hardly look “Indian” in the way most of the world perceives an “Indian” to look. They are of Mongoloid<sup>184</sup> stock (as opposed to the Dravidian and Aryan stock from which most of the rest of India are descended from racially) and are often asked if they are from some other Southeast Asian country or from China or Japan. If those from the rest of India go to NEI they will be surprised to be asked if they were from “India” or the “mainland,” as most of those in NEI don’t perceive themselves to be an inherent part of India<sup>185</sup>. The rest of India hardly knows what is happening in NEI. They don’t know partly because the media doesn’t report on this as widely as they would the Mumbai attacks by terrorists. So we hear nothing about the tumultuous build-up of many riots and demonstrations following the Manorama killing or the Malom killings. Even the naked protest of Manipuri women would have gone unnoticed by the “mainland” or “Indian” people had it not been so dramatic.

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<sup>183</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.172

<sup>184</sup> A word used to describe people of East Asian and North Asian origin. Its use originated from a variation of the word *Mongol*, a people who are considered one of its main proto-populations.

<sup>185</sup> Kalpana Sharma. “Manipuri Women’s Dramatic protest” <http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-sharma250704.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov 2010, 12.05pm IST]

### 3.6.2. Hermeneutics of suspicion

A hermeneutics of suspicion does not seek simply to peel layers or disguises, which the structures of oppression and domination wear, in order to arrive at a pure reality<sup>186</sup>. The layers themselves or the language, laws and methods used to express such domination are itself a tool that constructs reality in a certain way<sup>187</sup> and also makes them into, what has been explained earlier, “common sense understandings.” A hermeneutics of suspicion analyses what are its ideological functions in the interest of domination<sup>188</sup> and helps challenge the contexts<sup>189</sup> of domination contained in such texts/stories and in contemporary real life situations as well.

The entire NEI region has witnessed what is called “low-intensity-warfare” for many decades<sup>190</sup>. There are various political, cultural-ethnic and geo-political and economic sociological reasons that underlie the armed insurgency in NEI<sup>191</sup>. On one hand there is the ideological, cultural and ethnic conflict between the three major ethnic groups in Manipur and insurgent groups associated with each ethnic group, each with their own agenda for a separate State/region for themselves<sup>192</sup>. On the other hand Manipur has been involved in anti-State (Indian State) insurgency for decades<sup>193</sup>. Militant insurgents demanding separate statehood see the Indian State as the common enemy<sup>194</sup>. Shootouts, abductions, pitched battles with the army, the neighbouring Nagas and security forces are common.

It is in this context of violent activities by various insurgent groups that the State was declared a “disturbed area” as armed forces was seen as necessary

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<sup>186</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.175

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p.176

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. p.176

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. p.176

<sup>190</sup> Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, Delhi: Sage Publication India, 2005, p. 221-255.

<sup>191</sup> Ved Prakash, *Encyclopedia of North-East India*, Vol. 1, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 200, p. 413-494.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. p. 413-494.

<sup>193</sup> Sushanta Talukdar, “Manipur on Fire”, *The Hindu*, Vol. 21 Iss:18 URL:

<http://www.flonnet.com/fl2118/stories/20040910007400400.htm> [Accessed 9 Sep 2010 12.17pm IST]

<sup>194</sup> Ved Prakash, *Terrorism in India's North East: A Gathering Storm*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2008, p. 27-83.

“to aid civil power.” In 1958 when the Union Home Minister introduced the law in the Indian Parliament, he assured that the Act would be in operation for a mere 6 months. 52 years since, the law is still in operation in states like Manipur. The common people are the victims caught in the cross currents between insurgent groups, between insurgents and armed forces and between vested political interests in their State leadership as well as external help from neighbouring countries that help keep the armed insurgency going<sup>195</sup>. There is no normalcy, no options for life and livelihood, the economy is in shambles, the infrastructure for education<sup>196</sup> and employment minimal. Drug trafficking and its related problems add to the mix<sup>197</sup>. There is a total denial of a chance for common people to live normal and peaceful lives in safety and dignity<sup>198</sup>. Children disappear, women are raped, innocent civilians are mowed down in encounters<sup>199</sup> and in cross fire. The purpose of the AFSPA to help the civil power has not been served. All other factors aiding conflict in the area notwithstanding, the AFSPA has come to be seen by the people of NEI as a symbol of the oppressive power of the Indian State<sup>200</sup> that denies them the space to articulate their identities and has failed to create the space for a peace process to happen constructively.

### 3.6.3. Critical evaluation

A hermeneutics of evaluation helps us explore the values and visions buried in some alternatives to the biblical text. A hermeneutics of evaluation accepts the authority only of those texts and formulations that have passed through a critical hermeneutics of suspicion and have been found to be emancipatory in function.

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<sup>195</sup> R. Upadhyay, “Manipur – In a strange whirlpool of Cross-Current Insurgency. Paper no. 1210, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers13/paper1210.html> [Accessed 24 Feb 2011 5.10pm IST]

<sup>196</sup> Biloris Lyndem & Utpal Kumar De eds. *Education in North East India: Experience and Challenges*, Shillong: North East India Council for Social Science Research, 2004, p. 10-12

<sup>197</sup> R. Upadhyay, “Manipur – In a strange whirlpool of Cross-Current Insurgency. Paper no. 1210, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers13/paper1210.html> [Accessed 24 Feb 2011 5.10pm IST]

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Kaka D. Iralu, “A Salute to Irom Sharmila in the context of AFSPA”, [http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news\\_section.opinions.Opinion\\_on\\_Killing\\_of\\_Manorama.A\\_salute\\_to\\_Irom\\_Sharmila](http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.opinions.Opinion_on_Killing_of_Manorama.A_salute_to_Irom_Sharmila) [Accessed 24 Feb 2011, 5.15pm IST] See also Shoma Chaudhury, “Irom and the Iron in India’s Soul” *Teheika Magazine*, Vol 6, Issue 48, December 05, 2009 [Accessed 15 Nov 2010]

<sup>200</sup> Kalpana Sharma, “Manipuri Women’s Dramatic Protest”, <http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-sharma250704.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov 2010, 12.05 pm IST]



This hermeneutical step will be used to analyse both Irom's story and the story of the naked protest by Manipuri women.

"Irom's is an inspired unilateral act of leadership. An act that intuits the moral heart of a question and proceeds to do what is right – without precondition. Irom's epic fast is such an act. It reaffirms the idea of a just and civilized society. It refuses to be brutalized in the face of grave and relentless brutality."<sup>201</sup>

"Irom is not a front for any large, coordinated political movement. Irom's *satyagraha* was not an intellectual construct. It was a deep human response to the cycle of death and violence she saw around her – almost a spiritual intuition."<sup>202</sup>

Irom Sharmila's fast unto death is a single act that has tested the State and central powers and their capacity for apathy.

Irom saw violence. She saw brutality. She felt a peace rally would be meaningless and that she personally had to do something to change the situation. So she used the only means she had to try to stop further violations by the armed forces against innocent people. For Irom, a poor, simple woman, her body is her only resource. "When asked why she chose to fast and inflict this type of punishment on her body, Irom replied, '*It is the only means I have*'"<sup>203</sup>; she does not see the fast as punishing her body but as her bounden duty.

When asked what would be her one wish if she was given a wish, she clearly says "we must have the right to self-determination as rational beings"<sup>204</sup>. So the focus of her struggle is that the Indian army and the Indian government should do everything possible to create the space in which the people of NEI could determine for themselves what they wanted; that the Indian government not dictate what they should want and force them to accept the kind of unnatural divisions that were imposed on them in the post independence period without thought for cultural and ethnic harmony. And one of the key elements that Irom

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<sup>201</sup> Shoma Chaudhury, "Irom and the Iron in India's Soul" *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 6, Issue 48, December 05, 2009 [Accessed 15 Nov 2010]

<sup>202</sup> Ibid

<sup>203</sup> "Irom's Iron in the soul", Interview of Irom by film maker Kavita Joshi, *Tehelka Magazine*, 9 November 2010 [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main23asp?filename=Cr032506\\_Irom's\\_iron\\_in\\_the\\_soul.htm](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main23asp?filename=Cr032506_Irom's_iron_in_the_soul.htm) [Accessed 9 Nov 2010]

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

and the people of Manipur and NEI want to be removed so that such a space can be created is the repeal of the AFSPA.

Amidst a conflict that is multi-layered and has a history of many decades, what motivated Irom to take such a decision and use such a means of protest and think that it really might work? A clue to this may lie in what her brother Singhajit says about her childhood. She had been suckled by any mother who was available and he feels her fast is probably her tribute to all her mothers. In an interview Irom, when asked why she started this fast, says that she is doing it “for the sake of my motherland.”

There is a stereo-type broken here in that mother is seen as plural in Irom’s story. In Manipur this culture is strong. In the Manipuri women’s naked protest too, we must see it in the background of this strong culture wherein

“individual mothers address the community as social mothers thus enlarging the space of tradition-specific roles.”<sup>205</sup>

Many news reports of the Manipuri women’s naked protests called them the “*Manorama Mothers*.”

The Manorama Mothers were pushed to the limits of desperation – they had tried many forms of protests to make themselves heard, but they had not been heard. When Manorama was raped and killed, the mothers of Manipur valley decided that they must invent new ways of speaking for themselves<sup>206</sup>. They chose to use their bodies to speak, to send a message to their aggressors. Their bodies became their way of telling a repressive State that they cannot separate their beings and identities from their bodies and so though they may be raped and killed Manorama to show that they had destroyed her being and identity, she was reproduced here in front of the very eyes of the perpetrators and aggressors – through their naked bodies crying out to be raped. They brought alive the voice of Manorama crying out for justice. They chose to use

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<sup>205</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, “Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India”, <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

<sup>206</sup> Ibid

their bodies to “intrude into the space of the aggressor – the violent state”<sup>207</sup> by choosing to strip at Kangla Fort, the army head quarters.

Irom does not see her fast as a death wish. Though the State calls it an attempt to suicide, Irom affirms she is no suicide monger. Irom’s continued fasting and the State’s attempt to keep force feeding her through her nose symbolises “the impossibility of living in Manipur, which is as good as being robbed of one’s appetite”<sup>208</sup> i.e. tantamount to just being alive in flesh and blood and dead in every other way. The impossibility of any space for normal and peaceful existence in Manipur due to the repressive State that determines how and when and why they should live is symbolised in the force feeding Irom goes through. Her staying alive to symbolise this “transforms her suffering body into a body and being beyond the binaries of repression”<sup>209</sup>. Irom’s body becomes here a “body that encounters every experience of repression beyond the concept of repression”<sup>210</sup>. Irom, through her body, turns the “subjection” that a suffering body is supposed to undergo into an instrument to overcome the repression that is inscribed on the bodies of all people in Manipur. With her own fasting and wasting body Irom turns the act of suffering against itself by challenging the subjection of a suffering body. Irom realizes that her fast is the threshold of death, but she does not see this as a punishment. Irom’s fast through her body symbolises her “being” that is beyond the binary of aggressor-victim.

The body of Manorama who was arrested, tortured, raped and killed, shows the female body as a site for the inscription of power. The power of the repressive armed forces, the might of the Indian State, the power of the label of ‘insurgent,’ and the power of gender – as she was not only tortured and killed, she was, like Dopdi, also raped.

The naked protest of the Manorama Mothers is an act symbolising “the recovery of the being in the subjected body”<sup>211</sup> from the many inscriptions of

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<sup>207</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, “Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India”, <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

<sup>209</sup> Ibid

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

<sup>211</sup> Ibid

power. Their bodies, like Irom's, become symbols challenging the "socially and politically determined decline of continuous existence as such"<sup>212</sup>. They were affirming their subjectivity against the repressive apparatus of the State. The repressive State's rationale behind Manorama's killing is that the women's body can be separated from women's being. Through their bodies that bring alive the voice of the many dead Manoramas, the Manorama Mothers show the inseparability of the body and subjectivity or being.

Through their banners saying, "Indian Army Rape Us," they were challenging the gendered (masculinity), structural and violent power of their aggressors. The Army had picked up Manorama and dumped her body in the dead of the night but the Manorama Mothers walked naked in broad daylight. Naked bodies that are supposed to be symbols of vulnerability – political and physical – are ironically reproduced by the Manorama Mothers constituting an act of protest which creates its meaning through the irony it reproduces. The inherent connection between body and being coupled with the body "intruding" into the space of the aggressor, make the Manipuri women's act a unique protest.

"The complete sway of the AFSPA in Manipur, including the subjection of female bodies, are brought out into the "open" by the unique and historic protest . . . Women's protest in their naked bodies for the first time lays bare the statist violence which has already subjected the body of the women in Manipur"<sup>213</sup>.

Irom's fast and the naked protest of the Manorama Mothers are "manifestations of two forms of subjectivities that women constitute with their bodies on the face of coercive power structures"<sup>214</sup>. The imprisoned and force fed body of Irom is a site for writing her protest as well as to affirm an identity beyond stereotypical construction of gender roles in society<sup>215</sup>. The naked Manorama Mothers protesting outside Kangla Fort are inscribing/ writing resistance with/on the body and presenting it in the public domain<sup>216</sup>. Irom Sharmilla's body

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<sup>212</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India", <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

“is used for reversing such a process of inscription. She inscribes her act of resistance through fasting on the body of the State. Her defiance and resistance, on the one hand, makes a mockery of statist power while, on the other hand, she poses a moral threat to the State by putting her life at stake”<sup>217</sup>.

### **3.6.4. Creative imagination; Re-membering and reconstruction**

In the hermeneutics of creative imagination, we are able to see the connections with struggles of women in the past and our own through what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “historical imagination”<sup>218</sup>. It is this ability that helps us see history in a different light, imagine and believe in change and makes us determined to seek alternatives to existing situations of domination<sup>219</sup>.

We will use this imagination to analyse Irom’s story and the story of the naked Manipuri women. The hermeneutics of re-membering and reconstruction tries to relocate the kyriarchal dynamic of a text/story and make visible and audible the arguments of the subordinated and marginalized in the text<sup>220</sup>. In this way Schüssler Fiorenza sees the memory of women’s religious history, victimization, struggle and accomplishments as ways to make visible and audible the hegemony and kyriarchal biases of the historical times and contexts inscribed in the texts/stories studied<sup>221</sup>. This hermeneutic too will be used in the analysis of Irom and the naked Manipuri women.

The motivation for resistance and protest using the body for both Irom and the Manorama Mothers, probably arises from the inseparability of the body, the being and subjectivity<sup>222</sup>. Irom keeps her body and mind healthy with Yoga. After an interview, she requests the interviewer Kavita Joshi to send her books about Nelson Mandela’s life. She seeks to find continued inspiration from models who have followed the method of satyagraha to affirm their being and their subjectivity. We must note here that one finds one’s points of inspiration

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<sup>217</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, “Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India”, <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

<sup>218</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.181

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. p. 180

<sup>220</sup> Ibid. p. 183

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. p. 183

<sup>222</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, “Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India”, <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

depending upon the choices one makes and the purposes we've chosen to serve.

The motivation to protest peacefully against repression using one's body transforms the unnatural to natural. Being fed through a nose tube for 10 years is not natural. But for Irom the nose tube is now natural. Walking the city streets naked is not "natural." For the Manorama Mothers walking naked to Kangla Fort was the most natural thing to do. It is circumstances that make things natural and unnatural. Amidst a culture that would sell one's body to keep one's self alive and fed, Irom makes a choice to starve herself so that others may have peace. Amidst a "bollywood culture" that uses the woman's body to expose, titillate, sexualize and gender people, Manipur's Manorama Mothers walk the streets naked so that no more daughters of their lands would be raped.

"When women protest the use of their bodies as commodities the world knows what they are talking about . . . But when women themselves turn their bodies into commodities, people don't know how to react."<sup>223</sup>

The commercialized notion in which naked body is considered "beautiful" is broken. By labelling them "mothers" (i.e.) not young bodies with hour glass figures that are fashionable to expose, the label detracts from the stranglehold of the commercialized notion of body. When labelling them as "mothers" it exposes the extent of their repression – whether a child, woman, mother or old woman – all their bodies were under the power of the army – and this is what they were trying to break by saying – here is our body – take it. (This perspective of looking at these women's act of offering their bodies as challenge to aggressors, has echoes in the Eucharistic liturgical words "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you." For lack of space, I do not analyse the Eucharistic implications here.)

### **3.6.5. Transformation and conclusion**

In all the three stories, the body is a space of resistance and a means of protest. It is a volatile space of peaceful protest.

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<sup>223</sup> Urvashi Butalia, "The body as weapon (Urvashi Butalia's view from the South) (Manipuri women protest against the rape and murder of a young woman by the army). *New Internationalist Magazine*, 2004. Retrieved Nov 9, 2010 from HighBeam Research: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-122319342.html>

Irom forgoes her right to eat and drink by choice and uses that hunger as a symbol, a protest and a means. What were the resources that fostered or motivated Irom? There is a clue in her answer about not meeting her mother when she says “We all come here with a task.” This is her resource – a sense of purpose. Her hunger strike is a form of spirituality for her and this spirituality is also one of her resources to keep going. Her conviction that her stand is for the truth – is her hope that keeps her going.

Naked bodies when raped and brutalized are perceived in shades of victimhood, being subjected, compelled. In Dopdi’s story and in the naked protest of the Manipuri women, the same naked bodies, in broad day light, is used as a form of resistance, protest and as a weapon to shame and humiliate the gendered notions of power and masculinity. The body becomes a weapon to shame those who wanted to shame it.

All of the 30 naked Manipuri women at Kangla Fort became the mothers of the raped and killed Manorama. All of them voluntarily took on nakedness and in so doing they were naked and unashamed. Thus they could shame those who considered that the bodies and their beings and their subjectivities were something to be ashamed of. As one Manipuri activist said, their anger made them shed their inhibitions that day. This kind of “anger” is what Jesus too practiced when he drove the vendors and merchants from the temple (as recorded in Mark 11:15; Matthew 21:12). A Tamil poet Bharathiyaar captures this same attitude when he asks one to “*Roudhram Pazhagu*” meaning “practice this kind of righteous anger” against social evils. The depth of violence they’d been pushed to and the righteous anger at injustice caused Manipuri women to see their naked bodies in a different way; Body here is a tool of protest.

In contrast to the inscribed and violated bodies of the women at Godhra, Gujarat (that we discussed in the previous chapter) the women in this chapter reverse the inscriptions on them. At Godhra women’s bodies were the first target in a conflict situation, here the Manorama Mothers use their bodies as a last resort in their state of anger and desperation to somehow make themselves heard. The bodies of women in Godhra were taken and violated with impunity.

Here Dopdi and the Manorama Mothers invite those who want to objectify, control and inscribe them to make them their targets, but the powerful are unable to do so when challenged openly. At Godhra the honour and shame of the men was mapped and inscribed on the women's bodies. In Manipur too the honour and shame of the Manipuri men is targeted by attacking women and children; to show power; to show who is in control. But here the Manorama Mothers and Dopdi refused to let honour and shame be mapped on their bodies. Instead they take control of their bodies and ask to be raped. They used their bodies as weapons and tools to shame and humiliate the mighty army.

What gave the Manorama Mothers the strength to walk the streets naked and protest? They answered brutal violence on a vulnerable body with peaceful nakedness of their inviolable public bodies. For these women this nakedness was not suffering, it was for them fighting for a cause. They did not do it just for their own individual daughters, but for all the daughters who should never face the prospect of being picked up and raped on suspicion that they were involved in insurgency. Many protests were going on in Manipur at that time to protest Manorama's killing but this made the nation stand still and listen. It was only on that day the rest of India even knew that such a problem existed in Manipur and NEI. The rest of India have been complacent to such a protests. But it must be noted that the AFSPA is a law in India – that can be promulgated in any State in the “mainland India” when the government sees fit, just as it has been in force in the NEI for over 50 years. In this sense, the Manorma Mothers were fighting for all the daughters and children of India as well. Their reaching for subjectivity from within their subjected state is a new hermeneutic approach to understand Jesus' struggle for justice and his protest against unjust structures.

The ability to resist and protest evil, injustice and violence that we see in these three stories have both a personal and a corporate dimension. They were trying to assert their identities, their beings as persons in and through their bodies and they were all able to do so because their motivations were of a corporate nature. Their horizons were wider than what their gendered roles assigned to them. They were extraordinarily moved by injustice and violence,



prodded by a righteous anger, had a purpose, a cause and a struggle that was bigger than their individual subjectivities; but at the same time their individual body-protests was also part of the community of struggling selves trying to actualise their visions for a more just world. Each of these stories show that what they did was 'voluntary' but it is not 'suffering' they take on voluntarily, but "protest and resistance" that they take on voluntarily.

These are all important resources that can be used to build a christology that is liberative and leads to transformation. These experiences of body as struggle, as protest/resistance and as an attempt by women to gain subjecthood can be used as reconstructive ways of looking at the body and at christology. This could help us understand the suffering of Christ not as voluntary but as protest – like Irom, Like Dopdi and like the Manorama Mothers. The phenomenon of critical 'Resisting Bodies' open up a dialogical/ hermeneutical space that can challenge traditional common sense understanding of christologies that glorify suffering. This is what the next chapter seeks to engage with.

## CHAPTER 4: THE SUFFERING SERVANT'S INSCRIPTIONS ON WOMEN

The objective of this chapter is to explore how the commonsense christological understanding of Christ as “Suffering Servant” provides basis for women’s oppression through its glorification of suffering as voluntary and salvific. The writings of various feminists on christology and its connections and impact of women have been drawn in to weave this exploration.

### 4.1. COMMON SENSE CHRISTOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

The popular “Suffering Servant” image is one of the most influential and common sense understandings of Christ in most Indian Christian women’s identities<sup>224</sup>.

The understanding is that “Christ came into this world to suffer and die on the cross as Saviour to save sinners.”

Why is this image of Jesus a ‘commonsense understanding’? Some general contextual reasons are:

- 1) It makes sense in an ethos that accepts everything that happens to one as your lot in life/ “what is written on one’s forehead” as *Thalaezhuthu/ vidhi (Tamil)* one’s fate/ one’s that is preordained by the gods. So the suffering one goes through is also considered one’s lot. It is also considered as something that will ultimately result in good for the sufferer. It is not uncommon to hear the sufferer being told that, “it is all for your own good” (*ellam un nanmaikkaaka than nadakuthu - Tamil*) or that, “All the suffering you’ve gone through will not be without some result/gain in the end” (“*Nee padura kashtam ellam oru palan illaamae pokaathu*”- *Tamil*)
- 2) In a context where extreme poverty and extreme wealth exist side-by-side and caste structures entwine with class, creed and gender structures to fossilize certain hierarchies, the only way that some/all of those at the bottom of these pyramids can make sense of their extreme poverty and deprivation, is to accept that their poverty/their state of deprivation,

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<sup>224</sup> Shalini Mulackal, *Towards a PEÑ Christology: Prospects and Challenges*, <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr005/shalini.htm> Accessed 27 Sep 2010, 4.00pm IST

exploitation and oppression is deserved and that only a spectacular Saviour can save them.

- 3) Fatalism removes the urge to be proactive in changing one's fate, and relies instead on an agency outside of oneself. Most religious traditions within India have this motif of waiting for God to come in an "avatar" (like *Kalki*) to set right all that is wrong in the world.
- 4) In a culture where sacrifices and token rituals to gods and goddesses to expiate the wrong one/ one's community has done (*Parikaaram*) is common, the motif of a sacrifice in the form of a Saviour dying "on behalf of" all sinners is quite understandable.
- 5) A culture that has been colonised and continues to face colonisation in various forms – of the mind, of economy and of technology – is a fertile breeding place for the internalization of inferiority and servanthood as an integral part of our identity.

#### **4.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR AN INDIAN CHRISTIAN WOMAN**

As Jacquelyn Grant recognises, "there is a direct relationship between our perception of Jesus Christ and our perception of ourselves"<sup>225</sup>. Therefore the implications of this christological understanding are that certain attitudes and beliefs become ingrained in the psyche of women<sup>226</sup>:

- that suffering is part of being Christ-like, is salvific and redemptive
- that therefore only in obedience to self-sacrificing love for others and through the humble service on behalf of others one can be saved<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Karen Trimble Alliaume, "The risks of repeating ourselves: reading feminist/womanist figures of Jesus" *Cross Currents*, Summer 1998, Vol. 48 Issue 2. <http://www.crosscurrents.org/alliaume.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2.02am]

<sup>226</sup> These points are collated from Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved The World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2;10 AM IST]; All these points are also based on the answers of five women in the Researcher's family & extended family (educated, middle class women) who were asked what defines a Christian woman's character. The ages of the five women questioned were between 30 and 65. All five listed patience, humility, generosity, obedience, and serving others.

<sup>227</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995. p.38

- that servanthood, humility and subordination is the idealized identity for a “good Christian”
- Suffering that is voluntarily taken on is seen as more virtuous. Suffering is perceived as something good and that it will ultimately lead to gain for the sufferer.

### **4.3. ANALYSIS**

#### **4.3.1. Domination, Social Location and Critical Evaluation**

A critical feminist Systemic analytic for liberation does not only deal with women’s experience vis-à-vis a particular theological formulation and its interpretation. It must reflect on “how social, cultural and religious location has shaped our experience” of our body, christology and our reactions to both<sup>228</sup>. So the hermeneutics of domination and social location here will help us look at how women’s body and ‘self’ have been shaped reflecting our social, cultural and religious location and how these have in turn shaped our understanding of christology. This hermeneutical step helps expose the ideological, religious-theological, functions of theological and christological formulations in inculcating and legitimizing a kyriarchal order in terms of the body and women’s experiences of selves and self-affirmation. A hermeneutics of critical evaluation has a double reference point: a) cultural-ideological and b) religious-theological<sup>229</sup>. So this hermeneutics will help analyse how both these reference points show up in the common sense understanding and appropriation of the Suffering Servant image by women. The key question in this hermeneutical step will be “what does a text do to those of us who submit to its world of vision and values?”<sup>230</sup>

##### **4.3.1.1. Suffering as subordination and submission**

In countries like India, while there are cases of women becoming CEOs or heads of political parties and there is a moderate level of empowerment in a section of women due to education, employment, reservation and affirmative action, these

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<sup>228</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p. 172

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. p. 179

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. p.178

must be seen as exceptions rather than the rule. Predominantly women in India still live in a primarily patriarchal and kyriarchal ethos which means that according to their caste, class, education and creed, they find themselves in different levels of the structural pyramid where they have to negotiate different levels and textures of oppression, exploitation and violence depending on what is considered their primary identity in any given situation. In such a context pervaded by dominant structures, a Christian woman's identity is shaped by all of this and her place in the structures she inhabits. The role that christology plays in the formation and perpetuation of problematic identity, can be glimpsed in an observation that Peniel Rajkumar makes in connection with Dalit identity formation. Drawing on the views of Balasundaram, Peniel Rajkumar says,

“relating Jesus’ servanthood to Dalit reality does not really help the Dalits. Jesus offered himself in servanthood, whereas the Dalits are already in servanthood, rather in servility. In a context where the Dalits have no authentic self to offer to others, is it helpful to speak of servanthood, service and patient endurance of suffering?”<sup>231</sup>

For most women, religion plays an important role in shaping their acceptance of their suffering – physical, emotional and psychological violence and abuse as well as material poverty, gendered status and exploitation<sup>232</sup>. Adding to the gendered and inferior status of women and their violent suffering in countries like India, the core christological components – motifs of suffering, servanthood and sacrifice – have colluded to make women accept the most heinous crimes on them as their deserved lot (*vidhi*) and have led millions of women the world over to give up any autonomous living as they live their lives “for others” and find their self-worth only in such service and sacrifice.

This form of christological projection on women's lives is abuse of the most violent, unrealized and unnamed nature. This kind of abuse is so corrosive and debilitating but most women don't even realize it.

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<sup>231</sup> Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010, p. 67.

<sup>232</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2:10 AM IST]

“Our acculturation to abuse leads us to keep silent for years about experiences of sexual abuse, to not report rape, to stay in marriages in which we are battered, to give up creative efforts, to expend all our energy in the support of other lives and never in support of our own, to accept it when a man interrupts us, to punish ourselves if we are successful, to deny so habitually our right to self-determination that we do not feel we have an identity unless it is given to us by someone else.”<sup>233</sup>

Filipina theologian Liza Lamis drawing on Michel Foucault in her analysis of sexual abuse in the church says that,

“the subtle exercise of power over a woman at no cost at all is in the internalization of one’s subordination as a woman, sacralized by theology and scripture”<sup>234</sup>.

#### **4.3.1.2. Suffering as obedience**

We have seen in chapter 2 how some characteristics like submission, subordination, modesty and humility are projected as gendered identity characteristics on women’s bodies. Augmenting and cementing such characteristics, christological understandings that uplift Christ’s obedience to the father’s will as virtue, leads women to appropriate obedience to the path of servanthood, sacrifice and suffering. This path of obedience is seen as another characteristic of being a “good Christian woman.” Lisa Lamiz in her analysis of sexual abuse in the church, elaborates that

“the intrinsic structural violence in the church is justified and sacralized by patriarchal theology and teachings.”<sup>235</sup>

Australian, Marie-Louise Uhr explains this clearly when she says,

“There is a long tradition of the primary virtue of obedience in the Christian churches and I believe it needs to be seriously challenged . . . Christologies of an obedient, and even at times, a passive Christ have been part of developing theology since the earliest Christian writings. For instance, Paul compares an obedient Christ with the disobedient Adam in his second Adam christology, while John stresses the obedience of the logos figure to the Father. The trouble for present Christianity has come from the dominant position given to these christologies . . . There has been a stress on the Christ figure as the obedient one.

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<sup>233</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2;10 AM IST]

<sup>234</sup> Liza B. Lamis, “Sexual Abuse of Women in the Church”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.29, No. 1, March 2010, Yogyakarta: AWRC, p. 25

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25

One of the main consequences of this christology has been the conclusion that if we are to be Christ-like then we too must be obedient – obedient to God and to all in authority. I have examined something of this christology and its terrible consequences . . .”<sup>236</sup>.

All of these combined forces lead women to image ourselves as passive and obedient rather than as struggling for self-determination and freedom.

#### **4.3.1.3. Suffering as sacrificial and voluntary**

Self-sacrifice and obedience are considered definitions of one’s faithful Christian identity. These qualities – of a sacrificial lamb that doesn’t raise a voice – foster a victim mentality in most Christian women by idealizing these as Christ’s qualities. Mary Daly points out that Christianity idealizes for women qualities of a victim, namely:

“sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus ‘who died for our sins,’ his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women<sup>237</sup>.”

#### **4.3.1.4. Suffering as salvific and redemptive**

The main message of the cross seems to say “suffering is redemptive” and so if Christ suffered so must women – more so women! We internalize that our suffering for others will save us and others. Brown and Parker affirm that it is this fundamental understanding of Christianity that, “Christ’s suffering and dying for us,” “upholds actions and attitudes that accept, glorify and even encourage suffering<sup>238</sup>,” which is the problem.

When reimagining of God as servant God in the interests of repositioning the subjectivity of marginalized groups like the Dalits (and women) who are seen as replicating Divine agency, Peniel Rajkumar notes that there is a danger that

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<sup>236</sup> Marie-Louise Uhr, “The Priestly Ordinatio of Women and a Christology of Obedience”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 20. No. 4, December 2001, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC,) 55

<sup>237</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, p.77

<sup>238</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2:10 AM IST]

“this suffering servant image could be counter-productive to practical liberation since there is the risk of romanticizing Dalit servanthood, which is both a product and continuing source of their oppression”<sup>239</sup>.

Such pathos-based Christologies according to Peniel Rajkumar “reinforce masochistic acceptance of their present suffering”<sup>240</sup>. He says,

“The link between pathos-based christology and masochistic resignation cannot be glossed over. In such instances, it would be fair to argue that christology merely operates as a palliative, inuring the suffering people to the existing suffering (caused by systematized and structural oppression, institutionalized discrimination and religion-validated hierarchy), where the suffering Jesus is inordinately romanticized. Recruiting God as an ally in suffering could therefore be counter-productive for Dalit liberation as suffering is not demonized but deified.”<sup>241</sup>

Brown and Parker throw in a different angle of analysis to christology and its appropriation by saying that “Why we suffer is not a fundamentally different question from why Jesus suffered.”<sup>242</sup> The “victorious Christ” theory of Jesus’ suffering implies that the follower of Christ must endure pain and be patient and that ultimately something good will come out of it<sup>243</sup>. This reinforces the already existing Indian mentality that sees suffering as something that will ultimately lead to good for the sufferer<sup>244</sup>.

Echoing that this kind of subjugation mentality is part of the colonial legacy in the Philippines as well, Virginia Fabella says,

“Through centuries of Spanish colonial rule, women have been made to believe, partly through the instrumentality of the Christian religion, that they are inferior to men and hence subject to them. This has made many Filipino women servile, unduly dependent, unquestioning and fatalistic”<sup>245</sup>.

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<sup>239</sup> Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010, p. 65.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. p. 65

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. p. 65

<sup>242</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2;10 AM IST]

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Refer point number 1 under 4.1 of this thesis.

<sup>245</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Asian Women and Christology”, *In God’s Image*, September 1987, Singapore: AWRC. p. 15



When commonsense understandings state that it was Jesus' suffering and death that saved us, by extension, this doubly reinforces for women that to be like Jesus means to be willing to endure pain, and that salvation from pain is through pain<sup>246</sup>. Their salvation is through obedience to abuse, violation, suffering – this by implication – is the common sense christological and theological teaching ingrained into women. .

But Brown and Parker affirm,

“the reality is that victimization never leads to triumph. It can lead to extended pain if it is not refused or fought. It can lead to destruction of the human spirit through the death of a person's sense of power, worth, dignity or creativity. It can lead to actual death<sup>247</sup>.”

They declare that such an understanding, “by denying the reality of suffering and death . . . defames all those who suffer and trivializes tragedy”<sup>248</sup>.

#### **4.3.1.5. Suffering as salvific: for the oppressor's salvation**

Suffering as seen in Jesus is appropriated by women as meaning that through their suffering they can help those they love to escape suffering. In the context of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in solidarity with Women, Aruna Gnanadason, talking of the reports from teams that went to the churches to ask them to reflect on this theme, quotes one of the reactions from a church leader: “Every time I beat my wife she should thank me, because she is one step closer to salvation”<sup>249</sup>. When women see their suffering as freeing others just as Christ's suffering freed all humanity, this glorified suffering is understood as salvific. This understanding causes women to be more concerned about those who abuse them than about themselves as they think they are freeing the abuser by enduring the suffering induced by the abuser on them.

The other aspect that makes Jesus' suffering seem salvific is the “moral influence” understanding that the suffering of an innocent and suffering victim (as

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<sup>246</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2;10 AM IST]

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “A Christological Reflection on Women's Movements in the world”, *In God's Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 73

Jesus) has the power to confront the abusers with their guilt and move them to new decision<sup>250</sup>. So in this twisted logic, the suffering of a woman who endures undeserved suffering is a reason for sinful structures/people who inflict it on her to become righteous. This seems to place women per se as the chosen victims in society – who suffer to make others righteous, or in the hope that they will turn righteous.

#### **4.3.1.6. Suffering as enduring pain and abuse**

When suffering is interpreted as necessary for salvation to take place, as women are persuaded it is, then women are persuaded to endure suffering. This has been used by oppressors to justify their oppression, absolved them from taking responsibility for the condition of the oppressed, and convinced the oppressed that they must endure suffering as it is salvific for themselves and also for the oppressor. Hope Antone points out that there is something about traditional theology that “makes people aware and guilty of their grave sinfulness more than their being sinned against”<sup>251</sup>. Such theologies do not point to the inherent capacity within the oppressed to resist those who/structures that sin against them.

The suffering of Jesus is also seen as his voluntary submission to the father’s will and Christ’s followers are encouraged to emulate this. The voluntariness of Jesus suffering has a damaging impact on women when it is put forward as a model to be emulated. Interpreting suffering as one’s lot in life is one thing but to advocate that women voluntarily take on suffering as a sign of their obedience to God and in adherence to the path of Christ, is to advocate masochism. Compounding all the identities and inscriptions that a woman bears on her body and mind, a call to voluntary suffering limits the horizons she can ever hope to reach, as all available options are oppressive.

Many women who suffer in silence remain silent about their suffering because “they are taught by the church that ‘Christ died for you on the cross, can

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<sup>250</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “A Christological Reflection on Women’s Movements in the world”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 73

<sup>251</sup> Hope Antone in “Making Sense of Christ’s Atonement”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 36

you not bear some suffering too?”<sup>252</sup>Rita Nakashima Brock narrates the story of a battered wife who sought pastoral help from a male priest. His advice was, “Jesus suffered because he loved us. If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.”<sup>253</sup> The priest’s advice is based on “the traditional atonement theology that the death of Jesus atoned for human sin and saved the world and is therefore a model of loving self-sacrifice”<sup>254</sup>. Hope Antone asks whether such a christological understanding of atonement really liberates those who suffer<sup>255</sup>. Aruna Gnanadason says “women ask whether the sacrifice and suffering demanded of them has a purpose.”<sup>256</sup>

For many women in Asia, the crucified Christ is more preferred than Jesus the Nazarene or the Risen Christ. Sr. Mary John Mananzan points to a survey in Manila area to substantiate this<sup>257</sup>. Seforosa Carroll, quotes Sharon Ruiz-Duremdes and underlines that

“the death and resurrection of Jesus has ‘in the course of time and movement across cultures become lost and distorted . . . as in the Philippines we have developed or inherited a dead-end theology of the cross with no resurrection of salvation in sight.”<sup>258</sup>

#### **4.3.1.7. Suffering servant: liberation traditions’ inadequacies**

Some critical traditions of understanding christology have advocated viewing the suffering of Jesus as God suffering along with humanity or as “co-sufferer” or “fellow-sufferer” who understands what one is going through. It is true that many women across Asia find this understanding appealing. It gives them strength to carry on their suffering as they feel God and Christ are in solidarity with them<sup>259</sup>.

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<sup>252</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “A Christological Reflection on Women’s Movements in the world”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 74

<sup>253</sup> As quoted by Hope Antone in “Making Sense of Christ’s Atonement”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 35

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37

<sup>256</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “A Christological Reflection on Women’s Movements in the world”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 74

<sup>257</sup> Mary John Mananzan, “Who is Jesus Christ? Responses from the Philippines”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.12, No. 3, 1993, Seoul: AWRC, p.39

<sup>258</sup> Seforosa Carroll. “Who is Jesus Christ for me In Australia: A Reflection on Virginia Fabella’s Christology from an Asian Woman’s Perspective”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 19, No.1, 2000, Kuala Lumpur, AWRC, p.58

<sup>259</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, “Christology”, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000, p. 79-97

But these critical christological traditions too still ultimately ask one to endure suffering patiently. Brown and Parker point out the gaps even in such a critical tradition of seeing Christ as co-sufferer or fellow-sufferer when they say, “bearing the burden with another does not take the burden away.”<sup>260</sup> In a similar vein, Chung Hyun Kyung, while acknowledging that Asian women have identified with the Suffering Servant who has been their only hope, also challenges any attempt to legitimize the suffering of women with this teaching<sup>261</sup>.

Other critical traditions also interpret Jesus’ suffering not as passive suffering but as active suffering that recognises the need for change. Some critical traditions critiquing christology have tried to distinguish between the passive and active suffering of Jesus and imply that it is only the passive suffering interpretation of Jesus that is damaging, but that the active and unjust suffering of Jesus has salvific value as suffering for the sake of building a more just world falls in the category of salvation<sup>262</sup>.

Brown and Parker however point out that, “the glorification of anyone’s suffering (including that of Jesus) allows the glorification of all suffering”<sup>263</sup>. William R. Jones also affirms that all suffering should be viewed as negative for “if we define one instance of suffering as positive or necessary for salvation, we are persuaded to endure it”<sup>264</sup>. To label unjust suffering such as Christ’s as active suffering also defeats the purpose and only serves to perpetuate the acceptance of the very principle of suffering that one (including Christ) is supposed to be struggling against.

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<sup>260</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2:10 AM IST]

<sup>261</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, “A Christological Reflection on Women’s Movements in the world”, *In God’s Image*, Vol. 22, No. 4, December 2003, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p. 76

<sup>262</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Asian Women and Christology”, *In God’s Image*, September 1987, Singapore: AWRC, p. 16

<sup>263</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2:10 AM IST]

<sup>264</sup> Ibid

#### 4.3.1.7.1. Problems in “making meaning” of suffering

As the previous section attests, there are theologians who have tried to make meaning of suffering. However in the ambit of this research, trying to make meaning of suffering is not the focus as I feel there are problems in trying to make meaning of suffering. I find Flora Keshgegian’s analysis of Dorothee Soelle’s theology of suffering helpful in explaining this.

Flora A. Keshgegian analyses Dorothee Soelle’s theology of suffering from the perspective of trauma studies<sup>265</sup>. Soelle offers four options to deal with suffering: 1) understand it in relation to a tyrant God and submit to it 2) avoid or deny it and fall into apathy 3) resist it 4) mystical affirmation of suffering - understood to be the way of Jesus. The fourth option is what Soelle affirms which implies in itself that there is no rational way to explain suffering<sup>266</sup>. Keshgegian says Soelle’s interest in maintaining a subject/agent, an “I to the Thou” is a thread that runs through Soelle’s understanding of the need for suffering to be meaningful<sup>267</sup>. In the place of a tyrant God who would allow human suffering, Soelle offers a God as being present in suffering and on the side of those who suffer and so those who suffer do not suffer alone<sup>268</sup>. This view tries to justify God by making God present in suffering while not really giving those who undergo real suffering their due<sup>269</sup>. Drawing a binary opposition between the tyrant God and the loving God embodied in Christ, Soelle consequently draws a binary between dolorous suffering/compassion<sup>270</sup>. This indicates both difference and value as in any binary, one side is good and the other bad<sup>271</sup>. So this implies that dolorous suffering is not of value, while compassionate suffering is<sup>272</sup>. Though Soelle condemns submission to suffering and suffering by choice, Keshgegian critiques Soelle saying the relationship to suffering is different for a person of privilege, as a person of privilege can choose not to suffer or can be

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<sup>265</sup> Flora A. Keshgegian “Suffering in a World of Victimization” in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003. p.93-108.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid. p.102

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 95

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. p. 96

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. p. 97

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 98

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. p. 98

<sup>272</sup> Ibid. p. 98

apathetic to suffering<sup>273</sup>. Keshgegian sees Soelle's view as that of a first world person who has a choice about their suffering<sup>274</sup>. She says, "Suffering has a different valence for those who choose it than for those upon whom it is visited."<sup>275</sup> She sees the location of Soelle as a first world person having bearing on the urge to look for meaning and purpose in suffering<sup>276</sup>. Keshgegian feels this position does not sufficiently recognise the plight of the inconsolable who don't have a choice about the suffering they undergo<sup>277</sup>. Keshgegian feels that "The process of dealing with traumatic suffering requires that the victimized let go of the need to find meaning in relation to it."<sup>278</sup> Just because suffering is necessary to make one want to return to life and because it is seen as something that must be gone through to reach another place, does not justify the suffering or render it of value.<sup>279</sup> Keshgegian perceives suffering to be of different types: some deserved or a result of other behaviours, some of limited value, some is chosen or is a necessary outcome of another choice, but much of suffering is not chosen, deserved or necessary.<sup>280</sup> She feels that suffering must therefore be understood in a more nuanced way and no one approach to suffering must be universalized.<sup>281</sup>

With Keshgegian, I acknowledge that many feminist theologians including Soelle have boldly challenged traditional understandings of passive suffering and submission to suffering and condemned undue suffering of the oppressed, abused and poor. However I fully agree with her also that much of Christian theological tradition needs to pay more attention to the experience of absence of God and feelings of void and emptiness in the lives of those who suffer from violence, before it can speak fully to their situation<sup>282</sup>.

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<sup>273</sup> Flora A. Keshgegian "Suffering in a World of Victimization" in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003. p.99

<sup>274</sup> Ibid. p.104

<sup>275</sup> Ibid. p.105

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. p. 104

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. p. 104

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. p. 105

<sup>279</sup> Ibid. p. 105

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. p. 105

<sup>281</sup> Ibid. p. 105

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. p. 105

#### **4.3.1.8. The ambiguity of the suffering servant**

Alliaume rightly observes that the suffering servant figure is a problematic construction precisely because it can be interpreted both as liberating and as oppressive. She says,

“The Suffering Servant is a shifty figure, one who can symbolise redemption (as in Christian, especially South American, liberation theology) as well as the brutality exercised on ‘his’ behalf”<sup>283</sup>

Alliaume along with Donna Haraway affirms that

“Jesus as incarnation of the ‘suffering servant’; is too easily subsumed back into the Christian patriarchal narrative of supersessionism and the valorization of feminine sacrifice”<sup>284</sup>

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

Women across Asia have experienced the image of Jesus, the Suffering Servant as a double edged sword. While for many it has been a source of comfort as they journeyed painful paths of suffering, it has also equally been a source of abuse, violence and subordination. The problematic element of the suffering servant image is the glorification of suffering as necessary and the claim that suffering in itself can be redemptive and salvific. The painful inscriptions these elements have caused to women’s identity formation and on women’s bodies are legion. This makes it necessary to revisit the Jesus story to see if the “suffering” in Jesus’ story was necessary for the resurrection, if suffering was meant to be salvific and suffering was the element that made Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>283</sup> Karen Trimble Alliaume , “The risks of repeating ourselves: reading feminist/womanist figures of Jesus” Cross Currents, Summer 1998, Vol. 48 Issue 2. <http://www.crosscurrents.org/alliaume.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2.02am]

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5: RECONSTRUCTING CHRISTOLOGY AS RESISTANCE AND RESURRECTION AS ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

Having explored in the previous chapter how the suffering of Christ is shown as parallel to women's suffering and thus legitimizes women's suffering, in this chapter I want to draw on the third chapter, which drew attention to the wisdom that arises from women's bodies that are involved in resistance and protest. The objective of this chapter is to explore how this wisdom can be used as hermeneutical keys or heuristic keys to reconstruct christology and resurrection in ways that do not reinforce the Suffering Servant christology that is oppressive and limiting for women. This chapter will try to trace how the Jesus story of resistance offers resistance to the common sense christological understanding, and how this motif can help us analyse how Jesus became the Christ who we can appropriate as the resurrected one.

### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

While acknowledging the importance of feminist involvements in the historical Jesus discourses, I feel feminist theologians must be more wary about the constructions being made around Christ. As women we read the Bible from the christological construction of "Jesus as Saviour" and this limits how we are able to read the Bible. In feminist articulations, we find feminists constantly trying to deal with the conflict between the so-called "historical Jesus" and the "theological interpretations" surrounding Jesus such as the Suffering Servant, Christus Victor, Christ the mediator, and Christ the Saviour of the world. These christological formulations have their roots in various parts of the New Testament. However these different theological interpretations are all theological-ideological constructions<sup>285</sup>.

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<sup>285</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995, p.26



“Christological dogma must be understood as the result of a political process through which the imperial church, under the pressures of the political interests of the Roman emperors, came to dominate”<sup>286</sup>.

The conceptualizations of Christ as the emperor, son of God, Exceptional Hero, Jesus the light of the world and Jesus as the Suffering Servant who died on the cross as innocent victim and Saviour of the world – all of these formulations developed in this context. The cross thus came to be seen as the symbol of Jesus accepting suffering as a salvific act. Suffering gradually became almost synonymous with salvation in the development of Christian thinking<sup>287</sup>. Christological images, sculptures, art in churches and Christian institutions mostly glorify suffering.

## 5.2. Some Feminist Starting Points for Christology

Some feminist articulations have tried to show women as female Christas<sup>288</sup>.

Lieve Troch narrates the story of a graphic sculpture of a woman on the tip of her toes, her naked body with arms apart and hanging<sup>289</sup>. The body has very deep cuts, showing signs of torture, of being battered and used. The body is shown as almost being raised up in this state. This sculpture by a Canadian artist was placed in a church. There was objection from the church, the pastor and the community so this was removed and placed in a garden of a seminary.

Lieve Troch, analysing the reasons for this says that the objections were because the suffering of women cannot be compared to the suffering of Christ (though women suffer all their lives); that the statue was pornographic as it showed the naked body of a woman and that such a naked body representing Christ was blasphemous; and that such a statue could not be inside a church because it disturbs the thinking of the congregation when they look at the naked

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<sup>286</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, NY: Continuum, 1995. p. 26

<sup>287</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2;10 AM IST]

<sup>288</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child Sophia's Prophet – Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (NY: Continuum, 1995) 51

<sup>289</sup> Lieve Troch, from researcher's lecture notes on the “Christology Workshop” led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

body of a woman. Lieve says that the moving of the sculpture from the church to the garden almost symbolically shows the way theologizing is done – suffering of women is not in the center of theologizing but an ornament in the garden of the seminary.

We have seen in the previous chapter how the Suffering Servant image and discourse of christology reinforces the inferior status and servile/submissive, victim mentality of women. Rejecting the images of the Suffering Servant, the silent lamb taken to slaughter and the perfect sacrifice for the expiation of sin, Indian feminist theologians like Stella Baltazar have tried to reclaim other traditions in their culture like the feminine principle of *Shakti* which is the life energy of the human universe<sup>290</sup>. Kwok Pui-lan points out that Asian Christian women have tried to answer the question of who Jesus is from their own experience and circumstances<sup>291</sup>. If christology can become part of a critical feminist theology of liberation and transformation feminists have to ask if such christological affirmations, images and discourses actually reinforce or challenge the situation of women.

If christology has to be liberative and transformative for women, the theme of needing Jesus to be “a Saviour” also needs to be deconstructed, as this motif takes away the power of agency inherent in the story of Jesus. The Jesus story is itself a critique of dominant hierarchical powers. But the theological interpretations and constructions conveyed through images such as Suffering Servant and Saviour are rooted hierarchical dualisms of Lord and servant, sinner and the Saviour, exceptional hero and innocent/dependent victim. By deconstructing the glorification of the cross and of innocent suffering Saviour, we can break down such doctrinal salvation stories that are oppressive. Womanist theologian Delores Williams helps put things in perspective by suggesting we rearticulate the starting points of christology. She asks if christological articulation

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<sup>290</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, “Christology”, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000, p. 79-97

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79-97

needs to begin with the assumption that Jesus came to suffer for others<sup>292</sup>. Was it necessary for Jesus to suffer on the cross? Why was Jesus on the cross in the first place? Was it because he voluntarily hung there to save people through the blood he shed? Or was it the price Jesus paid for staying the course of struggle for justice and resistance to power in and through his life.

Dorothe Soelle debunks “the ‘must’ used to explain the necessity of Christ’s suffering (Luke 24:26)” and explains that it is

“not because God requires or demands Christ’s suffering for the purposes of atonement. Rather the “must” emerges from Jesus’ own inner authority and his decision to remain true to the nonviolent, domination-free vision of God – thus, to retain his integrity, he “must” go to the cross. Jesus does this “for us” now in our place but (also) for the benefit of all persons”<sup>293</sup>

Dorothe Soelle also affirms that

“The cross symbolises not a one-time event in which the sufferings of the world are forever taken up in the life of Jesus, but concrete historical situations of oppression that we continue to experience today”<sup>294</sup>.

Jesus resisted the powers of domination of the Roman Empire and the interests of some of his own people in religious and political power who had self-serving agendas. For this path of struggle, protest and resistance, he was killed by those in power who knew their power would be broken if more people around them followed Jesus’ path of questioning, challenging, protesting and resistance.

Soelle affirms that

“Jesus said “yes,” remaining faithful until the end. He was faithful not because he was “obedient” to the will of God demanding his death, as some traditional theologies claim, but because he maintained his commitment against the injustice of the Roman Empire.”<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Asian Feminist Christology”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) p.8.

<sup>293</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, “Christ in the World” in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003, p. 119

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. p. 120

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. p. 120

## 5.3. ANALYSIS

### 5.3.1. Creative Imagination

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, “Imagination enables us to fill in the gaps and silences and thereby to make sense out of a text”<sup>296</sup> and she calls this “historical imagination.” She says it is this ability that helps imagine and believe in change<sup>297</sup>. This makes us determined to seek alternatives to existing situations of domination. Schüssler Fiorenza sees this hermeneutics of creative imagination taking many forms and methods such as storytelling, role-play, poems, song, etc<sup>298</sup>. But she believes that even our imagination and vision are “both informed and deformed” by our past experiences and present socio-political locations<sup>299</sup>. So she says that even these forms and methods must be critically reflected on and discussed with the hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation, so that they do not re-establish again the kyriarchal identity inscribed in the characters they role-play and historicize them<sup>300</sup>.

In this section I will attempt to reconstruct the story of Jesus keeping in mind this “historical imagination” and also by trying not to slide into the pit fall of reinscribing kyriarchal identity to the characters in the story.

### 5.3.2. The Jesus Story: His Social Location

Jesus was a bastard child, born to Mary<sup>301</sup> – a mother who couldn’t tell the world who the father of her child was. The stigma that such a situation carries for both mother and child is something all Asian cultures are familiar with<sup>302</sup>. Jesus grew as a carpenter’s son helping his father’s business, and so obviously they were

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<sup>296</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, “Christ in the World” in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003. p.180-181

<sup>297</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.180

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. p.181-182

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. p. 182

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. p. 182

<sup>301</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, “Christ in the World” in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003, p. 119

<sup>302</sup> Hari Dev Kohli, *Law and illegitimate child: from Sastrik Law to Statutory Law*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2003, p.104, 76.

not wealthy<sup>303</sup>. They lived in a fishing community where most people depended on the catch of the day for sustenance. When they had no catch most would probably go hungry. These elements marked Jesus' identity as poor, living in a community by and large exploited by the imperial Roman structure. The advantages that Jesus' identity did afford, was probably due to his maleness in a patriarchal culture, and his rabbinical status in a clerical culture. But it must be noted that despite these advantages of power, he chose to identify with the poor, exploited and disadvantaged.

He observed as a child and as a man the injustices of his time – the tax collectors<sup>304</sup>, the excesses of the Roman Empire<sup>305</sup>, the politically inclined religious leaders<sup>306</sup> who led the people with repressive customs and practices<sup>307</sup>, the mercenary tendencies of the religious establishment<sup>308</sup> – the temple which served more as a market to fill the pockets of the religious authorities<sup>309</sup>. He saw the poverty around him of those who were sick, lame, possessed<sup>310</sup> – who were all assigned to live on the fringes of society, not because of anything they did, but because of identities assigned to them by society, as being sick (and therefore not-whole and so impure), disabled, incomplete and possessed.

### **5.3.3. The choice Jesus made: For life and not death**

When Jesus had been observing the situation around him for quite a while, there must have come a point when he couldn't take it all silently anymore. Something inside him would have felt the contrariness and un-rightness of things around him. As a young man, when he went away to the wilderness, he had probably

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<sup>303</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, "Christ in the World" in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003, p. 119

<sup>304</sup> Matthew 17:24

<sup>305</sup> John 11:48 implies a threat of the Roman's taking over "their place and nation", if the Jews should assert themselves under a new "king".

<sup>306</sup> Matthew 15:1-20 shows the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who have elevated their traditions over honoring and knowing God; Also the Sanhedrin that governed in Jesus' time was a group of religious leaders appointed to be judges for the people. While not traditionally involved in falsifying evidence to bring about someone's death, Jesus was doing much to disrupt their work and undermine their authority.

<sup>307</sup> The Saducees were a small but powerful group of religious leaders at the time of Jesus who were mostly priests and who followed only the Old Testament law.

<sup>308</sup> Matthew 21:12

<sup>309</sup> Matthew 17:24; 21:12;

<sup>310</sup> Matthew 4:23; 8:16; 9:35; 10:1

gone away to think through and process for himself all the oppressive labels he had to live with and the oppressive society he was part of. He probably wanted to take a hard look at his life and consider the options before him about how he could lead his life. He could continue to live on the fringes of society making a living along with his father and watching in silence as the Roman Empire and the corrupt religious establishment enslaved and exploited his people. Or he could begin to resist the kind of inscriptions and identities thrust on him and his people by questioning the structures around him that enslaved and kept people unquestioningly in submission, ignorance, suffering and servitude. Like the characters Dulna and Dopdi, in the short story, *Draupadi* that we saw in Chapter 3, who faced such a choice – settle down and have kids or take up resistance and struggle against injustice, Jesus too had to make a choice.

In the wilderness Jesus made a decision – not to indulge in the pursuit of security and wealth and of glorious titles and the power they gave. He chose to resist this path that many so-called learned men of his time had taken. They gained power through their positions either in the religious establishment or in their service to the Roman Empire. Jesus thus conquered sin, not on the cross, but in the wilderness by refusing to give in to the sin of being co-opted to the prevalent and attractive trends of his time. Jesus chose to fight for life. He chose not to endure suffering that was inscribed on him and his people. As Brown and Parker point out,

“at issue is not what we choose to endure or accept, but what we refuse to relinquish. Redemption happens when people refuse to relinquish respect and concern for others, when people refuse to relinquish fullness of feeling, when people refuse to give up seeing, experiencing, and being connected and affected by all of life.”<sup>311</sup>

#### **5.3.4. Jesus’ strategy and vision: challenge, resist; together as equals**

In our reimagining of Jesus’ story, we also keep in mind the hermeneutic of critical evaluation in which it is important that we reconstruct the key values or

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<sup>311</sup> Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved The World?” in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. pp.1-30 <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/forgodso.htm> [Accessed 24 Nov 2010, 2:10 AM IST]

articulate an “emancipatory scale of values” that Schüssler Fiorenza talks about<sup>312</sup>. It is because of our historical imagination that we are able to tell a story differently, and it is our motivations and inclinations for a certain set of values that inspire us to be able to tell a story differently<sup>313</sup>. So let me try to reconstruct Jesus’ vision and his strategy to reach this vision.

Jesus gathered around him a group of like minded people – people who like himself were probably disillusioned with what they saw around them, but had not thought through a way to transform it. Together with this group of women and men, Jesus formulated his strategy to bring about transformation for himself and his society – to question (and not simply submit) to the religious and social rules, practices and fabric of his time, to challenge (and not simply accept) those in authority about what really gave them their authority, to liberate the sick, the lame, the possessed and the poor by showing them that they were not sick because of some sin in them.

Jesus’ vision was that all will have the power to resist, that they will not need to bow down to the Roman Empire or to religious authorities just because they had “power.” Jesus protested and challenged the barriers and restrictions of gender and communal boundaries by having a conversation with women considered “the other.” These acts of Jesus were in keeping with the vision that all are equal and boundaries were created by those in power to keep those under them in an alienated state – alienated from their selves and from each other and therefore unable to draw from their inner resources, and unite to fight the inscriptions of the powerful on them. All his life Jesus fought exclusive and oppressive boundaries believing in the kingdom of God principle that means abundance for everybody and where no one is excluded.

When we see Jesus as the one who fought the exclusive boundaries of his time and in this struggle against exclusive groups that close themselves, found the meaning of his life; then we see Jesus not as someone who saw

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<sup>312</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.178

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. p. 178 & 180

himself as destined for the cross (for voluntary suffering), but as someone who drew meaning in his life from his vision for society. For Dorothe Soelle,

“There is no Jesus who goes to his death knowing that God will be victorious and “win” a decisive victory for all time by raising him from the dead. Instead, there is a Jesus who does not have the power to “win,” in the traditional sense of conquering or having final victory, but who does have the power to love. Thus Jesus’ powerlessness is what constitutes his inner authority”<sup>314</sup>

While I agree with the first part of Soelle’s affirmation, I’d like to differ and add to her latter part of the quotation that Jesus’ inner authority rose not from powerlessness, but from his power to resist – which was a formidable power.

Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar elaborates on Jesus’ vision and ministry saying,

“Jesus challenged the ethical-social-cultural barriers of his time. He redefined what holiness meant. Jesus showed that touching the dead and raising them by his hand did not pollute him. Neither did the touch of the haemorrhaging woman contaminate him. Pollution happened only on account of evil thoughts and deeds. It was this resistance and challenge that led him to the cross”<sup>315</sup>

Evangeline Anderson powerfully explains the resistance of Jesus thus:

“Jesus speaks out as a voice of resistance – resistance to the powers that wanted to silence him, to define him as an ideal male Jew, and mould him to the practices, traditions, and cultures of his time. Jesus however rejected these definitions that denied the human dignity of the other, the wholeness of the other. The cross of Jesus Christ teaches us that love for justice cannot be quenched by any power”<sup>316</sup>

### **5.3.5. Jesus made the Christ: by a woman**<sup>317</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza says, imaginative role-play

“is a process of encounter between a biblical text and a group of people who use their imagination and dramatic capabilities to identify and enter a biblical scene with all their senses, emotions, heart and reason”<sup>318</sup>.

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<sup>314</sup> Dianne L. Oliver, “Christ in the World” in Sarah Katherine Pinnock. ed. *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003, p. 120

<sup>315</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Asian Feminist Christology”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.22, No.4 (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC) 2003. p. 9

<sup>316</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Turning Bodies Inside Out: Contours of Womanist Theology in Clarke, Manchala, Peacock. eds. *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.210

<sup>317</sup> For this entire interpretation of Mark 14:1-11, I have relied completely on the lecture by Lieve Troch in the “Christology Workshop” held by AWRC and led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

<sup>318</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.182



I am indebted to the workshop group of the christology workshop organized by Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC)<sup>319</sup> of which I was a part. In this group, we as a community of struggling selves trying to reach for agency and subjectivity in our individual lives and in the work we each were involved in, attempted to make sense of the ongoing structural violence, the nuances and complexities of living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society in which despite the ongoing violence, oppression and dehumanization, we also found themes of ongoing resistance in our individual and collective lives and work. We tried to reconstruct this story of Jesus' anointing in the background of this wider discussion. Schüssler Fiorenza says that 'Imaginative role-play is a feminist spiritual practice of imaginative interpretation'<sup>320</sup>. Taking a cue from the story of Jesus' anointing by an unnamed woman recorded in the Bible (Mark 14:1-11), I have used imaginative role-play to reconstruct the interpretation of this story.

At times Jesus was not able to sustain his strength and resolve to keep resisting and struggling. He too needed to be encouraged. When he knew it was merely a matter of time before he was found and killed, he prayed to God asking that this task be taken away from him. He was scared. He was fearful if he would be able to stand firm till the end. He doubted if what he was doing was worth the effort at all. This was when he was really alone. Most of his so-called closest followers did not understand the inner-turmoil and trauma he was going through. This was a few days before his arrest and crucifixion. The Chief priests and teachers of law (who were Jesus' primary targets through out his struggle) were plotting how to arrest and kill Jesus (Mark 14:1-2). Jesus was at the house of Simon, the leper. He was probably hiding there because a leper's house would be the last place those who were after him will venture into.

One of his women followers came to the house of the leper. This was a risk for her. This also means she knew Jesus would be there, so was probably one of Jesus' trusted friends. She came with a plan. She brought a perfume jar,

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<sup>319</sup> "Christology Workshop" held by AWRC and led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

<sup>320</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001. p.178

broke the jar and anointed Jesus' head with expensive perfume made of pure nard. She knew the custom of anointing a king and was familiar enough with Jesus to walk in, pour perfume on his head and ruffle his hair. Through her action she was performing the role of a prophet by anointing him their leader. Those in that room knew this symbolism as all the Jews had been waiting for another king/ a Messiah. But among his followers, none had had the courage or the vision to relate this Jesus, their friend and colleague in struggle, to the religious-political figure of Messiah they'd all been brought up to wait for and expect. When this woman openly proclaimed that she saw Jesus as their leader and the Messiah whom the Jews had been waiting for, some in the room were shocked. They didn't know how to react. They simply changed the subject by talking about money and how much the perfume cost. They diverted attention from the message, the act and the ritual performed by the woman.

This woman who was capable of anointing Jesus must have been a woman with some authority and power within Jesus' group. She must have been Jesus' equal in the movement against injustice, someone who worked with him and faced all the doubts he had too. She must have been accepted as a woman with the prophetic authority to anoint. Yet those in that room that day were angered by the timing she chose for her act. She had not anointed him when he had publicly performed spectacular acts among people. She chose to do this now when they were in hiding and hunted. So some in that room start arguing about peripheral things and take attention away from what had just happened. The act of anointing foreshadows the preparation of a body for burial. This woman realized that it was more important to prepare Jesus, herself and the entire group involved in the struggle, for the painful road of resistance ahead of them, than to feel guilty and sinful.

But what did this anointing mean for Jesus. Until she walked into that room, Jesus had been reclining at the table – alone with his thoughts probably of fear and doubts about his life's mission. Fearing whether he had the strength to give this struggle all that he had, doubting if this struggle was worth it if he got himself killed in the process, wondering if there was any purpose then in the

struggle. When this woman anointed him, Jesus understood the ritual symbolic implications of her act, and accepted it. He asks the others in the room to leave her alone. Jesus points out to them that they will always have the poor with them. By this Jesus means that the poor will always be there, since there will always be those who exploit and those who are exploited, this is a reason why their struggle against such structures needed to always go on, and not end with his death if he were killed. Jesus says the unnamed woman had done a beautiful thing for him (Mark 14:6). He recognises that in the risky and crucial point that their movement against injustice was in, this woman risked doing what she could, what was in her power to do.

The communication that goes on between Jesus and the woman through her act is both comforting as well as subversive. Through her act, this woman was silently telling Jesus, “You can go on! Do not hide. Overcome your fear, this (our struggle) is much bigger than you.” Jesus had been mulling over this fact that the struggle he was involved in could cost him his head and wondering if it was worth it. Now here was a woman who was empowering him and telling him “You can do it, and yes, it is worth it because it will go on even after you’re gone.” And Jesus realized and was empowered to feel that, “Yes I will do this even if it will cost me my life.” By way of acknowledging this woman’s empowering act, Jesus declares and charges all those in the room saying, that wherever the gospel – the story of their struggle and resistance against oppressive structures which is the good news – is told, this woman must be remembered. Jesus’ charge was “in memory of her” – the vision she had for the struggle that was larger than any single one of them, the courage and vision she had in declaring that it must go on. It must be noted here that Jesus said that this act must be told, not in memory of *him* (Jesus), but in memory of *her* (the woman who anointed him) (Mark 14:9). Maybe Jesus did not want to be “the anointed one,” but the woman gave him that last push of affirmation that helped him accept his role in the wider vision and purpose of the struggle.

The story begins with the verses indicating that the Chief priests were looking for a reason to kill Jesus (Mark 14:1). The story ends with the verses that

say Judas went to the Chief priests to say, “I have a reason for you – Jesus has just declared himself the Messiah” (Mark 14:10). It must be noted that if Judas could inform the Chief priests and they could accept as legitimate the anointing performed by this woman, she must have been a legitimate figure they all knew and who was accepted as having the power to anoint.

Judas totally missed the point of what the woman did and what Jesus said. He only appropriated the political-religious title of “Messiah” that he’d grown up with in his Jewish upbringing and used that to accuse Jesus. Not only Judas, but others among the disciples in that room too didn’t get the message – that her act and her memory should be remembered, if the core strength, meaning and purpose of their struggle were to be understood and carried out. Jesus needed them to understand that their struggle against structures of power, exploitation and injustice was bigger than any individual one of them and that this struggle must go on. Some of those present got the message. They realized that “Yes, it was time to go on; they couldn’t hide from what they had started. They must see it through.”

The unnamed woman in Mark 14 was the one who made Jesus the Christ (the anointed one). But she is never talked about though Jesus charged that she be remembered. We can assume that being an equal with Jesus in their struggle, this woman too faced the same threat as Jesus did. We can also assume that she too was considered dangerous by the Chief priests who recognised her power to anoint and believed Judas’ report about her anointing Jesus. But in history we don’t hear about her. In the interpretations of Jesus’ story that were handed down, the patriarchal and kyriarchal motivations chose to ignore the woman who made Jesus the Christ.

In this kind of interpretation, what does it mean to be Christ and what does it mean when we call ourselves Christians? Jesus became anointed as the Christ to go on with his struggle. We are called and anointed to continue that struggle – for life, for resistance against hegemonic power, for justice – by following the path of struggle, protest and resistance.

### **5.3.6. Critical evaluation**

A hermeneutics of evaluation accepts the authority only of those texts and formulations that have passed through a critical hermeneutics of suspicion and have been found to be emancipatory in function. The double reference points - cultural-ideological and religious-theological – of this hermeneutical step helps us reinterpret how we understand the Jesus story and our appropriation of it for our lives.

#### **5.3.6.1. Do we need a Saviour or do we want ‘agency’?**

We see Jesus as a “Saviour who suffered,” when we as a human race feel we are in need of being saved. What do we want to be saved from? Many Christian women in Asia<sup>321</sup> feel we must be saved from the “original sin,” of turning away from God, and go back to God. We feel something has to be restored. The shortcomings of human beings as a whole is conceptualized as original sin – anger, greed, hunger for power, destructiveness – all and more are conceptualized in this “sin” from which we need “to be saved.” But when we say we need “to be saved” it takes away the responsibility, onus and agency from us to do something about our state ourselves. For this instead, we seek a Saviour from outside ourselves. When we see Jesus as a Saviour who came to take on all our sin on himself and suffer and die on the cross so that we can be saved, we claim a Saviour from outside ourselves and abdicate our own responsibility and ability to save ourselves or transform the world around us.

When we look at Jesus only as an exceptional hero who resisted the powers of his time, we still also have to admit that because of this struggle for justice, Jesus had to suffer. This is like saying that when we want to change the world, we must suffer and that suffering comes with struggle, but that this suffering is ‘better’ because it is for a better goal, which somehow makes this suffering seem salvific. But this too is again a pitfall. When a person chooses to

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<sup>321</sup> In the “Christology Workshop” held by AWRC and led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006, the group consisted of women from Philippines, Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore. When we came to the point in the discussion when Lieve asked the question “do we need a saviour and if so why? The immediate reaction from most of us in the group was: “If we don’t have a saviour, how will we be saved from our sins?”

stand for a cause and is killed for it/become martyrs, they are again seen as exceptional heroes who suffered and died for their cause. This is an awful end which doesn't allow one to make meaning of the experiences of non-catastrophic, ongoing and persistent struggle, resistance and protest, because in this understanding, all of it ultimately leads to one's being killed. From this perspective, the death of Jesus is,

“no longer an execution but a ‘sacrificial atonement,’ no longer a violent dehumanization, but an obedient self-immolation, no longer an encounter with brutal force, but a willingly accepted victimization”<sup>322</sup>.

When we deconstruct the need to see Jesus as a Saviour whose suffering was sacrificial, voluntary and salvific, and instead try to look at Jesus in the light of our own experiences as women living on the fringes of society, being considered inferior, subordinate and defiling, being inscribed with the labels of gender, creed and community, we gain courage to affirm Jesus' life as a choice for life and resistance and his “death” as a murder on the cross for the path of resistance and struggle that he took. It was the punishment that structures he fought against nailed him for, for resisting the power structures of his time, for unravelling new values, for exposing the “power of the powerful and making them seem ordinary”<sup>323</sup>.

### **5.3.6.2. Reactions to the Cross**

When we realize that in the moment Jesus fought for life, liberation and justice, he was killed, we could have two reactions to the cross: we could get very angry or we could say, “Yes he suffered and was killed and so I have to suffer and be killed.” The latter of the reactions is what we usually are taught to internalize except that it is coated in the language of “salvation” saying if you suffer (read submit, be subordinate and silent), you will be saved (read be killed).

When we have the first reaction – of getting angry at the cross – then we realize, as Lieve Troch says, that the historical person of Jesus fought injustices

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<sup>322</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.126

<sup>323</sup> Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Asian Feminist Christology”, *In God's Image*, Vol.22, No.4, (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2003) p.8

of his time and for that he was killed. Then we realize that it is this person who protested, resisted and was killed/executed for his struggle that we call and claim as Christ<sup>324</sup>. It is the man who chose life and resistance and not suffering and death that made this struggle possible. It was the choice for life and struggle for life that made Jesus the Christ – the one who makes it possible for the struggle to go on.

### **5.3.6.3. Making meaning of resurrection: Reactions to the tomb**

The early community of Jesus' followers did not know how to make meaning of the cross when Jesus was killed. For a time they went through sadness, doubt and depression. But then the women tell the community that what has been inaugurated was not death, but a struggle for life and resistance. The apostles first dismiss Mary Magdalene's claim that Jesus' tomb is empty (Mark 16:10) as "women's talk." Then slowly some the community started to believe that to be killed at the point when you struggle for life showing resistance against death-dealing forces, is not the end. The cross is not the end when one struggles for life, right to resist and liberation from oppression. They were angry at the cross as it seemingly spelt their end.

Their anger at the cross led them to believe in the resurrection. It is not the cross but the ongoing struggle for life and resistance against death-dealing forces which becomes the center. When they started to believe that death does not close the movement for justice, the early Christian community was able to make sense of the resurrection. Even after Jesus' death, the community had to move on and continue to resist and struggle for life.

The first reactions from the early Christian community showing direction that they should move on came from women who pointed to Jesus as one who struggled along with them in their movement for life and against religious systems and institutions. The women firmly located the resurrected one on earth,

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<sup>324</sup> Lieve Troch, From researcher's lecture notes on the "Christology Workshop" led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

on the open road leading to Galilee<sup>325</sup> (Mark 16:7). Lieve Troch points out that the men on the other hand made a story about Pentecost which signified men taking over meaning-making from the hands of women and which also signifies the moment that the church starts to become an institution rather than being a movement on the road, as the women saw it<sup>326</sup>.

Women saw Jesus as part of the movement which they continued as his co-conspirators, co-challengers and co-resistors. They felt they needed the same spirit of resistance that Jesus had – his utter refusal to relinquish fullness of life for himself and for others. Jesus had gone ahead of them in this road to Galilee (Mark 16:7) and they needed to continue on this road.

This re-imagined understanding of Jesus and resurrection is diametrically opposed to the common sense christological understanding that says “I need Jesus as my Saviour, to suffer for me in order to save my soul.” The common sense understanding of resurrection, as James H. Charlesworth clarifies, is:

“the concept of God's raising the body and soul after death (meant literally) to a new and eternal life (not a return to mortal existence)<sup>327</sup>.

In other words, most Christians believe that just as Jesus rose from the dead, they as believers too will be raised from the dead<sup>328</sup>. This common sense understanding mystifies resurrection as relating to the spiritual life of a believer or as guarantee of being raised from the dead (1Cor 15; 1 Thess 4: 15-17)<sup>329</sup>. The resurrected Jesus is then believed to go up into heaven at ascension (Acts 1:9-11). This gives believers the hope that despite the suffering they undergo on earth, believing in Jesus as Saviour and living obedient to God's will, will save them and ultimately take them to heaven after death. The common sense

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<sup>325</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.123

<sup>326</sup> Lieve Troch, From researcher's lecture notes on the “Christology Workshop” led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

<sup>327</sup> James H. Charlesworth, "Where Does the Concept of Resurrection Appear and How Do we Know that?" in James H. Charlesworth, H., C. D. Elledge, et al. *Resurrection: The origin and future of a Biblical doctrine*, New York: T & T Clark, 2006. p.2.

<sup>328</sup> W. Waite Willis Jr. "A Theology of Resurrection: Its Meaning for Jesus, Us and God" in James H. Charlesworth, C. D. Elledge, et al. *Resurrection: The origin and future of a Biblical doctrine*, New York: T & T Clark, 2006. p.188.

<sup>329</sup> James H. Charlesworth, "Where Does the Concept of Resurrection Appear and How Do we Know that?" in James H. Charlesworth, C. D. Elledge, et al. *Resurrection: The origin and future of a Biblical doctrine*, New York: T & T Clark, 2006. p.16.



understanding of resurrection and ascension has an “other worldly” orientation. It does not see Jesus as going ahead of us on this road, but as having gone up to heaven to be with God the father (Acts 1:9-11). Seeing Jesus as going up and away forms the basis of christological understandings such as the one we see in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 which sees Jesus as having gone back to heaven and sitting at God’s right hand. The understanding in 1 Corinthians sees Jesus’ presence as obtained in some visionary form to certain individuals such as apostles, gifted and spiritual people<sup>330</sup>.

The re-imagined understanding of Jesus and resurrection is diametrically opposed to the common sense christological understanding of the cross, salvation and resurrection. In re-reading resurrection following our reimagining of the narrative of anointing by an unnamed woman in Mark 14:1-11, we see resurrection as giving believers a concrete principle to practically live life on earth – in resistance and struggle against injustice, hegemonic power and oppression. In our re-reading of resurrection, the tomb is not the last word in the Jesus story, for as W.W. Willis points out "It is important, ... to make it clear that calling into question the empty tomb tradition does not mean discarding belief in the resurrection."<sup>331</sup> The empty tomb tradition celebrates women as those, who, like Jesus, refused to “relinquish their commitment and solidarity with those who fall victim in the struggle against dehumanizing powers”<sup>332</sup>. The empty tomb does not symbolise absence in that the resurrected and living one has gone away into heaven, but it signifies the presence of the resurrected one on the road ahead of them – in a place like Galilee – which is a particular place/space for naming oppressions and struggling against them to bring about life for themselves and

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<sup>330</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.126

<sup>331</sup> W. Waite Willis Jr. "A Theology of Resurrection: Its Meaning for Jesus, Us and God" in James H. Charlesworth, C. D. Elledge, et al. *Resurrection: The origin and future of a Biblical doctrine*, New York: T & T Clark, 2006. p.199

<sup>332</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.125

for all<sup>333</sup>. As Schüssler Fiorenza says, “Jesus is going ahead – not going away”<sup>334</sup>.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter we’ve discussed the life of Jesus, the choices he made, the path he took and the woman who made him realize his purpose and gave him the affirmation to go on in his struggle. We’ve also discussed how we could appropriate or understand the Jesus story without our pre-understandings of the need for a Saviour and what the correctives to such an understanding could be.

To summarise what we have gleaned from the discussion in this chapter:

- The understanding of Jesus as a Saviour removes responsibility and agency from us as we seek salvation outside of ourselves and we also see ourselves as inherently in need of “being saved”.
- Understanding Jesus as an exceptional hero means that when he is not around he is no longer a danger. It means that ordinary people cannot do what he did. This reduces the power of the struggle for justice and life that Jesus began.
- Appropriating Jesus as an ordinary person lets us understand him as one who in the face of deadly odds chose life and refused to relinquish his and his community’s right to life in fullness.
- Realizing that the cross is not the last word, feeling anger at the cross is the beginning.
- Acknowledgement of the empty tomb means acceptance of it as signifying struggle for life that is ongoing, in which Jesus, the living and resurrected one has gone ahead of us.
- Realization of Jesus’ resurrected presence with us in the open road to Galilee puts us on the open road along with Jesus to follow his path of resistance.

Such an understanding of Jesus who is Christ who was not conquered by the cross and as the resurrected one on the road ahead of us calling us to continue

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<sup>333</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.126

<sup>334</sup> Ibid. p.126

the struggle through resistance and protest are the heuristic keys to seeing how the Jesus story offers resistance to the common sense christological constructions of Jesus as the obedient son of God, the sacrificial and Suffering Servant and Saviour of the world.

When understood in this light, Jesus' journey to the cross can be envisioned as "a decisive event in the breaking of the Kingdom of God"<sup>335</sup> A Kingdom of God that envisions "the possibility of a reality where social space for all is created and people are empowered with political agency"<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Y.T. Vinajajaraj, "Anointing at Bethany: New Imaginations on Body", *In God's Image*, Vol.26, No.3, September 2007, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC. p.62

<sup>336</sup> Ibid. p.62

## CHAPTER 6: RESISTING BODIES: FORESHADOWS OF RESURRECTION POWER IN OUR TIMES

### 6.1. Introduction

Vinayaraj comments, that the bodies of the oppressed are constructed by those who categorize them as the “abnormal” or as outside of constructed images of pure, strong, intelligent, developed, religious etc<sup>337</sup>. Such discourses, I feel, are inscribed on the bodies of women and other marginalized groups. Chapter 2 showed us how women’s bodies are defined, inscribed upon and marked with various identity discourses. Michel Foucault says,

“Freedom does not basically lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized and classified”<sup>338</sup>.

Following this argument, Vinayaraj therefore affirms that new imaginations on Dalit bodies (and, I add, women’s bodies and bodies of other marginalized groups) is a pre-requisite for (dalits, women and other marginalized groups) to construct new discourses about themselves.<sup>339</sup> In chapter 3, Draupadi, Irom and the Manorama Mothers show in their lives how they have used their bodies to rebel against and challenge the ways in which they have been defined (as illiterate, weak, powerless), categorized and classified (according to their gender, community and regional location), and in this rebellion and resistance how they have actually experienced what freedom means.

These 3 stories of women’s resisting and protesting bodies defy the stereotypical interpretations of women’s role in conflict situations as the vulnerable and powerless. Their use of their bodies makes possible a

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<sup>337</sup> Y.T. Vinayaraj, “Anointing at Bethany: New Imaginations on Body”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.26, No.3, September 2007, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p.62

<sup>338</sup> As quoted in Y.T. Vinayaraj, “Anointing at Bethany: New Imaginations on Body”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.26, No.3, September 2007, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, p.63

<sup>339</sup> Y.T. Vinayaraj, “Anointing at Bethany: New Imaginations on Body”, *In God’s Image*, Vol.26, No.3, September 2007, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC. p.62

“shift in the image of women from vulnerable victims to an image of women as a highly differentiated group of social actors, who possess valuable resources and capacities and who have their own agendas”<sup>340</sup>.

These women “exhibit unique ways of constituting their subjectivities for speaking and writing in response to dominant discourses of power”<sup>341</sup>.

Though one’s social context helps one to evolve one’s understanding of self, each person by being critically self reflexive, has the ability to re-define notions of self given to us by our social context. When one feels one’s personal experiences clashing with the definitions given to us by society, we modify our self-fashioned subjectivity. As Jesus did in his times, and as these women did using their bodies. This is how

“women and subalterns have always been able to fashion a space of creativity even under the most oppressive and fascist structures, away from the gaze of the oppressors”<sup>342</sup>.

This is also probably why despite the Suffering Servant christology’s inscriptions on women that we’ve seen in chapter 4, we are still able to use the resources and strength that comes from women’s bodies that resist and protest, to unearth a radically different christological articulation. We are able to do this through following the overt and subtle acts of Jesus and certain women characters in the Jesus story, like the unnamed woman who anointed him and Mary Magdalene, who first realized the message of resurrection along with her women companions.

## **6.2. Parallels Between Christological Meaning-Making And Women’s Resisting Bodies**

Schüssler Fiorenza sees the meaning-making by the early Christian community as attempts at meaning-making not just in terms of history, but as responses to and affirmations of Jesus’ resurrection<sup>343</sup> in the face of the devastation they experienced at Jesus’ death.

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<sup>340</sup> Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, “Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India”, <http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/GenderedConstructions.htm> [Accessed 9 Nov2010, 12.36pm IST]

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.120

She sees the early Christian attempts as beginning with the very real experience of Jesus' dehumanization and crucifixion as a political criminal. Schüssler Fiorenza draws three similarities between the early Christian attempts at meaning-making and feminist critical assessments of the theology of the cross:

1. Both have the same starting point.

“They begin with the historical fact of unjust oppression, the experience of struggle for a different world, and an encounter with the victimization and death of the dehumanized person”<sup>344</sup>.

2. Both have the same context for their meaning-making – of unjust suffering.

3. Both

“claim the historical agency of the oppressed and disenfranchised to define and change death-dealing situations of dehumanization.”<sup>345</sup>

I would like to trace these three similarities also in our analysis of the three stories of bodies as resistance and protest in chapter 3: Of Draupadi, Irom Sharmila Chanu and the Manorama Mothers.

The starting point of Draupadi's journey is that Draupadi as an individual belonged to a group that faced oppression and exploitation. Along with her husband Dulna, she struggled for a different world for herself and her community. She had to deal with Dulna being killed like an animal as he drank water from a river. Her apprehension by the army, her torture and rape – constitute unjust suffering. In refusing to be clothed again, and in using her raped and torn body as a form of resistance and protest, she claims agency from within her disenfranchised state, challenges the dehumanization inscribed on her, and turns her victimized state back on her oppressor and uses it to shame him by redefining and transforming notions of masculinity and femininity.

Irom Sharmila Chanu starts her journey from the historical fact of the unjust oppression of her people in Manipur and NEI. She was part of the movement in Manipur that fought for peace through rallies and activism. She encountered the victimization and death of innocent people at Malon due to the

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<sup>344</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet-Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, New York: Continuum, 1995. p.120

<sup>345</sup> Ibid. p.120

indiscriminate shooting of the Indian army. Her whole State and region lives in a dehumanized state where normal life is not an option. Irom realizes that innocent people are suffering in her State. Though Irom doesn't perceive her ongoing hunger strike for the past 10 years as "suffering," her incarceration in a hospital room and being force fed through a nasal tube is physical suffering. From the disenfranchised state Irom uses the only resource she had – her body, to resist the inscriptions that the oppressive powers of the State want to impose on them as a people by limiting their lives and curtailing any normalcy, and also to symbolise the inability of the State to conquer her resolve to struggle for peace and the repeal of the AFSPA in Manipur. She is struggling to change the death-dealing situations of dehumanization in Manipur through her body.

The Manorama Mothers share the same elements as Irom – the unjust oppression of their people through acts of brutality by the army. They were part of the ongoing peace-building and conflict-resolution activities in their State by women like the "torch-bearers" who walked the streets with torches at night to prevent any mishaps and abuse happening. They too encountered the victimization, dehumanization and death of Manorama by the Army that arrested, tortured, raped, and then killed her and dumped her body. The Manorama Mothers saw the unjust suffering of many around them - from children who were kidnapped by insurgents to women who were raped by the army. With no other resort, and angered at the continued abuse of power by the army, they use their bodies to carve their agency from their state of disenfranchisement and challenge the powerful army to dare rape their naked bodies in public. They re-define the raped and dehumanized body of Manorama and try to change the equations of power by using their naked bodies to challenge the army right at their head quarters.

These three stories evidence women claiming their power of agency through their bodies. Using their bodies as protest, these women, from their state of unjust suffering and powerlessness, claim their ability to challenge the death-dealing forces around them by their resistance and protest. These stories show three different forms of subjectivities that they constitute with their bodies in the

face of coercive powers. This foreshadows Jesus' resistance and his choice for life.

### **6.3. Women's Resisting Bodies: Foreshadows Of Resurrection**

Elements from the Jesus story that led to our reconstruction of the Resurrection in Chapter 5 are seen in the stories of the 3 women in chapter 3 as well. When Jesus made a choice in the wilderness to embark on this struggle, he wasn't sure where the path would lead him. When he was doubtful, an unnamed woman helped him realize that the struggle was bigger than him, yet he had his historic role to play in it. Foreshadowing this aspect of the Jesus story and our appropriation of his resurrected state, we see that Draupadi too knew her cause and her struggle would go on beyond her and without her because she understood the significance of her part in history to make the struggle go on. Her story parallels the story of Jesus who resisted the powers and principalities of injustice during his time. Just as Jesus' body was torn and tortured and killed, yet his struggle went on beyond him, so too was Draupadi's body torn and broken yet her struggle lived on. Jesus struggle and Draupadi's cause lived on because it was a struggle against injustice and powers and principalities. Her resistance to fall into the "victim, martyr" who voluntarily dies for others" marks Draupadi as a hermeneutical tool for encountering christology on a different level. She had a cause to fight for, but she did not voluntarily give herself up – she was taken, apprehended, raped; As was Christ – he was hunted, betrayed, found, tortured and murdered on the cross.

Jesus' body was publicly displayed on the cross to make an example of what would happen to those who did not conform, but resisted and challenged the powers that be. However little did the powers that be know that the this same body's absence at the empty tomb and presence with all his co-resistors, would spawn a movement much greater than the number of people they could publicly crucify. This finds its parallel in the Manorama Mothers' public display of their naked bodies as a form of protest that reproduces before their aggressors that their bodies brought alive the bodies of many abused by the army. The message their bodies send is clear – they may have been killed by the army, but their



beings are reproduced in the naked and publicly displayed bodies of these Manipur women, crying out for justice. The repressive State that tried to quell Manoram's being by killing her body, were confronted by that same body that challenged them. The Manorma Mothers were fighting for all the daughters and children of India. Their reaching for a subjectivity from within their subjected state now offers us the possibility of a new hermeneutic approach to understand Jesus' struggle for justice and his protest against unjust structures.

Jesus' life was a protest and resistance against the decline of continuous existence or life in all its fullness. Just as Irom's body became a symbol for challenging the socially and politically determined decline of normalcy in her State. I doubt if the iron will of this "iron woman of Manipur" can ever be paralleled in history – she has pushed the limits of endurance and is still fasting – 10 years and counting. The strength of her conviction in the purpose is such that it cannot be paralleled even to the ministry of Jesus that ended in 3 years. It is her conviction that keeps alive her struggle and continues to make a mockery of the State's apathy. It is this strength of hope in the face of mammoth structural and systemic death-dealing forces that makes Irom's ongoing struggle a hermeneutical tool to encounter and reconstruct christology and resurrection with a dimension of resistant hope.

In Jesus' story of resistance he struggled not only for himself from his state of being stigmatized, but also for fullness of life for all around him. The ability to resist and protest evil, injustice and violence that we see in the stories of the three women have both a personal and a corporate dimension. They were trying to assert their identities and their beings as persons in and through their bodies and they were all able to do so because their motivations were also of a corporate nature. Their horizons were wider than what their gendered roles assigned to them. They were extraordinarily moved by injustice and violence, prodded by a righteous anger, had a purpose, a cause and a struggle that was bigger than their individual subjectivities; but at the same time their individual body-protests was also part of the community of struggling selves trying to actualise their visions for a more just world. Each of these stories show that what

they did was 'voluntary' but it is not 'suffering' they take on voluntarily, but "protest and resistance" that they take on voluntarily. This trajectory of protest and resistance rather than "submission and sacrifice" is what helps us use the motif of resisting bodies as hermeneutical tools to interpret christology and resurrection.

#### **6.4. Resisting Bodies As Hermeneutical Tools To Interpret Christology**

Chapter 3 has shown us how women who are able to use their bodies as protest to resist oppressive structures, are able to do so, not because they wait for an external Saviour, but because they dig deep into themselves and find the strength to resist. Their strength also comes from their hope and belief that the road of resistance is worth the struggle. Draupadi hoped that even if she is killed, some day in the future, her people will be rid of unjust money lenders and corrupt law enforcement. Irom hopes that one day in the future her people will have the right to self-determination. The Manorama Mothers hope that their righteous anger at the dehumanization of their daughters and their peoples will one day bear fruit and their children will be able to lead safe and secure lives in their own land. All three stories of women's bodies as protest carries elements of resistance that is rooted in, and draws from their belief and hope that their struggle and resistance are worth it. In the words of Lieve Troch, for these women, "the struggle is its own justification"<sup>346</sup>.

I believe that believing in the power of resistance against oppressive structures, is in itself a legitimization for such struggles. Draupadi, Irom and Manorama believed in the validity of their actions and were able to legitimize for themselves that their actions were meaningful. In discovering and asserting their own sense of meaning-making of their oppressive situations, these women claim a rare sense of "authority" – an authority which in the words of Hyunju Bae, is

"the ability to validate what is true, not depending on recognition or approval from others, but the spirituality to negotiate the multiple spaces/locations we find ourselves in"<sup>347</sup>.

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<sup>346</sup> Lieve Troch, From researcher's lecture notes on the "Christology Workshop" led by Lieve Troch, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 20-24 Aug 2006.

<sup>347</sup> Hyunju Bae, "Women's Leadership and Authority in Pauline Christianity - Session II" in *AWRC Leadership Workshop*, Jan 18, 2006, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. (Researcher's lecture notes).

Hyunju Bae also affirms that such authority for most women springs from our bodies, when she says that

“Women’s bodies are women’s wisdom. Gynecologists say women’s problems are psychosomatic. This means its all about how she heals herself, finds her own centre of being with authority”<sup>348</sup>.

Draupadi, Irom and the Manorama Mothers found their sense of authority and their center of being claiming their own authority.

As Christian feminist theologians seeking to build a critical feminist theology and christology of liberation and transformation, it will be profitable for us to appropriate Jesus as the resurrected and living one who goes ahead of us in our struggles, as one who made a choice and took a specific path during his life – a path that we choose in the present. He chose life and he chose to struggle for justice and fullness of life for all by taking the path of challenging, resisting and protesting the structures and powers of his time. As Hyunju Bai points out, Jesus found his center of being and claimed his own authority to validate what was true for him, not depending on approval from the religious/political authorities or even his own group of friends and comrades, but in and through the spirituality he found in his negotiation of the multiple spaces and locations he found himself in.

The public display of broken bodies – in the stories of Jesus, Draupadi, Irom and the Manorama Mothers also shows that struggles of resistance and protest will always be punished by the powers and principalities. This should be perceived as punishment that lays the onus on those perpetrating it and not suffering that lays the onus on the one receiving punishment. The forms of protest that these women or Jesus took, did not perceive their resistance as suffering. They also refused to accept their public punishment as the last word. The cross was not the last word. The rape of Draupadi was not the last word, the incarceration and force feeding of Irom is not the last word, the rape of Manorama or the incarceration of the Manorama Mothers is not the last word. In

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<sup>348</sup> Hyunju Bae, “Women’s Leadership and Authority in Pauline Christianity (II), Planning Team for Feminist Theology Modules Project.eds. *Telling Her Story: Introduction to an Asian Feminist Re-reading of History*, in the series *Modules on Asian Feminist Theologies*, Book 2, Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2006. p.75-76.

each of these stories it is in their continued and ongoing struggle for life even beyond these seeming 'last words' or public punishments, that is the final trajectory – the trajectory of resurrection – resistance breeding hope in the continued and ongoing struggle for life despite all odds.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to show how “resisting bodies” of women can provide a hermeneutical key to unlocking a more liberative and transformative christology than the traditional common sense christologies peddled in popular Christianity and in traditional theological discourses. Below, I shall summarise what this exploratory study revealed.

The exploration of the gendered inscriptions on the bodies of women in the Indian context revealed the following:

- That the woman’s body becomes the site for marking religious, cultural, communal and gender identity
- Underlying all of these markings is a tendency to own, objectify, control and subordinate the woman’s body
- Holding all of this together is also the thread of ‘submission-suffering’ that is seen as deserved, virtuous and salvific for a woman

The analysis of stories of women’s bodies as resistance and protest revealed the following:

- Body here is a site of resistance though it may appear to be physically and psychologically torn.
- Body is a weapon of resistance and protest.
- The strength to use the body this way was the realization that the cause they struggled for lay beyond their gendered horizons and stereotypical roles.
- They realized that their cause and their struggle would go on beyond them and without them yet also realizing the significance of their part in history to make the struggle go on.
- The stories of the women find parallels with Jesus who resisted the powers and principalities of injustice during his time, and just as Jesus’ body was torn and tortured and killed, but his struggle went on beyond him, because it was a struggle against injustice and powers and principalities; so too continues the contemporary struggles against injustice.

- A sense of purpose and conviction that their stand is for the truth – becomes the resource, strength, a form of spirituality and hope to keep going.
- Naked raped brutalized bodies usually perceived in shades of victimhood, being subjected, compelled is overturned and these same bodies are used as a form of resistance, protest and as a weapon to shame and humiliate the gendered notions of power and masculinity. The body becomes a weapon to shame those who wanted to shame it.
- They were extraordinarily moved by injustice and violence, prodded by a righteous anger.
- Their anger made them able to shed their inhibitions in using their bodies. This kind of “anger” is what Jesus too practiced when he drove the vendors and merchants from the temple. The “practice of this kind of righteous anger” against social injustice (*Roudhram Pazhagu*) helps women shed stereotypes and societal strictures.
- The refusal to let honour and shame be mapped on their bodies and thus their refusal to relinquish their rights to self definition and self-determination.
- The ability to resist and protest evil, injustice and violence have both a personal and a corporate dimension.
- They had a purpose, a cause and a struggle that was bigger than their individual subjectivities; but at the same time their individual body-protests was also part of the community of struggling selves trying to actualise their visions for a more just world.
- What they did was ‘voluntary’ but it is not ‘suffering’ they take on voluntarily, but “protest and resistance” that they take on voluntarily.
- ‘Resisting Bodies’ opens up a dialogical/ hermeneutical space that can challenge traditional common sense understanding of christologies that glorify suffering.

The analysis of the damage that the christological understanding of Suffering Servant has wrought on women and its legitimization of women's suffering revealed:

- Women across Asia have experienced the image of Jesus, the Suffering Servant as a double edged sword: it has been a source of comfort as they journeyed painful paths of suffering, it has also equally been a source of abuse, violence and subordination.
- The problematic element of the suffering servant image is the glorification of suffering as necessary and the claim that suffering is in itself redemptive and salvific.
- The painful inscriptions these elements have caused to women's identity formation and on women's bodies are legion.

The experiences of women's bodies as struggle, as protest/resistance and as an attempt by women to gain subjectivity in their individual lives and for a collective goal, became heuristic keys to analyse christology. The themes, motifs from this analysis then became hermeneutical lenses to look at christology and to reconstruct a christology that is liberative and leads to transformation. The wisdom of women's "Resisting Bodies" as a reconstructive tool to reconstruct a christology that is liberative and not oppressive helped me understand suffering of Christ not as voluntary but as protest and resistance.

The reconstruction of christology and resurrection led to the following conclusions:

- The understanding of Jesus as a Saviour removes responsibility and agency from us as we seek salvation outside of ourselves and we also see ourselves as inherently in need of "being saved."
- Understanding Jesus as an exceptional hero means that when he is not around he is no longer a danger (to the powers that be). It means that ordinary people cannot do what he did. This reduces the power of the struggle for justice and life that Jesus began.

- Appropriating Jesus as an ordinary person lets us understand him as one who in the face of deadly odds chose life and refused to relinquish his and his community's right to life in fullness.
- Realizing that the cross is not the last word, feeling anger at the cross is the beginning.
- Acknowledgement of the empty tomb means acceptance of it as signifying struggle for life that is ongoing, in which Jesus, the living and resurrected one has gone ahead of us.
- Realization of Jesus' resurrected presence with us in the open road to Galilee puts us on the open road along with Jesus to follow his path of resistance.

Finally in tracing the similarities in early Christological meaning-making and a feminist critical assessment of the cross and Jesus story we were able to glimpse the traces of resurrection power for our times foreshadowed in the stories of women's resisting bodies.

Thus this research, by critically studying the phenomenon of 'Resisting Bodies,' has opened up a dialogical/ hermeneutical space in which we could:

- challenge traditional common sense understanding of christologies that glorify suffering
- understand christology in a critical, feminist and liberationist perspective
- appropriate the resurrection of Jesus in a new way that can sustain us and help us strive for transformation in our ongoing struggles in the midst of constant dehumanization and oppression



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