

## ○ 'NOT A PLACE, NOT A TIME...' REVIEWING JUDITH MCKINLAY'S *REFRAMING HER*

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Milena Kirova reviews *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* by Judith McKinlay (Sheffield Phoenix Press, Sheffield, 2004)

Even at a first glance, the writing position of Judith McKinlay seems ambivalent, if not somewhat strange. She is a 'Pakeha reader'<sup>1</sup> in Aotearoa<sup>2</sup> New Zealand. This means she is a modern reader of the Bible, situated in a postcolonial context. Writing along the methodological lines of Postcolonial Studies makes her engaged in revealing and exposing the colonial strategies of the ancient Hebrew text. At the same time, being a typical European settler descendent in Aotearoa, she belongs to the 'camp' of the colonisers. The paradox still goes on, though in a different direction. Being a woman who lives in a patriarchal world, McKinlay is both 'coloniser' and 'colonised'. This double placing reminds us of the biblical matriarchs; Sarai will be a good case in point: she is simultaneously a violator and a victim in the frame of a common set of social rules.

Postcolonial criticism has predominantly been research undertaken from the perspective of the colonised; it has always had – more or less – the character of liberation. (There is also a paradox here, because the anti-colonial strategies stem out of 'colonial' based discursive practices rather than of any 'indigenous' methodology or social practice. In this respect Postcolonial Studies share a common feature with Women's Studies: both are doomed to speak against a 'violator' using the language which has conceived the practice of their violation. Though used to speak against 'patriarchy', we are still immersed in its verbal and conceptual practices.)

'Decolonising' the strategies of ethnic and political violence, reading the most canonical text of her earliest education by a 'sharply refined' Ricoeurian hermeneutic of suspicion, Judith McKinlay teaches herself 'to be aware of the danger of not seeing and so colluding with textual tactics and interpretations that might reinforce a politics of dominance, and discovering ways to counter these in an ongoing process' (p. x). This 'ongoing process' cannot be of rational and cognitive character only, it also has personal and emotional dimensions. To write against the colonisers whilst having being brought up as one of them certainly means a long process of self trial, self awareness and self education. 'A journey of awakening awareness' will be a good metaphor speaking out the dialectic of the writer's position behind the book *Reframing Her*. Who is actually the reframed one? Is it only the biblical woman, a literary character? Or is it a broader strategy of reframing the modern consciousness from all restrictions, inescapably created by birth, ethnicity, nationality, class and religious belonging?

After drawing a short line of female domination in *Genesis* (focusing for a while on Eve and Sarai) in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on the main critical story. This is a parallel between the history of biblical Israel as a colonising adventure and the history of New Zealand which is 'merely a variation in the pattern of colonial domination of indigenous races' (p. 18). As far as the first one is concerned, it is little of a secret that this 'history' is far from any archeological and paleoethnographic evidence. It is much more of a political and religious ideology constructing national history along the lines of a sacred colonisation. The very act of colonisation in the Hebrew Bible is a mythological paradigm of great importance, constitutive of many later western

traditions. It has always been, and still is, a discourse 'that might reinforce a continuing colonizing mindset in the reader'; politically dangerous, 'a matter of contemporary ethical and political concern' (p. 20) in New Zealand as in many other countries of the world.

Colonising is not a problem of geo-political dimensions only. It has much to do with religious, ethical and gender aspects of identity. This opens the door for another set of problems which can be summarised by the question what does it mean to be not-an-Israelite in the Hebrew Bible? In other words, this is the problem of the Other, of the others who are 'to be the ones over against whom the "we" identifies themselves'. For Judith McKinlay, reading the characters of Otherness is a most important task. Starting with Chapter 3, the book journeys through a procession of female characters who play the role of being-the-other. Her reading is actually a deconstruction of the discursive mechanisms which have made their presence possible.

The first to come is the Ethnic Other. It is a common feature of settling histories that they 'efface and distort the complex histories and societies of indigenous peoples which existed prior to and during prolonged period of contact'<sup>3</sup> with the settlers. The *foreign woman (ishah zarah)* of the biblical text is the case in point. Judith McKinlay analyses two different strategies of her representation. The first one is followed along the stories of Rahab and Ruh; this is the case of otherness-turned-into-sameness.

Rahab is a typical *ishah zarah*, one of the condemnable Canaanites. Apart from the moral implication that foreign women are sexually available, 'just as their land lies there for the taking' (p. 46), she has an important place in what Esther Fuchs calls 'the semiotic economy of Israel'. Her foreignness is a mythological construction, somewhat similar to the way in which Edward Said's 'orientalism' is a West European mental construction. The otherness of her figure works like the mirror of the Queen in the fairy tale of Snow White: it confirms to the royal agency (the instance of national identity in this case) the beauty and superiority of its 'natural' presence.

Judith McKinlay reading the story of Rahab makes explicit that the figure of the foreign woman can function like a screen onto which the Israelite invaders project unwanted and repressed features of their moral identity. But this is not all of the story. Rahab the Canaanite manages to turn 'good', i.e. fearing Yahweh and compliant with Israelite social laws. This is the usual dialectic of biblical/mythological thinking: it is the worst transformed into good which confirms best the advantages of 'our' values. Reading this ideology of conversion, Judith McKinlay sees the danger at hand: 'there is an ongoing danger that other dominant cultures, such as mine, will find it all too easy to identify with the dominant voice, which justifies the taking of land, on the assumption that Canaanites are inherently wicked' (p. 49). And this is not all; there is still another, even more perfidious, danger implied: 'such a voice may also lead those who have lost their lands to Christian invaders and settlers to read against their own history and identity. They will be then reading with this Israelite agent Rahab, surrendering themselves unquestionably to this worldview' (p. 49).

Somewhat different – superior in 'historical' hierarchy but treacherously the same through the idea of prostitution, or making oneself sexually available – is the story of Ruth. Well known for her bravery, loyalty and *hesed*, Ruth the Moabite is constructed according to the same pattern which turns the foreign woman into a speaking mirror of 'our' ethnic identity. 'Ruth' is just the name of another screen onto which the colonisers project most picturesque and exalted images of their own (historical, moral, religious) beauty.

Very different is the case of Jezebel, the infamous prophet killer of 1-2 Kings. She represents the demonic kind of *ishbah zarah*, one of those ‘archetypal dangerously outside women’ who suit so well the ideological frame of the gendered biblical otherness. Her character, according to Judith McKinlay, is constructed by means of another ‘timeless strategy’. Jezebel is the ultimate (earthly) evil, a sublime embodiment of (all) the dangers which might come from ‘outside’, from the zone of otherness. Is it strange then that the evil *gebirah* of the Northern Kingdom has a personal name – unlike many good and believing women in 1-2 Kings? It is exactly the mediocrity of their goodness, the compliance with the ideology of ‘good femininity’ which makes them nameless.

Maybe here I should say that Judith McKinlay is not only a skilful writer and a politically engaged thinker, but she is also very well informed in the recent works on the Bible as well as in Feminist and Postcolonial theory. She herself defines her methodology as ‘reading with a gender lens’, or ‘through the lens of postcolonialism’ – a persistent metaphor, running through all of the book. Still, I am wondering whether Judith McKinlay realises all the dangers of the ‘viewing symbolism’ she so often implies. Viewing as *the way* of understanding or coping with some ‘essence’ of life is a traditional and pervasive strategy of biblical representation. It is in fact the most traditional and symptomatic strategy of patriarchal mentality. The metaphor of the gaze, of looking upon an object has always implied the problem of power and dominance; the gaze makes the object available – not unlike the sexual body of the foreign woman. Yahweh himself gazed at the world complacently each time some piece of work was done. Viewing, or gazing at, we may say, is a pleasure of colonising character; it empowers the viewing subject by drawing a distinct line of the subject-object opposition.

The viewing symbolism of critical thinking is balanced by the strategy of intertextual reading. As a first step the migration narrative of Sarai is used as a thematic background at which the writer discursively weaves a ‘collage’ of female voices, the voices of ‘some of the early European settler women who travelled across the world to enter the land of Aotearoa’ (p. 116). ‘Background’ is probably not the best term, because the Sarai narrative gradually intertwines with the voices of these women. Chapter 8 undertakes a step further into this Bakhtinian-Kristevian intertextual space. Starting with the Apocalypse of St. John, it moves to its comparison with a modern novel. The text written by John of Patmos is what can doubtlessly be called paradigmatic; in gender terms, inclusive. It creates a most allegorically vivid picture of femininity crucified between the poles of good and bad, high and low. Opposed to the sacred woman – ‘clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet’ is Babylon, the greatest and most demonic of all biblical whores. This is a typical patriarchal dichotomy of the feminine, it is easy to find and criticise the metastases of its presence in modern literature. Judith McKinlay takes the positive way, starting with the Heavenly woman: ‘Are there similar traces of the supernatural feminine to be unearthed in the literary works of our own time?’ Following the suggestion that John’s Apocalypse can be read as a work of decolonising character, she then reads another (modern) text written from the perspective of the colonised: Witi Ihimaera’s novel *The Matriarch*, published by Heinemann in 1986 (Ihimaera is an indigenous writer of New Zealand). As a result, two books, written in very different epochs, genres and styles, come into a dialogue which explicates the fact that similar postcolonial strategies can be detected in each of them. *Reframing Her* persuades its reader that – when ‘applying a postcolonial lens’ – the female figures in literature have predominantly been ideological constructions of patriarchal mythologies. There is ‘not a place for the politically

neutral or the ethically unaware' (p. 165), Judith McKinlay concludes. It is not difficult to agree with her. Not a place, not a time... What about our own efforts then?

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pakeha is the term used for those who are not Maori and therefore not the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand.
- <sup>2</sup> The Maori name of the country.
- <sup>3</sup> Stasiulis, Daiva, and Nira Yuval-Davis. 'Introduction: Beyond dichotomies – gender, race, ethnicity and class in settler societies'. In: Stasiulis, Daiva, and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage Publications; 1995), p. 23.