

# A Missional Reading of Susanna and the Woman Accused of Adultery

By Dr Mukti Barton, senior tutor at Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, in Birmingham, England

## Introduction

A contextual reading reveals remarkable inter-textual resonance between the stories of Susanna, from the biblical book that bears her name, and of the anonymous gospel woman accused of adultery. The article is divided into two sections. The account of Susanna finds a striking parallel in the gospel narrative and then both stories together shed light on the Bangladeshi context which has significant similarities with the scriptural narratives. To understand the Bangladeshi, primarily Muslim, context better, qur'anic verses are also cited.

## A CONTEXTUAL READING OF THE BOOK OF SUSANNA AND OF JOHN 7.53-8.11

The two narratives have been used as resources for discussion of sexual issues, at NPK<sup>1</sup> and other workshops. The apocryphal/deuterocanonical story of Susanna is not included in the popular Bengali version of the Bible, and therefore it is not commonly known among Bangladeshi Protestant women.<sup>2</sup> Although the same version of the Bible is usually known among Roman Catholics, their priests have in addition access to *Banibitan*, a liturgical lectionary. Roman Catholic women have reported to the Protestants that they have heard the story of Susanna read from the *Banibitan* during mass. However, since 1994, with the inclusion of the Greek version of the narrative of Susanna in the third part of the book of Daniel, this story is now widely available in the fourth volume of the *Christadikhhartider Bible* (a study edition of the Bible).

Interestingly, in the *Christadikhhartider Bible*, the Bengali sub-heading to the book of Daniel reads: "The Kingdom of the World and the Kingdom of God" and then it is introduced as "A Book for the Oppressed People". The particular story of Susanna in the book of Daniel is seen as the fulfilment of God's kingdom against the kingdom of the world in three respects: in Susanna's refusal to compromise with evil even in the face of death; in young Daniel's wisdom; and in God's refusal to abandon the innocent suffering Susanna. In the above mentioned version of the Bible with commentary, the tale of Susanna is seen as one of the folk stories connected with the name of Daniel. The writer of the book of Daniel is claimed as one of the revolutionary intellectuals of the ancient Hebrews.<sup>3</sup> Thus from the outset the book helps Bangladeshi women to read the narrative from the perspective of the oppressed people.

Whether Susanna's account is historical or not, and whether John 7.53-8.11 truly belongs to the tradition of Jesus, are not important questions for Bangladeshi women.<sup>4</sup> It is enough for these women to realise that these stories tell of the experience of Jewish people of the biblical period. Today, when they share their experience of suffering with each other, Bengali women at NPK workshops use fictitious names and narratives to articulate their oppression. Women's truth-telling through narratives is often very powerful as their own vulnerability is protected by the use of pseudonyms.

Although many women have never heard the story of Susanna, the popular interpretation of the gospel account known as that of an adulterous woman or of a woman caught in adultery is widely known among all Christians in Bangladesh. The interpretation of this gospel account heard by Bangladeshi Christian women and reported at the workshops does not vary in any way from what

Gail R. O'Day writes briefly:

Just as popular interpretation reads John 4.16-18 as a judgement against the Samaritan woman, popular interpretation of 7.53-8.11 reads this text as a judgement against the woman. In the most prevalent reading of this text, which can be traced back to Augustine, Jesus is the embodiment of grace and the woman is the embodiment of sin.<sup>5</sup>

They know the traditional way of understanding these stories, but now reread them in a new light.

### **Two Biblical Women: Objects of Male Accusers' Perceptions**

The gospel narrative is very brief compared to the rather elaborate tale of Susanna, the background of which is the Jewish community in exile in Babylon. A contextual reading of the narratives reveals striking similarities between the two.

- (a) The elders of the community bring a woman to trial by a religious court.
- (b) The allegation is adultery.
- (c) The elders claim that they have caught the woman in the very act of adultery, yet the supposed male accomplice is absent.
- (d) Because they are the elders, the community is ready to believe them.
- (e) The woman is objectified and dehumanised.
- (f) Compared to the men of power, the woman is powerless.
- (g) The woman could be executed then and there, even without the supposed male counterpart.
- (h) Whether innocent or guilty, whether she protests or not, the woman alone cannot win this case.
- (i) A prophet of God comes to the aid of the woman.

In both the narratives a woman is the focal point. However, she is at the centre not as a subject but as the object of her male accusers' perceptions and actions. Both Susanna and the gospel woman are to be tried by religious courts, the power of which lies in the hands of the male religious leaders of the community. The gospel woman is unnamed, whereas Susanna is not only named in the narrative, but also in the title of the book, an honour shared with only three other women in the Bible. Although the supposed male accomplice is absent from the trial, in the tale the elders remember the law of Moses according to which both the man and the woman are to be punished (Lev. 20.10; Deut. 22.22). They make excuses for failing to bring the man to be tried too.

In the gospel narrative, Jesus is at the temple teaching people who have gathered around him. An anonymous woman alone is brought to Jesus by the scribes and the Pharisees for trial on the charge of adultery. They claim that according to the law of Moses such a woman should be stoned. In the absence of enough evidence in the biblical text to prove her adultery, in my writing the woman is seen as one "accused" of adultery. In the gospel account, patriarchal conditioning has led religious teachers to become oblivious of the fact that a woman cannot commit adultery without a man. The scribes and the Pharisees of the time of Jesus, who are expected to know the law of Moses well, make no attempt to justify their failure to bring the man to justice. Patriarchy has blinded those who are supposedly the most learned and rational people.

The apocryphal/deuterocanonical account gives no reasons for the readers to suspect Susanna. The tale makes it clear from the outset that a distinguished rich Jewish man, Joakim, and his wife, Susanna, live in Babylon. Susanna is a devout woman. Joakim's house is a meeting place for the Jews. Two elders who are appointed as judges are constantly at his house. People who have a case to be tried come to see the judges. At noon, when the people are gone, Susanna goes to the garden. Every day the judges watch her. They desire to possess her because she is beautiful and are

looking for an opportunity to rape her. The Bible gives the reason for the desire: "Both were overwhelmed with passion for her" (Sus. v. 10). One hot day Susanna wants to bathe in the garden. She asks her maids to shut the main gate and bring olive oil and ointments for her. The maids leave through the side entrance. The two elders are hiding in the garden. As soon as the maids leave, the elders run to Susanna and tell her that they are overcome by desire and want her to yield to them.

It is interesting to note here that in the English translations of the Bible, the story of an attempted rape becomes confused with seduction by the use of the word seduce or seduction.<sup>6</sup> However, the Bengali translation uses *bhog kara*, meaning to possess and use, making it clear that Susanna is an object of the desire of the elders and not a potential accomplice. The elders certainly do not use any charm to seduce Susanna, rather they set a trap to rape her. They tell her that either she lies with them or (in order to bring a false charge against her) they will fabricate a story that they have seen her lying with a young man. The confusion between seduction and rape is perpetuated by the exegetes whom Jennifer A. Glancy challenges:

The elders are not seducing Susanna; they are not coaxing her to act on her own desire. They use coercion, backed by the threat of execution on a disgraceful capital offence, to try to force her to submit. Despite this, scholars regularly refer to the incident as attempted seduction. The elders are not rapists but would-be "suitors". The escapade is likened to a "mid-life crisis". The so-called seduction fails when "Susanna refuses to offer".<sup>7</sup>

In the present discussion, this incident is not considered seduction, but an attempted rape.

Susanna realises that if she does not submit to the elders she will be at their mercy. Yet she decides not to sin against God. She calls out at the top of her voice. If the rape victim cries out in a place where her voice is audible, or if a rape takes place in an open field where presumably the victim's cry goes unheard, the law of Moses states clearly: "You shall do nothing to the young woman; the young woman has not committed an offence punishable by death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbour" (Deut. 22.26). This part of the law of Moses remains above patriarchal conditioning: the rape victim is not blamed in any way. By crying out, Susanna acts according to the Mosaic law. As she has screamed, even if found in the act of intercourse, not the woman, but the men involved would be found guilty.<sup>8</sup>

A scriptural parallel is found in the narrative of Bathsheba. Although most exegetes presume that the case of Bathsheba and David is one of adultery, Nathan's parable compares Bathsheba with a lamb which is killed (2 Sam. 12.4). In the above Deuteronomistic verse a rape is compared with a murder, and therefore it can be assumed that Nathan judges the incident between David and Bathsheba as a rape case. The description in the beginning of 2 Samuel 11 gives a picture of an empty palace. In that case it would be presumed that Bathsheba's cry could not be heard by anybody.<sup>9</sup> In the story of Susanna, the elders know how to circumvent the Deuteronomistic law. One runs to open the main gate to the garden and together they shout Susanna down.

The powerful employ a crude method of silencing the victim, but there is enough uproar created to attract the people of the household, at least to stop the rape. Susanna does not give in to the spirit of timidity but uses her inner strength to refuse to lie with the infatuated men. Paul writes in his letter to Timothy, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power" (2 Tim. 1.7).<sup>10</sup> This is the power Susanna uses to secure herself for the time being. The elders, of course, tell their version of the event and accuse her of adultery: everybody is shocked. (In the gospel story, given the absence of any information about the accused woman, it is easy for the readers, at first sight, to believe that she is adulterous.) However, once the readers notice the absence of the male party to the supposed adultery, then the charge itself is questioned.

The day after the judges fail to rape Susanna, they plot to condemn her to death. The lust has turned into a complete abhorrence, proving even more strongly than before that Susanna, in the eyes

of the elders, is not a person of any worth, but is merely an object of their desire. Although the result is not as extreme as a murder, a scriptural reference to the same abhorrence is found in the case of Tamar's rape by her half-brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13). Rape follows more rape in David's palace. David rapes Bathsheba and later on marries her, whereas his son Amnon has no consideration for his rape victim.

Before the rape, Amnon is so overwhelmed by his lust for his beautiful half-sister Tamar, that he makes himself ill. He makes elaborate plans to get her into his chamber, forces her physically to lie with him and then immediately tells her to "get out". The Bible gives the reason for this harsh treatment: "Then [soon after the rape] Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her" (2 Sam. 13.15). The stories of Susanna and Tamar, which both reveal a connection between infatuation and loathing, suggest that the gospel woman may be another victim of male infatuation, about to be discarded. There will be further discussion of this issue later in the article.

In the apocryphal/deuterocanonical story, frustrated infatuation seeks some satisfaction. The elders summon Susanna to be tried in the religious court and order her to be unveiled, so that they may "feast their eyes on her beauty" (Sus. v. 32). Jesus would interpret such actions as committing adultery with the eyes: "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Mt. 5.28-29). With reference to this saying of Jesus, Susanna's account points to two types of adultery: that in which two parties are involved, the male and the female, and the other in which only the male is involved, committing adultery with his eye. Susanna is accused of the first type and the elders commit the second type.

The story of Susanna, the incident between Amnon and Tamar, and the above saying of Jesus (Mt. 5.28-29) reveal a distinction between natural mutual loving attraction and lust. Moreover, some conscientised women understand that lust is not merely connected with the biological desire of one sex for the other, but with the politics of gazing. In patriarchal societies, the gender endowed with power gazes and the powerless gender is gazed at. In the biblical narratives the structural power of the gazers is sometimes emphasised: in the story of Susanna it is the elders and in the tale of Bathsheba it is the king himself. The Bible depicts king David as a voyeur who takes pleasure in looking at the bathing Bathsheba, from the roof of his palace (2 Sam. 11.2). According to Jennifer Glancy, Susanna's story provides an example of the politics of gazing:

Representation of gender in the story of Susanna rests on the gendered polarity of the gaze; actively looking defines masculinity and "to-be-looked-at-ness" defines femininity. Modern readers still share this ancient code; I suggest that identification with the masculine gaze has been a factor in seducing most critics into classifying the elders' crime as adultery rather than rape.<sup>11</sup>

The gender politics of voyeurism turn Susanna into an object of pleasure. Later Daniel's judgement is made easy by detecting obscenity in the eyes of the elders as they "feast their eyes on her beauty" (Sus. v. 32).

In the gospel account the woman is objectified in a different way. The scribes and the Pharisees bring the woman and make her stand before Jesus and the crowd. The Bible does not state clearly how she is brought, whether she is dragged or carried. Gazing at a woman's body, coveting it, raping or handling a woman in such a way as depicted in the gospel, are different phases of the same action of objectifying the female. In the apocryphal/deuterocanonical narrative, Susanna is summoned. She is still given a little of the respect due to a human being.

While women are objectified in both narratives, the subjects are religious men with structural power. However, it is not certain how much power the Jewish authority has in its own community. From Susanna's account it can be assumed that the Jews in exile are subject to Babylonian state

law. In the gospel woman's case, Roman law places limitations upon the authority of the religious court. It is not the religious court, but the state which can pronounce the death penalty.<sup>12</sup> Some Jews might view this as an impingement of the gentile state on the religious rights of the Jews, whereas from the point of view of the state the Jewish religious men can be seen as taking justice into their own hands. If there is such a dispute, in the gospel narrative an attempt is made to involve Jesus in the controversy regarding the authority of the state law vis-à-vis the religious law. The dehumanised woman is brought in as a bait to trap Jesus, to test his allegiance to the religious male structure. How Jesus resolves the dilemma will be discussed shortly.

In both biblical stories similar words are used by religious leaders to accuse the woman: "we saw them in the act" (Sus. v. 39); "this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery" (Jn. 8.4). Yet the man involved is not to be tried. The apocryphal/deuterocanonical narrative makes it clear to readers at the outset that there has been no other man involved and therefore, there is no man to bring to justice. Nevertheless, the elders tell the court that there was an accomplice of Susanna who was too strong for them to catch. If the gospel woman's case is different, there must have been a man. If so, the readers are left to guess his whereabouts. After a serious crime, Bangladeshi women often read in their newspapers: "the culprit absconded". Perhaps the gospel account refers to an incident in which the strong help the strong to get away, so that the men who bring the charge are collaborators and therefore guilty.

### **Patriarchal Conditioning**

The tale of Susanna states, "Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death" (Sus. v. 41). This verse evinces two types of power: the power of the patriarchal, religious authority over people, and the intrinsic power of the people which they silently surrender to the authority. The authority is doubly empowered to carry out an unjust ruling. In the gospel account, the assembly is more discreet and silent, but it is there. At the end of the incident, the departure of the people following the elders leaves Jesus and the woman alone. The account implies that these are the same people who were listening to Jesus before the arrival of the scribes and the Pharisees with the woman. It can be presumed that in the course of the event these people silently transfer their allegiance from Jesus to the patriarchal religious authority. In the gospel story too the structural authority is doubly empowered by the silence of the assembly.

Surrounded by her loved ones, Susanna is completely isolated. Her friends and relatives present have done no more for her than weep (Sus. v. 33). It is not even clear whether they are weeping for Susanna or for the loss of their honour through the whole incident. The power of Susanna measured against this corporate power is profound. She remains above patriarchal socialisation, evident from what the writer says: "for her heart trusted in the Lord" (Sus. v. 35). Susanna has not internalised the oppression she suffers in a male-dominated society. Her self-esteem is high. She boldly pleads "not guilty". She is suddenly in a life and death situation, yet she is not overpowered.

This suddenness is another common factor in the situation of both women. This is because they are placed under the jurisdiction of a religious court. In a secular court everything is well examined for months, even years, and adultery rarely constitutes a criminal offence punishable by death. In a religious court it is not rationality but strong emotion, religious sentiment and fanaticism that dictate the sentence. Within minutes these women could be executed in a very horrible manner.

Very little is known about the gospel woman. The account does not tell readers whether she, a victim of an attempted rape about to be disposed of in anger, has internalised the notion that her "beauty has beguiled" (Sus. v. 56) men and she deserves death. She might be a rape victim who is willing to take the blame and the punishment for sexual transgressions, because she failed to scream. The gospel woman may genuinely have been caught in adultery. She might even have been a prostitute. If her society is like Bangladesh, poverty-stricken, oppressive and male-dominated, perhaps she has not made a choice, but has been forced into prostitution. Possibly the gospel

woman has been trained into being a sex object for men. The account allows all these possibilities.

Unlike Susanna, the gospel woman is completely conditioned by patriarchy. She has not used her intrinsic power, neither has she called upon God. She has not placed any obstacles in the path of the religious authority in their carrying out of their ruling.

### **Protest and Justice**

Both vocal Susanna and the silent gospel woman are in need of a revolutionary, a prophet of God or a child of God who is above patriarchal socialisation. It is not clear whether these two women are expecting a revolutionary. Neither are the readers sure to expect such a rescuer. Nevertheless, the setting of both these incidents in societies under the rule of foreign domination perhaps indicates the possibility of a personality who in the light of his or her own oppressive situation will be able to detect the terrible injustice about to happen to both women.

Susanna's story, however, does not give a picture of any suffering of the Jewish community in exile: "although her (Susanna's) Babylonian setting is emphasised in the first verse, neither she nor her family is suffering in exile. Rather than lamenting by the waters of Babylon, she bathes in them."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the story of Susanna reflects the dreams and hopes of the Jewish people in exile. Historically for the writers of both the stories the experience is that of oppression and expectation of a redeemer. Experience of oppression sometimes begets the intuition that is capable of interpreting an injustice in order to correct the situation.

In Susanna's narrative Daniel, a Jew under the rule of the Babylonians, is portrayed as such a liberator, able to interpret an unjust situation clearly. A few centuries later some Jewish people see their dream of liberation fulfilled in Jesus. Under the repressive Roman political regime and the religious structure of his own people, Jesus is another revolutionary who sees an issue relating to a woman from a clearer perspective. However the other spectators remain under the control of the system of domination.

Quickness of mind is required from the spectators. Susanna's account states: "The Lord heard her cry" (Sus. v. 44). As a concrete proof that God hears the cry of the innocent, God's prophet, Daniel, hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He comes forward, challenges the two malefactors and proves them liars. There are two blessed people in the narrative as they both hunger and thirst for righteousness: Susanna, the innocent sufferer who cries out for justice, and Daniel, who is quick enough to act wisely. In the narrative of Susanna, the false witnesses are given the death penalty as prescribed by the law of Moses: "If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other" (Deut. 19.18-19).

In the gospel story, Jesus does not punish the accusers in such a manner. However, that does not prove the innocence of the people who brought the charge. Jesus seems to have a different way of dealing with the wrong-doers. Jesus' allegiance to two apparently contradictory laws, the Jewish and the Roman, are put to the test by the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus does not support one against the other. He exposes the limitations of all worldly criminal justice systems. According to the gospel story, instead of trying to argue with the religious leaders, Jesus bends down and writes with his finger on the ground.

What he writes is not known to the readers. I consider several possibilities. It may be that Jesus acts out a verse from Jeremiah: "those who forsake you (God) will be inscribed in the dust, for they have rejected the source of living water, the Lord" (Jer. 17.13).<sup>14</sup> If that is so, the significance of Jesus' dramatisation of a part of his scripture might not be understood by present-day Christians, but is apparent to the scribes and Pharisees who know their scripture well. The religious leaders perhaps understand not just the particular verse but also the blessing, in the same chapter of Jeremiah, on the people who do not forsake God: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water . . . It shall not fear when heat comes . . . in the year of drought . . . it does not cease to bear fruit." (Jer. 17.7-8).

Susanna is portrayed as the one whose "heart trusted in the Lord" (Sus. v. 35). She can be compared with a tree which bears fruit as it is planted by water. The name Susanna means "lily" and in the narrative she is seen in a garden and even by the water. She is also there, metaphorically, in the time of "drought" when she "does not cease to bear fruit" (Jer. 17.7-8). In hard times, during her predicament, Susanna stays firm, refusing to commit either the sin of adultery or the sin of timidity. Perhaps somehow Jesus' writing reminds people of the story of Susanna.

"The two elders of the story of Susanna are identified by Jewish tradition as the two false prophets mentioned in Jeremiah".<sup>15</sup> They "roasted in the fire, because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says the Lord" (Jer. 29.23-24). The elders did commit adultery with their eyes. It can be assumed that Jesus inscribes the names of the accusers in the dust, or writes some verses reminding them of Jeremiah's prophecy. Perhaps something in Jesus' writing helps the scribes and the Pharisees to identify with the two elders of the story.

It is not possible to know for certain what Jesus writes in the dust, or to penetrate the minds of the scribes and the Pharisees of the gospel. Whatever the reason, Jesus' message is clearly understood. The elders are the first to interpret the writings and the saying of Jesus: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8.7). Beginning with the elders, one by one the accusers leave. They do not condemn the gospel woman of adultery, neither does Jesus. Somehow Jesus, instead of making the woman a scapegoat, points at the injustice of the structure.

Jesus is the only one among the crowd to value the gospel woman as a human being created in the image of God. She remains central in his thinking. Jesus has spent the entire period of the incident devising a way to save this person from imminent death. Now that she is secure and that the two are alone together, Jesus does not just dismiss her, but initiates a conversation and asks questions. His intention is not to cross-examine her, but to encourage her to accept that she has been proved "not guilty". In response the woman speaks for the first time. No longer merely an object, she becomes a subject as she says, "no one sir". She admits that nobody has condemned her. Jesus says to the woman, "neither do I condemn you . . ." (Jn. 8.11). She is not convicted of adultery, either by the crowd or by Jesus. One who is not convicted is to be believed innocent, and yet, ever since, she has been understood to be an adulterous woman.

Jesus says to the gospel woman, "do not sin again" (Jn. 8.11). The woman has not been proved guilty of adultery, yet Jesus reminds her of her sin. The readers of the Bible have traditionally assumed that the sin referred to here is that of adultery. They have done so on the patriarchal assumption that the three categories "woman", "sex" and "sin" belong together. However, it may be that the sin to which Jesus refers is not sexual but a sin of which many women in a male-dominated society are guilty, namely timidity. It may be the sin of timidity, her lack of self-confidence, that makes the gospel woman forget her own worth. It was her lack of courage that benefited her oppressors.

Silence in the face of her accusers does not necessarily imply that she is guilty of adultery. On the contrary, it may be that the spirit of timidity due to patriarchal socialisation has overcome her in such a way that she has even lost the courage to proclaim her innocence. The lack of protest only reveals the depth of her soul-sickness. Jesus first deals with the corporate sin of the strong, which is the cause of the woman's low self esteem. Then he gives her strength to start a new life. Now that her accusers no longer look so daunting, she is told not to get caught up in sexual politics again. The following words of Walter Wink speak eloquently of the thinking that might have gone through the mind of the gospel woman:

Paradoxically, those in the grip of the cultural trance woven over us by the Domination system are usually unaware of the full depth of their soul-sickness. It is only after we experience liberation from primary socialisation of the world-system that we realise how terribly we have violated our

authentic personhood—and how violated we have been. For we are not just sinners, but the sinned against. We not only have defected from higher values, but we have been trained, schooled, cajoled, and bullied into defecting from them by the combined onslaught of much that goes to make up our world. In part, our sin is that we acquiesced in this socialisation.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Jesus sees this woman accused of adultery as the victim of oppressive socialisation, for her dehumanisation is so profound that she is almost incapable of sinning. The question of sin comes only after Jesus has valued her as a human being.

The gospel woman accused of adultery is silent. Jesus proves that God hears her silent cry. Jesus is quick to act but not quick to judge. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn. 3.17). Jesus does not pronounce any punishment or reward, and yet, in a sense, the people in the crowd are aware of God’s judgement. Jesus finds a way of opening the eyes of both the oppressors and the oppressed to bring them above cultural conditioning to see reality without distortion.

Jesus leads all the characters of the story, who were previously conditioned by the oppressive structure, towards healing. It is as if these people realise that, “Like addicts who cannot tell how distorted their perceptions have become until they get off drugs, we cannot recognize the depth of our alienation from life until we are well on the way toward healing”.<sup>17</sup> Jesus offers the people the opportunity to be healed, but he does not compel anybody.

Christ makes all things subject to himself not by coercion, but by healing diseased reality and restoring its balance and integrity. . . .

The gospel is not a message of personal salvation from the world, but a message of a world transfigured, right down to its basic structures.<sup>18</sup>

Following the crowd and religious leaders, the woman leaves the scene. The invitation of Jesus to the kingdom of God is heard by this individual woman and her society. The gospel does not give the final results. “God’s will is the transformation of people and society. Individuals will enter the New Jerusalem, but so also their nations, redeemed and healed by the leaves of the tree of life .”<sup>19</sup> In the tale of Susanna two of the oppressors had no further opportunity to repent. Except for these two, in both the biblical narratives choices are offered to both the oppressed and the oppressors, to the individuals and to their communities to re-evaluate their position under patriarchal socialisation.

## **CONTEXTUAL AND INTER-SCRIPTURAL REFLECTIONS**

The biblical narratives of Susanna and the gospel woman from different millennia could well be taken from incidents of today’s Bangladesh, where women are still brought to trial by religious courts. The only difference is that while both Susanna and the gospel woman survive the trial, many Bangladeshi women do not. One such woman whose death stirred the whole of Bangladesh in 1993 was the beautiful young Noorjahan. The brief version of the event given below is based on various journalistic accounts and a report of Amnesty International.<sup>20</sup>

### **The 1993 Case of Noorjahan**

Some Muslim village elders are infatuated by the beauty of Noorjahan who has been divorced from her first husband. Noorjahan’s parents plan to get her married the second time. They have her divorce papers checked by one of the village religious leaders who declares Noorjahan’s marriage lawfully dissolved. She is told that she is free to marry again. The leader gives permission for her second marriage in the hope of marrying her himself. A few other elders of the village also desire to



possess her for her beauty. However, the parents find a bridegroom suitable for her age.

The beauty that cannot be possessed has to be disposed of. The village religious leaders declare Noorjahan's second marriage illegal under Islamic Law, and their conjugal relationship adulterous. The elders arrange a *salish* which acts as a religious court to try Noorjahan and her second husband for adultery. The *salish* sentences her and her second husband to death by public stoning and her parents to fifty lashes each for being partly responsible for the marriage. Noorjahan asks to speak but is not permitted to do so. The husband of Noorjahan questions the ruling and is slapped.

Immediately after the verdict, Noorjahan is buried in the ground up to her chest, then villagers begin throwing stones at her. Noorjahan repeatedly calls on the name of God. The stoning continues and Noorjahan dies a few hours later. Her parents, according to some reports, later say that Noorjahan does not die as a result of the injuries sustained during the stoning, but survives, only to commit suicide later. Noorjahan's husband is subjected to stoning too, but survives. The village headman and some other members of the *salish* are arrested and charged with intentional insult and abetment to suicide. They are found guilty and are sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

Noorjahan's story has some similarities and dissimilarities with the biblical narratives. All three women are accused of adultery. Both Susanna and Noorjahan are good-looking women whom some infatuated powerful men want to possess. All three women are tried by religious courts, Susanna and Noorjahan because they do not submit themselves to these men. Their "religious zeal" leads the men to transgress the bounds of their authority. The religious authority in Susanna's story is under Babylonian law, in the gospel account under Roman, and in Noorjahan's case under Bangladeshi state law. Susanna, chronologically the oldest, protests against the accusation, the gospel woman is silent, and Noorjahan is silenced by the authority.

Susanna's loved ones are present, but they do not protest; nothing is known about the gospel woman; Noorjahan's husband protests and questions the ruling of the religious court. He is violently silenced. The strategy of intimidation works and the whole crowd is silenced. This timidity of the crowd is what the village leaders exploit. As in the other stories, so in the case of Noorjahan, the powerful are easily believed. In all three narratives the assembly silently surrenders its intrinsic power to the more powerful religious structure. In the absence of any human help, Susanna and Noorjahan cry to God.

Daniel, a prophet of God, responds to Susanna's cry on behalf of God. Jesus listens to the silent cry of the gospel woman. No doubt some God-fearing people hear Noorjahan when she calls on the name of God. However, fear has already overtaken the crowd, making the religious structure doubly empowered to carry forward the ruling. Noorjahan dies for the sin of many. It is often claimed that the biblical period is characterised by violence. Yet the two biblical women, who lived at a time when such cruel laws as stoning people to death were in force, were not killed. They survived, while Noorjahan of today dies. Although some of Noorjahan's loved ones are punished with her, Noorjahan, as the female party to the alleged adultery, bears the full brunt of physical and emotional punishment. The humiliation is so great that it is impossible for her to live. It seems God does not hear the cry of Noorjahan, for no prophets respond to her cry.

Soon after the incident many people recognised the injustice that was done to her. Taslima Nasrin wrote a newspaper article under the heading, "Any woman is Noorjahan today"<sup>21</sup>, showing that Noorjahan's death was the result of an acute form of misogyny. On the first death anniversary of Noorjahan, Reja Arfeen wrote in a newspaper article, "Noorjahan is not only a woman, she is our conscience too".<sup>22</sup> The death of Noorjahan stirred the conscience of many people. Her case was taken up by women activists, journalists and many national and international agencies, in a persistent way until some sort of justice was done. Although the punishment of seven years' imprisonment was very light compared to the loss of Noorjahan's innocent life, nevertheless it was crucial for powerless people to see the powerful punished.

The execution of women following the verdict of a religious court is a new phenomenon in

Bangladesh. In the 1990's there have been other cases similar to that of Noorjahan. In different parts of the country women have been executed by orders of religious courts and the killers have gone unpunished. Because actual stoning was involved, the case of Noorjahan is chosen here for its resonance with the biblical narratives. However, such a choice is precarious as it can encourage an unfair comparison between the ideals of the Jewish-Christian scriptures and the reality of an incident in a contemporary Muslim society. Therefore, the case of Noorjahan must also be examined in the light of Islamic scripture.

### **The Triumph of Patriarchy**

Noorjahan in Bangladesh was killed in the name of Islam and therefore there is a serious danger of thinking that the killing was Islamic. The punishment accorded by the Bangladeshi government to the religious authority involved partially vindicated the innocent death of Noorjahan, but nothing has been done to vindicate the cause of Islam. A close look at the incident of Noorjahan in the light of the Qur'an exposes the severity of the damage done not only to a woman, but to Islam itself.

Noorjahan was not found guilty of *zina*, adultery, but her conjugal relationship was declared adulterous. Even if the relationship were to be proved adulterous, the qur'anic punishment for adultery is not stoning to death. In fact, in the Qur'an, there is no mention of stoning for adultery or any offence whatsoever. According to the Qur'an:

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication,—flog each of them with a hundred stripes, . . . And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations),—flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence ever after: for such men are wicked transgressors;" (*Sura* 24.2 and 4).

In the case of Noorjahan, if strict qur'anic procedure had been followed, not Noorjahan, but the accusers would have been found guilty. It is interesting to note that the Qur'an is extra vigilant about possible patriarchal bias against women. In the above text, charges brought against women have been given special attention. Yusuf Ali comments on this verse:

The most serious notice is taken of people who put forward slanders and scandalous suggestions about women without adequate evidence. If anything is said against a woman's chastity, it should be supported by evidence twice as strong as ordinarily be required for business transactions, or even in murder cases. That is four witnesses would be required instead of two.<sup>23</sup>

Finding four witnesses to an act of adultery is a near impossibility. Therefore it can be assumed that if Islamic rules were followed properly, the punishment by lashing would hardly ever be put into practice. Moreover, if the adulterers were all stoned to death, as some fanatics claim, the Qur'an would not have commanded: "Let no man guilty of adultery or fornication marry any but a woman similarly guilty, or an unbeliever: nor let any but such a man or an unbeliever marry such a woman: to the believers such a thing is forbidden" (*Sura* 24.3). The Qur'an assumes that adulterous people survive their punishment.

Noorjahan was not given a chance to defend herself. The Qur'an gives women's self-defence priority over men's, even their husbands', allegations of adultery. In such cases, in the absence of other witnesses, the husbands bear witness four times against their wives and the fifth time they solemnly invoke the curse of God on themselves if they tell a lie. Then the wives bear witness four times that the husbands are telling a lie and the fifth time they invoke the curse on themselves if the husbands are telling the truth. As a result the punishment is averted from the wife (*Sura* 24.6-10). In these qur'anic verses a woman's evidence takes primacy over the man's.

It is clear that, in the 1993 case of Noorjahan, the intention of the *salish* was not to secure

Islamic justice for the weak, but to consolidate patriarchal injustice. However, in both the biblical stories and in the qur'anic injunctions that I have analysed, divine justice triumphs over patriarchalism. The sign of this victory is what both Christian and Muslim women search for in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi women, irrespective of religion, can identify with the objectification of Susanna, the gospel woman and Noorjahan. Looking at their own society and beyond, women see themselves at the receiving end of the gendered polarity of the gaze. In Bangladesh many women have been conditioned to cover themselves lest they tempt men and in the West, to expose themselves for the pleasure of men. The western concept of the female body as a profit-making commodity continues to impinge on Bangladeshi culture. The results are the pressures on women to use their bodies for commercial purposes and the influx of pornographic films into the country, further endangering Bangladeshi women's lives.

At NPK workshops, Christian women have reported that if they go out without a male escort and without their heads covered, they hear a passing comment like: "Does anybody buy a peeled banana?" Such sayings in Bangladesh and the distorted portrayal of women's sexuality in the western media confirm that women are identified as objects for consumption rather than as people in their own right. Cycle rickshaws in Bangladesh are equipped with a hood that may be raised or lowered. If a woman in Bangladesh goes on a rickshaw without the hood up, many passing men are bound to look back and stare.

As many Bangladeshi women are conditioned by their patriarchal socialisation to identify themselves as objects of desire for men, they also internalise the notion that their body can make men transgress. Therefore these women believe that they are to be blamed if female "beauty beguiles a man".<sup>24</sup> They silently bear the punishment of restricted movements within four walls inflicted on them by their patriarchal society. The harmful effects of women's imprisonment in their own homes in their own free country are often clearly visible. Many Bangladeshi women bear this punishment in the hope that men will remain free from the sin of lust. However, this method of punishing one for the sin of another does not solve the problem of a man's infatuation. In unsegregated western societies and in segregated Bangladeshi society alike, women continue to be sexually harassed, raped and killed, for they are still seen as things to gaze at, to covet and to possess.

A woman's life remains precarious as long as she is seen as a thing to covet and possess. The biblical narratives of Susanna and Bathsheba reflect Bangladeshi women's own experience that the next step to being an unwilling object of a masculine gaze is often attempted or actual rape. As women are blamed for the masculine gaze, so they are if they are raped. It is a well known fact that until recently in many countries, including Bangladesh, rape victims were blamed for arousing men's lust. However, because of worldwide feminist protests, judges and others in the power structure are now a little reluctant to blame the victim so readily. Although the law of Moses clearly states that a rape of a woman is like a murder of a neighbour (Deut. 22.26), a Bangladeshi Christian woman can hardly ever expect a preacher to draw a comparison between a rape and a murder so as to declare the victim innocent.<sup>25</sup> Usually rape victims are considered sullied objects, unsuitable for marriage and unworthy of respectable status in society.

After the war of liberation in 1971, some attempt was made to honour the rape victims as martyrs of the war. Naila Kabeer writes:

During the war of liberation women were thrust dramatically into the national consciousness as victims of rape by the Pakistani army—an estimated 200,000 minimum. Along with the hypocrisy that led to them being termed "war heroines" in an attempt to secure their social acceptance, some real effort was made to help these women . . .<sup>26</sup>

Through various events, year by year, some women's groups endow the so-called "war-heroines" with the honour given to the martyrs of the war of 1971. In Bangladesh, following cases of

attempted seduction, attempted or actual rape, the life of the victim, not of the perpetrator, is endangered. Newspapers and different organisations in Bangladesh report many incidents of women burnt by acid when they do not let themselves be seduced by men. After a rape some commit suicide or take up prostitution. Some, of course, become a thing to be discarded as soon as the man's sexual appetite is satisfied. The murder of a rape victim is a universal phenomenon.

At NPK and other workshops Christian women give evidence that although incidents of women being condemned to death for adultery are unheard of in their Christian community, metaphorically speaking women are stoned if they are accused of adultery. A double sexual standard exists for men and women. Women are often seen as temptresses and as solely responsible for, and the cause of, sexual offences. Metaphorically, women are often brought to trial without the man involved in adultery. More women are punished, and punished more severely, than men for involvement in sexual misdemeanour.

### **The Struggle for Justice**

When the two biblical narratives are related to the Bangladeshi context, it becomes clear that the contemporary patriarchal religious authority in Bangladesh, whether Muslim or Christian, has largely identified with the patriarchal structure of scriptural times. In both the stories the whole assembly supports the patriarchal religious authority. However, God is on the side of the two women and their liberators. In the biblical accounts God's prophets support oppressed women, whereas in contemporary Bangladesh and in most other societies, religious authority fails women. The religious structure follows not prophetic, but patriarchal norms. Hence, in contemporary religions patriarchy is perpetuated at the expense of the scriptural vision. In the eyes of women, all Bangladeshi preachers who accuse the gospel woman of adultery, stand themselves accused of androcentrism for failing to be amazed at the lack of a man in the act of adultery. The interpreters have identified with the gullible crowd portrayed in both the biblical narratives, who easily believe not the weak in their society, but the strong. Such male biased interpretation has a direct effect on the situation of women.

Bangladeshi Christian communities that fail to question the lack of a man involved in adultery in the gospel narrative, become oblivious of the involvement of a man in the act of adultery in contemporary incidents. The reinterpretation of the gospel account makes Bangladeshi women analyse the incidents in their own community in a new light. At NPK workshops, women recall events from their experience when the Christian community ostracises women and their families for alleged adultery without raising any questions about male involvement. While many such incidents are seen as adultery by the religious authority, analysis of the dynamics of power raises questions about the appropriateness of calling them adultery rather than rape. Adultery needs two equal willing accomplices, whereas in most cases the girl involved is a minor and the man much older and more powerful.

As the institutional church identifies with patriarchy, Bangladeshi Christian women connect with the sufferings of Susanna and the gospel woman. Their ethical standard is set by Susanna, Daniel and Jesus who struggle for justice. Women learn not to accuse the victims as they traditionally did, but the patriarchal structural injustice. What was redeemed in scriptural times continues to be redeemed. The liberation of biblical women has repercussions for contemporary women of Bangladesh. Reinterpreting the biblical narratives so raises the self-esteem of some participants in NPK workshops that they are empowered to transform their lives and those of others to make a better family, church and society.

Many NPK women today understand that any social, political or religious system or structure that dehumanises people is to be regarded as the thief of Jesus' saying. The system or structure is what sometimes literally and sometimes in other ways kills and destroys people and the created order. The Christian women who fight against the corrupt patriarchal structure of their own society find in Jesus and in biblical narratives the life-giving spirit. The biblical accounts of these two women which were previously treated as either neutral or oppressive to women in Bangladesh, have become

the very resources of women's empowerment for liberation and justice. These two narratives of biblical women are by no means exceptional. Bangladeshi women have found many others that speak to them directly.

## References

1. NPK (Netritto Proshikkhon Kendro) was an Ecumenical Women's Training Centre for doing theology from women's perspective in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
2. *Pabitra Bible: Puraton o Nutan Niam*(Dhaka: The Bangladesh Bible Society, 1984) is the version of the Bible commonly used among all denominations in Bangladesh.
3. Giovanni Martoccia, trans., *Christadikhhartider Bible* (Jessore: National Social Catechetical Training Centre, 1994), pp. 318-319 and 350.
4. No gospel other than John's has this story of the woman accused of adultery. The most ancient authorities lack John 7.53-8.11. In other authorities this passage is found elsewhere in John's gospel or even in Luke. Some scholars doubt the authenticity of this account.
5. O'Day, Gail R., "John", in Newsom, Carol A., and Ringe, Sharon H., eds, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, London: SPCK, 1992, p. 297.
6. See REB and NRSV, Sus. v. 11, GNB, before v. 18 a heading is added: "The Judges Try to Seduce Susanna". Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 214 has a footnote for vv. 15-27: "The attempted seduction."
7. Jennifer A. Glancy, "The Accused: Susanna and Her Readers", in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 297. Glancy bases her assessment on the works of A. Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 22; R. Dunn, "Discriminations in the Comic Spirit in the Story of Susanna", *Christianity and Literature* 31 (1981), p. 24; M. P. Carroll, "Myth, Methodology and Transformation in the Old Testament: The Stories of Esther, Judith and Susanna", *SR* 12 (1983), pp. 301-12, esp. p. 307.
8. See Deut. 22. 23-27.
9. According to the text, David "sent Joab with his officers and all Israel" into battle (2 Sam. 11.1). Although David sent messengers to enquire about Bathsheba and to bring her, it can be presumed that he was also in a position to dismiss them when he wished. Moreover, these messengers would not have been in a position to challenge David. The palace was de facto empty.
10. NIV is quoted as the word "timidity" better illustrates the point here.
11. Glancy, Jennifer A., "The Accused: Susanna and Her Readers", in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, pp. 299-300.
12. See Jn. 18.31.
13. Levine, Amy-Jill, "'Hemmed in on Every Side': Jews and Women in the Book of Susanna", in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield:

Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, p. 312.

14. The REB with Apocrypha is quoted here as it corresponds to the commonly used Bengali translation.
15. Metzger, Bruce M., ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 213.
16. Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 73.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 85. See Rev. 21.24-26; 22.2.
20. The story is a summary of various Bangladeshi newspaper articles. These articles are from: *Janamat*: 22-28 January 1993, Fazlul Bari, "Ei Meye Zena Karechhe Er Dafan Habena", p. 14; 16 to 22 July 1993, K. M. Sobhan, "Dharmer Name Be-aini Salish", p. 9; 25 February to 3 March 1994, "Fatwadankari Mawlanasaha Nay Janer Sat Bachhar Kare Sashram Karadanda", p. 1. The Daily Star, Dhaka, 4 November, 1993, "The Village Salish: Taking the Law in Their Own Hands", p. 8; and Amnesty International: see Chapter 1, n. 22.
21. *Janamat*, 5 to 11 February 1993, Taslima Nasrin, "Je Kona Narii Aj Noorjahan", p. 9.
22. *Janamat*, 28 January to 3 February 1994, Reja Arfeen, "Noorjahan Shudhu Nari Nay Amader Bibeko", p. 18.
23. Ali, A. Yusuf, trans., *The Holy Qur'an, Text Translation and Commentary*, London: The Islamic Foundation, 1975, p. 897.
24. See Sus. v. 56.
25. See Deut. 22. 23-27.
26. Kabeer, Naila, *Minus Lives: Women of Bangladesh*, London: Change, 1984, p. 5.