

**SPIRITUALITY, VULNERABILITY AND COPING WITH SUFFERING AMONG
AFRICAN WOMEN: A REFLECTION**

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Abstract

This work examines the link between divine intervention and the capacity to cope with suffering among African women. The work is derived from Sicily Mbura Muriithi's (2008) doctoral thesis, entitled *Vulnerability and Capability in Kenya: towards an African Women's Public Theology*. The discussions in this paper are guided by Martha Nussbaum's comments regarding the capability approach to human development. The following are the key objectives: to examine comprehensive vulnerability as the root cause of suffering among African women, to assess the effects of vulnerability on African women's capacity to participate in socio-economic activity and to discuss divine intervention as a source of empowerment for African. The research design for this work was descriptive survey. Information for this paper was gathered using literary method' Data was analysed and interpreted using the Grounded Theory approach. Among the key findings include the assertion that African women suffer oppression due to comprehensive vulnerability. As a result, African women are, despite their immense capabilities, subjected to great suffering. Vulnerability can however be both a means and an end insofar as African women's religious orientation is concerned. Certain aspects of religious practice can enhance women's vulnerability. Jesus Christ as a true liberator, serves as an appropriate source of empowerment for increased capacity to overcome vulnerability and advance in self-actualisation activities among African women. The paper concludes by recommending increased role of Churches and governments in formulating policies that can liberate women.

Key Words

Vulnerability, pauperization, capability, social construction, divine design

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper advances the argument that women experience untold suffering manifested in domestic and sexual violence, lack of or limited access to education, inheritance, health, polygamy, property ownership and control (Mbura, 2008). The paper highlights the state of women's comprehensive vulnerability and champions the need for a theological perspective that would eradicate such a condition adequately. The proposal for a theological perspective points to the role Churches and the governments of Africa should play in ensuring gender equality through sustainable development, especially for women who are the most vulnerable.

Mugambi, (1995), Mbiti (1988) and Getui, (1998)- among other writers, assert that the task of African Churches and governments should be to strive and set up liberating policies which promote and strengthen woman's capabilities. It is the view of this paper that African women's vulnerability and pauperization that lead to untold suffering are a social construction and not a divine design. It is therefore very possible that communities can willingly recognize and promote women's rights and

dignity that lead to their self-determination and self-actualization which are the prerequisite for a holistic well-being.

This paper is guided by Martha C. Nussbaum's (2000) observations concerning the capability approach to development. Capabilities development, she argues is for all human beings. While she argues that "practical reason and affiliation are crucial to all other capabilities, she firmly cautions that all capabilities are of equal worth and none should be undermined"(Nusshaum, 2000) The capabilities approach contains three central concepts: functioning, capability and agency. A functioning is being and doing what people value and have reason to value. A capability is a person's freedom to enjoy various functioning – to be or do things that contribute to their well-being. Agency is a person's ability to pursue and realize goals she values and has reason to value_(Alkire and Deneulin, 2009).

This paper calls for the strengthening of women's capability in a way that underscores the place of God in human existence and well-being as central in liberating women from comprehensive vulnerability.

2. THE LIBERATING NATURE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION

Christian beliefs based on Biblical teachings reveal that God is Almighty and Merciful. He is the Creator and sustainer of everything. He is the Protector of his creatures especially humankind created in his image and likeness (Mbiti, 1990). In view of this assumption, women should not be subjected to discrimination, oppression, violence, rape and economic marginalization since; all these, among other vices, lead to 'comprehensive vulnerability.'(Nusshaum, 2000, Mbura, 2008)

In this paper, an appraisal of African Women Theologies is presented as a suitable theological perspective in coping with vulnerability and suffering. The argument here is that contravention of the pillars of vulnerability is imperative for the churches and the governments of Africa as a forward motion in their redefinition of their membership made of women and men/girls and boys who should experience God's divine love in its entirety (Oduyoye, 2001).

This paper projects an evaluation of African Women theologies based on authors' own experiences in women's vulnerability and development. The paper argues that African women suffer in many ways because they are extremely vulnerable.

3. WOMEN'S COMPREHENSIVE VULNERABILITY: AN AFRICAN CULTURE OR A DIVINE DESIGN?

We have heard it said

We have heard that it was said, "the girl-child is a disappointment"

But now we say to all, girl or boy

A child of God has been born.

We have heard that it was said

"Women, stay at home and serve"

But now, we say, No one was born with a ladle or paddle.

We have heard that it was said

Without circumcision you cannot be fit for marriage

But now we say the premise is false and we have proof.

We have heard it was said

"All shall marry and bear children"

But now we say life has more choices than marriage and procreation

We have heard that it was said

Widows must suffer to be cleansed

But now we say widows are women not

Just wives who have lost their husbands

Women are human beings

No human beings are born to suffer (Oduyoye, 2001: 27)

The above poem shows that there is an inbuilt social construction of who and what a woman should be. The writer also confirms that the perception has been changed or must be changed. On the same grip, Muriithi (2008), gives a detailed analysis of women's comprehensive vulnerability giving an example of women from a Kenyan Community called Meru. She presents eight key different ways that women experience hardship and injustices and goes on to argue that "an African woman's situation is characterised by social, cultural, religious, political and economic determinants of women's place and status in the society" (Oduyoye, 2001:27). Members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians gave the impetus of doing theology from a woman's perspective. This was a result of the understanding that women's issues and concerns needed special attention

(Oduyoye, 1992). This vulnerable condition affects women's capability in dealing with their state of susceptibility.

Nowadays, even though some good policies have been made, it is sad that women still suffer terrible oppressions and discrimination just because of their sex. They are suffering from sexual harassment at work and at home, domestic violence, rape, exploitative part-time work done in poor conditions for meagre salaries, limited access to education, lack of access to technology and resources, discrimination in inheritance and land ownership and employment (Scott 2006, Muriithi, 2008: 7-8). There are also issues of forced and early marriages, forced divorce; gender based violence; high risk to HIV and AIDS; and all these facts have kept women in vicious circles of poverty and vulnerability.

It is very unfortunate that for many years the Church has been fully influenced by traditional cultures which are male-dominated and has failed to give women equal opportunities in leadership and ministries in church. Different authors have lamented that the Church in Africa has followed the African traditional patriarchal worldview which tends to keep women for domestic responsibilities, excluding them from public domain. James R.M (2003) has rightly lamented that,

Those women who became Christians were taught how to make tea, gardening, cleaning and nursing the children of the whites as ayahs. This domesticating education was expanded in the church as cleaning the church building, making tea, arranging flowers and other care services. Until now, most women see their role in the church as such (James, 2003).

In order to reverse this trend which dehumanizes women and dishonours God who created them in his image and likeness, there is great need to develop an African Women's Public Theology which is liberating and affirming for women in Africa. As Sicily Mbura Muriithi (2008) notes,

The discipline of Public Theology is about the link between theology and the public sphere of politics, economics, law making and specifically in this case, social development. In this sense the heart of the discipline concerns the engagement between the two areas, namely, theology and social development (Muriithi, 2008:9).

This discipline must take seriously issues that relate to integrity, dignity and wholeness, which are addressed through the capability development of each and every person. For the success of African Women's Public Theology, this article suggests the 'Human Capability

Approach’ as developed by Martha Nussbaum. In this regard, the Human capabilities approach can be simply explained as “an approach that emphasizes the recognition and appreciation of human dignity and integrity in real-life terms. It is about what one is ‘actually able to do and to be (Nusshaum, 2000). This approach is mainly based on what people are able to be and to do (Phiri, 1995). The approach helps to assess women’s vulnerability and allows empowering them for justice, equality, integrity and holistic well-being. Values and personal desires of women are given due consideration so that women can exercise their right to make informed choices and are not forced to do things against their will.

Research focusing on African culture and issues point to patriarchy arguing that women suffer because of man’s selfishness motivated by his wicked requirements (Phiri, 1995) as rightly argued by the following three African women scholars who are also key proponents of African Women Theologies:

i) Musimbi Kanyoro -“African cultures present a woman as one who has to fulfil her destiny by being a mother. In becoming a mother this woman renounces her personality or personal identity, she is referred to as the wife of... or the mother of... she belongs to her husband and she does not possess but rather she is possessed. She is the rural landless woman who works for the farmer and earns a meagre salary, which she has to subsidise. She works sixteen to eighteen hours a day. She suffers in silence and weeps in secret. She is the candle and her children are the light she gives”(Kanyoro, 1996)

ii) Nasimiyu T. Wasike -“Culture is the leading issue, which pre-occupied the theology of African women. Culture has silenced many women in Africa and made us unable to experience the liberating promise of God. Favourable aspects of our cultures, which enhance the well-being of women, have been suppressed. Those that diminish women continue to be practiced in various degrees of our societies, often making women objects of cultural preservations” (Wasike, 1992: 196).

iii) Nyambura Njoroge -“Patriarchy is a destructive powerhouse, with systematic and normative inequalities as its hallmark. It also affects the rest of the creation order. Its roots are well entrenched in society as well as in the Church – which means we need well-

equipped and committed women and men to bring patriarchy to its knees” (Jane N Njoroge, 1997).

It is therefore clear that certain aspects of African traditional culture have been or are still being used to subject women into subjugation, thus enhancing their vulnerability. Mbiti (1988) observes that African cultural traditions that perpetuate prejudice against women should be abandoned in modern society. Such practices militate against holistic living that is divinely sanctioned for all humankind, regardless of race, gender and creed. (Moywaywa, 2013).

4. THEODICY AND SUFFERRING

The term theodicy denotes the attempt by Christian theologians to reconcile between the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God and the presence of evil in the world. There are two major types of evil, natural and moral. The former is caused by cosmic processes while the latter results from human agency. Vulnerability of African women can result from either natural processes such as drought, famine and disease or from moral evil such as domestic violence, cultural practices as well as socio-economic and political marginalisation, among others. The question arises as to why God would allow such suffering to be inflicted not only on African women but also on humanity in general. Among the most popular theodacists is St Augustine of Hippo,. The Augustinian theodicy is also sometimes referred to as soul-searching theodicy. According to him, evil did not originate from God. God created a perfect universe and evil is a result of human beings exercising their free-will to choose the lesser good, thus leading to evil. According to Augustine, evil does not exist as an entity of its own; rather it is simply a deprivation of good (just as blindness is a deprivation of sight). Although Augustine’s theodicy has come under criticism in its various aspects, it can however be applied to inform our understanding on the origins of evil. Humanity was created with free will ability, meaning that humankind is able to choose what to do. They can either follow the way of love and mutual respect recognizing the actualization of gender justice, equality and freedom. Similarly, promotion of human rights as women’s rights can also be propagated through inculturation of positive African traditional values as discussed in “the concept of motherhood in the Agikuyu tradition” (Kabugi, 2004: 44). They can also prefer to oppress and marginalize part of humanity as it is done to some group of people based on their

gender or races or economic status and choice of selective cultural practices that demean women (Moywaywa, 2013: 67). The articulations above reveal that there is systematic social construction that maintains women in the state of comprehensive vulnerability leading to suffering. This therefore leads to interrogating how this compares with divine sovereignty and suffering. Is it the will of God that women suffer? What is God saying about their suffering today?

4. BIBLICAL INSIGHTS ON COPING WITH SUFFERING

Comprehensive vulnerability, injustice and suffering that women of Africa go through are contrary to the will of God (Genesis I: 26-31). God created humanity (male and female) in his image, blessed and gave them dominion over every creation for their good. Creating them in his image shows he accorded them an opportunity to share a unique relationship with him. It is therefore right to question, why the Almighty (Psalms XXIV:1-10) God allows women to suffer while he is able to remove all kinds of suffering. There are numerous biblical texts that reflect how vulnerable humankind is likely to behave before God and how they struggle to understand their situation. There are biblical texts like, Ruth, Job and others that reflect people who represent dilemma of God's divine sovereignty and coping with suffering.

“...the husband of Naomi died...when they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died so that the woman was left without her two sons and husband...No my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you because the hand of the Lord has turned against me. Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother –in-law but Ruth clung to her”...Do not press me to leave you or turn back from you! Where you will go I will go...call me Mara, for the Lord has dealt bitterly with me...and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me”(Ruth I:1-22)

“Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, “naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing” (Job I:20-22)

The book of Ruth is one of the books in the whole Bible, where female figures are featured prominently. A quick look at the chapter, one is able to identify religious, social,

cultural and economic development aspects that affected and shaped the lives of Naomi and Ruth. The whole family moved to Moab during famine. While in the foreign land, Naomi lost the husband and the two sons. This situation subjected Naomi into untold kind of suffering. Unable to understand her situation, she felt that God was dealing with her bitterly and had actually caused her the kind of calamity. Her deep feeling of vulnerability can be compared with the expression of pain in the book of Job although the reactions are different.

In desperation Naomi resolves to go back to her people and tells them to change her name in congruent to the bitterness and calamity she suffered. But at the point that she felt that she had lost all, she gained all and more because Ruth gave up everything for her and later became part of those in the lineage of David. This is a lineage through which Jesus Christ was born. On the other hand when Job found himself in the midst of intense suffering, instead of complaining he worshiped God “Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped...in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong doing” (Job I). Job uses the word “naked” showing that he felt completely torn apart. It actually reveals his utter inner vulnerability prompted by the collapse of his physical property and children. It is however recorded that he never sinned or charged God meaning that his faith and trust in God was unwavering.

The story of Job in its entirety attest to the fact that God does not tempt but allows people to stand and proof their relationship with God. It provides guidance on how human beings should respond when subjected to suffering. One should never despair or give up on their faith. Nor should one blame himself/herself but should patiently wait for God to reveal his divine purpose. In the case of Job God revealed his divine purpose and restored his health, his children and property, all of them were doubled (Job XLII: 10-17). The all-powerful, all-knowing and all-merciful God was with and walked with his people in the olden time.

6 GOD’S INTERVENTION AND AFRICAN WOMEN’S SUFFERING

In this paper, it is getting clear that, beyond good policies, and capability development, there is great need to rethink divine intervention in all aspects of human life. Beyond vulnerability and suffering, there is an ultimate solution in Him who is the source of everything and everyone –God.

Gender development should also be understood as Christian humanism which recognises both spiritual and temporal liberty through liberation Christology:

Jesus is ... the centre of Christian humanism through his incarnation and suffering for the oppressed people. Christian humanism entails recognizing the image of God in all people. ...A proper ... environment is necessitated by the existence and co-existence of the people recognising the mission of Christ as a model of Christianity. Jesus becomes the figure of liberation and empowerment. The pivot point of Christian humanism is hence necessitating... integral development for the good of all human beings. This means eradicating all forms of bondage. Hence manifesting the love of Christ as he loved the world (Kabugi, 2004: 196).

African women could, therefore look upon Jesus Christ as their ideal model in coping with and overcoming suffering. The yoke of vulnerability may weigh heavily upon their shoulders but this should not make them doubt the fact that they are created in the image of God, just as the rest of humanity.

CONCLUSION

African women have a responsibility to rise up and secure their liberation from all those forces that militate against their ability to enjoy freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right for all human beings. Freedom of expression is essential for self-determination and self-actualisation. African women are presented with a challenge on how to devise a mechanism that could cushion them against the ills associated with vulnerability. The starting point for the realisation of such a mechanism could ought to lie in the projection of Jesus Christ as the ideal liberator. This is so because the fact that, like them, Christ underwent undeserved suffering. The journey towards the full emancipation of African women cannot, however, be left to the women alone. There is need to engage Church and state leadership in pursuing this noble task.

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