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Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21*

Phyllis Trible, in her book, *Texts of Terror*, applies a feminist hermeneutic to the story found in Judges 19-21.[1] Her emphasis is on the power dynamics which men have over women. She portrays the women as powerless victims, and the men as powerful, uncaring victimizers. While such a dynamic may be found in the story, it does not reflect the only power dynamic. Such a one-dimensional perspective of this story—which does not account for the various types of victimization—can only have a limited use for women of color, who experience multivariate victimization.

This work will examine the social dynamics of the relationships in the rhetorical segments found in Judges 19-21. After a critique of Phyllis Trible's interpretation, I shall offer a womanist interpretation of the segments of the story. A brief review of the societal setting in which the story takes place is in order.

The Societal Setting

The over arching social context of the story was a system of patriarchy. Under this system the rights and privileges of individuals were variously distributed according to gender and societal rank. Men were granted the greatest amount of power and privilege based upon several factors: wealth (measured by household size and production), birth order, age, and clan and tribal affiliation. The household could consist of three or four generations of families living communally under the authority of a

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*This article first appeared in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, Athalya Brenner, ed., (Sheffield; Sheffield Academic, 1993) and is used by permission.

[1]P. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

dominant male member.[2] Within the household, youth had the fewest rights. The older male generation was accorded greater respect due to wisdom and experience, but exercised less power within the family because of their waning strength. This generation functioned more as counselors and conflict resolvers within the larger society.[3]

Women, on the other hand, received rights and privileges based on the status of their patrons, whose authority they were under: their fathers in their youth, their husbands during most of their lives, and their sons in widowhood. Female sexuality was viewed as a valuable asset, protected and transferred from father to husband. Therefore, virginity became a prized status among unmarried women and contributed to their marriageability. Once married, a woman could protect and increase her social and economic value by becoming a mother. Reproduction was of primary importance to these relatively small bands of tribes attempting to dispossess the Canaanites from their lands. Thus, homosexual activity was rejected because it did not result in the perpetuation of the family, tribe, or nation.

Within this patriarchal system, polygamy was acceptable. A man, able to afford more than one wife, exercised this privilege to increase the number of his dependents, thereby increasing the production of his household. Within such a family unit, the primary wife had a higher social rank, compared to the secondary wife or concubine. She exercised authority over the secondary wife, but as the older woman's potential for child birth decreased, she usually found herself losing ground in the competition for sexual

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[2]C. De Geus, *The Tribes of Israel: An Investigaiton into Some of the Presuppostitions of Martin Noth's Amphictyony Hypothesis*, Sudia Semitica Neerolandica, 18 (Assen, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 1976), 134.
[3]*Ibid.*, 141.

rights among the wives.[4] However, this greater sexual appeal provided little protection for the secondary wife.

Analysis of the Story

The first character introduced is the Levite sojourning in Ephraim, who takes a concubine wife. The Levitical priesthood was highly respected in this region.[5] His marriage to a secondary wife suggests some level of wealth.

In the MT, we are told that his secondary wife "played the harlot against him, and she left from him to her father's house" where she remained four months.[6] The LXX says she left because "she became angry with him," which effectively shifts the reader's focus to find fault in the husband instead of the concubine. But if one takes the wording of the MT seriously, one might conceive of a scenario in which this husband takes a young woman as his wife, then after the consummation of the marriage accuses her of not being a virgin. Then, either in anger or fear for her life, she flees to her father's house. The status of her virginity was a much more serious matter to a Levite, because he was to protect his sanctity by marring a virgin (Lev 21:1-15).

Without implying any textual dependency upon the case law presented in Deut 22:13-21,[7] I believe the general scenario

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[4]Cf. Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16:6), Leah and Rachel (Gen 29:30, 30: 14-15).
[5]See Judg 17:7-13.
[6]"Violation of a husband's sexual rights, the most serious of sexual offenses, is signified by the term *n'p* 'adultery'; all other instances of sexual intercourse apart from marriage are designated by the term *znh*. These include premarital sex by a daughter, understood as an offense against her father or family . . . " Phyllis Bird, "To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 77.
[7]"If a man takes a wife, and goes into her, and then spurns her, and charges her with shameful conduct, and brings an evil name upon her, saying 'I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her the tokens of virginity,' then the father of the young woman and her mother shall . . ." (RSV)

justifies the introduction of the next character, her father, and his behavior toward the husband.[8] The father's role here is as guardian of his daughter's honor against such a claim. His belief in her innocence may account for his allowing her to return home. One wonders why the husband waited four months to address this alleged deception against him? Perhaps it was a cooling off period (cf. 20:47), or maybe her concubine-ness allowed him to let it pass quietly without anyone noticing.[9] He may have been torn between his honor and his love for this woman. Whatever his reason, he finally goes after her to speak to her heart and bring her back (v.4a).

The arrival at the father-in-law's house is initially a cordial one. The father is referred to as "father of the young woman," not as "father of the concubine." Her secondariness is not a factor for her father. The father's speech is forceful and manipulative, but polite when speaking to the husband. The narrator uses an interesting pattern of labels for these two men. Each time the father of the young woman makes a demand upon the husband to remain at his house, under the guise of hospitality, the narrator uses legal terminology (father-in-law, son-in-law) to underscore the relationship between them (vv. 4a, 5b, 7b, 9b). Clearly, the husband's father-in-law has the upper hand. It is also clear that the husband did not come to visit, but to get his wife back. But

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[8]Using the method of narratology, Mieke Bal views the problem between the two men as a conflict between two opposing institutions of marriage: Patrilocal marriage (the husband residing with the wife's tribe) and virilocal marriage (the wife residing with the husband's tribe). *Death & Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 80-93.

[9]Cf. Gen 16. Abraham did not go after Hagar when she fled form Sarah's harsh treatment of her.

each time he rises to leave, his father-in-law manipulates him to stay.[10] Each time he concedes to his father-in-law's wishes, he then is referred to in more casual terms(i.e., simply husband in vv. 6b, 7a, 9a). The woman is not given voice in the narration of events, but her father was probably seeking some assurances of her safety before he willingly let her be taken from his house. The husband is given no voice either; he simply reacts to the manipulation of his host. By the fifth day, however, he is determined to leave at all costs, although he allows himself to be delayed until late in the day.

A very different dynamic arises in the conversation between the young man, the Levite's attendant, and the Levite, who takes on a new characterization *'adôn* ("lord") in relation to his attendant. Since the sun was quickly setting on their journey, the young man suggested they stop at the nearby city of Jebus to spend the night. His speech is urgent yet respectfully tempered by the enclitic particle *na'*. This may be contrasted to his lord's response (vv.12-13), "We shall not turn aside.... Go and let us approach...." Neither the prohibition nor the imperative is tempered. Not even the father-in-law's manipulative speech was so direct and forceful. The Levite seems to have overcompensated for his lack of power in the previous situation and now decisively and forcefully negates his attendant's suggestion. By avoiding the city of foreigners, he avoids placing himself at the total mercy of others. Hospi-

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[10]In this case, hospitality is not primarily for the comfort of the guest. It is a means of subordinating the guest to the host (i.e., the respected priest is simply a husband/son-in-law in his father-in-law's house). The father-in-law takes away the power of the husband by restricting his movement. See Michael Herzfeld, "As in Your Own House: Hospitality, Ethnoghraphy, and Stereotype of Mediterranean Society," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore, Special Publication of the American Anthropological Association, 22 (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Assoc., 1987), 75-89.

tality could not be taken for granted by strangers—he fared a better chance of receiving it from his own people.

However, much to his dismay, they did not find hospitality forthcoming at Gibeah either. They were stranded in the plaza during the evening, until an old man coming in from the field engaged them in conversation. His characterization as "old" and as a "sojourner" indicates the limitation of his power. In addition, the fact that an old man still worked in the field, not having sons to perform such tasks, may suggest that his economic resources were minimal too.

When conversing with the old man, the Levite is very respectful, partly due to respect for the old man and partly out of his need for shelter. The Levite speaks with deference to the old man, referring to his concubine and himself as "your maiden...your servant," as he assures his potential host that his group will not be a burden upon his resources. However, as any good host would do, the old man assures them that he can meet all their needs. There is equity in their speech.

Observe the contrasting lack of respect for the old man shown by the men of the Benjaminite city who are characterized as"worthless," compared to that shown by the travellers. The Benjaminites address the old man, who now is characterized as "lord *(ba`al)* of the house, the old one" with a direct and brief command (v. 22b): "Bring out the man who came to your house and we shall know him!" The lord of the house was the protector of those under his roof. As stated earlier, the old man's ability to protect them was limited by his age and status as sojourner. This limitation is reflected in his response (vv. 23-25), as he adamantly pleads with them to change their course of action. By offering his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine as substitutes, he hoped to curb their evil plan. It would be presumptuous to assume that it was easy for the old man to offer either of the women under his care. Since the crime of homosexual rape was a more serious

offense than heterosexual rape within their social context, he was acting to lessen the degree of victimization.[11] The Levite, eager to save himself, thrusts his wife, his concubine, out to the men.[12]

The men sexually abused her all night and released her just before daylight. She struggled back to the house of the man where her "lord" (*'adôn)* was and fell at the door.[13] The Hebrew text may not be as explicit as one would like, as to whether she was actually dead or just near death. The statement of her having fallen at the opening of the house and her hand still being on the sill sometime later when her husband found her, may suggest that she had been dead for a while and the process of rigormortis had advanced. Moreover, he had to put her upon the donkey, where earlier she moved by her own volition. The LXX, not leaving this point to interpretation, makes explicit that she was indeed dead. When "her lord" got up to leave,[14] discovering her, he abruptly said, "Get up, and let's go!" But there was no answer. His speech is unexpectedly terse, although this is precisely how he spoke to his attendant in his role as "lord".

Now, the woman for whom he had gone through so much trouble to retrieve was dead. Such an offense could not be ignored, but how would he obtain justice? Since the Levite tribe had no inheritance in the land, and was not among those chosen for war, he needed to lure his fellow tribesmen into participating in his

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[11]Again, the literary tool of silencing the victim is at work. Neither the husband nor the concubine are given voice during these terrifying events.

[12]He may also have been harboring some feelings regarding the earlier accusation of harlotry, and her father's subsequent manipulation of him. Perhaps, he thought her responsible for all these troubles they were now undergoing.

[13]In v. 26, the lordshop *(ba 'al)* of the old man is played down; he is simply "the man." By contrast, the lordship *('adôn)* of the Levite is now accentuated. This is the first time this term is used to describe the relationship (husband) to a more objective, functional relationship (lord).

[14]Note that he did not arise early in the morning, as he had done at her father's house.

search for justice. The news of the death of a mere concubine may not have been adequate in itself to arouse the more distant tribesmen. So he took the body of his concubine home, dismembered it, and sent a section to each of the twelve tribes. This shocking parcel provided the necessary incentive to muster the troops![15]

When the sons of Israel sought an explanation for his heinous act, the Levite selectively reported the events, leaving out both how it all began and his participation in his concubine's death. He explained his unusual act of dismemberment as being a direct reaction to the Benjaminites' performance of an "evil plan and folly in Israel." *Nevalah* ("folly") was a technical term used to describe the violation of acts regarded as taboo among the tribal community. Such an act was to be swiftly punished by death or risk inviting disaster to the entire tribal confederacy.[16] Thus, the Levite's careful retelling of events changed the ordeal from a personal matter to a community matter.

As in previous instances, the narrator reports the victim's actions but does not allow the victim to speak on her/his own behalf. The entire tribe of Benjamin defended itself against the other eleven tribes, because they refused to turn over the guilty individuals. After victories in the two initial battles, the Benjaminites were finally annihilated in silence, except for 600 men.[17] Likewise, in the Israelites' attempt to repair the damage

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[15]Some have compared this dismemberment of the concubine to Saul's dismemberment of an oxen (1 Sam 11:7), for the purpose of threatening those who did not assemble for war with a similar fate. But the Levite did not have the military might, nor the political authority to make such a threat. Although the Israelites viewed the act as an evil one, the narrator clues us that the Levite will not be victimized for it, because he is allowed to speak on his behalf.

[16]See Gen 34:7, Deut 22:21,and 2 Sam 13:12.

[17]Exceptions may be found in 20:32a and 39b, where the Benjaminites think that the second and third battles will go like the first. This, however, is something which they say or think to themselves, not as a part of the dialogical conversation.

done by nearly wiping out one of the tribes of the confederacy, their solution victimized the people of Jabesh Gilad and Shiloh who were similarly given no voice. The citizens of Jabesh Gilad were destroyed, except for their 400 virgin daughters, while 200 of the virgin daughters of Shiloh were taken captive, leaving no recourse for their fathers or brothers.

These closing chapters of the book of Judges exemplify the problems which plagued Israel during the entire period before the monarchy, as was set forth earlier in the second part of the double introduction (2:1-3:6); that is, "Israel did what was evil in Yahweh's sight," playing the harlot after other gods. Therefore, Yahweh allowed Israel to fall into misery and servitude at the hands of foreigners, until he raised up judges to deliver Israel from their enemies. However, in these concluding chapters, the enemy was not an external foe; the enemy was within. "They did what was right in their own eyes," and this poor judgement precipitated more and greater violence. Unlike the earlier chapters of the book, the victims were not given a voice to cry out for help. In addition to being victimized themselves, the Benjaminites had to accept solutions for peace from the mouths of their victimizers, giving no input.[18]

Critique of Phyllis Trible's Interpretation

Trible's *Texts of Terror* is an oft-quoted work representing contemporary feminist analysis of biblical texts. In her basic description of the formal literary aspects of the text, Trible has justifiably

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[18]This may be contrasted with David's question to he Gibeonites, when he tried to rectify the slaying of the Amorites by Saul: "What shall I do for you? How shall I atone . . .?" (2 Sam 21:3).

seen the events in question as terrifying. Grounded in a feminist hermeneutic, she has brought the reader into solidarity with the female victims in the text in a manner in which few biblical scholars before her have had the sensitivity to do.

By separating chapter 19 from the rest of the literary unit(19-21), in order to emphasize the plight of the concubine, Trible has been able to interpret the set of events as simply representing male power over women, overlooking the greater degree of victimization and suffering in the broader context of the story. Recently, several other feminist scholars have alerted us to the problem inherent in setting up a dichotomous system of analysis, which is itself a patriarchal pattern of thinking.[19] The very ideology which Trible tries to avoid, she ends up reinforcing. Her dichotomy of wicked men/innocent women sets up a thought pattern which ignores the interrelatedness of their fates—the men are also victimized by the victimization of the women. Many characters inthe story were victimized (including males), and the magnitude of victimization and suffering increased each step of the way—from the individual, to the family, to the clan, to the tribal confederacy.

Trible negatively evaluates the father-in-law's display of hospitality toward the Levite as "an exercise in male bonding," since the text does not say he likewise extended hospitality to his daughter.[20] Such a polemical statement functions to anger the reader toward the men, but the context simply does not support

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[19]See J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. 1992), 67; T. Drorah Setel, "Feminist Insights and the Question of Method" in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Yarbro Collins, Biblical Scholarship in North America, 10 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985) 35-42; and Mieke Bal, 33-34.
[20]Trible, 68.

her assumption that the young woman should have been entitled to hospitality. Hospitality is something extended to guests, whose presence is brief. The young woman who had been living with her father for four months was, therefore, not a guest and was not entitled to hospitality in that situation. She did, however, share in the hospitality when she was a guest in the old man's home. Trible also misses the power inversions created through the act of hospitality. The father-in-law's repeated extension of hospitality was not for the Levite's comfort but was intended to restrict his movement until the father-in-law achieved his goal. The acceptance of hospitality is an acceptance of subordination of power, but this does not necessarily mean abuse.

When discussing the abduction of the daughters of Shiloh, Trible interprets certain motivational dynamics involved, as she explains that the women were taken "to gratify the lust of males."[21] However lust was not the issue. They were attempting to regenerate the nearly lost tribe of Benjamin and to restore their inheritance. This could not be done without insuring the continuation of offspring (a fundamental theme in pentateuchal theology). None of the fathers readily gave up their daughters to achieve that end. The Israelites chose between the lesser of evils—between allowing marriage through capture or the death of the Benjaminite tribe. The Israelites' had bound themselves by oath not to give their daughters in marriage to the Benjaminites. So, turning their backs, while 200 women were taken by theBenjaminites to restore a chance of survival, became the imperfect solution to end the tide of destruction which they had caused.

It seems that Trible reduces this story to the victimization of women—which does not adequately account for the complexity of the problems in that society. It was a society in chaos. By

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[21]*Ibid.*, 83.

reducing the problem of victimization to gender, she victimizes the other characters with a silencing technique comparable to that used by the narrator. One may arguably posit that the narration represents the view of the dominant class, which favored the institution of kingship. This entire story functions within the Deuteronomistic History to justify the establishment of kingship in ancient Israel. Likewise, Trible's feminist perspective, rooted in the dominant culture and the middle-class, contributes to her propensity not to acknowledge other types of victimization beyond that which white middle-class females experience (i.e. from male domination). This type of feminist approach lacks the holistic vision needed to see the various levels of victimization and suffering that took place.

Moreover, Delores Williams calls into question the validity of Afro-American women uncritically appropriating the feminist idea that "patriarchy is the major source of all women's oppression".[22] Williams points out the historical reality that white females, as benefactors of patriarchy, have also been instrumental in black women's oppression. This further demonstrates the need to develop a distinct biblical hermeneutic, which more accurately addresses black women's reality. A hermeneutic is needed which will empower those who are victimized to create fresh solutions, and to bring an end to their victimization.

Potential Hermeneutic for Womanist Readers

The term womanist is borrowed from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, as she incorporates the black folk expression. Walker defines womanist variously as referring to

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[22]D.S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue" *JRT* 43, (1986): 47.

"outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior." Also a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."[23] Then, the task of a womanist biblical hermeneutic is to discover the significance and validity of the biblical text for black women who today experience the "tridimensional reality" of racism, sexism, and classism.[24] The following illustrations are gleaned from the story.

First, we must reevaluate our usage of the terms "victim" and "victimization." To continually view oneself as a victim, because of one or several events in one's life, is to absolutize the definition of the self, closing it off to growth and redefinition. Such a view surrenders the vitality of one's being to another, because it elevates a single negative aspect of an entire life, and negates all the other creative and positive aspects. Such a view has functioned as an oppressive tool—relegating minorities and women to one-dimensional roles in society. Instead of being recognized as mother, father, lover, artist, engineer, orator, comic, athlete, etc., we wear the mark of victim seared into our consciousness. By this mark are we known, permitting those who meet us to overlook every other characteristic by which we may be uniquely identified. Therefore, we must reject any view of victimization which represents an isolated definition of the self or state of being. Instead, we must view victimization as a process, one which by the fact of our birth, to which we have become more susceptible, but also one in which we actively or passively participate.

Like the concubine, we as black women usually find ourselves near the bottom of the social ladder. The privileges of race, sex, and class are entitlements which we view from afar as some

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[23]A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

[24]J. Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, AAR Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta: Scholars 1989), 202.

thing to be desired, but never achieved. We are subjected to standards of beauty and goodness which are defined in white, middle-class female terms. We are subjected to standards of success and fulfillment which are defined in terms of white, middle-class male terms. Thus, we find ourselves seeking to become more white and more male in order to become acceptable persons in society. Our appropriation of such outward looking goals has contributed to our dismemberment and fragmentation. In addition, we are constantly being required to cut off pieces of ourselves—white feminists ask us to downplay our concerns for racism in order to support the battle for equality for women; black men ask us to downplay our concerns for sexism in order to support the battle of racial equality. We do not have the luxury of being in the "either/or"group. We are both female and black and must fight for the liberation and equality of both aspects of ourselves and not allow ourselves to become pawns for either movement. We must make our voices heard so that we do not die in silence!

We are like the father-in-law, who had no direct power to change the course of events, and thus resorted to manipulative speech tactics in order to try to redirect the actions of the son-in-law. Such manipulation has been recognized as one of the few weapons which oppressed persons have had against the oppressor. As women, we are taught to manipulate the men in our lives. As blacks, we are taught to manipulate white folks, using deceptive speech and body language. Paul Laurence Dunbar portrays this so eloquently in his poem "We Wear the Mask."[25]

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[25]P. Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1930), 70.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Howard Thurman speaks of the innate danger of such continual deception to the integrity of the person saying, "The penalty of deception is to become a deception...."[26] Both the manipulator and the manipulated are aware of the process and yet it continues to occur; it is expected. The only way to break the cycle of deception is, as Thurman points out, "to be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, or security."[27]

Like the Benjaminites, we must distinguish whether it is better to stand in solidarity with our brothers or not, and at what cost. By refusing to surrender the guilty individuals, the entire Benjaminite tribe was nearly destroyed, all the women were de

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[26]H. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United 1981), 65.

stroyed. Black women must determine whether and when to stand in solidarity with black men and at what cost. Will race always be the determining factor? At great risk do black women point out the sexist behavior of black men. For example, the U.S. Senate confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas broadcast across the world the risk of exposing such activity to public scrutiny. Anita Hill was scorned by black men and women for betraying this black man before a white public. She did not stay in her traditional place, hiding the faults of the black man in order that he may represent his race in a position of authority.

Like the Levite, we must take care in the retelling of our story to others. When we share aspects of our intimate lives with whites or feminist groups, some aspect of our story is taken out of proportion and lifted up in a new light in order to serve their purposes. Clarence Thomas shared the story of his childhood to gain a sympathetic hearing from white Republicans. The final result sounded like a caricature of black poverty—lightening the weight of poverty under which the vast majority of blacks suffer.

The process of victimization becomes cyclical, moving from generation to generation, with the victimized victimizing others. The only way we can break this cycle is to risk everything for that which will bring *wholeness* and *integrity* to our personhood—as blacks and as women. We must carefully judge each and every situation which sets us up to be a sacrifice for others. The hope for the black race and women of all colors lies in the reincarnation of the black woman, who must gather together all the pieces of herself from every field and dumping ground, and stand before God and humanity—as a whole black woman. This hope is captured in the poem of Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise."[28]

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[27] *Ibid.*, 70.
[28] M. Angelou, Maya Angelou: Poems (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 154-55.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?'
Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard'
Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling
I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.