

Unsilencing Tamar: Creative Narrative in Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics

The community book of the People of God finds itself under critical analysis daily by laypersons and scholars. Much of this analysis brings to the table the pride and assumptions of the patriarchal heritage of our society. So ingrained is this context that, unless these tendencies are identified, many voices found within this holy community book are silenced and lost. We see how easy it is to lose these voices in Pamela Cooper-White's retelling of the story of Tamar from 2 Samuel 13. She not only shows how these voices are lost, but also reclaims the silenced voice of Tamar to question these assumptions by inverting the story from a patriarchal perspective to one of the victim's. In doing so, *The Cry of Tamar* illustrates an urgent need to stop "the violence and abuse of women and other oppressed groups."¹

Cooper-White's investigation combines elements of incest and domestic violence that are all too often echoed in modern events. She addresses the connection between modern and ancient stories by reminding the reader that, like so many other stories of domestic violence that we hear of today, the perpetrator was someone whom the victim knew, and that the assault was committed in a familiar place². Taking into consideration Tamar's silencing, Cooper-White points out that not only does the perpetrator pay no respect to her voice, but those whom Tamar seeks help from silence her as well: "The victim's brother minimizes what happened. He asks not, 'Did Amnon rape you?' but 'Has Amnon your brother been with you?' The victim is told by her

¹ Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

brother to keep. . .quiet.”³ This silencing robs Tamar of her personhood and any ability to have control of the situation.

Moreover, Cooper-White points out that this silencing is related to the bias of the narrator: “[they are] concerned with the succession of kings, the fulfillment of (patriarchal) prophecy concerning the establishment of an absolute monarchy. . .the rulership of men is therefore not only the implicit cultural perspective of the book of 2 Samuel, but its explicit agenda.”⁴ We can see even today that the biases of the original author of this text have been carried through history to modern day interpreters who continue to silence Tamar’s voice. These modern interpretations focus solely on the succession of kings in Israel, leaving out any attention to the injustice committed against Tamar. Instead, Cooper-White interprets this text as a story primarily dealing with the cry of the victim. We can use this interpretation to help us hear the cry of victims of domestic violence, for those who are oppressed around us.

Cooper-White invokes this new interpretation by retelling the story of Tamar from the viewpoint of her niece. This helps the reader of this new story to see this painful struggle, drawing the reader into a personal realm and evoking emotions that may not have been felt in the original telling of the story on account of preexisting biases. This small child, without power herself, tells a tale of great importance, conveying power of one whom we may see as otherwise weak and insignificant. The reader sees through the eyes of the niece the many aspects that are not told in the original story: the quiet whispers of the remaining women after the rape and death of

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

Tamar, the indifference for Tamar, and most importantly Tamar’s silenced voice. The effectiveness of this technique, *subversive memory*, is to “[describe] a process of retrieving lost voices of biblical women through historical imagination and re-creation.”⁵ Cooper-White employs this style of narrative extremely well, which demonstrates the restorative power of storytelling.

Unfortunately, narrative can be used as a subversive means to win over the audience by making them assume the biases of the historical context without their even knowing it. The narrator is in a position of power. This affords the ability to leave out and put in various different elements of the story at will, molding the story into whatever the narrator wishes. Cooper-White points out that almost invariably “the narrator” of these stories are the men who already have power within the social context of the time: “mostly, the narrator (I assume *he*) steers us in the direction of primary interest, even sympathy, for the men all around [Tamar].”⁶ This position of power found in the narrator has been passed along through the generations of men telling this story to the interpretation of men from even our own time. The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* of the Revised Standard Version even praises the narrator of the Story of Tamar without any concern for the historical bias contained within. Cooper-White argues that these interpretations claim objectification by siteing historical cultural trends of patriarchy, which only continue to silence Tamar. “Some reader may argue that the treatment of women as property was simply a cultural reality of biblical times, and that we cannot read back into the text a consciousness about women’s equality and

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

personhood that did not exist then.”⁷Interpreters such as P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., even go so far as to lift up Amnon even more than the original narrator and frame the story of Tamar as one of “excessive love.”⁸ For those who have ever experienced the pain and suffering of domestic violence or seen the effects of such horrific pain, to even begin to believe McCarter’s interpretation is unthinkable. Amnon’s type of “love” was one of ownership, one arising from the wanton desire to subjugate all he perceived as a means to an end.

The hold of these patriarchal interpreters has not completely squashed to oppressed Tamar. There are many progressive authors reclaiming lost voice and power for the silenced and oppressed. Calling into question the traditions of the original narrators and oppressive interpreters. Phyllis Tribble and Judith Todd are two such voices that are calling into question this silencing patriarchal system.⁹ These challenging voices point out past atrocities and shoot them down: “Todd not only raises the justice issue pertaining directly to Tamar...but she also highlights Tamar’s counsel, restoring to Tamar the status of wise woman.”¹⁰ Tamar has a new life in this interpretation; one that is in a place of honor and dignity despite the shame forced on her by the powerful men within the story. This act of unsilencing frees the reader from the bonds of the patriarchal mandate to objectify all things “lowly.”

Where can we take Tamar’s newfound voice? The connection between the ancient and the modern experiences of domestic violence have already been drawn and

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

can be further applied to that of giving voice. The freed voice of Tamar can be used to help free the voices of others long silenced by those with power. Cooper-White's theology is one of listening and of restoration.¹¹ We see that no longer can the old ways of hearing the voice of the bias of the narrator be taken for granted: "to the extent that we simply accept the bias of the narrator as time- and culture-bound, rather than critically examining it and challenging it, we run the risk of becoming complicit with it."¹² The bible is full of stories such as the rape of Tamar, though not all as redeemable for teaching, which this new theology and hermeneutical style can be applied to empower the powerless of our modern day. This theology holds us accountable as much as the perpetrators for silencing if we do not actively give voice.

The retelling of a story to reclaim voices will be met with opposition from those who would have the patriarchal methods left unquestioned, as it has historically been unquestioned. Many questions arise from the opposition, questions that need to be asked and taken seriously but not in the way for which the patriarchal leaders would have reviewed. The answers that Cooper-White offers are a paradigm shift unraveling the assumptions of the historical past, noting "the retelling of Tamar's story through historical and biblical imagination...is an act of resistance that raises the whole question of biblical authority."¹³ She re-weaves the threads of the story and paradigm to cradle the voices of those who have been silenced by others 'authority.'

¹¹ Ibid., 14.

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

The Cry of Tamar is a powerful and accessible reading of domestic violence and the church's response, or lack of response, throughout history. I appreciated the retelling of the story of Tamar for the time that Cooper-White has spent to peel away the layers of patriarchy contained within the original narrative. The new perspective offered in this unique story of revoicing invokes more questions than answers, which I believe is Cooper-White's intent. With more questions come more answers and more voices brought forward that have been overshadowed for so long. The voice of Tamar is calling us to action to free the voices of others silenced by power. This power must continually be questioned and Cooper-White brings this idea to the forefront of our intellects. She accomplishes her goal and tears down the assumptions by means of a quiet voice with little or no power of her own. With this framework in mind, Cooper-White goes through three different sections in her book concerning the "why", the "how", and the "response" to violence against women in a society of patriarchy.

Frameworks of Violence

Power is where Cooper-White begins the discussions of the frameworks in abuse against women. To talk about power in a social context is to take into consideration how we as human beings relate not only to one another but to the world around us as well. How we treat creation speaks volumes of how we would treat others around us. Cooper-White picks up her first chapter here by telling a story of one of her sons.

“the younger boy, when he was three years old ran head on into a giant saguaro cactus in the Arizona desert. For those of you who have never seen one

of the beautiful plants, they are a sight to behold, a symbol of the west itself, as well as very dangerous with their two to three inch spines which cover the plant and this little three year old was running right for the cactus at full speed. The boy threw his arms around its middle in a bear hug. The boy's father and older brother were horrified and rushed to him, expecting to be confronted by a frightened and crying human porcupine. But Adam was just little enough to have avoided the large spines. He turned to them in amazement at their worry and with a broad smile on his face said, 'The cactus likes me!'

What a wonderful world it must seem to three-year-olds who can still see and respond so spontaneously to the subjectivity in every living creature and feel themselves to be in real communication with plants, animals, waves, even rocks. This is akin to the seeing of native sagacious peoples all around the world, and is a respect, wonder, and expectancy that is born into everyone and that is only slowly eroded as we are civilized."¹⁴

This *subjective* (as opposed to *objective*) relationship we are born with is all to soon lost to the constructions of the modern world. Creatures become “its” and people become means to an end. We are no longer connected to each other and all of creation in what Cooper-White picks up from Martin Bruber as an “I-Thou” relationship¹⁵ It is this loss of connection, the “I-It” relationship, that Cooper-White supposes is the root cause of violence against women.¹⁶ She notes that in every form of violence there is a moment either in rage or in discernment when the perpetrator of violence begins to think and speak of the victim of the violence as an object. The desensitization we grow up with is the objectifying¹⁷ that washes over us and patriarchy obtains its objective and has objectified women and nature to meet individualistic goals within society. In the second chapter of her book, Cooper-White goes into detail about the specifics of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

objectification of women in the pornography industry.¹⁸ She also discusses the “myths” society has grown up with that allow women to be objectified. These myths range from pure patriarchal hatred of the inferiority of women to changing women into purely sexual objects for the pleasures of men.¹⁹

Objectification is the most powerful and widely used tool of patriarchy to control nature and others. It has become such a part of our worldview that it is hard to separate the object from the ‘other’ in our society. This objectification leads to violence and hatred if the object does not help the individual reach the goals of ultimate power. In particular, objectification of women leads directly to violence against women. The worldview, the vision of humanity must change to become more connected to the ‘other’ before any change can happen and violence against women can be truly squashed out of existence. Until then we must do all we can to understand the individual ways in which this objectification is manifesting itself and to do that is to study the various forms of violence against women in particular and all of creation generally.

Definitions of Abuse

There are various types of abuse against women in our society and Cooper-White devotes a chapter to each of the following subjects of abuse: Sexual Harassment, Rape, Battering, Clergy Sexual Abuse, Child Sexual Abuse, Ritualistic Abuse. I found Pamela Cooper-White’s chapter on clergy sexual abuse²⁰ the most helpful as well as the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

most challenging. Cooper-White lays out a firm and well-supported outline of clergy sexual abuse in our midst and offers many helpful steps to put into place to prevent a continuation of this disease. Starting from the voice of a survivor Cooper-White tells the story of Peg and how a seemingly innocuous budding “relationship” can wreck havoc because of the power structures present within clergy/laity relationships. The obvious cases of clergy sexual abuse do much damage but Cooper-White points out that any clergy sexual relationship with a congregant is abuse and will cause damage.

According to Cooper-White, this includes single clergy seeking a life long partner.²¹

This section alone in the chapter was the most challenging for me. Being a single soon to be (hopefully) clergy, I thought it only natural that my partner would come from the congregation I served. I’m very egalitarian in my vision of pastorship but Cooper-White states that no matter how egalitarian the power structure is within the church, there are still roles to which abuse of power are very much possible.²² I see her rational but it seems odd to me that what she is proposing would seem to disallow spouses of clergy to not attend the same church as where the clergy member presides.

Nevertheless, I agree with Cooper-White that in our current socially formed structures, ‘clergy dating parishioners’ is just a bad idea for everyone. Cooper-White also (and most helpful of all) attempts to note the most common factors that contribute to being a victim and being a perpetrator. She uses the factors to attempt to form a claim that the reason clergy sexual abuse occurs in such frequency in all denominations and religions

²¹ *Ibid.*, 131-134.

²² *Ibid.*, 132.

is the social structures that draw individuals pre-disposed (not that I or Cooper-White are trying to say victims are pre-disposed to victimization) to this type of problem.

Clergy sexual abuse within the church is a major problem that needs to be addressed by everyone within the body of the institution. As Fortune notes it is destroying the ability of the church to minister the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ effectively. I believe many of the cases of clergy sexual abuse are a direct affect of the patriarchal social structures we have placed within our society and within the church; the structures which we continue to uphold as Tradition and sacred. It will be the cry of the abused calling us to justice that will bring these structures down. A complete paradigm shift in accountability and mentality will heal the church as the Spirit of God leads us to a fuller and more joyful creation.

The Church's Response

Cooper-White in the final section of her book goes into the various ways we are to respond to the problem of violence against women within our society. She focuses mainly on the response the church must have to be a healing force in our society.

Cooper-White is an Episcopal priest and thus does not speak directly of how my denomination background has responded to the problem of violence against women.

Fortunately, the PC(USA) has a document that is a direct response to the problem of violence against women. *Turn Morning into Dancing!: A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence* was developed by an advisory committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2003.

The first objective of the statement was to define who the victims of abuse were and what constituted abuse. This is not as simple of a process as it may seem. The document went into great detail on this objective. To obtain this objective of defining abuse, the document first spoke to the “desecrat[i]on of] God’s Good Creation”²³ when abuse takes place within creation. Looking at the biblical witness to support the need to address the issue of domestic violence as well as the people of God’s call to bring justice for this abuse in the world, the document calls to attention human integrity of body, our freedom as people, our relational nature with God and others, and that we as beings of creation have been created for joy.²⁴ The next step was defining what domestic violence is.

“Domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behavior, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners or vulnerable family members.”²⁵

The document then goes on to define various categories of this type of abuse being sure to include real stories of victims so that it is not the authors placing silenced individuals into categories but the survivors themselves that claim a voice and place to be heard. The final task for the document in reaching this goal of defining was to speak to how our very culture impacts patterns of abuse within the above defined categories. More importantly, the document calls to attention in this section the disproportionate role of women as the victim in many cases of domestic violence within our cultures.²⁶

²³ PC (USA), *Turn Morning into Dancing! A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence*, (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2001), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

A secondary, but no less important, objective of the document was to define the perpetrators of violence. Again, the document begins by looking at the biblical witness but as a place of terror for survivors. Particularly, the focus seems to be how scripture is used to maintain the silence and a safe place for abuse to happen. The document then goes into defining who abusers are and then gives a space to voice factors that contribute to abusive behaviors in perpetrators.²⁷

Finally the document offers suggestions so as to be able to claim the promise found in Psalm 30:11 and allow God to turn “mourning into dancing” for everyone either directly or indirectly suffering the effect of domestic violence. There are many direct steps suggested by the document but most importantly is the dissemination of the above definitions to allow for an open and understanding community of faith that provides a safe place for survivors as well as the ability to minister to the perpetrators. The document does not stop with a call upon the church to put into place this safe place for all to live joyously but it calls for all people of faith to bring about this justice within the society at large. As the document noted in defining domestic violence society has a large role in perpetuating the cycles of violence we all face today.²⁸

Conclusions

The way in which our society is formed and how it responds to issues of victimization/objectification are a very important goal that must be taken up by the church. Pamela Cooper-White has taken up the voice of the victimized/objectified

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Sections IX; X; XI, 26-30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Sections XII – XX, 30-35.

woman and has retold her story. But how can we stop the cycle of selfishness, of objectification, of violence against women? Obviously the easiest was is to change our vision of humanity from what our culture has told us to that which Cooper-White has spoken of as the “I-Thou” relationship and Christ has enacted for us. But what can we do to enact the vision? How can we reclaim our connectedness to all of creation? I can only offer a few meager suggestions for accomplishing this task, which I have been given by my professors at seminary and the study, and reflection I have received from others and myself. The first is to pray. Prayer and meditation have more avenues of change than I thought possible. Second is to listen to the long silenced voices and actively look for where we are silencing each other. Another is to care for the environment around us to restore within us an edict of connectedness to the entirety of creation; buy organically grown produce, free range as opposed to factory farmed animals, recycle everything you can. Care for the sick, the poor, those who are marginalized by our culture; the ethnic minorities, the Pharisees, the disabled, widows, homosexuals, lepers, children, Sadducees, the list goes on. All of these things mentioned are directly derived from that change of vision. There are any number of ways to enact the connectedness we are born with and they are not all going to be the same. I think we can all start this task so that future generations have a better chance to change our culture so it fulfills the vision of “I-Thou” and women have a safe place in our society that is not dependant on how society sees them as objects. Cooper-White has challenged us to live up to the vision of Christ in the Gospel and we must answer Christ’s call through the cry of all the Tamars in our society.

Bibliography

1. PC(USA), *Turn Morning into Dancing! A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence*, The Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, 2001.
2. Cooper-White, Pamela, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995.