

A JOURNEY ON THE PATH OF AN AFRICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGIAN AND PIONEER, MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE: CONTINUING THE PURSUIT FOR JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The central thrust of this article is a review of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's contribution to African feminist theologies in her pursuit of justice in the church and in society, particularly with regard to gender justice. The article studies the context in which African feminist theologies emerged and some of the thematic areas that stimulated their "eruption" in the African church and academia. It also explores their implications for the church and society. This article suggests that it is imperative that African feminist theologies, especially those which have been adopted by the members of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, be used to expand the theological methods and lenses of doing theology beyond cultural hermeneutics in order to attend to the ecological, economic and social struggles that impact life in Africa. The affirmation of the relevance of cultural hermeneutics, it is suggested, ought not to exclude the possibilities of expanding the contours of analyses or using other hermeneutical approaches such as ecological, economic and social analyses – particularly in Africa where most people are hindered from experiencing fullness of life because of ecological degradation, economic exploitation and social power struggles in local and international politics.

1 INTRODUCTION

We shall teach men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and practice ... freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage. (ANC women quoted by Elizabeth Schmit, 1983)

When I think about the Church, I think of all women presumed dead or who are dying, who attend Sunday services and are presented week after week before all-male panels of celebrants. Then I pray that women will hear the voice of Jesus saying to them, "Daughter arise". I pray they will wade through the muddy terrain of prejudice, taboo, and silence and find their way to touch Jesus and feel the

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healing stream flowing from him, healing their marginalisation. I pray that the church does the same so that it might be healed of its ineptitude so as to become a power that empowers all in the community it seeks to minister to (Mercy Amba Oduyoye 2005:154).

The concern and search for gender justice in the church and society in Africa have stirred the development and enunciation of feminist theologies in Africa. Systematic approaches to and the analyses of gender justice in the life, ministry, theology, praxes, liturgies, etc of the churches in Africa were generally spurred and popularised mainly by the Ghanaian feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. According to Amoah (2006:xiviii), Mercy Oduyoye was born in the eastern region of Ghana in Asamankese. She pursued her secondary education at Achimota from 1949 to 1952. Thereafter, she enrolled for a teacher's training education at the College of Technology (now known as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) in Kumasi, Ghana. After teaching for some time at Asawase Methodist Girls' School near Kumasi, she went to the University College of Ghana in Legon in 1959, where she was encouraged to pursue theology. She furthered her studies for a Master's degree at Cambridge University where she studied dogma. Amoah (2006) further states that "upon completion of her theological studies at Cambridge, she returned to Ghana to teach religious knowledge at Wesley Girls' High School, in Cape Coast". She then taught at the University of Ibadan, where she published her first book in 1986 which is entitled *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa*. This was followed by other books such as *Who will roll the stone away? The ecumenical decade of the churches in solidarity with women* (1990), *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* (1995) and *Introducing African women's theologies* (2001). Oduyoye not only put her thought on theology and critique on patriarchal theologies in her books but also extended her analyses by creating a theological movement of feminist theologians through the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians (the Circle), which she started in 1988 and was officially inaugurated at Trinity Theological College in Accra (Ghana) in 1989.

The life and academic work of Mercy Oduyoye have inspired and influenced the theological work of not only Ghanaian women, but also significant members of African women's theologians, many of whom she nurtured through the creation of the Circle and the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture (Amoah 2006:xxi).

Her theological insights and method of engaging theology and culture were subsequently used and expanded (or developed) by members of the Circle. The Circle is one of the most organised, vibrant and systematic collectives with specific theoretical or epistemological methodologies in Africa and is known for "doing theology" and "cultural hermeneutics" (which I will elaborate on in detail later). Mercy Amba Oduyoye has, for example, described the evolution and advancement of African feminist theologies in the church and in society (including academia) as the eruption within eruptions of liberation and contextual theologies in Africa and in the countries of the Global South.

The purpose of this article is therefore to focus on the legacies of African feminist theologies and the epistemological frameworks, themes and approaches which Mercy Amba Oduyoye has developed and which members of the Circle use. Particular attention is given to cultural hermeneutics. The idea is not to expound on the specific content of cultural hermeneutics as it is applied by Oduyoye, but to demonstrate the ways in which it has spurred the systematic development of African feminist theologies. This article also illustrates the ways in which Oduyoye's use of cultural hermeneutics has inspired many feminist or African women theologians within and outside the Circle in their quest for justice in the church, academia and society.

The article will therefore briefly describe the context in which African feminist theologies, thought and consciousness evolved. It will then describe the epistemological or hermeneutical tool (cultural hermeneutics) which has been many African feminist theologians' major lens or theological method for doing theology. I will look at the relevance and role of cultural hermeneutics in the expansion of feminist critique on the injustices that persistent in the church and in society, which undermine the wellbeing of women and other people who are marginalised, discriminated against or undermined by life-denying theologies, church praxes and/or liturgies. The article will demonstrate the possibilities that the eruption of an African feminist theological voice has for the transformation of theologies in Africa and for the improvement of life on the continent.

The articulation of the methods, processes and theoretical discussions of the Circle is helpful in understanding Oduyoye's contribution to the growing body of knowledge on feminist theologies, the increase in the number of women who are doing theologies in the church and in academia, and the influence of cultural hermeneutics as a primary theological and theoretical method which she has developed and which has found currency among many African feminist theologians. The article also looks at the implications of feminist theological concerns (particularly for justice in the church, academia and society in terms of the marginalisation of women) and feminist theologians who seek justice in some churches in Africa, and how they contribute to transforming the church and society in Africa today.

2 THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGIES AND MERCY ODUYOYE'S CONTRIBUTION

As stated earlier, African feminist theologies have been spurred primarily by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and many other feminist theologians and academics. African theologies, churches, academic institutions and certain aspects of African culture have tended to disrespect, undermine, exclude and/or marginalise women from active and full participation in the church (particularly in ordained ministry), academia and society. For example, even today the question of women's full participation in the ecclesia in most African churches continues to be a highly charged and contested issue. Some churches have

supported women's full participation in the church (including their ordination), whilst others have limited their participation in most offices and have not affirmed their ministries and/or ordination.

The churches that have contested the basis for allowing women's participation in all spheres of ecclesial life have tended to justify their stance by appealing to theology and referring to the Bible. They did this through a literal interpretation of some texts or by holding on to some male-stream and life-denying texts which advance violence against women and their marginalisation (see, for example, 2 Samuel 13). In addition, some churches have resorted and/or appealed to regressive aspects of African culture that discriminate against women, while others have maintained the marginalisation of women by using biological and/or scientific arguments (such as biological differences between women and men) to justify the inequality and therefore the inferior roles or nature of women. These and many other reasons have been advanced to justify the exclusion of women in the church or to further exclude them from academia and leadership in society.

For a long time, patriarchal theology (and in South Africa, racialised patriarchal theology) has maintained the idea that women ought not to participate in ordained ministry in the church. Racialised patriarchy is:

... an ideological and social position. Its fundamental premise is that by a natural (genetic) inclination, divine rule, and historical practice that which men rule is the primary and what is primary is ruled by men. It also presumes that is as it should be. Like white supremacist ideology, it uses existing unequal social arrangements as evidence of the validity of its premise (Jackson 2003:51).

Racialised patriarchal theology has in many instances in the church and in society resulted in academic institutions not creating opportunities for women theologians to actively participate in full tuition, research and leadership. The arguments that are given, particularly with regard to denying women's full participation in the church, have included the following ideas:

- "The distinctive identities for men and women in their relations to each other were assigned by God at Creation. These identities are not nullified by Christ redemption, and they should be reflected in the church" (Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod 1975).
- Jesus Christ did not select any women as one of his apostles.
- The *Theotokos* did not exercise the sacramental priestly function in the church, even though she was made worthy to become the mother of the Incarnate Son, Jesus and the word of God.
- The Apostolic tradition, following the example of Jesus, never ordained any women to the priesthood.
- Pauline teachings categorically state that women ought to be silent in the church; that their place is well defined.

- Any logic and/or principle of comparison will reveal that if the exercise of sacramental priesthood by women were permitted, it should have been exercised by the Theotokos.

(The last five ideas are some of the examples that some members of the World Council of Churches who are opposed to the ordination of women have advanced, as cited by May 1998:2).

The Catholic Church has promulgated (through the Apostolic letter of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*) that “the church has no authority to ordain women to the priesthood” (May 1998:1). This has been seen as a confirmation of the consistent message or teaching of the unbroken tradition of the church.

The exclusion of women from full participation in the church has to a large extent been promoted by the contradictory and sometimes ambiguous messages from the Bible, particularly some of Paul’s teachings. On the one hand, Paul teaches that women should submit themselves to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24) and that they should be excluded from the authoritative roles in the church (1 Timothy 2:11). Yet, on the other hand, he affirms the importance of women’s ministry and their support for the work of God (Romans 16:1-3, 6 and 12) as “fellow workers”, as prophets and as people who have laboured alongside him in the Gospel. He also says that women are equal to men in the Gospel (Philippians 4:3). The contradictions that are embedded in the Bible and in particular in Pauline theology have, in many instances, resulted in conflicting views and contestations between what is and what should be done in the church in relation to women’s ministry. It is interesting, however, that despite of other biblical texts that support the full participation of men irrespective of their social position in the Bible (such as Joel 2:28), there are still those who hold on to women’s exclusion from full participation in the ministry on the basis of the Word of God.

The marginalisation of women in the church and in church history has painfully demonstrated the ways in which the church participates or colludes with structures of violence and discrimination when it denies women’s ministry. It also demonstrates how churches colluded with unjust systems that create and develop hierarchies of oppression which feed on injustices such as gender injustice. For example, many churches affirm that economic exploitation and ecological degradations are injustices, but they fail to acknowledge that silencing the voices of women and denying them full ministry are equally a violation of women’s human dignity, a denial of the image of God in them and a form of discrimination – thus an injustice. Discrimination against women and the trivialisation of their experiences of pain which derive from their exclusion from the church, I suggest, is an insult to God who has created all human beings in God’s image.

As a result, feminist consciousness has created awareness by naming and linking the exclusion of women to patriarchy. Oduyoye (1999:110) has posed questions such as: “Should women simply look on as men build empires that survive on the blood and sweat of women? Should we continue to indulge, pamper and worship our men folk even when we see them clearly acting contrary to the good of the whole community?” These questions have demonstrated the willingness of feminist theologies to grapple with the gender

contradictions that manifest themselves in social relations and in the church. African feminist theologians have pointed out that patriarchy values men and undermines women (or render them unimportant and secondary in societal organisation). They have also demonstrated the link between patriarchy and kyriarchy (master/slave domination) and other systems that facilitate oppression and injustices against women.

Patriarchy is a system that justifies the relationship between gender and power. It is based upon the idea that “men” are superior to all living beings. Men’s lives become the decisive factor and criterion by which women and other living beings are defined or judged. This implies that patriarchy asserts and apportions power over other beings. Despite women’s lack of visibility in the hierarchies of the church, academia and society (and historical records of church polity), their contributions cannot be discounted. Their exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation in the church and society have served, instead, as a motivation for them to find solutions to end exclusion and violence. It has also spurred them to actively contribute to the transformation of gender relations in a society such as South Africa, which requires the consolidation of democracy, the search for peace and justice including justice on the earth.

Feminist theologies have questioned the authenticity of theologies that thrive on exclusion and marginalisation. They have also questioned what the relevance of challenging these exclusions is for the church. For example, some of the following questions have formed the basis of their attempt to understand and raise life-giving and affirming theologies which male-stream and mainstream African theologies have taken for granted.

- How can women achieve the status of subjects in fields, institutions and theologies that subsume or ignore them?
- In what ways do African feminist theologies and histories that aim at addressing questions of silence and invisibility of women move beyond the “hidden from history” or “absent from church leadership” models? Is making women theologians and theologies visible in the church, academia and society sufficient for transforming the church and society and rectifying the past and the continued disregard or marginalisation of women?
- How might African feminist theologies undercut rather than reinforce life-denying ways of relating and doing theologies, and affirm redeeming aspects of the church that promote justice, respect, peace and meaningful relationships between men and women?
- How do African feminist theologies transform the ecclesia, academia and society to become communities, spaces and forums for justice, love, growth and compassion where all God’s people are nurtured, affirmed and allowed to live fully and meaningfully (i.e. where all God’s creation thrives without being degraded)?

It is in the light of the above contextual challenges and questions that the systematic development of African feminist theologies have generally emerged.

3 “DOING THEOLOGY” THROUGH CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

In the context of the sometimes clear rejection, exclusion and intentional marginalisation of women in the church and in society on the basis of the Bible, church tradition and African culture, theologians such as Oduyoye have called for the pursuit of justice (particularly gender justice) through the development of feminist theologies. They have sought to transform these exclusions and the ideologies and theologies that support them. They have challenged and continue to challenge the church and society to bear witness to God in ways in which all the people of God and their contributions are affirmed.

One of the central hermeneutical methods of the Circle is one that is referred to as “doing theology” which can be described as:

... the method of action-reflection out of which theological reflections arise, rather than simply applying existing theological insights to present situation. This method invites communal theology. It is in a group where the action and reflection take place and where the religious experience finds its communal experience (Kanyoro 2002:2).

This is a method that seeks to re-read and re-interpret theology, the Bible and other sources of theology (such as experience, revelation, scriptures, tradition, knowledge and rationale). It is informed by the commitment to empower and liberate women in particular, but also men, who suffer from multiple forms of oppression (including the intersections of gender injustices, discrimination on the bases of race, ethnicity, place of origin, sexuality and or class/social position) which tend to play themselves out structurally or at a micro level within the church and in society. Oduyoye has used culture as a lens through which life can be interrogated in most of her writings (e.g. *Daughters of Anowa*). It was, however, only in 2002 that Musimbi Kanyoro defined this methodology as cultural hermeneutics. For example, she says:

Our cultural heritage was indeed the basis for our common understanding about who we are and what that means. It seemed to imply that for our community in Bware, if change were to be viable for anything, it must address first and foremost, cultural issues. This premonition that led me to suggest that our culture needs to be put to a thorough test under the framework of what I later came to call cultural hermeneutics ... [it emerged from biblical hermeneutics] ... which permits people from one generation to another to re-interpret scriptural texts in the light of their times and culture (Kanyoro 2002:9).

“Doing theology” through the lens of culture is a method and approach that was pioneered and primarily used by Mercy Oduyoye; it was developed by

others such as Musimbi Kanyoro (as is revealed in the quote above). Other women theologians and members of the Circle such as Nyambura Njoroge (who was one of the first African feminist ethicists), Musa Dube (a New Testament specialist and post-colonial studies expert), Isabel Phiri (a religious studies expert) have also used this method in their theological works. "Doing theology" through cultural hermeneutics derives from the view that "culture must not be romanticised. It was necessary to come to terms with identifying in our cultures those things that were beautiful and wholesome and life-affirming and to denounce those which were denying us life and wholeness" (Kanyoro 2002:5). It is also based on the notion that theology ought to become relevant and meaningful to African women and their communities, and therefore has to intentionally engage and deliberate (theologically) on the cultural context of Africa. It is, as Oduyoye and others suggest, rooted in culture. It evaluates the sufferings, struggles, joys, hopes, aspirations and contributions of those who are on the receiving end of history, church hierarchies and social stratifications that perpetuate injustices. It concerns itself with the silent and silenced women and the perspectives and/or methodologies which are marginalised by mainstream and male-stream theologies. Its hermeneutical function is to unearth, liberate, affirm and overcome the violence against women which is manifest in the church and in society.

African women's use of cultural hermeneutics does not only aim at understanding the texts from socio-historical and/or literary perspectives. Kanyoro (2002:10) states, for example, that "cultural hermeneutics puts every culture to scrutiny with the intention of testing its liberative potential for people at different times in history". It seeks to engage culture and to evaluate it; to transform its message from the vantage point of women and men who are on the receiving end of socio-political, economic, ecclesial and ecological injustices. They reject those aspects of hermeneutics which undermine the integrity of the web of life and the inherent dignity of full participation in God's ministry and in the community of believers, the church. They also reject imposed traditions and static notions that fail to acknowledge and accept the full participation of women in society.

Feminist theologies have become helpful in dislodging traditional church history's alliance with patriarchy and have contributed fundamentally to the processes of overcoming the violence which has tormented us, brutalised us and destroyed our spirit of humaneness in the church and in society. They have become central to the healing of our wounded and broken relationships that are caused by gender discrimination in the church and society. In addition, they have contributed or ignited the pursuit for reconciliation and reconstruction of the church and society. The promotion of feminist theologies in church and society is not just a pure expression of choice; it is a matter of justice which life itself demands from us.

Nyambura Njoroge (2002:45) affirms the relevance and influence of the Circle's approach and its methodology. She points out that feminist theologies have enabled women and those who are in solidarity with their struggle for justice in the church and in society "to develop their political as well as their religious consciousness in the struggle for liberation and freedom from

patriarchy, hierarchy, sexism, racism and economic exploitation” (Njoroge 2002:45). They have made it possible for women and men to articulate their understanding of God as God is known to them. God is therefore explained “as one who is for all women together with all men and for justice and harmony in the whole creation” (Njoroge 2002:45). God is not understood to be on the side of women to the exclusion of men; God is understood as one who is with and loves all creation, including women and men as attested to by both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Testament (New Testament). (Refer to Psalms and Proverbs for examples).

Some of the key inspirations for African women’s theologies are the pathways Oduyoye created, her invitation to all other theologians to continue the search for liberation from all forms of dehumanisation and degradation, and her proclamation of the full integrity of all God’s earth and creation. This is attested to by the following words:

Mercy Oduyoye was the first African women theologian to challenge the patriarchal image of the Church as proposed by her African male counterparts. Subsequently, other African women theologians have addressed this important issue, but it is Oduyoye’s work that laid the foundational image of “being church” for both women and men in Africa (Phiri 2005:30-31).

In collaboration with other social institutions and agencies, the Circle has continued to influence the ethos and the work of churches and social movements at national, regional and international agencies to address gender injustice in the relations of people. This has been pursued with the understanding that justice for women in the church and society is not simply a matter for women alone “but continually requires the active participation of the whole church” (Russell, quoted in Njoroge 2002:45). The imperative to affirm the dignity of women and to uphold women’s rights is not an obligation that derives from our desire to live harmoniously as citizens of the world or that is required by civil virtues such as human rights or church ordinances. They derive from the understanding that all “human beings are made in the image of God and deserve equal rights, protection and care” (Njoroge 2002:45).

A vital element that has surfaced in the Circle is the affirmation that the earth and other creatures of God are inextricably bound to humanity. This implies that in order for one to be an African feminist theologian, a Christian and an active citizen, one has to understand that humanity (male or female) are not separated from God’s creation. An African feminist ontological and/or ecological and anthropological understanding of what it means to be human can be seen in the firm reminder to the church and society of the fact that God does not exist outside and apart from the web of life. This has, to a large extent, been different to the prevailing or mainstream theological and ecumenical thinking which has tended to be anthropocentric and emphasises the uniqueness of humanity over and above other created beings. African feminist theological insights have generated theologies which take seriously our daily immersion in the web of life as embodied persons and have encouraged us to promote wholeness in our lives, thoughts, ministry and educational responsibilities.

African feminist theologies have also pointed to the need of thinking about God beyond the static, disabling and discriminatory imagery and thinking about God which are made normative by unjust, male-stream and ecologically insensitive theologies. They have encouraged the church and Christians to creatively utilise other ways of thinking about God which promote justice for all people irrespective of their gender, social position, geographic context, ability or disability, sexuality and class. The traditional descriptions of God which the churches and academics continue to use are not helpful to many members of the body of Christ. For example, they tend to see God in almost violent masculine terms. A reading of the African Lectionary of the All Africa Conference of Churches for 2008 demonstrates this in many ways. In the main, God is referred to as “mighty”, “Lord”, “king” as though these terms are exhaustive of the nature, scope and breadth of who God is.

Other metaphors of God as a redeemer, creator, etcetera, are marginalised and/or rendered non-existent, even though the Bible is full of a variety of diverse metaphors and descriptions of God. Many churches have continued to directly or indirectly purport and overemphasise this violent and or hierarchical understanding of the nature of God in order to intentionally or unintentionally alienate, control, violate, numb and even undermine the image of God in women. The unfair and discriminatory practices of the churches (whether through leadership, liturgical or hermeneutical practices and choices) have generated essentialist and non-creative ways of thinking about God. Feminist theologies have shown the limitation of such conceptualisation of God. They have also noted that when the dominant images of God are made normative, they obscure the diverse experiences, understanding and presence of God in our lives.

African feminist theologies have demonstrated the fallacy of using reason to justify women’s exclusion from full participation in the church and in society. Those who oppose women’s ministry often argue that because Jesus did not appoint a woman as an apostle, this is an indication that women and men have to play different roles in the church – and that women ought therefore not to be ordained. The argument is that by not selecting a woman to become one of his apostles, Jesus upheld the Old Testament role distinction between men and women in which men had to lead the church and family life. While Jesus Christ did not appoint women as apostles, he also did not teach against their participation in the ministry. Instead, he interacted and accepted women as leaders, friends, followers, learners and participants in ministry. This argument is limited because it does not state that Jesus did not elect men of other ethnic traditions to be his disciples or apostles; he chose males of Jewish descent such as him. The argument that Jesus did not elect women to be his apostles and that this therefore suggests that they should not be allowed into ordained ministry is limited and does not hold. If it did hold, the logical conclusion would be that all other males who are not of Jewish descent ought not to be in ordained ministry because Jesus had only chosen those of Jewish descent as his disciples and apostles. It is clear that such perspectives are limited. They are purely ideological, unjust, and do not make the ministry and the reign of God abundant for all.

Exclusionary perspectives against women's ministry and their full participation in the life and work of the church contradict the egalitarian experience of the Pentecost and the positive values that Jesus showed in his interactions, ministry and praxis in relation to women (such as respect, compassion and understanding). Exclusion of women can therefore be viewed as hostile to the egalitarian relationships, conversations and interactions that Jesus had with a variety of women – something which was quite radical for his time. They are not only hostile, but they also contradict Jesus' message of liberation and salvation, justice and the pursuit of abundant life for all.

One has to question the reasons as to why there are still churches, church leaders and theologies that have problems with respecting the dignity of women their full participation in the church and in ordained ministry. Why do some churches and individuals continue to support the exclusion of women from theological work even when there is no adequate and intellectually stimulating theological or valid and conclusive biblical support for this? Furthermore, it is imperative that the ways in which churches will address these questions, especially in the context of hostility toward justice for women is evident in the work and life of the church. This constitutes some of the central concerns for the church and society today, especially those who proclaim to minister the word of God. "[W]omen require knowing the commitment and the extent to which the churches are willing to overcome the exclusion of women in the church and in society" (LenkaBula 2006:6).

De Gruchy (2005) makes a similar point when he suggests that the church has to circumvent bifurcations and marginalisation of the other, in particular women:

In the power of the Holy Spirit, God has called into being a fellowship [sic] of those who have been touched by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who believe that he is the life of the world, who want to both experience and manifest [peace] in their lives, and who long to be agents of God's Shalom. This community of faith – the church – thus has no other purpose than to bear witness to the ongoing work of God in the world.

Furthermore, he asserts that because God calls the church into existence for the task of proclaiming the reign of God on earth and not as an exclusive end in itself, "[n]o one is [to be] excluded because no-one can join due to their own effort, status or origins. A church that is built upon national, ethnic, class or other exclusive characteristics, loses the right to be called the church ..." (De Gruchy 2005). The church's calling to participate in *Missio Dei* requires the experience of the right relations with God, between men and women, and with the earth.

It is in the light of the requirement for a just community of faith (which welcomes all to God's table and community) that African feminist theologies demand the restructuring of church life, thought, analysis and patterns of relations that are unjust. The transformative work of feminist theologies is

therefore aimed at the transformation of biblical texts and interpretations that are life-denying for women and for the body of Christ. It is also in the attempt to retrieve the positive images, metaphors and message that affirm the dignity and integrity of women, the web of life and their partnership with God in the story of salvation that this transformation is envisaged. The transformative thrust of African feminist theologies also seeks the following:

- The affirmation of the dignity and full humanity of women and men since they are all created by God and in God's image.
- The affirmation of the integrity of creation and the fact that humanity is inextricably bound to the web of life in its entirety; hence life affirming ministries that takes this seriously should be developed.
- The affirmation of the diversity of metaphors and imagery of God and the divine in order to promote creative and life-giving communities where the ontology (being) and talents of each member of the community of faith are affirmed, nurtured and used for the betterment of the church and society irrespective of their gender, social position, sexuality, place of origin, age, ability and/or disability, race or ethnicity.
- The solidarity of the church with women and many other categories of people who are on the receiving end of power, histories, economies and even ecclesial communities and who are struggling for fullness of life, freedom, peace and justice in relationships, the economy and ecology has to become a reality and a living witness to the grace of God to humanity and creation.

According to (Dube 2001:9), transformation through feminist theologies incorporates the pursuance of the liberation and transformation of structures and institutions that promote injustices, and entails the "transforming power in God's household". This, she states, requires the will and commitment to change life, institutions, churches and theologies for the better – not for more injustices. It is therefore not "reformation which maintains basic structure ... [it is] an attempt to inaugurate *metanoia*, a complete change of the current situation ... the involvement of all members of a society" (Dube 2001:9).

Kanyoro (2001:176) reiterates the above point and suggests that the transformation of those aspects that weaken life and the values of justice in the church should be achieved by speaking out:

Speaking up on issues that diminish life has been the most difficult part of our self-understanding as individuals and churches ... speaking up involves foremost risking the wrath of the powerful. Those who have dared to speak out despite all risk involved are the prophets that our continent [Africa] badly needs today (Kanyoro 2001:176).

Speaking out (in this sense) questions the attitudes, behaviour, obstacles and impediments which the church places in the way of the people of God who try to affirm, experience and share the presence of God amongst and between each other. It is the prophetic call and inspiration to the churches to lose the shackles of injustices that limit it from transforming itself into a safe and loving community of justice, peace and reconciliation by affirming the diversity of

God's people and God's creation. The church has to affirm the fundamental constitutive elements of its essence (such as unity, compassion, community and love) which can never be manifested if women are excluded or marginalised. Speaking out is therefore the proclamation of the message of Christ and the rupture of the boundaries of injustices and exclusion which manifests themselves through the rejection and alienation of women's participation and ministry (or the discrimination against women and other people) in the church and in society.

4 SOME OF THE LIMITATIONS OF "DOING THEOLOGY" THROUGH CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

Whilst I am tremendously grateful for the path of feminist theologies in Africa, the method of doing theology and the development of cultural hermeneutics, and appreciate their value and contributions to liberative theologies in Africa, I am also anxious that they will run the risk of being called *the* normative approaches of doing theology by feminist theologians and the Circle. My apprehension stems from the observations that the issues for which African women and their communities require God's salvific love, liberation and justice lie not only in the cultural domain. There are other life concerns that emerge from unjust economic systems, such as hyper-capitalism or economic globalisation, the entrenchment of violence through militarisation and the vulgar commoditisation of life (including the ownership of life forms; the abuse of women, children and vulnerable boys and men through unjust and exploitative practices of human trafficking; sexual violence) which also require our analyses and/or transformation. When cultural hermeneutics is used as if it is the only means of discerning the theological or moral experiences of women and those who are on the receiving end of injustices in Africa, it runs the risk of not attending to other issues that undermine fullness of life for God's people and creation in Africa.

As a black feminist ethicist who is living in South Africa and is grappling with the meaning of life and what God means in our context, I find the nominal attention which cultural hermeneutics give to racial injustices, ecological destruction, and economic exploitation and injustice one of its opaque spots. This is because in South Africa, race, class, gender, ethnicity and other forms of articulating differences have and continue to shape not only participation of women in particular but also women and men who are in relationships of oppression and exploitation. Andersen (2000:223) states that "[g]ender relations cannot be neatly sifted apart from the processes of racialisation, racism, class relations, and other social relations that structure women's lives". This is particularly true because:

... racism is after all a concrete social formation. It cannot be independent of other social relations of power and ruling which organise the society, such as those of gender and class ... Both black men and women are subject to racism, but there is a distinct gender-appropriate difference in "raced" stereotypes regarding them (Bannerji, quoted by Anderson 2000:223).

Moyo and Kawewe (2002:165) make a similar when they say that the exclusion of African women from full participation in the mainstream political economy (and, for the purposes of this article from the church and academia) “has not been solely due to male dominance, but rather is a part of the historical product of struggles for power in racialised societies”.

Fatima Meer (1985:1) who was one of the foremost literary scholars and anti-apartheid activists in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and who is still active in anti-racist work and South African literature – has also made us aware of the limitations of concentrating on gender as the sole lens of understanding oppression and or discrimination against women. She has stated that when gender is considered as the lone focal point and category for analysing political and economic context, it becomes unhelpful because it does not cover the breadth and complexities that other hierarchical systems which collude with gender injustices create, especially in South Africa. In a country like South Africa and many others where forms of injustices persist and where “the fundamental criterion for discrimination is race; it is unreal to consider the position of the one sex in isolation of the other” (Meer1985:1).

When gender is the only criterion for analysing political systems such as apartheid (or church polity or structures), it obscures the hierarchies which exist in relationships between black and white women, particularly when such hierarchies are legitimised by the state or are legacies of long engrained attitudes such as white supremacy in South Africa. Meer points out that although women of all races in South Africa took their positions within a framework of male domination in the family, politics, the economy and society during apartheid, “the enjoyment of the privileges of apartheid by white women differ[ed] only marginally from that of white men; likewise, while black women suffer more than black men from the violation of their rights, the violation are gross in respect to both” (Meer1985:1). Any attempt to deny or obscure these contradictions, she suggests, have the potential negative implications of stunting dialogue between women of all races in South Africa. It also has the effect of denying transformative and just relations and the possibility of expanding gender justice discourses and radical or constructive feminist theory (I would add feminist theologies) in South Africa.

While it is important to note the relationships of inequality that exist within and between women in South Africa, it is also important to note that, white or black women cannot always be homogenised and presented as though they are all victims of exclusion and marginalisation in life. Sometimes they inhabit different spaces and locations and therefore act to undo injustices, ignore injustices or are numbed by them. This suggest that African feminist theologies should also be expansive and attentive to the diverse realities, life experiences and theologies of the diverse women in Africa

The Circle has not, in my opinion, been radically attentive to the intersections of gender and race in its theological engagement. This can have the potential of trivialising injustices between women (and between women and men) in the church and in society which result from such experiences. If meaning only lies in the pursuit of gender justice through a cultural understanding or an interpretative approach, the negation of the other spheres and lenses of

theologies and life, will directly or indirectly collude with the systems of injustice that are embedded in economic systems and sometimes in people's interaction with the environment.

The painful history of apartheid and legislated racism in South Africa has "already shown that any attempt to consider gender in isolation from other forms of oppression just reinforces the hierarchies already in place, so deeply are they in the capitalist world" (Daymond 1996:viii). It would seem that African feminist theologians ought to seriously engage "race and gender simultaneously and develop practices and theories which acknowledge multiple forms of oppression without blurring their historical distinctions" (Daymond1996:x).

It is therefore imperative to note that whilst cultural hermeneutics can be a liberating and life-affirming theoretical approach and method of doing theology, it also has potential limitations (especially in the way that the Circle tends to espouse it as their normative hermeneutical method). I believe that it is an invaluable method and has generated a lot of prophetic witness. It has unearthed many unjust cultural and patriarchal practices such as female genital mutilation, inheritance rights and the abuse of women in patriarchal cultures. However, it should seek to include other ways of doing theology and of assessing and evaluating life that go beyond the cultural lenses, particularly in Africa where ecological destruction, economic exploitation and injustices, poverty, life struggles in the midst of HIV and Aids, high illiteracy rates, etc are so prevalent.

When cultural hermeneutics is considered the normative approach for doing feminist theology in Africa, this might limit the scope of the transformative imperative of feminist theologies on the continent. The more the hermeneutical approaches the Circle engages in, the more the Circle and feminist theologians in Africa will be prophetic and will creatively engage systems, structures and economies of injustice that render life redundant and disposable. They will begin to expansively impact on processes that seek to overcome and undo the violence of discrimination, exclusion and alienation which patriarchal theologies promote. Moreover, they will promote peace and justice as visible signs of their prophetic witness to God's grace and justice on earth – a message that is urgent and relevant for the church, society and academia. This will contribute to the ongoing celebration of following in the path of the pursuit of justice in the church and in society which feminist theologians and pioneers such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye have charted for us. It will also creatively extend the impact of feminist theologies in the church, academia and society.

Another important advantage of diverse approaches to feminist theologies is their potential for dismantling the ideological justifications of discrimination and oppression that are persistent in the relations between men and women, the North and the South, and humanity and other parts of God's creation. This will be an affirmation that any form of exclusions (whether based on gender, race, age, ability, disability, sexuality, education or social position) is not acceptable because it creates boundaries between God's people. It will also affirm the reign of God and the responsibilities which we all have to meet in

order for God's love, grace, compassion and justice to be manifested in our lives and in creation.

5 SOURCES OF HOPE FROM THE BIBLE, AND CONTINUING THE PURSUIT FOR JUSTICE

An example in the Bible of the idea that all humanity, male and female, should be granted full participation in God's ministry is evident in the message of the prophet Joel in Joel 2:28: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions." In this text, the prophet Joel affirms that both our sons and daughters will prophesy and that men and women servants will also prophesy. His message radically proclaims the importance of a holistic and inclusive ministry and participation of both men and women in the church. Furthermore, it does not only address the proclamation of God's Word by men and women, sons and daughters; but also deals with the questions of social position. It states that even men servants and women servants are called to share in the ministry of God's word, thus extending God's ministry even to those who are marginalised, silenced or on the receiving end of power, history and control in the church and society. Joel's message is later re-affirmed by Peter in Acts 2.

The pneumatological (Holy Spirit) understanding of Joel's text *inter alia* implies that all children of God, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender/sex, place of origin and religion, will receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifests God-self in all people, including men, women and children, no matter their social status. This implies that no one, whether men or women, can claim the Holy Spirit in a domineering, monopolistic and exclusionary way (Dolamo 2005:2).

In Acts 2:16-18, Peter says that God's Spirit was never going to be a once and for all event, but rather an experience to be enjoyed throughout human history; thus he radically implies that God empowers us all to minister. The church should therefore affirm and teach that both women and men have the gift and role of prophesy and that women should be allowed full participation in the church. The church and male-stream theologies ought to learn from the Bible that, although the understanding then was that the role of women was limited in the expression of faith, Jesus' closest disciples were women. Luke 8:2-3 mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others who participated in ministry.

The other implication for the church is that in all its forums and structures the church ought to resist the shallow and exclusive reading and interpretation of the Bible which obstructs *Missio Dei* (God's mission) by limiting women's participation from in the church. African feminist theologies that deal with ecclesial issues should therefore constantly reiterate and remind those who oppose women's participation in theological ministry (whether ordained or lay) that the Pentecost was a paradigm of change and revival which churches can look into for their own renewal and search for justice. The Pentecost was representative of unity in diversity, justice and inclusion, and the merging of theory and praxes in that the Holy Spirit encouraged transformation and the appreciation of the diversity of God's people and creation. This, in essence,

means that the church that silences, inhibits or rejects women's ministry also inhibits the manifestation of the Holy Spirit which empowered Jesus' mission on earth to include those who were socially and ecclesiastically ostracised or denied fullness of life in the church and society (Luke 4:18ff). Alienation, refusal, silencing and rejection of women's ministry are therefore also a rejection of the Holy Spirit which anointed Jesus' inclusive ministry.

6 CONCLUSION

African feminist theologies of liberation have adhered, to a large extent, to the prophetic task of naming and denouncing the evil effects of the male-stream church, theological teachings and religious practices which undermine the dignity of women and which alienate women's contribution to the life and work of the church. At the same time, African feminist theologies have sought to offer and continue to pursue alternative communities of wholeness, inclusivity and justice where all God's children and creation can be affirmed. African feminist theological approaches have been rooted in the understanding that all human beings (male or female) are created in image and likeness of God – hence their violation is a violation of God's presence and image. This understanding is also grounded in the idea that all people (male and female) are gifted and moral agents with the power to participate meaningfully and actively in the life, work and identity of their societies and the church. Women, men and children's participation in life is therefore a reflection of a community of justice and equality where the discipleship of equals is lived out as envisaged by God and by Jesus Christ (as attested to by the Bible in Matthew 23:8-10, for example) for the benefit of all God's people and creation.

The message and ministry of women in the church and society is important. It requires that the leadership in the churches have a Christ-like mind, attitude and acceptance of the capabilities, abilities, gifts and talents of women. It also requires the church to develop systems, strategies and methods that are aimed at enabling women to access theological education and opportunities to serve the church and society. Not only should women theologians be seen to serve, but they should also be encouraged to lead, share their talents and use them for the promotion of God's reign on earth.

It is also important for the church and society to acknowledge and affirm women's ministry because it is the will of God that all God's children participate in the life, work and service of God. It is theologically and ethically appropriate for the church to enable women and men to announce the reign of God on earth, the fullness of life for all people and the message that God's creation and earth is good. The affirmation of the full participation of women in the church ought to be visible in its message (*kerygma*), service (*diakonia*) and community (*koinonia*). Mercy Oduyoye has called us to promote inclusive ministry where our daughters and sons can minister without coercion or inhibition. The marginalisation of women is contrary to the message of love, hope and justice that are constantly affirmed and called for in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Testament (New Testament).

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