SAROJINI NADAR

READING RUTH: TOWARDS A POSTMODERNIST, LITERARY AND WOMANIST ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the book of Ruth from a postmodernist, literary and womanist perspective. The main methodology is postmodernist literary criticism, but it employs intertextual and autobiographical approaches as well.

Chapter 1 is an exploration of the plot of Ruth and reveals that in order for the end-goal of the plot to be achieved "emptiness has to return to fullness." It is shown that Ruth's action (her decision to return with Naomi) is the catalyst that begins the process that ultimately leads to the denouement of the plot. The fact that it is the two women, Ruth and Naomi, who drive the plot forward, indicates that the Book of Ruth is a woman's story.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that the significance of narrative time for any literary analysis lies in the fact that the amount of time allowed for the retelling of the events rarely corresponds to the time it took for the events to happen. Since Ruth is a short story, the choice of what to tell, what to omit as well as how long to dwell on details are indeed significant. In other words it is shown that literary time is only spent on those aspects which are crucial for the advancement of the narrative. Since the reader's main goal is to see how the conflicts are resolved, the literary time spent on the resolution of the conflicts is an indication of where the weight of the story needs to lie. In this case, it is certainly with Ruth and Naomi judging from the amount of time spent on dialogues between the two women. They are therefore the ones that contribute to the resolution of the conflicts of the plot.

Chapter 3 reveals that in the book of Ruth the narrative voice or the perspective of attitudes, conceptions and worldview are those of a woman. The fact that the book of Ruth is named after a woman; the fact that at the very outset all the males in the story die and it is the women that take over the narrative; the fact that in the end the women of Bethlehem declare that Ruth is better to Naomi than seven sons are just some of the reasons that substantiate the argument that

the narrative voice in the book of Ruth was that of a woman. It is also shown that this narrative voice (whether overt or covert) subverts gender and ethnic expectations.

Chapter 4 outlines the way in which biblical characters are portrayed. The subsections of chapter 4 deal with the characterisation of each major character: Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth. Chapter 4 is the longest chapter since it is difficult to evaluate characterisation without engaging the other facets of literary criticism as well, such as plot and dialogue.

Chapter 4.1 examines the character of Naomi and reveals that she is portrayed as a selfish character but that her selfishness is not meant to be a negative aspect of her disposition. In fact given the virtual insignificance of her status as an aged childless widow, her selfishness appears understandable. She goes through a process of role dedifferentiation by initiating a plan that is so daring and outrageous that it undermines the patriarchal notion of female passiveness. She is also at the outset very prejudiced against Ruth because she is a foreigner. However Ruth's loyalty and determination force Naomi to overcome her initial apprehension concerning Moabites and accept Ruth as a member of the Israelite community.

Chapter 4.2 analyses the character of Boaz and this analysis shows that unlike in conventional patriarchal narratives where the cardinal male figure is the hero Boaz is not. He does not act to change the situation or drive the plot. Boaz, although called *ish chayil* only acts in response to Ruth's actions. Boaz is also portrayed as a selfish character. His main aim is to protect his wealth and reputation in society. He wants to marry Ruth but was afraid of criticism from society since Ruth was a foreigner. The tensions surrounding foreigners are made clear both by the text itself and the intertexts. He therefore finds a legitimate excuse to marry Ruth by combining the laws of redemption and Levirate marriage. As such, he both uses and transcends the patriarchal system

in order to get what he wants. Despite the fact that he does contribute to the denouement of the plot, he does not emerge as the hero in the end.

Chapter 4.3 examines the character of Ruth and concludes that Ruth is at the heart of the narrative. She is not, as some commentators have maintained, a docile and submissive character. Ruth, stubbornly and determinedly, with all the odds of being a childless foreign widow against her, turns her fate around and manages to sustain both her mother-in-law and herself. In fact, she is a subversive character and one that womanists can use as a role model since her subversion of both gender and ethnic boundaries is what leads to the denouement of the plot.

From the preceding summary it is clear that the dissertation seeks to emphasise ways of reading the text which liberate, therefore although the text is analysed using the tools of literary criticism the analysis is framed by a distinctly womanist perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

For the last two hundred years historical critical scholarship has dominated the field of Biblical studies. A significant part of historical critical methodology aligns itself with modernist discourse which seeks to find the objective, determinate meaning of the text, through either reconstructing the universe of the author or attempting to discover the original intentions of the author. The reader's social, cultural and ideological location and the role which they play in the process of interpretation are ignored. In recent years historical criticism and notions of positivism have been breaking down, and "with that breakdown our modes of theological interpretation from the recent past are less and less pertinent" (Brueggeman 1993:2). This breakdown is largely due to a paradigm shift away from modernism towards postmodernism, with its emphasis on "the impossibility of arriving at objective certitude" (Keegan 1995:1).

Historical criticism was afforded a relatively high status, to the exclusion and dismissal of other methods as subjective and unsophisticated. As Segovia (1995:5) has pointed out:

> Historical criticism was perceived and promoted not only as the proper way to read and interpret the biblical texts but also as the ultimate sign of progress in the discipline, the offer of the (Christian) West to the rest of the (Christian) world and the means by which the backward and the ignorant could become modern and educated.

The purpose of historical critical scholarship is to find the "true meaning" of the text, using a number of different methods, such as redaction, source, form and tradition history criticisms. This kind of scholarship although valuable in that it allows one access to the periods and cultures for which the various parts of the Bible were written, has made the Bible inaccessible to communities of faith such as the one from which I come. Barr also recognizes this problem when he

asserts that the modern Biblical scholar (who) "is largely insensitive to literary values...looks for the intentions of the original author but cannot see what this product has meant to thousands of faithful religious people down the centuries" (1989:6). Cone makes this point more clearly by relating it to liberation discourses. "It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors" (Cone 1990:31). A case in point would be my own faith community, where many people struggle in order just to survive. When they read (for example) Psalm 23 they read it as a source of comfort; they see it as speaking directly to their own life situation, especially since they themselves feel as though they "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," much of the time - in other words their interpretation is informed by their life experience. It matters little to them who the authors of the Psalms were or the time period at which the Psalms were written or even what the Psalms may have been intended to mean by their authors.

Historical scholars, unlike "ordinary" readers, do not acknowledge the effects of their own ideological locations on their interpretations. Instead, they claim "value free observation," and take on the role of "rational disinterested researcher" (Segovia 1995:6). As a result all their readings claim to be "scientific" and focus heavily on recapturing the world of the Biblical author. Unlike the way in which faith communities read, with historical scholarship there is no place for the reader's perspective or context in the process of interpretation.

Given the fact that historical criticism is unable to open up the Bible to "ordinary" readers in faith communities, and the fact that it ignores the significance of the reader in the process of interpretation, I think that Barr's, Cone's and Segovia's disquiet with historical critical scholarship is justified. I also want to suggest that it is precisely such problems that have led to the decline of historical criticism over the last few decades.

With historical methods being subject to heavy critique especially towards the late 1970's, new methods began to emerge. In the 20 years that followed, methods such as new literary criticism, which comprise approaches such as structuralism, formalism and rhetorical criticism, developed. However, these methods also seek objective certitude with regard to meaning, and focus on the text as an independent entity. In other words they focus on the formal features and elements of the text and seek to discover how an analysis of those features might lead one to an "objective" interpretation of the text. This kind of criticism also ignores the role of the reader and her/his social, cultural, and ideological location. When it does focus on the reader, it is only on a superficial level. In other words this kind of criticism maintains that the reader is important to the process of interpretation, but only in an "implied" sense. The "implied" reader is the reader whom the "implied" author is speaking to, and whose interpretation is being shaped. The governing principle of new literary criticism is that the formal features or characteristics of the text are what guides the reader's interpretation, rather than the reader's own interpretive approach.

Presently, Biblical criticism is at a stage where Biblical scholars cannot or should not be satisfied with either just historical criticism with its focus on authorial intention, nor new criticism with its focus on the text as an independent and stable entity. As Okure (1995:54) points out Biblical scholars are now

> taking full cognizance of the influence that the social location of the interpreter plays on his or her search for meaning in the Bible...[so much so that] a reading of the Bible that is not directly related to the social location of the reader is almost considered out of fashion.

My rationale in this dissertation is centrally motivated both by the current state of biblical criticism and the fact that both historical criticism and new criticism

have made the Bible inaccessible to communities of faith such as the one from which I come. As such I want to reaffirm the reciprocal relationship between the contemporary reader (in a faith community) and the biblical text. This focus on the contemporary reader within a faith community is important, because as Nielsen (1997:3) asserts "the Biblical texts belong to our own culture as legitimizing texts, and function in the church as a basis for true preaching." In other words, in many contemporary churches, the Bible is considered as foundational literature upon which they base many of their practices, both within the church and in the secular world. Taking cognizance of this fact, I feel that it is extremely important, even for academic readers, to find ways of reading the Biblical text, that do not close off meaning in certain contexts only, such as the context of the author. The fundamental difference between the interpretive strategies of faith communities and academic scholarship is that faith communities begin with a belief in the authority of Scripture. Postmodernist interpretations could help bridge the disjuncture between academic scholarship and the Christian community, precisely because it acknowledges the contextual nature of interpretation, irrespective of whether the Bible is taken as authoritative or not. Fiorenza (1988:15) makes a similar point by arguing that:

> If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogynism, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization...then the responsibility of the Biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions of the writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of Biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary socio-political contexts.

Aim:

Taking into consideration the points made above, the aim of this dissertation is to find postmodernist ways of reading the biblical text in a way that takes into account the contextual nature of interpretation. The text I have chosen for this study is the book of Ruth. Reading the biblical text in a postmodernist way overcomes the limitations of both historical criticism and new criticism, especially for scholars wanting to generate meaningful knowledge for living as a Christian in the contemporary world. The importance of the real or physical reader (what Segovia [1995:3] terms "flesh and blood readers") in the process of interpretation is affirmed in postmodernist discourse. One of the consequences of this is that a postmodernist reading implies reading autobiographically to a large extent. An autobiographical reading requires that the reader acknowledge her/his context at the very outset. However, like contextual Bible study autobiographical interpretation "is not content with (simply) an admission of contextuality" (West 1999:51). Autobiographical interpretation, again like contextual Bible study "embraces and advocates context. Commitment to rather than cognizance of context is the real issue."

As such this dissertation functions on the premise that the reader is positioned at the entry point of the hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle as Putt (1996:205) asserts is a term that suggests that the process of interpretation always takes place within specific contexts. One does not proceed from the "foundation of non-hermeneutical objectivity to knowledge." Rather, one always starts "wherever one is with whatever perspectives one has been given by history and language." The circular movement does not imply ultimate understanding but clearer understanding. It is the reader, therefore, who decides how to generate meaningful knowledge from the text.

Proceeding with the assumption that the role of the reader is of central importance in the process of interpretation, it is necessary at this point to state my own location. I am a fourth generation South African Indian Christian woman, born into a lower middle class home, and am a member of a lower socio-economic Pentecostal church. I am also the only one from seven children in my family who completed school and has a university education as well. However, as stated above it is not enough to declare my location and carry on "with business as usual" (West 1999:44). I admit that the hermeneutical choices I make within this reading are determined by my ideological position. The community with which I have read the Biblical text, and with which I continue to read the Biblical text, also influences the way in which I read. In other words reading as a Biblical scholar does not imply a rejection of other "ordinary" readings as well.

It is precisely because I read as an Indian South African Christian woman that the central concerns in the narrative of Ruth, namely, ethnicity, gender and class are significant for me since I and the community I read the text with have at some point or the other experienced, the "triple oppression," of race, ethnicity and class, both in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. One of my other aims in this dissertation will be to show that the covert narrative voice of Ruth is aligned with alleviating this "triple oppression" and can be used as an example for moral teaching even in the contemporary church. Through a process of unveiling this covert narrative voice I will demonstrate that the text can be read as especially affirming to Indian women in South Africa today.

Theoretical Framework:

(Castelli et al, 1995:225-226) make a strong case for a

> foundational shift in biblical criticism away from a hermeneutical project whose goal is to find the correct key to unlock the unitary truth

> of the text and toward projects focused on multiplicities of meanings, interpretations examining layers of ideology and shifting meanings - in short, toward cultural critique.

Cultural critique lies at the heart of this dissertation. The central defining force of cultural critique is that "real readers lie behind all models of interpretation and all reading strategies" (Segovia 1995:6). My search for meaning in Ruth is just one in an ocean of multiplicities of meaning that exist. I am reading Ruth from my own social location and cultural context, without denying that there are also many other social locations and cultural contexts that can yield interpretations which are different to my own. The concept of meaning and how we as readers construct meaning is central to the theoretical framework of this dissertation.

In this dissertation I will engage in a postmodernist literary critical analysis. Although this method will inform the major sections of this dissertation, it will not be the only method that I will employ, since I am also interested in exploring other postmodernist methods to see how these methods can generate meaning for the contemporary church, especially women within the church. This means that I will employ ways of reading the Biblical text that takes into account not only the context of the author but the context of the reader as well. I will accomplish this in three ways.

Firstly, I will undertake a close reading of the text of Ruth to establish how literary techniques in the text operates. Secondly, I will read the text in relation to other written Biblical texts. As Nielsen (1997:2) asserts "a text is always read through other texts on the basis of particular expectations." Thirdly I will read the text in relation to myself as the reader, since I too am considered a text in terms of postmodernist literary analysis. In the light of the above, my dissertation will aim to answer three critical questions which will be framed by a womanist perspective:

1) How does one read the book of Ruth as a **literary short story?**

2) How does one read the book of Ruth **intertextually**?

3) How does one read the book of Ruth **autobiographically?**

These three questions will be dealt with not as mutually exclusive questions, but as complementary partners in my examination. This means that each question informs and interacts with the other. They do not form separate units. However, in explaining each approach it would be best to separate them.

Reading Ruth as a Literary Short Story

Because the book of Ruth has long been considered a fine piece of literary art, the first question has been dealt with extensively in other scholarly essays and books. However, I will be examining the traditional literary subjects, such as plot structure and characterization, already explored in other scholarly works in a postmodernist manner. For example, in previous modernist discourse, the purpose of reading for the structure of the plot was so that one could render the "correct" exegesis of the text at hand. Even though my analysis might lead to certain conclusions about how the structure of the plot functions in Ruth, it does not mean that the structure will only yield to one kind of interpretation. The situation can be further complicated by the fact that the possibility exists that several structures exist and again could point to multiple interpretations. As Trible (1978:4) notes:

> A single text appears in different versions with different functions in different contexts. Through application it confesses, challenges, confronts and condemns. What it says on one occasion, it denies on another. Thus, scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations of itself.

Applying the methodology of modern literary criticism to ancient writings does not imply that the authors could have been consciously aware of these aspects when they were writing. Although literary techniques are cultural and linguistic productions, most aspects of literary techniques used in Biblical narrative have been carried over into our own time as well. The assumption made is that the literary techniques used in the construction of Biblical narrative are in most ways fundamentally similar to the ones found in non-Biblical (modern) texts. The fact that the book of Ruth contains literary aspects of plot, narration and characterization substantiates the assumption made above. It is also quite possible to use contemporary literary concepts in the analysis without assuming that the author was aware of these. This is typical of postmodernist analysis. Authorial intention becomes secondary to the reader's interpretation. This kind of research follows the arguments made by scholars such as Fewell and Gunn (1990:13) who assert that "narrative is an art form which recognizes that meaning is never quite fixed, if only because time does not end, and a new possibility always exists, *even if it be beyond the story's end*"(my emphasis).

The theory of narrative will also be used in this analysis. The point of narrative as O'Neill (1994:3) asserts is to tell a story. This is what happens in the book of Ruth. A story is told. Even from this rather basic definition, we can infer that there are two levels to narrative. O'Neill (1994:3) explains these two levels quite aptly in the following:[1]

> [N]arrative is an essentially divided endeavour, involving the *what* of the story told, and the *how* of its telling - or to employ the appropriate technical terms, involving the *story* (or narrative content) and the *discourse* (or narrative presentation).

[1] Aristotle who distinguished between logos (the events represented), and mythos (the rearrangement, the plot) first introduced this view of the two layers of narrative. Several other scholars have also made this distinction, one of the most notable being Chatman (1978).

Understanding narrative as *a* representation (one out of many possible representations) of the story forms the basis of a theory called narratology. The theory of narratology is the theory of narrative. This dissertation functions on the premise that the Ruth narrative is a representation of the story of Ruth, with the emphasis being on the *discourse* of the book of Ruth, rather than the *story*. Examining the book of Ruth as a *discourse* means allowing for multiplicities of meaning. This implies that there can be a number of discourses, but only one story. I will be reading the book of Ruth as a womanist discourse, whereas other people might choose to read it differently.

Analyzing the text of Ruth in this way, also means placing a degree of emphasis on the reader. This is significant because even though narrative involves the process of questioning *what* and *how*, "the fundamental of all narratives must be seen as the telling: a narrative necessarily involves a story being told. Moreover it is told *by* somebody and *for* somebody"(O'Neill 1994:14). The reader plays an important role in the analysis of narrative. The reader ultimately has to make sense of how and why events unfold the way in which they do in the narrative. The reader also reconstructs the world of the narrative, into his/her own world and attempts to make sense of the events accordingly.

Reading Ruth Intertextually

The second approach I employ examines Ruth from an **intertextual** perspective. This means that I aim to construct meaning from the text of Ruth by understanding it through various other texts which share common themes, and structures and therefore suggest that they may be part of the same genre. The issue of genre is crucial to an intertextual analysis since it provides the essential clues needed to find other texts with which to compare the given text. This is extremely important because very often the concept of intertextuality becomes difficult to apply since its definition is too broad. Kristeva, for example, expanding on Bakhtin's idea of intertextuality, asserts that all

language is intertextual and that "...every text is an absorption and a transformation of another text" (Kristeva 1986:37). Although Kristeva's statement holds truth, asserting that in every text we can trace some intertextual elements makes it difficult to define intertextuality as a subject for an interpretive study such as this one. Clearly, a delimiting of our understanding of Ruth as an intertextual text is needed for the purpose which is central to this dissertation, namely, developing a womanist interpretation of the text. I want to emphasize that delimiting the text in this way is only so that we can narrow it down for the purpose of the study. It does not imply a rejection of other interpretive possibilities. Hence, I will use the genre of Ruth as one of many keys with which to unlock the intertextual possibilities of Ruth. Clarification of the genre of Ruth is therefore important at this point.

Almost all scholars agree that Ruth may be classified as part of the narrative genre, but where they differ is in the actual type of narrative genre into which Ruth falls. For example, Campbell (1975:4) regards it as a short story, while Sasson (1989:214) has argued that Ruth is to be read as a folktale since it displays various fundamental likenesses to other folktales especially those proposed by Vladimir Propp.

The genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth seems to pose a problem for most scholars especially the scholars mentioned above who dismiss the genealogy at the end as a later addition. For these scholars the genealogy does not play a part in the determination of genre. However, Nielsen (1997:7) argues that *classifying* a text into a particular genre means *clarifying* the texts alongside other texts with which the text can be read and understood, and therefore what the contemporary audience in those days knew was a narrative in which genealogies were appended as a matter of course. Therefore she argues that Ruth would fall under the genre of the patriarchal narratives by virtue of the fact that the patriarchal narratives are linked into a chain of events that often end with a genealogy (Genesis 22:20-24; 25:1-4; 25:12-18; 35:23-29; 36). I am

inclined to agree with Nielsen that Ruth may fall into the genre of patriarchal narratives but not primarily because of the ancient audience's familiarity with the convention, but because the themes are very similar, and also because in the Ruth narrative the author chooses to make overt references to other patriarchal narratives as well, such as the Rachel and Leah, and Judah and Tamar narratives.

Understanding Ruth as an intertextual text is also important to the literary analysis of the narrative since it can also be an entry point into a further literary analysis of Ruth itself on a broader level. The greater significance of the fact that Ruth can be classified as part of the patriarchal narratives is related to the fact that this study is framed by a womanist perspective. Although womanism differs from feminism in many significant ways,[2] they share many fundamental similarities as well. One of these similarities is that like feminism, womanism approaches patriarchal narratives with suspicion, and recognizes that all patriarchal narratives are ideologically patriarchal. However, as I will demonstrate later in my examination of the text, I aim to move beyond being suspicious of patriarchal texts to revisiting them with new ways of reading that allow those texts that could be deemed oppressive to actually be read as liberating. By outlining the similarities between Ruth and other patriarchal narratives, I will show how these "texts do more than they say. In fact they often do quite the opposite of what they say" (Fewell 1995:246).

Reading Ruth Autobiographically

My third approach is to read the book of Ruth **autobiographically.** This is a fairly recent postmodernist addition to the tools of critical literary analysis used by Biblical scholarship. This kind of approach urges the scholar to construct meaning through her/his own existence. In other words the interpretation process moves beyond considering only the author of Ruth and his or her social

[2] The differences are dealt with in more detail in the section that follows.

and cultural context, to a serious consideration of the reader's own ideological, social and cultural locations as well. This does not imply that one simply attempts to identify corresponding parallels between the reader's life and the characters in the narrative. Autobiographical interpretation involves a deeper analysis of how one's social, cultural and ideological location influence the way in which one interprets the text, and it exposes the way in which the text has been interpreted by other interpreters' ideological assumptions as well. Fewell and Gunn illustrate this point aptly by relating one of Aesop's Fables called "The Lion and the Statue." The fable goes like this:

> A Man and a Lion were discussing the relative strength of men and lions in general. The Man contended that he and his fellows were stronger than lions by reason of their greater intelligence. 'Come now with me,' he cried 'and I will soon prove that I am right.' So he took him into the public gardens and showed him a statue of Hercules overcoming the Lion and tearing him in two. 'That is all very well,' said the Lion, 'but proves nothing for it was a Man who made the statue' (Fewell and Gunn 1993:189).

According to Fewell and Gunn (1993:191), the lion in the story demonstrates that meaning, "is a matter of perspective...a matter of ideology." The man in the fable understands Hercules' defeat of the lion from his own world-view, and as such for him it represents reality. This method attempts to demonstrate that there is no "one" reality. It works on the assumption that "texts are not objective representations of reality, but representations of particular value systems. How we respond to such value systems is determined by our own values" (Fewell and Gunn 1993:192).

Because of my own ideological location, the concerns which I find central to a reading of Ruth involves not just gender, but class and ethnicity as well. As such I will be reading more as a womanist than a feminist. In other words the

nexus of race, class and gender, which feminism has often chosen to ignore, will be affirmed and re-affirmed throughout my reading. Some feminist scholars in South Africa critique womanist discourse because it privileges race over gender issues. For example, Lewis (1994:162/3) argues that womanism

> tends to naturalize stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity, and urges women in their conventional supportive roles to assist in male-centered struggles against white oppression...womanist claims, therefore, are in many ways symptomatic of the very iniquities that feminism contests.

Lewis, although elsewhere advocating the nexus of race, class and gender, here totally misunderstands womanism on two counts. First, she does not grasp the fact that womanism is a liberation discourse that encompasses both sexes. As one of the definitions of a womanist offered by Walker (1983:xi-xii) points out, a womanist is one who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." Secondly, and more importantly for the issues of this dissertation, Lewis, like many other feminist scholars, does not seem to understand the fact that race is an axial force in a Black woman's life. She cannot ignore it or make it secondary to gender concerns. Therefore, the deep connectedness of race, class and gender are constantly affirmed in womanist discourse.

If one is going to place emphasis on the location of the real reader in the process of interpretation, then one cannot assume in gender discourse that all women are "sisters under the skin." Our contexts define our identities, and as Childers (1990) argues race and class have to be specified...

> even if it means continuously using extra adjectives as in poor Latinos, black middle-class women, white working-class women, it is worth it so that people don't feel excluded or robbed of an ability to identify with

> the category 'women' because they feel appropriated rather than addressed by feminism.

These broad ideas that shape womanism in general, shapes a womanist interpretation of a Biblical text as well. Therefore, since I am reading the text of Ruth as a South African Indian woman, the subject of gender is not my only concern, but that of ethnicity and class as well, especially since those categories of oppression have also applied in my own life.

A womanist perspective will frame the responses to the three pivotal questions of the dissertation. A postmodernist analysis easily accommodates such a perspective. Womanism, although differing from feminism in many key respects, is also like feminism in many other ways. Like in feminist discourse, I will proceed with a "hermeneutic of suspicion with respect to the patriarchal character of the text. As Fiorenza (1993:11) explains, a hermeneutic of suspicion

> invites readers to investigate Biblical texts and traditions as one would 'search' the place and location where a crime had been committed. It approaches the canonical text as a 'cover-up' for patriarchal murder and oppression. It seeks to identify the crime by carefully tracing its clues and imprints in the text in order to prevent further hurt and violations.

Such an approach is adopted by other feminist scholars such as Exum (1995:70) who views women in Biblical literature as male constructs. "That is to say they are the creations of androcentric narrators; they reflect androcentric ideas about women; and they serve androcentric interests." Exum's argument may be legitimate, but it does not have to stop at the point of "suspicion." I will argue that it is possible to find liberating elements within the text, despite the fact that it was originally written to serve androcentric interests if one is able to alter one's way of reading the text, by recovering the female voices in the text. In

other words, with a "hermeneutic of suspicion," one stops at the point that one is able to expose the patriarchal elements in the text as biased and androcentric. However, a "hermeneutic of revision" seeks to search the text for

> values and visions that can nurture those who live in subjection and authorize their struggles for liberation and transformation...Like the woman of the Gospels seeking diligently for the lost coin, so a hermeneutic of re-vision investigates Biblical texts for submerged meanings, lost voices and authorizing visions (Fiorenza 1993:11).

Employing a hermeneutic of revision in my analysis demonstrates the power of reading "transformatively" that instead of rejecting the Biblical text completely women can actually embrace it.

CHAPTER 1
PLOT

Brooks (1984:1) defines plot as:

> [T]he design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning...plot (is) the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression.

The above definition of a plot clearly points out that the plot has the power to affect the way in which a reader interprets the narrative, since it is that which directs the reader from one event to the next. The plot is worked out by means of representing the characters and the events to the reader with the intention to impact in a particular way, often in a way that suits the ideological assumptions of the author. However, this does not mean that the reader is a passive recipient of everything the author wants to impart. The author in structuring the plot in a certain way tries to influence the reader to interpret in certain ways. Though, ultimately it is the reader's own interpretive strategy based on past expectation (other texts) and the reader's own interpretive strategy that leads to meaning. Reading for the plot often means reading for the end. Fewell and Gunn (1993:105) suggest that an analogy can be drawn between the way a reader experiences the classic plot pattern and Freud's pleasure principle. In other words reading for the plot is goal-oriented and we read to "get to the end because the end will make sense of what has gone before." What makes the plot interesting is the obstacles that stand in the way of what the reader might perceive to be a satisfactory ending. The resolution of the complications through various skillful artistic techniques defines a good plot.

The plot is constructed through various sources such as the voice of the narrator, the actions of characters, various motifs, and most notably in Ruth through the dialogue between the characters. Sasson (1987:320) notes that fifty-five of the eighty-five verses in Ruth are in dialogue form. This means that the author chooses to structure the plot not primarily through the voice of the narrator, but through the voices of the characters themselves, thus allowing the reader to get an inside view into how the characters themselves see events unfolding.

Brook's definition also demonstrates that the concept of narrative time is intricately linked with that of plot and that time plays an important role in the way in which a plot is worked out. Temporal sequence is central to our understanding of the concept of plot for the simple reason that plot does not signify the same meaning as story. Story signifies the events that happened, and the time sequence is preserved. Plot, on the other hand signifies the way in which the author chooses to tell these events. The order of the events, the amount of time spent on each event and the words that are chosen to narrate the events are all clues to the way in which a plot is worked out.

Another useful way of explaining the distinction is to use the concepts put forward by the cognitive psychologist William Brewer who studies the way in which people understand and make sense of stories. Brewer (1985:167) uses the concept of *event structure* to signify the order in which events actually happened, and the concept of discourse *structure* to signify the order in which these events are told. In other words there can only be one event structure, but there can be a number of discourse structures, and the way in which the story is told depends on the way in which the author chooses to work out the plot in the narrative. For our purposes event structure could be a signifier of the *story* of Ruth, and discourse structure could be the signifier of the *plot* of the book of Ruth. Plot is that which shapes narrative discourse in a dynamic way - that which pushes the story forward. In Brooks' words (1984:14) "the plot, therefore, places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity."

Green (1982:55) outlines three important aspects about how the plot of a story works. She asserts that firstly, a plot must be continuous and flowing so that the audience understands at all times what is going on. She goes on to say that secondly, the plot must have some kind of suspense in it both for the audience and the characters. And lastly when the climax has been reached the audience must be able to trace back the events that brought them to the end.

Fewell and Gunn (1993:102), similarly, assert that the plot may be charted most simply with three basic categories that correspond to Aristotle's famous "*beginning, middle* and *end.*" According to Fewell and Gunn (1993:102) these categories can be equated to the terms *exposition*, *conflict,* and *resolution*. They explain that the *exposition* sets up the events that initiates the main complications of the story. *Conflict* obviously, follows up on the disorder or incompleteness set out in the exposition. The *conflict* situation then moves through various stages until a satisfactory *resolution* is reached.

Both the above frameworks set up by Green and Fewell and Gunn can clearly be applied to the plot of the book of Ruth itself. At the same time one is able to see with clarity that the author of Ruth is an excellent "plotter" since we, the audience are taken from one step to the next in a manner that is continuos and flowing. There seems to be no shortage of suspense when Boaz informs Ruth that there is another redeemer and he will have to check with that redeemer first. The audience waits with bated breath as it were to see how Boaz is going to handle the other kinsman. The audience also waits with bated breath when Ruth goes to the threshing floor for the events that will unfold at that time. When the climax of the story has been reached and Ruth and Boaz are married, and the genealogy is given then we can trace the story back to the beginning and to Ruth's conversion.

Plot Structure

The plot is also structured in a particular way. Grant (1991:424-441) discusses in detail the plot structure of Ruth. He maintains that the book's plot structure is comic/monomythic. Monomythic or comic is the cyclic composite narrative comprising the four elements of tragedy, anti-romance, comedy and romance. Grant asserts that the book of Ruth exhibits these elements as it moves from tragedy to anti-romance to comedy and then to romance. Romance, according to Grant's definition is "literature that depicts an ideal human society; joy and harmony pervade the atmosphere"(1991:427). Anti-romance is the opposite of romance and portrays a community in enslavement; there is a distinct absence of joy and harmony. Tragedy is an event that distinctly and directly changes the romantic ideal into the antiromantic unideal; the tragic element is in this sense transitional. Comedy (and this is the pen-ultimate stage in Ruth, the level at which the story builds up to the end) is also transitional and is the opposite of the tragic element in that it elevates the action up from the "bondage of joyless anti-romance into the freedom of joyful romance" (Grant 1991:428).

The plot of Ruth is structured according to these four elements. Ruth 1:1-7a contains the element of tragedy. The element of anti-romance is evident in Ruth 1:19b-22a. The comic element can be located in 4:5-6 and the element of romance is evident in Ruth 4:13-22.

Intertextual Links

Since the plot of Ruth is not in many ways dissimilar to the plots in other patriarchal narratives as well, I believe that understanding the intertextual links between the various narratives will prove to widen our understanding of the way in which the plot of Ruth functions as well. The most notable stories from the patriarchal narratives that share intertextual links with Ruth are the stories of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19), of Jacob, Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29) and

of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). These stories are examples of two types of intertextuality, namely "manifest intertextuality," and "interdiscursivity," respectively. Fairclough (1992:104-105), who introduced the above terms indicates that manifest intertextuality occurs when other texts are explicitly present and directly referred to in a new text. This is true of the stories of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38) and Rachel and Leah as they are directly referred to in Ruth 4:12 in the blessing given by the elders to Ruth and Boaz. Interdiscursivity is when there is an awareness of how another text could fit into one story, without there being direct reference to it. This is true of the story of Lot and his daughters, especially because of the constant allusion to Moab, since it was from Lot's line that the Moabites descended. Both forms of intertextuality are effective in influencing the way a reader will perceive the satisfactory progression and structure of a plot.

As suggested earlier, reading for the plot often means reading for the end. Judging from the way in which the plot progresses, we can at the end make sense of what has gone before. Reading Ruth as an intertext can yield several different meanings at the end, as is evident by the different ways in which scholars have interpreted the intertextual links between Ruth and the other patriarchal narratives. As a result the intertext creates an effective way of reading that allows for multiplicities of meanings, and a variety of viewpoints. I shall now examine the interpretations of four scholars to demonstrate this point.

Fisch (1982:426) notes that the three stories of Lot and his daughters, Tamar and Judah, and Ruth and Boaz all have a similar plot structure. All three stories have a common starting point - a departure or a breaking off family ties. Lot leaves Abraham, Judah descends from his brothers and Elimelech leaves Bethlehem. In all three cases after the departure tragedy strikes. In Lot's case there is destruction of the environment; for Judah there is the loss of his wife and two sons; and in Ruth Elimelech and his sons die. Fisch (1982:427) notes further that all the stories exhibit the *aguna* theme. This is the theme of the

woman/women abandoned or widowed and as a result unable to continue the line of generations. In the end the problem is resolved when the father or the father figure, becomes responsible for the perpetuation of the male line. Although Fisch concedes that in all three narratives it is the women who take the initiative, he nonetheless perceives their actions to be dishonest and deceptive. From the three narratives which he uses as intertexts, Fisch finds only Ruth and Boaz's actions honourable. He sees the intertextual significance of Ruth in the fact that she has redeemed both the unnamed ancestress who slept with her father (Lot's daughter) and the daughter-in-law (Tamar) who ostensibly prostituted herself to her father-in-law to continue the male line.

> The Ruth-Boaz story is the means of redeeming the entire corpus and of inserting it into the pattern of Heilgeschichte. Ruth establishes a new kind of language for understanding what has gone before, so that a full exegesis of the stories of Lot and Judah requires references to the story of Ruth and conversely, the story of Ruth looks back to these earlier paradigms and what is to be disclosed in the story of the house of David. This is the method of intertextuality (Fisch 1982:436).

Grant (1991:438) concludes that the intertextual links between the Tamar/Judah and Ruth/Boaz narratives shows that God's ways are above human ways in that He chose to "include the illegitimate product (Perez) of a sinful union of a Jew and an ostensibly Canaanite prostitute in the messianic line," and also include the product (Obed) of the union between an Israelite (Boaz) and a Moabite (Ruth). According to Abraham's standard of covenant purity these two women would have never been allowed to enter into the covenant promises of the Jewish line. At the end, though, they are the forbearers of the messianic line. According to Grant (1991: 439) "the idyllic romance into which Ruth resolves, turns out to be the product not of human engineering and manipulation, but of simple faith in the Architect of history." In other words it is God who uses the women to continue the male line.

Black (1991:21-35) sees the three stories of Tamar and Judah, Rachel and Leah and Ruth and Boaz as intertextually connected through what he terms a "bride in the dark pattern." He asserts that all three women have to trick the men in order to get what they rightfully deserve. The trick involves substituting one woman for another (Leah for Rachel, Tamar for a prostitute, Ruth for Naomi). Through the women's' brave actions they are able to "venture alone into the dark to seek their own means of recourse against fate, law and social constraints..." (Black 1991:35). Black like Fisch perceives Ruth's actions at the threshing floor, even though heavily laden with sexual connotations to be "for betrothal not consummation, " by virtue of the fact that unlike in the other two narratives where the men only speak after they discover their mistake, Boaz speaks immediately inquiring who Ruth is. Jacob only discovers after the event and Judah with "ironical intensification" only much later. The twist in this scene is Boaz's dialogue with Ruth. Black concludes that Ruth resolves the "creative tensions between patriarchal law and feminine resourcefulness" (1991:35). Black, unlike Fisch does not perceive the women's' actions to be deceptive. He concludes that the women are "far from simply being folktale "clever wenches" (Black 1991:35). Instead they do what they have to in order to survive, and are rewarded accordingly. Both Tamar and Ruth are complimented in the best possible way for their heroic deeds. Tamar is said to be "more righteous than Judah" and Ruth is said to be better to Naomi than seven sons." They are both considered to be better than men.

Phillip's (1986:7) interpretation focuses on the intertextual relationship between the story of Lot's daughters and Ruth and Boaz. He argues that Boaz acts speedily to arrange a marriage, because he fears that Ruth who is also a Moabite might have acted in the way her unnamed ancestresses did and repeated their deeds with him at the threshing floor. He therefore, acts accordingly to avoid shame, by placing emphasis on the redeeming of land. Phillips concludes therefore that the book of Ruth is about deception and shame. Ruth's deception causes the deceived Boaz to act in a way that avoids shame,

and therefore he marries her. The happy ending is therefore based on manipulating the themes of deception and shame.

The four interpretations offered above indeed proves how enriching an intertextual reading can be. Reid (1977:54) defines a short story as having a "singleness of effect and economy of means." However, even though the plot of Ruth is essentially economical in words and length, when reading the plot of Ruth intertextually it is far from having a "singleness of effect." In fact the intertextual approach proves the opposite. From all the interpretations offered above, Black's analysis comes closest to a womanist reading. What is most significant for a womanist analysis is that although in each case the father or the father figure becomes responsible for the perpetuation of the family, it is the women in the narratives who take the initiative to secure both a future for themselves and the line of generations. Although most of the above scholars perceive the plot of Ruth to be about the perpetuation of a male line, like Black, I perceive it to be about female resourcefulness in a patriarchal world. The plot only moves forward when the women act, and the women act against all odds. In the case of Tamar and Ruth they are "triple oppressed." They are foreigners, widows and childless. And yet they are the ones that drive the plot forward, not the men. In their stories the men all die at the outset. Further, in the stories of Tamar and Ruth it is the men who are shamed by the women into fulfilling their responsibilties. The women in all of the stories are given the most powerful literary roles. They have to carry the plots of their stories forward, they have to elevate the action up from the "bondage of joyless anti-romance into the freedom of joyful romance" (Grant 1991:428). And they rise above their lowly statuses, of being foreigners, widows, childless and women, to become great matriarchs. It is their actions which make their respective plots so interesting. Each uses different methods and feminine resourcefulness in order to survive, but in the end they manage to elevate the story to a happy ending.

The demands of the genre of a short story requires that the story be told in quick succession, so the author has a short space of time to tell a story that could actually have happened over years. Because of the confines of time most short stories use the device of binary oppositions to illuminate the themes of the story (Shaw 1983:195). The binary oppositions of emptiness vs. fullness works well with the elemental structures that Grant has argued for above. These binary opposites function in a way that provide a vehicle to move the plot forward. The motif of emptiness, therefore, is the central metaphor of the story. Grant, along with many other scholars,[3] remarks that the plot of Ruth is worked out via two major motifs - that of "emptiness" and "return". I shall discuss each of these in turn.

The Motif of Emptiness

In the first chapter, natural emptiness (the famine) causes Elimelech and his family to sojourn to Moab in search of food. There they find food (fullness) and live for ten years. Emptiness becomes the focus once again, when Naomi loses her husband and her two sons, which leaves her alone and actually without an identity.[4] When she returns to Bethlehem, she significantly asks the women of the village not to call her Naomi but 'Mara' (which means bitter) because she went out full and the Lord brought her back empty (1:21). Ruth is in exactly the same predicament as Naomi, if not worse. Not only is she a childless widow, she is also a foreigner.

[3] Among the many, see Alter (1981: 86-87) and Nielsen (1997:5).

[4] In ancient Israel a woman's identity was defined in terms of the men in her life. A daughter remained under the authority of her father until she came under the authority of the man to whom she was given in marriage. If the husband of the woman died and she had no son, his brother was to take her as his wife and raise up seed to his brother. For more about the status of ancient Israelite women and Levirate marriage see Jewett (1976:86-88) and Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Given the status of Israelite women, we can see why Naomi was so distraught. She was too old to have any more children, therefore she was in the worst possible situation in which a woman could have been in at that time - she was a childless widow.

Both Naomi and Ruth (though the focus is more on Naomi) are portrayed as having nothing. However, both women take the initiative to change their situations. We are made aware of what Valerie Shaw (1983:195) terms the "threshold periods" (the times in which there are significant changes in the lives of the characters) in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2 Ruth acts to find a temporary solution to their problem of survival by gleaning in Boaz's field. In chapter 3 Naomi motivates the course that will ultimately lead to the permanent solution of their problems namely the Levirate marriage of Ruth to Boaz. Chapter 4 shows the complete transposition of the two womens' fates. Their lives have changed from absolute emptiness to complete fullness (from tragedy to comedy, from anti-romance to romance). Nielsen (1997:5) asserts that the entire story

> [D]eals with a series of crises, which are gradually overcome so that emptiness is transformed into fullness. The famine in Judah is overcome by the journey to Moab. The loss of husbands is redressed in Ruth's case by her marriage to Boaz. And, the lack of an heir is remedied with the birth of Obed...

The motif of emptiness,[5] once again, can be said to drive the plot. Through the unfolding of the plot from emptiness to fullness, we discover the reciprocal relationship of two women whose destinies are bound together by their unfortunate circumstances of being childless widows.

The Return Motif

The device of dialogue gives us some insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings. Sasson (1987:320) points out that the plot is advanced mostly through dialogue and that 55 of the 85 verses of the story are in dialogue form. The dialogue especially in 1:6-18, highlights the motif of return through the constant repetition of the word *shuv* (1:6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16). Naomi urges her

[5] The themes of emptiness and fullness are explored by Rauber (1970:27-37).

daughters-in-law to return to their homes in Moab. She will return to her home in Bethlehem. Both daughters-in-law refuse at first and then Orpah leaves. Ruth, however, says that she will "return" with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. The choice of the word "return" is strange since Ruth is going to a foreign land. However, Alter (1987:13) points out that we get the sense that Ruth is actually "coming back to the unknown homeland of her new destiny." In other words Ruth's return is different to Naomi's in that it does not signify a physical return but in a sense a spiritual and cultural one. Her return marks her conversion to Naomi's religion and culture. As she indicates in her moving speech in 1:16:

> Do not make me leave you and return home without you. No, where you go, I will go, and where you live, I will live; your people are my people, and your god is my god.

However, this conversion is fully realized only when Ruth marries Boaz. Prior to the marriage Ruth has only "returned" physically. She has not yet fully connected with the Israelite community. Even when she meets Boaz in the field in chapter 2, she is surprised at his kindness towards her, a foreigner: "Then she threw herself on the ground and said to him, 'How is it that I have won your favour, that you acknowledge me, even though I am foreign?'" (2:10). This lack of integration is also evident by the constant use of the addendum "Moabitess" to describe Ruth.

However, there is a twist in the tale: if Ruth remains a foreigner, then the emptiness will not return to fullness. Ruth has to become fully integrated into the community (by her marriage to Boaz) in order for the plot to work, in order for the story to return to the romantic ideal. The "return" of Ruth to Bethlehem signifies the start of the transition period from tragedy to comedy from anti-romance to romance, from emptiness to fullness.

CHAPTER 2
NARRATIVE TIME

> The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world...Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience (Ricoeur 1984:3).

As indicated in the previous chapter, the concepts of time and plot are very tightly woven together. In order to understand the impact which time has on plot, it will be useful to cast a distinction between narrative time and story time in the same way that we made the distinction between story and plot in the previous chapter. Brewer's concepts of *event structure* and *discourse structure* might help clarify this distinction. *Event structure* signifies the actual order in which events happened, while *discourse structure* signifies the way in which the story is told. The time sequence of the real events is not necessarily preserved in the discourse structure. Most written narratives use discourse structure and discourse structure allows for a variety of viewpoints to be portrayed when presenting a story in a way that event structure cannot. The same can be said of narrative time and story time. In other words story time and narrative time can be understood in the same way that event structure and discourse structure is understood respectively. The governing principle is the same for both concepts. Thus when narrative time is used the time sequence of the events is also not necessarily preserved. In other words the time allowed for the telling of a particular event is left entirely up the author. The author can choose to relate something that happened over ten years in two sentences, and yet use ten sentences to describe an event that happened in two minutes. Therefore the way in which narrative time is used in one discourse structure

might differ from the way in which it is used in another discourse structure, even though the event structure can be the same for both discourses.

We can reason, therefore, that story time uses event structure, while narrative time uses discourse structure. Genette (1980:19) makes this distinction when he asserts that narrative is the text that relates the story. In other words the narrative is the signifier and the story is the signified, in the same way that narrative time is the signifier and story time is the signified. Narrative time is also non-chronological. It allows for events to be narrated in different sequences from the way in which they actually occurred. Narrative has the freedom as a genre to do this precisely because we draw the distinction between story and narrative. To reiterate, story is the what, and narrative is the how. In this analysis, then, story time becomes subordinate to narrative time, since the representation that we have before us is a narrative of the story of Ruth.

Since time is crucial to the working out of the plot, the amount of time allocated to the narration of certain events can indicate the importance of those events. Some events are accorded more telling time than others. The question is why does the author choose to allow more time for the telling of one incident and less for another. The answer is most obviously in the degree of significance that the author wishes to place on certain episodes.

For example, at the beginning of Ruth, in the space of seven verses Naomi and her family move to Moab; Naomi's husband dies; her sons marry Moabite wives; then the sons die; and Naomi and her daughters-in-law are on their way back to Bethlehem. However, the author chooses to allocate the next **twelve** verses (Ruth 1:8-19) to the dialogue between Naomi and her daughter-in-law, where she requests that they leave her and return to their homeland. Orpah heeds her request, but Ruth decides to stay with Naomi. The author allocates two whole verses (1:16-17) just for Ruth to say that she is staying.

> "Do not urge me to go back and desert you," Ruth answered. "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. I swear a solemn oath before the Lord your God: nothing but death shall divide us."

It is clear that we are meant to infer something significant about Ruth's character from the amount of time she is given in the narrative to say this piece. We shall discuss this aspect of Ruth's character described to us as *hesed*, in more detail in chapter 4. What is important to note at this point is how even the length of time allowed for each character's speech points both towards the unfolding of character and thereby the plot as well.

Length of time allowed for the telling of narrative is not the only aspect of narrative time that is important for our analysis. The order in which the events are told, and the repetition of key verses is also significant. Genette (1980:35) divides narrative time into three categories - order, duration and frequency:

Order

Order indicates that the sequence of events in the narrative, is not the same as the sequence of events in the story. For example in Ruth at the end of each chapter we are given a summary of what has happened. Also a semi-flashback device is used at the end of chapter 2 and 3 of the events of the day and night respectively, when Ruth shares with Naomi, the events of the day of gleaning (Ruth 2: 19-23) and the night on the threshing floor with Boaz with Naomi (Ruth 3:17-18).

Another example of non-chronological method of narrating is evident in Ruth 1:6:

> Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.

Berlin (1983:96) shows that there are three events at three different times mentioned here. She divides them according to their chronological sequence:

1. God remembered his people.
2. Naomi heard that God remembered his people.
3. Naomi started to return from Moab because she had heard that God remembered his people.

In the previous section the theme of "return" was established as a motif that advances the plot. From the way in which narrative time is worked out in the above verse, (that is the way in which the chronological sequence is rearranged), the emphasis seems to lie on Naomi's decision to return, "so all the information is presented at the time of her return" (Berlin 1983:96). The narrative highlights that which is crucial to the plot, and in terms of time sequence that which is most crucial to the plot is given first preference while the other information fades into background information.

Such devices are used to draw the reader into the world of the story, with an almost omniscient view of how the events unfold. Berlin (1983:95) argues that

> [I]t is much more effective to give information to the reader when it is most useful or significant, or to link it (the story) with other relevant information, rather than present it in the form of an annal or chronicle.

The genre of the short story demands that not only are the events of the story related in a way that woos the reader, but also in a manner that synopsizes the order of the events without taking away the essential characteristics of them.

Therefore, a "limited viewpoint is required" (Shaw 1983:195), while, "the unity of time and place needs to be kept" (O'Faolain 1970:206).

The rearrangement of chronological sequence also affects the act of reading. Narrative is linear in that it cannot present two events simultaneously, and therefore has to narrate one before the other. The reader, however, unconsciously rearranges these events into chronological order. Therefore, although narrative is linear, reading is not (Berlin 1983:98). Although the reader makes these rearrangements unconsciously, I would suggest that the effect of the non-chronological sequence still remains. In other words, in 1:6, because the narrator has presented Naomi's decision to return home, first, the reader is guided by the return motif.

Duration

Duration indicates the amount of time it takes to tell parts of the story. In Ruth it is very clear that some parts of the story are told more quickly than others. As was mentioned above, the first 5 verses cover a period of at least ten years. The next twelve verses, though, cover a time period of what one might realistically term half an hour. The whole of chapter 2 deals almost exclusively with the events of one day: Ruth gleaning in the field and her meeting with Boaz. Chapter 3 deals with a day and a night. Chapter 4 deals briefly with a legal scene, but within the space of the chapter we are hurled into another period. "There is a circular movement in the way time is depicted, with the book ending where it began, in a whole period. Within a few chapters we have moved from the period of Judges to Kings" (Nielsen 1997: 4).

This cyclical time frame also recalls intertextual links as well. Bull (1972:40) asserts that the intertextual link of the story being placed in the time of the judges prepares the reader for some sort of tragedy, since, "the days of the

judges[6] are days of stubborn departure from God, which brought to Israel subjugation from without and a frightening starvation at home." He also asserts that "each time a narrative begins with the familiar words, "'Now it came to pass in the days...' it is indicative of a period of impending adversity, which by reason of divine deliverance, issues in a happier outcome." This cyclical time frame corresponds well with the plot structure, which in a similar manner, moves from anti-romance to romance, from tragedy to comedy, from emptiness to fullness.

The amount of time allocated to certain parts of the telling of the story, as stated previously, is obviously an indication of the degree of importance that the author wishes the reader to attach to the event. At the same time, it indicates something about the importance of the character involved and something about where the weight of the narrative falls. Judging from the narrative time indications that we are given in Ruth (I refer, here to the fact that two whole chapters are devoted to the telling of the events of two days and a night), I think that it is safe to say that we are meant to focus on Chapters 2 and 3 which highlight the initiatives taken by the two women to change their hopeless situations. Trible (1978:166) argues that the book of Ruth is about Naomi and Ruth's struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment and their achievements in overcoming their situation. Both the content and structure of the narrative (especially chapters 2 and 3) confirm this. She goes on to say that

> Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Ruth and the females of Bethlehem work as paradigms for radicality. All together they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture (Trible 1978:196).

[6] From a womanist perspective, the tragic story of the concubine in Judges 19 also comes to mind.

Frequency

Frequency indicates the repetition of some events several times in the story. In a short story, like Ruth, this is not entirely possible because the short story genre is characterized by "singleness of effect and economy of means" (Reid 1977:54). However, in Ruth, although the events are not repeated entirely, there is another device that the author uses. This device takes the form of a summary or what Nielsen (1997:4) terms as "evaluative dialogues" at the end of each chapter. At the end of each chapter there are comments on the most outstanding events, the purpose of which, I think is to emphasize their significance to the story as a whole.

At the end of chapter 1 Naomi laments her situation to the women of Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19-22), even though the readers are already aware of the terrible situation that she is in. Her lamentation contributes to the motif of emptiness, which is, as I asserted before, the driving force of the plot. Chapter 2 ends with Ruth commenting on her experience of gleaning in the fields of Boaz (Ruth 2: 19-23), even though by reading the first part of the chapter the readers are already aware of the events that transpired, especially the kindness shown by Boaz to Ruth. This comment functions to reinforce the development of the plot from emptiness to what is at this stage partial fullness in that Ruth has found a temporary solution to their problem of survival.

At the end of chapter 3, as in the previous chapters a detailed repetition of the events that transpired at the threshing floor occurs in a discussion between Naomi and Ruth. Even though the text does not indicate this we can deduce this from Naomi's comment at the very end of the chapter that "that man will not rest, he will make sure the matter is settled today" (3:18). Once again the purpose of this evaluative dialogue is to help with the development of the plot which at this time has moved from complete emptiness to partial fullness, to

almost complete fullness with the advent of a permanent solution (the marriage of Ruth to Boaz) to the women's problems.

At the end of chapter 4 it is neither Naomi nor Ruth that share the evaluative dialogue. Rather, it is the women of Bethlehem. They comment that Ruth is better than seven sons to Naomi, and they comment on the situation that has turned from emptiness to fullness by saying: "Blessed be the Lord which has not left you this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel" (1:14).

Frequency, or in this case the device of the repetition of events via summary, serves not only to highlight significant events or characters to the reader, but also as Nielsen (1997:4) asserts "allows the author time and again to put conclusions into the mouths of women, a factor that is hardly insignificant in a book about the choice of a woman."

There are also cases of unreported speech that are repeated in direct speech. Berlin (1983:96) terms this unreported speech as "dischronoligised" information and cites two examples of such information. The first is to be found in 2:7 where the foreman is recalling a previous conversation with Ruth that the narrator has not related to the readers. The second example is to be found in 3: 17 where Ruth tells Naomi that Boaz has given her six measures of barley because he said: "Go not empty unto thy mother in law."

However, there is no narrated record of Boaz saying this. The reason for "dischronologised" information, I want to suggest, is economy of narrative. This is typical of the short story genre. Events are summarized for the purpose of the flow of the narrative, with the story being told in quick succession. As Shaw (1983:48) quoting H.G Wells notes:

> A short story should go to its point as a man flies from a pursuing tiger: he pauses not for the daisies in his path, or to note the pretty moss on the tree he climbs for safety.

In 2:7 if the narrator were to relate the conversation between Ruth and the foreman, and then repeat it when Boaz inquires, it would be redundant and ineffective to the advancement of the plot, and afterall the advancement of the plot is the main concern in a short story. The crux of what the narrator wants us to know is that Boaz has been made aware of Ruth's qualities, and that he is attracted to them. To relate the conversation between Ruth and the foreman would be to "pause to admire the daisies on the path." Similarly, in 3:17 we already are aware, from the previous chapter, that Boaz gave Ruth food and therefore, to repeat Boaz's speech would be ineffective at a point when the plot is thickening and moving at a much faster pace than before with the approach of a permanent solution to their problems unfolding. Ruth's reported speech of what Boaz has said is simply meant to highlight his kind and generous character which at this point is simply a function of the plot. This demonstrates once again, as Berlin (1983:97), notes, that "narrative is a product of *selective* representation."

The pacing of the story is brisk. The dialogues propel the story forward leaving little time for the reader to ask questions about the gaps in the text. Questions such as why Ruth and Orpah were not able to have children, or if Naomi knew about the plot of land that she owned, and if so, why did she not say anything about it earlier, become secondary to the reader's need to experience the resolution of the conflicts outlined at the outset of the narrative. Through the economical use of dialogue the reader is spared the details, and the attention is directed to the main issues at hand which is the resolution of the problems outlined at the beginning of the narrative. The most amount of narrative time was spent on Ruth in describing her loyalty and resourcefulness in overcoming her unfortunate circumstances. The amount of time spent on dialogues between

Ruth and Naomi is also a clear indication that it is the women who are the focus of the story and that it is the women's plight that needs to be identified with.

CHAPTER 3

POINT OF VIEW AND THE NARRATIVE VOICE

"The narrator is a character who tells the story while other characters enact it" (Fewell and Gunn 1993:53). Although this seems like an adequate definition of the function of the narrator, it does not describe the effects of the way in which the story is told, and how the narrator points the reader towards a certain perception of the characters s/he is describing and towards certain points of view as well. What the definition does, by referring to the narrator as a character, is distinguish between the narrator and the author. The voice or the point of view of the narrator is not necessarily the voice or the point of view of the author. For example an author who embodies an enlightened point of view, can set up a racist narrator to tell a story. The narrator will, therefore, narrate from a racist point of view. This can be done either directly or indirectly. The narrator can intrude in the narrative at all points and provide his/her point of view, or the narrator can demonstrate his her point of view by allowing the characters in the narrative to expand the point of view established.

There are many viewpoints from which the narrator can observe and relate events. Of the many possibilities (which are too numerous to mention here) that Bar-Efrat (1989: 14-15) provides, I think that the narrator in Ruth falls under the category of: "narrators who relate what is happening from a remote perspective, offering a wide panoramic view." However, even if the narrator narrates from a broad perspective, this does not imply that the narrative voice is lost.[7] In fact the narrative voice is very strong, but is almost entirely filtered through the voices of the characters themselves. In the case of Ruth this seems to be the case, because as was noted previously, 55 of the 85 verses in the book of Ruth are dialogic in nature.

[7] "Narrative voice" here is equivalent to what Chatman (1978:47) terms "conceptual point of view", and means the perspective of attitudes, conceptions, and worldview of the narrator.

I would argue for several reasons that the narrative voice in the book of Ruth is that of a woman. Perhaps the most important consideration is the fact that out of the 55 verses that are dialogic, 33 are uttered by women, to a large extent by Ruth and Naomi and a lesser extent the women of the village. Apart from this there are several pointers in the text of a narrative voice that reflects a woman's point of view. Before we analyze them though, I want to make some preliminary remarks about the narrative voice or point of view. I use the term narrative voice to indicate the voice or the point of view that emerges from the text. I want to draw clear distinctions between the voice of the author and the narrative voice. It has been suggested by scholars such as Campbell (1975:21), that a woman could have authored the book of Ruth. Although, this seems like a plausible suggestion, I do not want to focus on the identity of the author, since that would take me out of the scope of literary-narrative analysis into modes of historical criticism such as form and redaction criticisms. Rather, Meyers (1993:90) offers a better suggestion. She argues that "the text's authority rather than its authorship should be gendered." In other words the voice that comes through in the narrative text is of importance to the analysis, not the voice of the actual author. It is the narrative voice, therefore, that I want to suggest is female.

Criteria for the Determination of a Female Narrative Voice

Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:136) suggests the possibility of using three criteria for determining the gender of the narrative voice:

1. the text should contain traces of an intent which is less than normally androcentric;
2. there should be talk in it of a (re)definition of reality from the female perspective so that
3. the narrative contains definable differences between the view of the male and the female figures.

For the purposes of the point that I am arguing concerning the dominant female voice or point of view, I would want to add my own fourth criterion:

The narrative voice of the female can be heard in distinct contrast to a male narrative voice or point of view.

Finding evidence in the book of Ruth for a narrative voice that aligns itself with women's concerns using the above criteria is not difficult. The first and most obvious indicator is to be found in the title of the book. Ruth is one of only two books in the canonical Bible, which is actually named after a woman. This is certainly a departure from androcentric intent. The other book is Esther. Unlike Esther, however, Ruth's entire focus is on the survival of two women. Secondly, from the outset we are thrust into a woman's story. The narrator dispenses with the male family members of Ruth and Naomi in the first five verses. As Bledstein (1993:119) notes "untraditionally for a patriarchal story, attention shifts from the men who do not survive to the women who act in order to survive." In this sense Boaz is seen simply as an agent of their survival.

Thirdly, the relationship established between Naomi and Ruth - both via their dialogue and the narrator's indicators offers a view which diverges from the conventional Biblical idea of women as rivals. Rachel and Leah and Sarah and Hagar are just two examples. Brenner (1986:260) notes that although the close relationship between the two might provide opportunity for them to be characterized as rivals they are portrayed as having a relationship of co-operation and mutual respect. So much so that the words which the narrator uses to describe them, are "cling together." Such dramatic words as used in Genesis 2:24, are usually used to describe the closeness between a man and a woman. One can therefore conclude that the narrator is portraying a positive, mutually life-affirming relationship between the two women, and this certainly reflects a non-androcentric point of view.

The second criterion is also fulfilled by the use of what Campbell (1975:64) terms a "surprising" term. I refer here to Ruth 1:8, where Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their "mother's house," (*beit imma*).

The phrase "mother's house" is surprising because in most patriarchal narratives widows normally return to their "father's house."[8] Meyers (1993:85-114) provides an insightful analysis of the term "mother's house," by relating it to other instances where the phrase appears. She concludes among other things that in all cases where the phrase appears, the fundamental similarities are:

1. A woman's story is being told.
2. Women are agents in their own destiny.
3. The agency of women affects others.

When Naomi replaces the term "father's house" with "mother's house" she is certainly redefining her reality and that of her daughters-in-law from a female perspective.

The third criterion is fulfilled when we consequently note a difference in the status attached to male and female figures. At the end of the book, the women of Bethlehem declare that "a son has been born to Naomi" (4:17), not that "a son has been born to Boaz." Van Dijk-Hemmes (1993:137) declares that the women

> redefine the reality wished for Boaz by the men of Bethlehem - the creation of a noble line of descent - by proclaiming that a son has been born to Naomi. The meaning that the women assign to the birth of this son is formulated completely in terms of its significance for the grandmother (instead of the father).

Besides the fact that the women attribute the blessing to Naomi and not Boaz, they also declare that Ruth is better to Naomi than seven sons (4:15). Given the status that was accorded to male figures, this is certainly, to say the least, a compliment to Ruth. It is also indicative of the fact that it is women who have acted to change their destinies, and therefore, it is the women who are ultimately the heroines of the story. It is the female figures who are

[8] See the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 where Tamar is told to return to her father's house.

foregrounded not the males. The Jewish Midrash clearly also recognized that it is the women who emerge as heroines of the story. The rabbis in their efforts to try and explain why it is the women who are foregrounded and not Boaz, suggest that Boaz died on the day after the marriage.

The fourth criterion is also simple to identify in that there is indeed a shift from a male point of view to a dominant female one. Alter's argument of the rotation of the betrothal scene is a case in point. Alter (1981:52) asserts that there is a convention for betrothal scenes in the Hebrew Bible. This is how he defines a typical betrothal scene:

> The betrothal type scene then, must take place with the future bridegroom or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl...or girls at a well. Someone, either the man or the girl draws water from the well...finally, a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of instances only after he has been invited to a meal.

Alter (1981:58) argues that in Ruth this whole betrothal type-scene has been reversed both in terms of gender and geography. In terms of geography it is Ruth who has traveled to a foreign land, not Boaz. (Once again, we note that it is the women who act to change their fates). In terms of gender, the protagonist is a heroine, not a hero, and as Lacocque (1990:109) points out, "[F]itting such a reversal of the traditional elements of the betrothal scene, here it is the young men who draw water for Ruth to drink."(2:9). It is also the male (Boaz) who invites the female (Ruth) to a meal (albeit a modest meal of bread dipped in water).

Lacocque (1990:91) asserts that the book of Ruth can either be understood as an apologue ("apologue sets an ethical model; its purpose is edification and confirmation of world"), or as a parable (parable questions ideology; it subverts world). He argues that the Ruth narrative should be interpreted as a parable

because it subverts the ideology of the superiority of the Israelite nation over foreigners. He sees the book of Ruth as an antidote to the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms which encouraged Israelite men to put away their foreign wives. Accordingly, the story of Ruth is perceived as a "politically subversive pamphlet"[9] (Lacoque 1990:100).

I want to suggest that in the light of Lacocque's position Ruth could certainly be understood as a short story with a parabolic function. However, it should not be perceived simply as a politically subversive story, but a gender subversive one as well. Judging from the very strong evidence of a female narrative voice in the text as illustrated above, this possibility certainly seems plausible. The difference is that the tone of the narrative voice is not a harsh polemic tone but a cleverly subtle one. For even though there is bountiful evidence of a female narrative voice, the narrative is still organized around patriarchal structures. This implies that the women are represented as autonomous figures that initiate the processes that change their destinies and ensure their survival, but they do so under the guise of trying to preserve a male lineage. Nevertheless, the female voice and the female experience are not lost in this patriarchal guise. It is cleverly embedded within the text. As Naomi says to Ruth in 3:1, "Shall I not find you a home where you will be well off?"

Naomi does not say that she wants to find a home for Ruth, because she wants to continue Elimelech's line. All she indicates is that she wants to secure the survival of Ruth and in so doing guarantee her own survival too. However, she employs a patriarchal structure, the Levirate marriage, to ensure their survival. The narrative voice, therefore, ensures that the actual patriarchal structure becomes secondary to the initiatives taken by the women.

[9] Campbell (1975:26-27) argues a similar point by stating "Ruth was a protest paper by the universalists against the stringency of Ezra-Nehemiah nationalism, based on a subtle reminder that David's grandmother was a Moabitess." Gitay (1997:56-68) also explores Ezra's attitudes towards mixed marriages.

The women of Bethlehem also recognize that it is the women's' endurance that is important not the male lineage. Trible (1978:194) also notes this when she asserts that the women of Bethlehem:

> perceive this infant as restoring life to the living rather than restoring a name to the dead. They speak of Ruth the bearer rather than of Boaz the begetter. And they name the baby. Repeatedly, these women stand as opposites to the elders.

Lacocque (1990:113) criticizes Trible for this view by arguing that she is transposing "a modern problematic into a Second Temple period history." He argues that the war is not gender based but politically based. The elders, according to Lacocque are not opposed because they "wear a beard but because they shore up the establishment."

It seems to me that Lacocque wants to close off meaning in one context only, that of the context of Second Temple period history. His interpretation may be valid on historical grounds and can be used in the contemporary church in order to denounce political abuse. However, from a postmodernist perspective this does not imply that we have to close off meaning and limit it to that context only. The text certainly justifies Trible's interpretation. The difference between Trible and Lacocque's interpretation points once again to the fact that meaning is a matter of perspective and that there is no one correct interpretation of any given text. Authorial intention becomes secondary to the reader's interpretation, and the reader will interpret according to his or her social and ideological locations.

CHAPTER 4

CHARACTER AND CHARACTERISATION

Two broad basic processes are involved in characterisation. The first lies on the level of the text and the second on the level of the reader. The first process involves the "revelation" of character, and the second is what Fewell and Gunn (1993:75) call "reconstructing" characters. These two processes do not operate independently of each other. They feed into each other constantly. In other words by going through an almost unconscious process of collecting all the clues about the character that are supplied by the text (revelation of character), and coupling that with her/his own ideological assumptions, a considerate reader attempts to reconstruct the characters. In the analysis that follows I assume the role of such a reader. Therefore, I will not discuss reconstructing characters as a separate section because it is a process that will unfold automatically as my own ideological assumptions which are aligned with womanism informs my interpretation.

Revelation of Character

> Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations (Alter 1981:116).

Alter's description of character provides a good introduction as to how readers obtain knowledge about characters. The many ideas he puts forward can be divided into two primary categories which Rimmon-Kenan (1986:36) terms *direct definition* and *indirect presentation*.

On a simple level, *direct definition* can be attributed to the information we obtain about a character via the narrator. *Indirect presentation* indicates the information we get about the characters via the characters' themselves either through their actions or through their dialogue with other characters. Two basic categories of characterization are frequently used, but by no means are they meant to be definitive. Within these two categories different levels or types of characters may also be identified. These are the flat and the round characters. The flat characters are those characters who are not accorded an in-depth characterisation either by the narrator or other characters. The round character or what Berlin (1983:23) terms the "fully-fledged character" is fully developed.

Scholars such as Scholes and Kellogg (1966:166-167) have argued in the past that Biblical narrative is "primitive" narrative and, therefore, does not contain deep characters or indepth characterization. According to them Biblical characters are "opaque" and "inscrutable." They do not view this as a defect or a limitation but account for it as simply being a characteristic of Biblical literature. In other words they argue that all Biblical characters are types of a convention and, therefore, act in a way that is expected of them in terms of the dictates of the convention or the literary genre under which they fall. The socio-historical critic would similarly argue that the group oriented nature of most pre-modern societies did not allow for individuals to be thought of as having strongly individualistic tendencies that deep characterisation seeks to emphasise. Characterisation was generally stereotyped around certain archetypes which were thought to reflect reality.

Such interpretations are valid only if one bases one's interpretation on authorial intention and fixes meaning in certain cultural contexts solely. As I have mentioned in my introduction, interpretation is a dynamic process and therefore, meaning should not be fossilised. Instead it should be constantly evolving. If Biblical texts are used in the modern age as a means for teaching and preaching,

particularly because they are thought to contain examples of right living, then we cannot be satisfied with simply accepting characters as "types," because real human beings do not function as types. In the quest for meaning the interpreter does not simply look through a window into the world of the Biblical characters but actually looks into a mirror. Interpretation of character is, therefore, a two way process. The interpreter looks for attributes with which to identify in the Biblical character or to reject in the case of negative characterisation.

The deep and well-developed characterisations of Ruth and Naomi substantiate the fact that Biblical characters are not merely artificial types (Fewell and Gunn 1993:49). They are certainly characterised as not behaving like women would normally be expected to behave in a patriarchal context. In fact they turn the convention of the "man as hero" on its head because it is they through their daring and bold actions who emerge as the heroines at the end of the narrative. As Trible (1978:166) notes:

> These women bear their own burdens... No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile and the unknown.

We obtain our perceptions of characters both via the narrator and through the main characters' actions and their dialogue which we referred to as *indirect presentation*. This aspect of the revelation of character will be discussed in the next section in conjunction with the analysis of each individual major character in the book of Ruth. Before proceeding we need to note that in certain narratives which are not completely dialogic in nature the narrator can play a significant role in determining how the reader perceives a character.

Direct Definition: The Narrator's Role in the Revelation of Character

In the previous chapter a distinction was made between the narrator and the author. That distinction needs to be kept in mind in considering the role of the narrator because it implies that the narrator is to be understood as a fictional construct. In order for the narrator to play a decisive role in the way characters are portrayed, what Rimmon-Kenan (1986:36) terms direct definition, s/he has to present something of the inner life and thoughts of the character, describe their actions and motivations as well as their dress and their physical appearances, and to a certain extent evaluate them.

In Ruth the narrator is not very different from other Biblical narrators in that very little of this is done. The narrator is reticent about the characters, and therefore, they are not described in much detail. This does not imply that there are simply "opaque character types" in Ruth. The sparse intrusion of the narrator in this regard can once again be attributed to the fact that 55 of the 85 verses in Ruth are dialogic. It follows that the narrator leaves the bulk of the job of characterisation to the characters themselves. The narrator only has 30 verses to paint a picture of the characters, and in this time the narrator also has to divide attention between introducing scenes and the direct discourse which constitutes the majority of the story.

Although it seems like the narrator plays a minimal role in characterisation in Ruth, s/he does perform one significant task. The narrator names both the major characters and the minor characters of the story though in the case of Ruth the names of the minor characters are particularly important for the plot. Naming not only in terms of proper names but also in terms of addenda to names and descriptions is a significant clue to characterisation, and in the book of Ruth almost all the names are significant indicators of either character traits or the destiny of a character. But it is also important to note that many characters in

the book of Ruth actually go unnamed thus showing the narrator's lack of interest in them as individuals.

Several typical examples will show how proper names of characters act as an entry point into the function of the character and their function in turn to the plot. Each of the following characters is a minor one in the narrative and for this reason they may be deemed "flat characters." Although they may be defined as flat characters, they are by no means "types" by virtue of the fact that they certainly do not behave in the way that would be expected of them. This is certainly true for their gender. The male family members of Ruth and Naomi, Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion are all eliminated in the first 5 verses of the story and as a result the focus of the story is not on men as is the case in most Biblical narratives but on the women.

Elimelech, together with Machlon and Chilion are merely proper names in the book of Ruth because their characters are completely undeveloped. They appear only in the background of the story and act as agents. "Agents are characters who are not important in their own right, but function as pieces in the background or setting, or as aids in characterizing the major characters" (Berlin 1983:85). Elimelech clearly functions as a piece in the setting, his death being the reason for Naomi's return to Bethlehem. The name Elimelech means "My God is King." Nielsen (1997:42) asserts that his name sets out the king theme which is the end point of the book: just as Elimelech's God is king, so is David God's chosen king. This kind of interpretation is only significant if one sees as the purpose of the book an explanation of King David's Moabite ancestry. However, in keeping with my argument that the narrative in the book of Ruth is not only about male lineage but also to a large extent about the lives of two women who act to change their destinies, Elimelech's name is ironical in two senses.

First, as Sasson (1987:322) points out his name is ironical given the abandonment of God and his land. But, secondly and more importantly his name is ironical because it has a certain grandeur about it and boasts of the fact that his God is king, but he is also the first to die. He was also so impoverished that he had to move to another land. The "head" of the household who controls the family ("his" wife and "his two sons") and whose God is king is the first to be eliminated from the narrative. Naomi the woman then becomes the controller of the family and as Trible (1978: 169-170) points out there is a switch from "his wife" and "his two sons" to "her husband" and "her two sons."

Campbell (1975:53-54) considers it virtually impossible to define the meaning of the names Machlon and Chilion. However, many scholars have tried, among them Sasson (1987:322) who renders the meaning of Machlon and Chilion as "weakening and pining" or "blot out and perish." Whatever the precise meanings of their names are, we can certainly establish that they have something to do with sickness and death, and this is exactly what happens to both of them: they die. Machlon and Chilion are clearly flat characters since they are not accorded any in-depth characterization either by the narrator or through dialogue. Their only function is to connect Ruth and Orpah to Naomi as her daughters-in-law. Thus once again the narrative shifts from the males to the females, from Machlon and Chilion, to their wives Ruth and Orpah.

Orpah:

Orpah's name means, "back" or neck." Bal (1987:71) asserts that Orpah's name is significant, because

> [F]ar from describing just a feature of the character, it tells its action - an emblematic action, indeed, which thus becomes predictive, but which remains narrated action.

Orpah also acts as an *agent.* She falls under the second category of agent since she aids in characterizing the major character, Ruth. As (Simon 1990:14)

suggests: "[A] primary function of some minor characters is to further the plot while that of others is to lend the narrative greater meaning and depth". Orpah's character lends greater meaning to the character of Ruth.

Orpah did exactly what her mother-in-law asked her to do. She turned around and left. Orpah's name seems to act as a contrast to Ruth's character since when Ruth faces exactly the same choice, she does not turn around and leave but perseveres in convincing her mother-in-law that she will stay. We are not meant to view Orpah negatively because the narrator provides good reasons for her actions, but as Berlin (1983:85) asserts, it is because of the actions of Orpah that we view Ruth so positively.[10]

"The three men in the narrative and Orpah are silenced by the way in which the narrator deals with them in a third person narrative style. S/he "names the characters, specifies their relationships, and describes their plight," but this "does not allow for them to emerge as human beings" (Trible 1978:167) because all the information we are given about them comes from the narrator and not their own voices.

In terms of the minor characters that we have discussed above, it is clear that even though they are not given any voices, their function is not simply to further the plot but to lend the narrative greater meaning and depth. In the cases of Elimelech, Machlon and Chilion their elimination in the first five verses adds greater meaning to the fact that the narrative switches from being a male-dominated one to a female-dominated one. In other words the narrative becomes a female-centred one, where voices are given to females. In the case of Orpah, as was noted previously, through her contrasting actions to that of Ruth she adds greater meaning and depth to the character of Ruth by emphasising her loyalty

[10] Kirsten (1997:48) also asserts that readers sooner or later react negatively to Orpah, as is reflected in Midrash Ruth Rabbah which contains a brutal account of Orpah on her return journey being raped by a hundred men and a dog.

to her mother-in-law and ultimately her loyalty to the people of Israel rather than her own people.

Characters without Proper Names

Many characters in the book of Ruth do not have proper names, such as the unnamed redeemer, the elders and the women of Bethlehem. Their contribution to characterization and the significance of them not being allocated names needs to be discussed.

Mr. So and so:

Several scholars have speculated on the reason why the *goel* or the redeemer is not named.[11] Perhaps the most convincing explanation comes from Sasson (1987:326) who claims:

> [I]n a tale in which names enhance characters and prefigure their development, the potential redeemer is anonymous for his future, unlike Boaz's, will ultimately be anonymous.

Sasson's explanation certainly seems plausible given the fact that we have established already that names seem to predict character's actions, as was the case with Machlon and Chilion. Obviously Boaz could not have really spoken about a close relative in such a remote and indefinite manner. He would have referred to him directly by his proper name. The fact that the narrator chooses not to name him is evidence of a literary device at work. By not naming him the narrator allows the reader to distance her or himself from the character and identify with his foil, Boaz. The fact that the *goel* is not given a name, is a deliberate literary move and we are reminded again that "we are not witnessing

a videotape of a particular incident, but a recounting of that incident in someone's artful words" (Berlin 1983:101).

Similar to Orpah the unnamed redeemer also acts as an agent that aids in the characterisation of another character, namely, Boaz. Just as Orpah stands in contrast to Ruth, the unnamed redeemer stands in contrast to Boaz. Both Boaz and the unnamed redeemer are faced with the same choice. But, in the same way that Orpah turns away, the unnamed redeemer also does.

The Women of Bethlehem

The women of Bethlehem are also unnamed characters who act as agents, in two respects. Firstly, they are a link to Naomi and

> [T]hey serve as a mirror for her condition, both at the beginning when, from her bitterness she renames herself to them, and at the end when her moment of happiness, they name her grandson (Berlin 1983:86).

Secondly, as was noted in the previous chapter, they serve as a contrast to the elders whose main concern is to "raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren" (4:10). However, in naming the child as Naomi's, the women perceive this child as "restoring life to the living rather than restoring a name to the dead." (Trible 1978:194). The fact that the women are unnamed and not identified as individuals does not imply that they do not serve a significant purpose in the narrative, nor do I think is it meant to be derogatory to them. Instead of the narrator commenting on the fulfillment of the plot we once again find that women play a significant role by completing the plot of the story.

[11] See for example Kirsten (1997:83) who maintains that " the author's anonymization of the man must (therefore) be an expression of indirect condemnation of him as a man who refuses to

In direct contrast to the limited characterization of the minor figures in the narrative, Naomi and Ruth, and to a lesser extent Boaz, are allowed to emerge as human beings, as fully-fledged characters. This type of characterisation is achieved largely through their dialogue and their actions.

Indirect Presentation: Characterisation via Dialogue and Actions

As indicated in the previous chapter on narrative voice "many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters, and more specifically through their speech and fate" (Bar-Efrat 1989:47). The fact that the characters "carry forth" the voice of the narrative, however, does not mean that they cannot emerge as individuals and autonomous beings with personalities.

Formalists and structuralists have argued for a long time that the major characters, like the minor characters in Biblical narrative, serve as plot functionaries or agents. The basic problem can be described as whether characters should be analyzed as real persons or literary constructs.[12] If one accepts that characters are merely literary constructs, then

> Any complexity of characterization becomes subordinate to the character's place (as an "actant" sender, object, receiver, helper, opponent, or subject) in a plot that is already dictated by the narrative genre (Gunn 1993:179).

If we perceive characters in this way then we are limiting ourselves to only the narrative world of the text and its plot. Even though I recognize that plot and character are inseparable in the same way that plot and narrative time are inseparable, in Ruth there is an urge on the part of the reader to reach out and

safeguard the good name of the family for posterity. He deserves to remain nameless."

[12] See for example Chatman (1978:119) who argues that we allow characters to emerge as persons, not mere functionaries of the plot

identify with the characters, in terms of the reader's own world, rather than just in terms of the plot of the narrative.

While it is true that characters are literary constructs because they come to us via an artistic medium, this does not imply that we have to preclude the possibility of analyzing character in the same way that we analyze real persons. Reader-response criticism affords us this opportunity because meaning is derived not from the actual physical words of the text itself but through the temporal process of reading (Fish 1980:67). This implies that during the process of reading the narrative world of the character is fused with the real world of the reader, and the process of the interpretation of character consequently unfolds as the reader reconstructs the character in terms of her/his own world. Thus the character does not simply remain only a literary construct or a plot functionary. The character "as an effect of the reading process and as a paradigm of attributive propositions...may seem to 'transcend' the text" (Burnett 1993:3).

Therefore, in the analysis that follows, the process of reconstruction does not restrict itself to the characters as plot functionaries nor does it restrict the characters to the world of the narrative only. Rather, it seeks to open up the characters, and make them accessible even to contemporary readers, who seek to identify with the characters of the narrative world. As asserted previously, the hermeneutical circle begins with the reader. As such the reader whether consciously or unconsciously will attempt to identify with the characters because "narrative evokes a world and since it is no more than an evocation we are left free to enrich it with whatever real or fictive experience we acquire" (Chatman in Fewell and Gunn 1993:51).

In line with my postmodernist stance analysis of a character is not meant to yield one definitive meaning. This is because interpretation is dynamic, and as such readers are not passive recipients of one given meaning, whether it is the author's intention, or other reader's interpretation. Although the author's

intention or other previous interpretations might affect the process of interpreting, ultimately the text only comes alive when readers engage it on their own level (Fewell and Gunn 1993:50). Because the characterisation in Ruth is mostly done through indirect presentation, rather than direct definition, as we shall observe below, readers are much more able to "psychologise" about the characters, and the interpretive possibilities also remain much more open.

A good way to understand the complexity of characterization in the narrative, especially the characterization of the main characters, is to understand the way in which they develop. The three main characters, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all follow a process of characterization which Berquist (1993:34) terms "role dedifferentiation." Role dedifferentiation is defined as the process by which persons respond to a crisis through adding roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times. In the interpretation of the characters that follow it will become clear that all three of the major characters undergo this process of role dedifferentiation. Naomi and Ruth, specifically act in ways that dedifferentiate their gender roles while Boaz acts in ways that are consistent with his reputation in society.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the major characters in the following subsections of this chapter, it is important to state at the outset that it is impossible to understand the character development of these characters without engaging other facets of the story as well, such as narrative, plot, and dialogue. Therefore, in the exploration of the three major characters of Ruth these literary concepts will form an important part of the discussion.

CHAPTER 4.1
NAOMI

Naomi is a complex character and as such has been interpreted in many different ways. In the many interpretations the issue debated is whether or not Naomi is the main character in the book of Ruth. For example Berlin (1983:83) states that Naomi is the central character in the book and that all other characters stand in relation to her. This might be true given the fact that the narrative begins and ends with Naomi. However, it is necessary to make a further distinction that Berlin (1983:47) makes, using Chatman's categories of points of view.[13] She asserts that by-and-large in the story it is Naomi's perceptual point of view that is represented. She substantiates this by stressing the fact that from the time that Elimelech dies the focus is on Naomi, even to the extent that at the end when a child is born to Ruth and Boaz, it is said that "a child is born to Naomi."(4:17). In other words we see things through Naomi's eyes.

Ruth, on the other hand, is the focus of the interest point of view because she appears in every scene except the meeting between Boaz and the unnamed redeemer. The reader wants to know what will happen to Ruth. "So even though the events of the story are perceived from Naomi's point of view, it is Ruth who facilitates Naomi's perception - just as it is Ruth who facilitates Naomi's fulfillment" (Berlin 1983:85). These distinctions rather than clarifying who the main character of the story is, make it more difficult to decide. A simple way to establish the main character of the story is to decide who the heroine of the story is. In this case, as I will show in the chapter on Ruth, it is certainly Ruth because it is she who physically acts to change their situations of dire need. However, it is Naomi who initiates the action and she certainly is an important character, one that is deserving of close attention. In order to understand her

character in the narrative text, I think that it is useful to ask the following general questions about character that are put forward by Brooks and Penn Warren (1943:28):

1. What are the characters like?
2. Are they real?
3. What do they want? (motivation)
4. Why do they do what they do? (motivation)
5. Do their actions logically follow from their natures (consistency of character)?
6. What do their actions tell about their characters?
7. How are the characters related to each other (subordination and emphasis among characters; conflict among characters)?
8. How are the characters and incidents related to the theme?

It is clear from the above that the latter two questions are more related to the dimension of the actual narrative text, while the former ones offer us a way of "psychologizing" about the character. As discussed in the previous chapter, both these dimensions are essential for an understanding of character.

Ruth 1

The first we hear about Naomi, in terms of actions is that she wants to "return" to Bethlehem. The narrator informs us that Naomi heard that Yahweh had visited his people and had given them bread (1:6). Immediately we can make an assumption that Naomi believes that Yahweh controls the forces of famine and plenty and possibly peoples' destinies as well. This is reiterated twice when she laments to her daughters-in-law (1:13) and to the women of Bethlehem (1:20) that Yahweh has dealt bitterly with her. Immediately through the third person narration and through Naomi's own words we learn that she is a religious

[13] Chatman (1978:151-153) defines "perceptual point of view" as the perspective through which the events of the narrative are perceived, and "interest point of view" as the perspective of

woman, one who believes in the power of Yahweh to act either for or against his people, and in her case Yahweh has chosen to act against her.

The first time that we hear Naomi speak is when she tells her daughters-in-law to return "each to your mother's house" (1:8). By using the term "mother's house" as opposed to the traditional term "father's house," Naomi is reappropriating reality in terms of the female experience. Apart from asking them to return to their mother's houses Naomi is also assuming that they each will remarry and find happiness in their new husbands' homes (1:9). So, although Naomi is asking them to return to their "mothers' homes," Naomi assumes that happiness for a female can only begin once she is attached to a man. Nielsen (1997:46) asserts that "Naomi wants the God of Israel to take care of the two women, but immediately the care is defined as married security."

Naomi is bestowing on them a blessing or praying that Yahweh will deal well with them simply because she knows how difficult life will be for these two childless widows in a patriarchal society.[14] This is the first instance of Naomi distancing herself from her daughters-in-law. For their return is not like her own. The aim of their return is to marry again and find rest in the home of a husband. Naomi no longer expects that for herself (Van Wolde 1997:11).

The second time that Naomi speaks this distancing and her bitterness also comes through. Once again we find her urging her daughters-in-law to return to their homes, because they cannot find happiness without men. She also laments that she is too old to have children, and even if she could, it would not do them any good because they will have to wait until they were adults in order to marry them. This lamentation of her's is a reference to the Levirate marriage. She assumes that her daughters-in-law understand what she is talking about when she says that she has no more sons for them. She highlights their plight only in

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someone's benefit or disadvantage.

terms of herself. She cannot have children anymore because she is too old. Therefore, her situation is worse than theirs' because at least they can have children. She also highlights the fact once again that it is Yahweh that has chosen to deal with her so bitterly. Naomi's disillusionment with her sad state of affairs is very clear here.

Van Wolde (1997:12) asserts that Naomi is portrayed negatively as a selfish character. This is because she thinks that her daughters-in-law were only returning with her to get what they received from her previously, namely, husbands. Thus they were only returning with her to get something in return. The possibility that they could be returning with her out of loyalty or love eludes Naomi. Although to a certain extent, Van Wolde's viewpoint might seem valid, I will show later in the discussion that Naomi's selfishness is not necessarily a negative aspect of her character.

Naomi's third dialogue in the first chapter is short and is addressed to Ruth. She urges her to follow Orpah who has listened to her and gone back to her people and her gods. Fewell and Gunn (1988:102) assert that Naomi's reference to Ruth and Orpah's "gods" is tinged with religious guilt and bitterness. This is because she sees her hopeless situation as a direct result of the hand of Yahweh, who punished Elimelech and her sons with death for "flirting with foreignness" and is now punishing her with a situation that is worse than death. The intertextual references to Moab throughout the narrative highlight the tension surrounding foreignness. The story of the men of Israel "playing the harlot with the daughters of Moab," who in turn invited them to make sacrifices to their gods and their subsequent punishment, as recorded in Numbers 25:1-4, highlights a negative image of Moab, especially Moabite women. To seek refuge in Moab, and further marry Moabite women, "was both shameful and dangerous," (Hubbard 1988:87). Naomi's perception, therefore, that the deaths

[14] Refer to Jewett (1976:86-88) for details on the status of women in ancient Israel, especially childless widows.

of her sons and husbands were a direct punishment from Yahweh given the intertexts[15] connected with this text might be justified.

Naomi's fourth dialogue is most indicative of her disillusionment with her situation. Here she is addressing the women of Bethlehem who come out to greet her, and call her Naomi. She responds:

> " Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. With full hands I left here, but Yahweh has caused me to return home empty handed. Why do you call me Naomi, when Yahweh has witnessed against me, and the Almighty has brought misfortune over me?" (1:20-21).

Naomi here seems to have reached her ultimate sense of disillusionment. Because a woman's identity was defined only in terms of her relationship to a man or male offspring in ancient Israel and because Naomi has no possibility of ever being with a man again, she feels that she has lost her identity. As Van Wolde (1997:13) asserts, now she even "distances herself from her last fragment of identity, her name, and exchanges this for a definitive bitterness."

Through Naomi's dialogue in the first chapter we can formulate a complex interpretation of her character. Our interpretation can fall into one of two categories. The first category views Naomi as selfish and the second views her as altruistic with her dominant concern being for the welfare of her daughters-in-law. In the first category one would argue that Naomi is self-centered and does not care about her daughters-in-law who have also lost their husbands. All she cares about is her own hopeless situation and how Yahweh has dealt bitterly

[15] Beattie (1977:114-115) points out that even the rabbinical sources show that the deaths of the men were caused through their "flirting with foreignness." For example he cites a quotation from an anonymous rabbi: And Elimelech died. This is said to teach you that if he had remained alive he would not have allowed his sons to marry foreign women."
The law in Deuteronomy 23:2-4 further substantiates the tension surrounding foreignness.

with her. The blame for her situation in fact lay with her daughters-in-law because they were foreigners to Israel.

Naomi's self-centredness can also be inferred from the number of times she uses the words "I" and "my." In 1:11-13 she is speaking to her daughters-in-law, yet she uses the word "I" five times and "my" three times in three verses. The same can be inferred from her speech in 1:19-22 where she is lamenting her situation to the women of Bethlehem. She uses the word "me" seven times in two verses, and "I" once. As Van Wolde (1997:13) notes, every clause is wholly focussed on the first person: "I, Naomi, have suffered; injustice has been done to me."

Fewell and Gunn (1988:102-105) have argued extensively for the fact that Naomi's motives are less than altruistic towards her daughters-in-law. They form this opinion on the basis of significant silences on the part of Naomi. At this point, Naomi's two periods of silences in chapter 1 are significant. The first is when she does not say anything after Ruth has made such a moving declaration of loyalty towards her (1:16). Fewell and Gunn agree with Trible's (1978:172-173) argument that Ruth's commitment to Naomi leads to Naomi's withdrawal from Ruth. As a result Naomi rejects Ruth's radical decision, and therefore the two women begin their lives together in separation. Fewell and Gunn (1988:107) take Trible's assertion further and argue that Naomi is acting purely out of self-interest and that she wants to make a clean break with her past and a relationship with her foreign daughter-in-law who might bring her more misfortune. In other words, theology and bigotry motivate Naomi's decision (and I want to add the constraints of patriarchy as well).

Her second silence is when she does not acknowledge Ruth's presence to the women of Bethlehem (see 1:19-22) and she does not acknowledge that she has not returned completely empty but that Ruth has returned with her. Once again Naomi's focus is only on herself and her deprived situation, and Fewell and

Gunn (1988:102) assert that by saying that Yahweh has brought her back empty Naomi is making an implicit equation of Ruth with "emptiness." From the above it is very clear that there is a convincing case for Naomi being self-centred.

On the other hand, there is a case for Naomi being altruistic as well. Coxon (1989:39-43) on responding to Fewell and Gunn's argument that Naomi's motives are less than altruistic argues that to say that Naomi is selfish is to seriously misjudge her character, and he uses the non-representational aspects of the narrator's technique to prove this. He argues that by representing the activity of the two women, the narrator shows Naomi's acceptance of Ruth's company:

> So *the two of them* went on until they came to Bethlehem (1:19).
> So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law *with her* (1:22)

Coxon further asserts that the uncomplicated sentences of the narrator, as reflected above, rather than lyrical outbursts, are the vehicles of Naomi's feelings.

In response to Naomi's lack of acknowledgement of Ruth to the women of Bethlehem Coxon (1989:27) asserts that Naomi speaks of her own bitter situation because it is an "unsentimental assessment of her inadequacy in providing security for them" (her daughters-in-law). In other words, Coxon (1989:26) sees this bitter outburst as related to an earlier concern when Naomi implores her daughters-in-law to return to their homes. Her appeal according to Coxon is motivated by "an altruistic regard for their welfare which she saw as being best served by remaining within the social structure of their own Moabite family."

I think that Coxon's arguments are motivated by his own male ideological worldview. This is because he asserts that if Naomi's character is portrayed as self-centred it becomes a disparaging aspect of her character. A womanist reading suggests that this does not have to be the case. Reading as a womanist I see Naomi as self-centred, but only because that is precisely what the patriarchal environment in which she finds herself, forces her to be. She does not have any other choice given the impoverished status of women, especially childless widows in her time. I agree with Fewell and Gunn (1989: 40) who in response to Coxon asserts that Coxon wants an altruistic Naomi, a self-sacrificing Ruth, and a perfectly heroic Boaz. If one considers the options available to a childless widow of Naomi's age, then one can certainly contend that she is acting according to her need for survival in a patriarchal environment, since it is, as Naomi herself says, much worse for her than it is for her daughters-in-law.

Naomi's dialogue and the narrator's clues in the first chapter indicate that Naomi is a self-centred character. However, by asserting that this self-centredness is a negative aspect of her character, Coxon has betrayed his male interpretive bias because he has been unsympathetic to the plight of women, especially childless widows in ancient Israel. As Fewell and Gunn (1988:104) assert:

> A woman who buys the conventional prejudices of a society is also one who will impute those to others and who will adhere to the fundamental value systems of the social structure - in this case the dominant system is patriarchy. It creates Naomi's sense of total deprivation and structures the story as a whole through the mechanisms of female economic dependence.

Patriarchy seems to be the dominant reason that Naomi feels so deprived. She does not have any men in her life, no husband and no sons, and she is too old to

bear more children (1:11-12) Although we get the impression that Naomi has bought into the system of patriarchy, through her bitter dialogues at certain times Naomi actually 'transcends' her own viewpoints. This is clear in her use of the term "mother's house," (1:8) which implies as was suggested previously that she is redefining hers and her daughters-in-law's reality in terms of the female experience.

More striking evidence is to be found in the fact that it is she who directs Ruth to change their situation. This is a point at which I differ with Fewell and Gunn (1988:104). They assert that because Naomi buys into the convention of patriarchy she also buys into the convention of male initiative, and therefore, she does not act. When she does act, it is not her but her daughter-in-law who acts. Although Naomi does not act physically to change their situation, since she cannot due to her age, both in terms of gleaning and in terms of marriage to Boaz, to say that she does not act is to deny the evidence of the narrative.

Ruth 3

Chapter 3:1-4 is evidence of Naomi's initiative in the plan to ensure their survival:

> Her mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, shall I not get you a home where you can be well off? Listen! Boaz, whose girls you were together with, is in fact our relative, and he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash and perfume yourself now. Put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor; but do not reveal yourself to the man before he is finished eating and drinking. Then when he lies down, you must watch to see where he is lying. Then you must go over and uncover yourself at his feet and lie down; then he is sure to tell you what to do."

The text makes it very clear that it is Naomi's plan that Ruth will enact, and therefore, it is Naomi's initiative that begins the process that will eventually result in the marriage of Ruth to Boaz. As Berquist (1993:35) asserts, "Naomi dedifferentiates her roles in ways that catalyze." She takes on a role of matchmaker which in ancient Israel was the job of the father.[16] The addition of the role of matchmaker is an example of role dedifferentiation, and the catalyst for the plan of survival. The fact that Naomi is acting out of her own selfish needs is subsidiary to the fact that it is Naomi who takes the initiative.

In chapter 1 Naomi is portrayed as a bitter woman who is overwhelmed by her situation because of the patriarchal constraints that render her unsupportable and without an identity. In chapter 3 she subverts the ideology of patriarchy by taking the initiative in a world where the most significant changes in peoples' lives were activated by male initiatives. She acts positively to change her situation from emptiness to fullness. Naomi has developed as a character from "victim of circumstances" to "survivor through initiative." Ironically, the "foreign" daughter-in-law whom she thought might make her situation worse is actually the agent of her plan, which will make both their lives better.

To conclude this analysis of the character of Naomi we should go back to the basic questions about character put forward by Brooks and Penn Warren that we asked at the beginning. The first and most important question is what does Naomi want? From the preceding examination of Naomi's character, the answer is simple - she wants to experience happiness and fullness again. The other questions can be combined to read thus: Why does she do what she does and what do her actions say about her character? Naomi's actions and dialogue point to the fact that she is a selfish woman. She says that her situation is worse than that of her daughters-in-law, and therefore, they should leave and find their own husbands because she cannot provide them with any.

[16] See de Vaux (1961)

She also does not want her daughters-in-law with her because she thinks that her deprived situation is a direct consequence of Yahweh's action against her because of "flirting with foreignness." She asks them to return to their homes in the hope that no more misfortune will befall her. But Ruth remains, and Naomi's silence points to the fact that she is not pleased. Her dialogue with the women of Bethlehem also points to the fact that she is deeply embittered, and does not consider Ruth's decision to accompany her as a positive one that could help improve her own situation. However, when Ruth decides to go out and glean and provide food for her mother-in-law as well as herself, Naomi's attitude changes. She can see that Ruth could be her insurance for survival. At the end of chapter 2 Naomi's attitude is markedly different from her attitude in chapter 1. As Trible (1978:181) notes, in chapter 1 Naomi perceives herself all alone in bitterness and sorrow. At the end of chapter 2 she begins to move out of isolation and despair because Ruth and Boaz have reached her. This causes Naomi to reinterpret her past. The God of chapter 1 who brought bitterness is now Yahweh "whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead."(2:20). "Self-centred sorrow yields to divine blessing through human agents" (Trible 1978:181). The human agent in this case is Ruth whose actions have brought about a positive outcome to a situation that seemed so negative, as perceived by Naomi, throughout the first chapter.

Chapter 3 is also markedly different from chapter 1 where Naomi uses the impossibility of the application of a Levirate marriage as an excuse for Ruth not returning with her. The chapter opens with the following:

> Her mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, shall I not get you a home where you can be well off?"

In chapter 1 Naomi urges Ruth to make a home for herself in Moab with another husband. Here, Naomi wants to make a home for Ruth in Bethlehem. The initial stereotypical reactions of Naomi to Ruth the Moabitess has also changed even though the change is consistent with Naomi's character, who seeks self-fulfillment first. Naomi realizes that because Boaz is a relative of

Elimelech, if he marries Ruth her own survival is also insured, since it is Elimelch's line via Machlon that is going to be perpetuated. The women of Bethlehem at the end of chapter 4, mirror Naomi's perception when they declare "A son is born to Naomi" (Fewell and Gunn 1988:107).

We can conclude, therefore, that the narrator allows Naomi to develop as a character. In the beginning she is self-absorbed and overwhelmed by her situation, and can only lament about it. At the end, she is still aware of her hopeless situation, but she takes the initiative to change it. By taking that kind of initiative Naomi carries forth the voice of the narrative which, as I have argued before, is a female one. She substitutes the notion of helpless victim for one of hopeful survivor. Her negative and passive attitude is transformed into a positive and active attitude, and even though she acts out of self-interest, one can still admire such courage from a woman of her age. Her plan is a daring and outrageous scheme and by initiating it she undermines the patriarchal notion of female passiveness. Naomi, although not the heroine of the story, since it is Ruth that has to undertake the daring plan, can be viewed as one of the many Biblical women who displays courage and strength in pulling herself up from the depths of despair imposed by a patriarchal environment. She achieves hope of a new life via her own ingenuity and drive.

CHAPTER 4.2

BOAZ

This examination of the character of Boaz leads to my arguments in the following chapter that it is Ruth who is the central character in the narrative in spite of the fact that Boaz is the cardinal male character. All his actions are only re-actions to Ruth's initiative. His graciousness does not seek Ruth out, though he responds positively to her initiative in seeking his favour. The story subordinates Boaz to the women. "He has patriarchal power, but he does not have narrative power. He has authority within the story but not control over it" (Trible 1978:178). This is the assumption with which I proceed the following analysis.

Boaz in the Harvest Fields

The first time we hear of Boaz is at the beginning of chapter 2:1 where he is described as "*ish gibor chayil*,": "a strong and mighty man." The narrator very rarely describes Biblical characters, and therefore when a description is given, it implies that we are meant to attach significance to the description. The narrator's description of Boaz as a "strong and mighty man," or a "man of substance," is important because it is immediately followed by a description of Ruth and Naomi's needy situation which prompts Ruth to go and glean in the fields. The chapter immediately presents us with a man who has plenty and women who have little or nothing. We are presented with two pairs of binary opposites : male/female and plenty/want. Given the patriarchal context in which Naomi and Ruth are located and the poverty and barrenness that defines their situation the reader immediately questions the possibility of this "powerful male" being able to help Ruth and Naomi. The information concerning Boaz, though, is "privileged information" about which only the reader is aware. In the narrative world neither Naomi nor Ruth are aware of Boaz or his familial ties with them.[17] The purpose of this privileged information is to

[17] Cf. Sasson (1979:38-39) who argues that both Naomi and Ruth were aware of Boaz, and his familial ties with them, and therefore when Ruth goes to the field to find "favour in someone's eyes," she actually means Boaz.

add dramatic tension to the text, and this tension is resolved when Ruth and Boaz actually meet in the fields by chance as is indicated by the words in 2:3 - *vayiker mikreha.*

The significance of the designation "a man of worth," or "a man of substance," goes beyond the function of creating dramatic tension. This description of Boaz is central to our understanding of Boaz's responses to Ruth and the motivations that underly them. Bush (1996:100) notes that the designation *ish gibor chayil* can yield a number of interpretations, ranging from strength and power to ability and wealth. However, what is certain is that "it always designates one who possessed social standing and a good reputation." This implies that in whatever way Boaz acts he should take the community's feelings towards his actions into consideration before he acts. It is important that Boaz's concern for what the community feels is established as a distinctive and typical aspect of his character, since this aspect of Boaz's character plays a crucial role in the story.

In 2:1 the reader's interest is aroused through the introduction of Boaz as a man with status and worth in the community. The reader is not kept in suspense long because in 2:4 Boaz is immediately introduced as the owner of the field to which Ruth has gone to glean. Boaz's first words are an exchange of greeting with his workers that reveal him to be a devout Israelite.

From Boaz's greeting we immediately infer that he is a religious man, one that believes in Yahweh. He goes on to inquire about Ruth's identity, and upon discovering her identity he immediately proceeds to bestow upon her a number of favours or privileges. He allows her to glean not only behind the reapers but beside them as well (2:15), something that ordinary gleaners were not allowed to do. He also orders his men not to interfere with her(2:9) and grants her access to the jars of water as well. At the afternoon meal he allows her to share the bread and wine and roasted grain (2:14) and finally he not only allows her to glean among the sheaves, but he orders his workers to pull out handfuls of the stalks of grain that they have already harvested and leave them behind for her. Bush (1996:54) has termed Boaz's actions towards Ruth as *hesed.* He asserts

that "his magnanimity knows no bounds." He also sees Boaz's kindness shown to Ruth here as a prediction of his behaviour in the following scenes, especially with regard to marrying Ruth.

Ruth expresses great surprise at Boaz's exceeding generosity to the extent that she asks him why some one of his status would bestow such kindness on someone like her - a foreigner (2:10). The question which Ruth asks is also a question that the reader is inclined to ask. Boaz's response (2:11-12) is telling of his character and also points to an interpretation that is different from the one mentioned above by Bush :

> 11. "I have been told all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, how you left your father and your mother and your native land and traveled to a people whom you did not know beforehand.
> 12. May Yahweh repay you for what you have done, may you have the full reward of Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought shelter."

What Boaz is essentially saying in his answer is that his kindness toward Ruth is simply a response to her kindness towards her mother-in-law. In response to Boaz's answer to Ruth the reader can ask a number of puzzling questions, the answers to which will provide some insight into the character of Boaz. How does Boaz know of all that Ruth has done? All we hear the foreman saying is that she has returned from the country of Moab with Naomi. How does Boaz know that she has converted, and that she has left her father and her mother?[18] Why is Boaz so keen to show kindness to her simply because she has shown kindness toward Naomi? Why is the welfare of Naomi so important to Boaz?

[18] Note that Boaz does not use the term "mother" exclusively, but also adds "father" as opposed to Naomi, who uses the term "mother's house" in 1:8. Once again, this is an indication of the different ways in which males and females appropriate reality.

It seems very likely given how much Boaz says he knows about Ruth that he has heard about Naomi and Ruth before. If he has heard about Naomi and Ruth before, then he obviously knows about his familial ties with Naomi. But this poses another question : why does he not tell Ruth about their familial relationship? Instead he chooses to make it seem that he is a beneficent man and that he is acting out of *hesed*. He makes it seem that his action is because of his admiration for the way in which Ruth has dealt with Naomi, not because he is a relative. It seems very likely that Boaz knew that Naomi belonged to Elimelech's family and that he was a kinsman, but he had not previously acted to provide any assistance to either Naomi or Ruth. Now that he notices Ruth's loyalty towards Naomi, so much so that she takes the initiative not only to provide for herself by gleaning, but to provide for Naomi as well,[19] he perhaps feels that he should also take his responsibility towards care of the poor and the needy seriously.[20]

Bush (1996:54) asserts that Boaz is portrayed as an extremely kind and beneficent man, whose "magnanimity knows no bounds." However, if we interpret Boaz's statement, "I have been told of *all* the things that you have done for your mother-in-law," to mean that he has heard of Naomi's plight before, and until he has been goaded on by Ruth's perseverance, has done nothing as a "man of substance," to help, then Boaz does not seem as beneficent as Bush (1996:54) would want to make him seem.

Such an interpretation does not depend on Boaz responding to either the *goel* or the Levirate institutions. If he was acting out of *hesed* as Bush claims, then he did not need a law to make him act, nor did he need to be goaded by another person. An act of *hesed*, according to Sakenfeld (1985:233-234), is a "free act." In other words the person acts according to a perceived responsibility towards the person in need and goes beyond the call of duty. However, Boaz only acts after he sees Ruth in action. His action is neither

[19] Note the argument made in the next chapter concerning Ruth's decision to ask for permission to glean. She makes an extraordinary request not only to glean behind the reapers, but among them as well. This is because gleaning provided subsistence for those lowest on the economical scale, and one person's gleanings might not be enough to feed two people. Therefore, if Ruth wanted to provide for Naomi as well then she would have to make a request to actually glean among the reapers so that she could get more for Naomi.
[20] See Kirsten (1997:59) who offers a similar interpretation.

spontaneous nor free. It is true that the law did not require him to help, but the spirit of the law as interpreted by Ruth later on should have goaded Boaz into action since it required care for the needy, the poor and the weak. Instead it is only in response to Ruth's actions that Boaz responds. His consequent actions may be seen as acts of *hesed* because he goes "beyond the call of duty"(Sakenfeld 1985:233). In allowing Ruth to drink from the jars instead of the well, and to glean among the reapers instead of behind, we see an act of *hesed*, an act of kindness. The motivations behind his kindness may also be attributed to the fact that he is simply attracted to Ruth.

To summarise the argument set out above: it is clear that Boaz does not act out of immediate *hesed*. He acts in response to Ruth's *hesed*, as he himself admits in 2:11. If it were in his nature to show *hesed* he would have shown it to Naomi and Ruth when he heard of their plight upon their return from Moab. Instead he waited for Ruth to appear in his field, for Ruth to take action, before he was prepared to respond with corresponding *hesed*. It is this kind of action-response stimulus that characterizes Boaz's personality, as is evident in chapter 3. Boaz only acts as, and when prompted by Ruth.

The second part of Boaz's response, his blessing toward Ruth for all the kindness she has shown toward her mother-in-law, is also interesting in that Boaz indicates that it is Yahweh that can help this woman in need and that it is Yahweh who will repay her for all her kindness toward her mother-in-law. However, Ruth cannot wait for Yahweh to act as is evidenced at the beginning of chapter 2. She is a woman in a patriarchal culture, and she is childless, a foreigner and a widow. Therefore, she has to take the initiative to ensure her survival. When she takes the initiative, then Yahweh[21] intervenes. This is true for chapter 3 as well. Ruth cannot wait for Yahweh to act since it is the end of the barley season, and if she does not act then she risks her and Naomi's survival. She acts and in the end Yahweh acts by giving her conception (3:15).

[21] Trible (1978:176) points out that chance (2:3) is a code for the divine.

So, in contrast to Boaz, Ruth does not wait for blessings from Yahweh. She acts to secure those blessings.

Boaz at the Threshing Floor

The next time we see Boaz is at the threshing floor scene. As we will note in the analysis of the character of Ruth, Ruth presents Boaz with two options by employing the deliberately ambivalent statement in 3:9 : "Spread your wing over your maidservant for you are a redeemer." The choice that Boaz makes is telling with respect to his character. The choices with which Boaz was faced are clear. The first option is related to sexual relations between the two. Ruth is a younger woman and one who probably appears seductive, given the fact that she has washed and perfumed herself. She, therefore, presents him with the option of taking her for a wife by having sexual intercourse with her.[22] Both the ambiguity of the phrase "spread your wing over your maidservant," and the second part of her statement, "for you are a redeemer," point to the fact that she is offering him another option as well.[23] To take her for a wife but as a *goel*. Although Boaz might be a *goel* legally speaking, he is not required to marry Ruth.[24] Ruth in essence is interpreting the spirit of the law of Levirate marriage and the redemption laws, which not only sought to provide male progeny but social security for the widow as well. Ruth is interested in providing social security for herself and Naomi.

Boaz, as many critics have pointed out chooses to refrain from sexual activity on the threshing floor. Evidence for this argument is to be found in a number of textual indicators or the lack of them. Bernstein (1991:16) argues that there is

[22] See Deuteronomy 22:14/28 onwards which says that a man acquires a wife when he has sexual intercourse with her. Boaz who is portrayed as a religious man would know these duties, and therefore would know that if he sleeps with Ruth then she automatically becomes his wife.
[23] Refer to the full discussion on the ambiguity of the statement, in the analysis of the character of Ruth.
[24] The duties of the goel are to redeem the land, not necessarily the widow. See Leviticus 25,27 and Deuteronomy 25 for the respective differences between these laws.

no overt statement such as "he went into her," or "he lay with her," both standard expressions for intercourse in the Hebrew Bible. He further asserts that the idiom "'and she lay at his feet,' may be intended to preclude the reader's assumption that such behaviour occurred." Bernstein also points out that if something sexual had occurred, then the whole of chapter 4 becomes a sham, since Boaz, would be asking another man to marry a woman whom he has already taken for a wife. Also in 4:13 there is an explicit statement of sexual relations occurring when the narrator says :

> Boaz now took Ruth and she became his wife, and he went in to her. Yahweh let her conceive, and she gave birth to a son.

There is no such explicit statement in chapter 3. The ambiguity of the language in this scene may be a deliberate device on the part of the narrator and could point to the sexual tension that must have been present at the threshing floor. However, that does not indicate that something sexual happened.

Sasson (1989:90) also sees evidence for the fact that nothing sexual happened in 3:13 where Boaz says to Ruth : *Lini halaila*, which is translated as "stay the night." Sasson points out that the word "*lini*" is an indicator of a period of time, rather than the way in which that time is spent. The word *shakav* which is translated as "lie down" is what would have pointed to the way in which the time was spent, that is, sexually. This word is only used after Boaz explains that he will ask the other redeemer if he will redeem, and after he asks her to stay for the night.

The textual evidence and the cogent arguments presented by both Bernstein and Sasson that Boaz and Ruth refrained from sexual activity on the threshing floor that night is convincing. However, Boaz's motivations for not having sexual relations are certainly in question. Commentators who point out that nothing sexual transpired are also quick to point out that Boaz refrains from sexual

activity because it is in keeping with his noble character and integrity. For example Campbell (1975:131-132) asserts that Boaz and Ruth have been established as upright and proper characters, and therefore they each will behave in a manner that is in accordance to proper living and integrity. Boaz, according to Campbell, is indeed an upright and noble character, and therefore, he would proceed with what Israelite-*hesed* living called for. Hence, he would have refrained from sexual activity.[25]

The Midrash also has immense praise for Boaz's ability to resist the temptation of seduction. There is a sense in the rabbis' comments that they attribute Boaz's ability to overcome this temptation to his religiosity, or his faith in Yahweh:
All that night his libido was inciting him saying, 'You are unmarried and seeking a woman, and she is unmarried and seeking a man; go ahead and have intercourse with her and let her be your wife.' But he swore to his libido, 'as the Lord lives, I shall not touch her.' Ruth Rabbah 6 in Bernstein (1991:19)

From the above, it is clear that both modern scholars and even the ancient rabbis want to argue that Boaz acts according to his noble character. As we have established from chapter 2, Boaz does not act out of the spontaneous goodness of his heart to help Ruth and Naomi. His actions are motivated by Ruth's initiative. Here as well Boaz is not acting purely out of *hesed* in not having sexual relations with Ruth. He is acting out of the need to protect his reputation in society.[26]

This argument is based on the premise that Boaz declines the seduction, not because he was not interested in Ruth but because Ruth offered him another alternative for acquiring her as a wife. We know that Boaz is happy about Ruth coming to the threshing floor and seeking him out in the way that she had. This is clearly indicated when he describes her act of wanting him instead of the

[25] Both Sasson (1989:69-79) and Gray (1967:394) share similar views.
[26] Fewell and Gunn (1989:45-55) also argue this point extensively.

younger men as an act of *hesed*. Further, Boaz's reiterated warnings to Ruth not to go after the young men in the field, but to follow the young women (2:9, 15, 16) and his warnings to the men not to touch her, shows that he was concerned that she might go after the young men or that the young men might go after her. Boaz's concern can be interpreted in two ways. The first is that Boaz wants Ruth for himself. The second is that he is exhibiting a genuine paternalistic concern for Ruth's welfare.

Boaz's words to Ruth in 3:10, however, point to the former interpretation. His "sexual longing slips out from under a paternalistic and pious blessing extolling the virtues of loyalty (*hesed*)" (Fewell and Gunn 1989:47) :

> May you be blessed by Yahweh, my daughter. You have made this latter loyalty(*hesed*) even better than the former, in not going after the eligible young men, whether poor or rich.

Critics[27] have suggested that the latter *hesed* which Boaz is referring to points to Ruth's determination to preserve an Israelite name. However, as Fewell and Gunn (1989:47) point out, the loving kindness that Boaz is talking about is not Ruth's loyalty towards Elimelech or Machlon's family line but towards Boaz himself. "An obvious transformation of the clause 'in not going after the young men' would be 'in going after me!'" These words of Boaz demonstrate that he is certainly pleased that Ruth has sought him out in this measure and that he has also desired her.

Boaz and the Elders at the Gate

If Boaz wants Ruth, the question is why does he not take her as his wife by having sexual intercourse with her, or why has he not taken her for a wife already. The answer argues Fewell and Gunn (1989:46-49) lies in the key

[27] See for example Campbell (1975:137)

portrayal given to the reader at the very outset of the introduction to Boaz's character. He is an *ish gibbor chayil* - a man of worth, a man of substance, someone with a high reputation in society. If he takes Ruth as his wife by just sleeping with her it implies that he marries her out of his own will and consent. In essence this means that a Bethlehem man of considerably high status will marry a foreign woman of relatively low status willingly and of his own choice. However, if Boaz, can have the force of the law behind him, then his marriage will not seem unfavorable. The constant use of the epithet "Moabitess" in relation to Ruth certainly highlights that Ruth's foreignness is a central concern in the narrative.[28]

The text substantiates Fewell and Gunn's arguments, through the highlighting of the elders' preoccupation with building the house of *Israel* and *Ephrat* and *Bethlehem*, in their blessing in 4:11. This is indicative of the tension that exists in the community if a marriage between a Bethlehemite man and a Moabite woman occurs. The elders' emphasis on the house of Israel, seems to be a justification of the marriage between a foreigner and a Bethlehmite by emphasizing the fact that the foreign woman will be building up the house of Israel. Hence, the tension that is caused by the "unfavourable marriage" is resolved if the reason for the marriage is to raise up the name of the dead *Israelite* man and that is precisely the reason that Boaz gives for marrying Ruth.

As was noted previously, when speaking to Ruth in the privacy of the threshing floor Boaz speaks only in terms of concern for *her*. In 3:11, he consents to doing whatever *she* asks, and in 3:13 he speaks of redeeming *her*. However, in the public domain of the city gate and the elders, Boaz's concern is not for the redemption of Ruth or her social security, it is "to raise up the name of the dead man to his inheritance" (4:5). "Thus in a private conversation with Ruth, Boaz

[28] The text is littered with literary allusions to Moab. The intertextual links conjure up warnings about cohabitation with Moabite women (Numbers 25:1-5) and also the law against Israelites being in fellowship with Moabites (Deut 23:4-7). These ideas among the Israelites concerning

made her welfare the sole object of his concern, but in a public discussion with men he makes Ruth the means for achieving a male purpose" (Trible 1978:192). This is evidence that Boaz is concerned with what the community thinks and, therefore, patterns his responses accordingly. There is also evidence for his concern for what the community thinks in 3: 11 where he declares that he will do all that she asks him to do for her because everyone at the city gate knows that Ruth is an *eshet chayil*, a worthy woman.[29] The final evidence for Boaz's concern for his reputation in society is in 3:14 when he tells Ruth to leave before daylight so that no one would see her leaving the threshing floor.

Hence, when Ruth presents the proposal that he could take her as a wife posing as a redeemer, Boaz sees a way to get Ruth, while at the same time maintaining his reputation in society. He knows that if he can convince the elders that he is doing an honourable deed by marrying Ruth the Moabite to raise the name of the dead Machlon up, then the idea of marrying a foreigner would not seem unfavourable. As Fewell and Gunn (1989:50) assert, "Boaz needs a cloak to cover his marriage to the Moabite woman. Ruth offers him the clue." In other words, Boaz sees the idea of marrying Ruth under the guise of a redemption act as a good cover-up for the fact that he is marrying a foreign woman, and therefore, he chooses that path instead of seduction. Boaz is acting selfishly to protect his own reputation, but again, the idea is prompted by Ruth, and fits in with her plan of being accepted by the Israelite community as one of their own quite well.

> "The question of Boaz's reputation may be as large a motivating force as his desire for Ruth." (Fewell and Gunn 1989:48).

Moabites would create a huge stumbling block for Boaz's marriage to Ruth if it was not under the auspices of perpetuating a male line.

[29] Fewell and Gunn (1989:56) point out that the term *eshet chayil*, when used in relation to Ruth, can yield several possible levels of meaning. It could mean that Ruth is a 'woman of determination,' or that she is a 'woman of character.' However, it does not preclude the fact that her foreignness is a problem.

It is for this reason that he needs to have a public confrontation with the other redeemer. He needs for people to witness that he is indeed an honourable man in that he would even marry a foreigner, in order to raise up the name of the dead. The way in which his words to the other redeemer (4:3-7) are interpreted is significant to our understanding of the character of Boaz:

> Then he said to the redeemer, "That piece of field which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech, Naomi, who returned from the fields of Moab, wants to sell. So, I thought I would tell you so that you could buy it now in front of these people sitting here, as well as the elders of our people. If you wish to redeem it, then tell me so, so that I know; for there is no one else to redeem it except you, and then me after you." He answered, "I will redeem." Then Boaz said, " The day that you buy the field from Naomi, you will buy [30] the Moabite woman, Ruth, the wife of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the dead to his inheritance. Then the redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem, for I do not wish to damage my property. You must redeem what I ought to redeem, for I cannot redeem."

There are two legal issues which need to be clarified before we begin to analyse this passage in relation to the character of Boaz. In telling the redeemer, that in opting to buy the land he also has to buy the Moabite Ruth, Boaz here connects the laws of redemption with the law of levirate marriage. There is no indication

[30] The Masoretic (ketibh) text, contains the word *kaniti* which means "I buy" but the oral tradition renders the term as *kanita* which means "you buy." In terms of the development of the plot, I along with Beattie (1971:490-494), find it more appropriate to read the Masoretic text since for the denouement of the plot Boaz must marry Ruth. This is the expectation of the reader. Therefore, the reader expects that when Boaz says that he will marry Ruth then the redeemer will surely refuse given his concern about the inheritance rights. However, even if one reads the *qere* text, and interprets Boaz's statement as "you buy" then the redeemer can still refuse on two grounds. The first is that Boaz is interpreting the spirit of the law and not the actual law, and the second is that Ruth is a Moabite woman, and the law of Levirate marriage is an Israelite one. Therefore, whether one reads the *kethibh*, or the *qere* it does not make any difference to the denouement of the plot since in order for there to be a satisfactory resolution to the plot the obstruction which in this case is the redeemer, must be eliminated and Boaz must marry Ruth.

in either law that these two laws should be connected. In Leviticus 25:24-34, we find the law of redemption. It states that when an Israelite is forced to sell a piece of land, the closest relative acts as redeemer and buys the land, so that it can still be a part of the family and not get into outside hands. The duty of the *goel* is therefore only connected to the sale of property.

The laws for Levirate marriage are to be found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This law states that if brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, then the dead man's brother shall marry his brother's widow, so as to perpetuate the name of the dead brother in Israel. The duty of Levirate marriage therefore, applies only to the brother. The question, then is, why does Boaz make a connection between Levirate marriage and redemption? The simple answer is that Ruth has prompted him to do so.

We cannot be sure of what the legal practices were at the time when Ruth was written, since for among other reasons, there is considerable debate about when the book was written. The scope of this dissertation does not allow for an examination of the debates surrounding the dating of the book and its relation to the prevailing legal procedures of the time when it was written.[31] The fact that the legal institutions are called upon as part of the development of the plot and narrative is, however, our concern. So, if Ruth made this connection between her marriage to Boaz and the legal institutions of redemption and Levirate marriage, we can conclude that she was appropriating the law to suit her purposes. In other words she was giving Boaz, a man of high standing in the Bethehem community, a legal reason (a reason that would be acceptable to the community about which Boaz was so concerned) for marrying her. Davies (1981:140) points out that although Levirate law stated that the chief end of marrying the widow of the dead brother was to perpetuate his name, it also served the dual purpose of providing social security for the widow as well. The

[31] For a detailed, comprehensive, analysis of how the legal institutions functioned see Leggett (1974).

law did not seem to provide for cases such as Ruth's where there were no brothers to fulfill this obligation. From Boaz's readiness to accept Ruth's proposal and from the fact that the elders do not object to this kind of "unusual" Levirate marriage, we can assume that such an idea could have been a solution to the problem of the non-existence of a brother. The two obstructions to this course of "honourable" action for Boaz are first and foremost Ruth's foreignness,[32] and second the existence of another redeemer. In combining the laws of redemption with that of Levirate marriage Boaz manages to eliminate both obstructions to his marrying Ruth. The denouement of the plot is thereby achieved.

When making the proposal Ruth is not aware that there is a closer relative than Boaz. If matters proceeded according to Ruth's plan, then Boaz would have either married her through seduction, or he would have redeemed the land and married her as part of the custom of Levirate marriage, as Ruth was proposing. It was not the law but the spirit of the law that was being interpreted and even the elders, who might disapprove of Ruth's foreignness, could not deny that Boaz's intentions in raising up the name of a dead Israelite to his inheritance and redeeming the land was honourable and acceptable.

However, the twist in the plot is revealed when Boaz declares that there is another redeemer. Even though it has been established that the institutions of Levirate marriage and redemption are not legally connected according to the Biblical evidence of Deuteronomy 25 and Leviticus 25, because Levirate marriage ultimately involves inheritance rights it inevitably involves property as well. Therefore, if Boaz intends to marry Ruth, he has to let the other redeemer know since the child that is born of Ruth and Boaz is the child that will eventually inherit the land. Hence, even though the other redeemer might choose to buy the land to keep it within the family, it does not go to his own

[32] Cf. Phillips (1986:2) who asserts that Ruth's foreignness is not a problem, and contends that "clearly when the Book was written mixed marriages were both acceptable and unremarkable."

child, but to that of Ruth and Boaz, since the child of Ruth and Boaz legally speaking becomes the child of Machlon.

Conclusion:

Having dispensed with the legal issues that concern Boaz's statements to the other redeemer, the attention needs to turn once again to Boaz's motivations, and what those motivations reveal about his character. It is clear from all of Boaz's actions and reactions that although he displays a certain degree of kindness, he does so only in response to Ruth's acts of loyalty towards Naomi and that he is very concerned with his reputation in society. It is for this reason he chooses to marry under the auspices of Levirate marriage not within the institution of a simple remarriage to a foreign widow. Ruth's foreignness, as we shall see in the following chapter, is indeed a crucial factor in the story, and an honourable man of Boaz's high status marrying a lowly foreign woman might not bode well for his reputation. Boaz needs a cover-up for his intention to marry a foreign woman. Hence,

> he deliberately couches his announcement of marriage in the conventional terms of Levirate marriage. Taking his cue from Ruth's association of marriage and redemption he has seen that the redemption of the field and his desired marriage can be presented in tandem with his role as *goel* making his claim to Levirate status so much easier to accept (Fewell and Gunn 1989:52)

So, Boaz manages to marry Ruth while at the same time keeping his reputation intact. After this examination of Boaz's character the question remains as to whether Boaz can be thought of as a noble and heroic character. We have seen his actions are merely reactions and that ultimately he acts more out of his concern for his social standing in the community than his concern for the poor

and the needy. I, therefore conclude with Fewell and Gunn (1989:54) that Boaz is

> instrumental in mocking the system. He wishes to marry the Moabite woman and he does so. His profession of commitment to the name of the dead is hollow. He cares no more for Machlon and Elimelech than does the narrator. They are but weapons in his hand as he defeats one set of prejudices by wielding another.

The Meaning of the name Boaz

The meaning of Boaz's name is also significant in this regard and bolsters the argument that he is mocking the system. Critics often point out that Boaz's name means "in him is strength."[33] This interpretation of Boaz's name is arrived at by dividing the name into two parts - *bo* means "in" and *az* means "strength." An alternative way to find the meaning of most Hebrew names is to find the three root letters of the name.[34] The three root letters of Boaz are *yud, ayin, zain,* which forms the word *yaez. Yaez* means "daring" or challenging." Such an interpretation of Boaz's name bodes well with the above argument that Boaz is being daring by challenging the system in such a measure that he gets what he wants. In a narrative, where names predict characters functions and abilities, such an interpretation is justified.

Boaz can be compared to Naomi in the sense that what one might consider to be negative aspects of someone's character might not necessarily be so. In the analysis of Naomi it was established that even though Naomi was indeed a selfish character, her selfishness was motivated by the fact that she was a victim of the system of patriarchy that reduced an aged, childless widow's status to a bare minimum. She acted in order to secure what little future remained for her.

[33] See for example Bledstein (1993:131) who translates Boaz's name thus.
[34] Reisenberger (1999).

Boaz acts similarly though his actions are motivated not to protect his meagre resources, but his wealth and his reputation in society. If Boaz had acted according to his feelings for Ruth on the threshing floor he would have been at odds with the patriarchal system. Instead he uses those same patriarchal structures to get exactly what he wants.

Therefore, even though the examination of Boaz's character reveals that he is selfish (in terms of our modern understanding of the term "selfish") to the extent that he is concerned about his standing in the community and that he is only motivated to act in response to Ruth's actions, it can still be argued that he is, nevertheless, an admirable character. His character can be admired because in the same way that Ruth outstrips the boundaries of gender and ethnicity to get what she wants, Boaz both uses and surpasses the system of patriarchy to get what he wants, namely, Ruth for his wife. Ruth wants social security not just for herself but for Naomi as well, and Boaz wants Ruth. They both face impediments in their quest to achieve what they want, but each act in ways that ensure that they get exactly what they want.

CHAPTER 4.3
RUTH

> Ruth may be regarded as the paragon of all the virtues the sages believe a woman ought to embody. Ruth's role is to be a faithful, modest daughter-in-law and, by remarrying and bearing a male child, to continue the male line of her deceased husband. As attractive as her character is, Ruth is not independent, autonomous and free of male control; on the contrary she is docile and submissive, and this is why the sages laud and honour her (Bronner 1993:168).

Bronner argues here that the sages in rabbinical literature and the Biblical text in general emphasize Ruth's modesty and submissiveness not only to authenticate her fitness as the great grandmother of David but also to accent the qualities that they think a woman should possess. I agree with Bronner when she asserts that Ruth possesses the qualities of loyalty and faithfulness. However, in the following analysis of the character of Ruth I very strongly want to challenge the assertion made by Bronner and the sages that Ruth should be characterised as being docile and submissive and that she does not possess qualities of which feminists would approve. In fact, I will argue precisely the opposite: Ruth's character is independent, autonomous, strong-willed, and even subversive. This claim will be supported by an examination of the character of Ruth in terms of the process of role dedifferentiation.[35] A textual analysis of the character of Ruth will show how the rabbis' ideological assumptions about patriarchy, as reflected in the Midrash, colour their reading of the text.

Most of the characterisation of Ruth is not done through direct definition by the narrator, but through indirect presentation by the other characters and through her own dialogue and subsequent actions. The nature of this technique of

[35]Berquist (1993:34) defines role dedifferentiation as the process by which persons respond to a crisis through adding roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times.

characterization does not allow us to know what the internal motives of the characters are and

> [A]s in real life, we have to build hypotheses about people's motives. These hypotheses will be based on our knowledge of other actions and things said by the same person, as well as on our understanding of human psychology (Bar-Efrat 1989:77-78).

The Biblical narrator provides very little information about the thought processes and motives of characters. The genre of the short story requires that the narrator be even more economical than in other forms of narratives, for the reasons of time constraints and for the advancement of the plot. This does not mean, as I asserted previously, that the characters are merely functions of the plot. The characters themselves unfold in complex ways that allow the reader to interpret their actions and make judgements about their motives and internal feelings. The textual analysis of the character of Ruth that follows, will take cognisance of the above technique of characterization, and employ Bar-Efrat's method of building hypotheses about the characters' motives as prescribed above.

Ruth: 1

Our first glimpse of Ruth is in 1:4. Here she is spoken of only as the second Moabite woman whom Elimelech's son married: "The name of the one was Orpah, the name of the second was Ruth." Her role here is defined only in terms of her familial relationship to Elimelech's family, the wife of one of Elimelech's sons. Our following glimpses of Ruth in the rest of the first chapter are of her as Naomi's daughter-in-law. She has already undergone a role dedifferentiation from being defined in terms of her relationship to a man to being defined in terms of her relationship to a woman, her mother-in-law. This

is significant because the narrative is now handed over to Ruth and Naomi, and in essence shifts from being a man's story to being a woman's story.

However, even though Ruth is defined in terms of being Naomi's daughter-in-law, it does not imply that she is not independent or that she is submissive to Naomi's will. Her second role dedifferentiation is evident in 1:16 -17 where she does not act in the way that is expected of a daughter-in-law. Orpah, as was previously noted, acts as a contrasting foil for the character of Ruth and accepts her role as bereaved daughter-in-law by obeying her mother-in-law. Orpah, therefore, acts in accordance with the norms of the society. Ruth on the other hand deliberately disobeys:

> "Do not urge me to go back and desert you," Ruth answered. "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. I swear a solemn oath before the Lord your God: nothing but death shall divide us" (1:16-17).

The first glimpse of Ruth's selflessness, as opposed to Naomi's selfishness, comes into view in this passage. As Van Wolde (1997:20) has noted, Naomi's speech can be clearly distinguished from Ruth's. Whereas Naomi only speaks of "I" and "me", Ruth speaks explicitly about "you and I." Lacocque (1993:96) asserts that although Ruth undoubtedly has a profound affection for her mother-in-law, her declaration goes deeper than the level of feelings. "There is here an appropriation of Naomi's existence and fate, and a disappropriation of her own." The text is very clear about the fact that Ruth does not want to "abandon" or "desert" (1:16). Even though the narrator does not specify the motivations behind Ruth's decisions directly, we are allowed to hear of the motivation via two sources in subsequent chapters. The first is Boaz who twice bestows a blessing upon Ruth for her loyalty towards her mother-in-law. The first blessing is to be found in 2:11-12:

> "I have been told of all that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband's death, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people you did not know. The Lord reward your deed; may the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, give you all that you deserve."

The second is in 3:10 where Boaz says to Ruth

> "The Lord bless you, my daughter, this last proof of your loyalty (*hesed*) is greater than the first."

The first act of loyalty to which Boaz is referring in 3:10 is the act of loyalty or kindness to Naomi. Here Boaz is clearly acknowledging that Ruth's decision to remain with Naomi, even after her husband's death, is motivated by her kindness and loyalty towards Naomi. The second source of proof of Ruth's motivations lies in the words of the women of Bethlehem who declare to Naomi in 4:15, that her daughter-in-law who loves her has proved better to her than seven sons. We can deduce, therefore, that even though the narrator does not provide direct proof of Ruth's motivations, the women of Bethlehem and Boaz through their dialogue characterize Ruth as a loyal, faithful and industrious woman.

There is no valid reason for Ruth to stay with Naomi, because Naomi has already assured her that she cannot provide any sons for her to marry, and therefore, she will be better off in the home of a husband in Moab. But, Naomi has also declared to Ruth that her situation is worse than that of Ruth's. She is totally bereft, and has no hope of a remarriage or a future. Given Naomi's age and Ruth's characteristic loyalty, it is understandable why Ruth would not want to "desert" her.

Ruth has also added on the role of proselyte. Not only does she choose Naomi and her people but she chooses her God too. This is not only demonstrated by her statement "your God shall be my God," but also by the fact that immediately after her "conversion" she takes an oath using the name of Yahweh. She displays great faith, considering the fact that Naomi has expressed more than once, throughout chapter 1 that it is Yahweh that has dealt so bitterly with her. Yet Ruth opts to accept this God whom Naomi asserts brings misfortune.

From the first chapter it is very clear that Ruth is a kind and selfless person because she chooses not to abandon Naomi even when there is no assurance of her own future. Her act described by Boaz as an act of *hesed*, is a selfless one. She has no obligation to do so since according to Naomi the possibility of Levirate marriage does not even exist. As Glueck (1967:40-41) asserts "*hesed* in this context refers more to a subjective mode of conduct willed by an individual, and not simply to an attitude of obligation." Bronner (1993:148) also notes that a rabbinical source records that in most cases the prophetic books use the word *hesed* in the sense of practicing beneficence toward one who has no right at all to claim it from you. Naomi even refuses Ruth's beneficence, yet Ruth perseveres. Therefore, through Boaz's characterization of Ruth's act as an act of *hesed*, we are meant to infer that Ruth is indeed a kind and selfless person.

However, what also emerges from chapter 1 is that even though Ruth may be kind and selfless she is by no means docile and submissive. Her deliberate refusal to obey Naomi and return to her homeland is evidence of this. Moreover, "Ruth takes the initiative in doing something unprecedented : she gives up everything without knowing what she will get back in return" (Van Wolde 1997:21). This is indicative of an act of *hesed* but also of a very courageous woman. Ruth has been made aware of the difficulties of being a childless widow through Naomi's bitter discourse. Yet by "clinging" to Naomi she demonstrates that she will find some way to survive.

Ruth may also very well be aware of the fact that she will have to be the one who will provide for both Naomi and herself since Naomi cannot work because she is too old, nor can she remarry because she is also too old to bear children. In this regard there is also a role dedifferentiation especially in respect to the word *davak* which is translated as *"cling"* or *"cleave."* In 1: 14 the narrator says that Orpah turned around and left, but Ruth *"clung"* to her mother-in-law. Berquist (1993:26) asserts that the word *"davak"* in the Hebrew Bible is most often used in relation to God, but when it is used in relation to humans, it no where else describes a woman's act. In Genesis 2:24 it states that:

> A man shall leave his mother and his father and *cling*(*davak*) to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

This clinging refers to love and to marriage, and also possibly sexual relations. The important point that Berquist (1993:27) notes though is that *davak* refers to the male role in initiating marriage. Therefore, "when Ruth *clings* to Naomi, Ruth takes the male role in initiating a relationship of formal commitment, similar to marriage." Therefore, Ruth has added on a male role of clinging to Naomi as a husband and as a provider, as will be clear in Chapter 2 of Ruth.

Ruth 2

Fewell and Gunn (1990:28) refer to Ruth as the breadwinner. This is because in chapter 2 it is Ruth who goes out to glean in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Our first glimpse of Ruth in Chapter 2 is when she tells her mother-in-law that she is going out to glean so that she might get some grain:

> Now Naomi had a relative of her husband, a mighty and strong man from the same clan as Elimelech, his name was Boaz. Ruth, the Moabitess, said to Naomi, "I am going into the field to glean among the ears of grain

after someone in whose eyes I find favour." And she said to her: "Go my daughter" (2:1-2).

Sasson (1979:38) reads Ruth's words as a question. "Should I go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, in the hope of pleasing him (Boaz)." Sasson has used the third person masculine suffix to indicate that Ruth is referring to Boaz, and the assumption is that Ruth and Naomi have spoken about Boaz before, and therefore, Ruth plans to please him. The first problem with Sasson's translation is that it implies that Ruth is submissive to Naomi's will and that if Naomi said that she could not go, then she would not have done so. However, from our examination of Ruth's character in the first chapter it is clear that Ruth is portrayed as a strong-willed independent thinker, and if a situation arose where she could take care of her mother-in-law, then she would, irrespective of whether her mother-in-law granted her permission or not.

Therefore, she is not asking her mother-in-law whether she can go to the field; she is telling her that she is going. This is evidenced by the narrator's indications when Ruth speaks: "*Vatomer Ruth hamoabiya el-Naomi*" meaning "And Ruth the Moabitess, *said* to Naomi," and when Naomi speaks: "*Vatomer la leki biti.*" meaning "And she *said* 'Go my daughter.'" The difference is that the narrator does not indicate that Naomi answered Ruth, but that Naomi spoke to Ruth. The word "*vatomer*" is used twice to indicate that they each "said" to each other. As opposed to 2:6 where Boaz's foreman answers him (indicated by the word "*vayaan*") the narrator does not use the feminine of the word "*vayaan*" which is "*vataan*" to indicate that Naomi is answering a question, but uses the word "*vatomer*" which means "and she said." If we view Ruth's words to Naomi as a question, then it casts a totally different light on the character of Ruth. It contributes to Bronner's (1993:168) argument that Ruth is "docile and submissive." However, if we view Ruth's words as a statement and not a question, then we can conclude that Ruth makes her own decisions and is an

independent thinker, a characteristic that is not generally expected of women in Biblical times.

Berquist (1993:28) argues along similar lines as Sasson that Ruth means more than gleaning when she says : "I am going to the field to glean among the ears of grain after one in whose eyes I find favour." He asserts that the term "to find favour in one's eyes" refers to a petition, but since the law insists that all landowners allow gleaning,[36] gleaning did not require permission from the landowner (Leviticus19: 9-10). Therefore, he concludes that Ruth's intention is not only to glean, which is a short-term solution to hunger, but to attract a husband and provider, which is a long-term solution.

However, the text does not provide any indication of the fact that Ruth intends to find Boaz and please him. Ruth certainly asks permission from the foreman as is confirmed by the foreman himself in 2:7, where the foreman informs Boaz that Ruth had come to the fields in the morning and had said that she wanted to glean among the reapers. Therefore, "finding favour in someone's eyes," here is a simple indication of asking permission to glean, and does not indicate that Ruth is looking for a husband and provider. Even Berquist (1993:28) admits that although "the law required landowners and labourers to co-operate, reluctance could well be expected." Therefore, Ruth's asking for permission becomes understandable.

The above assertion that Ruth had no other intention than to glean can further be verified from two other indications in the text. The first is the words, "*vayiker mikreya*" which means "and so it happened," which indicates that it happened by chance, that she ended up in the fields which belonged to Boaz. Both words come from the root "*kara*" which means happen, and the double use

[36] The laws governing the practices of gleaning are mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:19 where the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow are allowed such a right. A similar legislation can also be found in Leviticus 19:9, and 23:22. Hubbard (1988:136-137) offers a conflicting view to Sasson.

of the term (literally translated "and it happened and it happened") could very well point to the fact that it was by chance. Mandelkern (1978:1047) in the Hebrew concordance also points out that these words when used elsewhere in the Bible point toward a meeting by chance or accident or divine chance as in Ecclesiastics 2:14, where it denotes the fate that humankind does not control.[37]

The second indication of the coincidental meeting of Ruth and Boaz, is to be found in 2:20 where Naomi expresses surprise when she asks Ruth in whose field she had gleaned and Ruth answers Boaz's. Naomi, expresses great joy and subsequently informs Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman of herself and Ruth[38]. Therefore, the information the narrator has given in the first verse of chapter 2 is privileged information. In other words the reader is made aware that there is a close relative of Elimelech's that is very well off. However, in the narrative world Naomi and Ruth are not aware of this. The reader hopes and expects that by some chance that Ruth or Naomi will meet him. This expectation is fulfilled in the chapter. So the first verse of the chapter is simply an indication by the narrator for the reader, and does not point to knowledge that the characters have. This is meant as part of the plot development plan.

We can deduce from Ruth's dialogue at the beginning of chapter 2 that her intention is to be the "breadwinner" and to provide a solution to their problem of hunger. Ruth's concern is not to find a husband and provider. This concern is only initiated in chapter 3 when Naomi suggests the plan. She is simply making

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He asserts that although according to law Ruth should have had the right to glean, it could be that more often it was left up to the owner whether or not a person could glean.

[37] Refer to Hals (1969:11-12) who sees the obscure hand of God in this meeting that seems accidental. However, in keeping with my argument that Ruth acts to change her destiny, I would suggest that even though Hal's argument is plausible, it is through the initiative of Ruth that "the hand of God is moved."

[38] The significance of Naomi calling Boaz a kinsman of herself and Ruth's, instead of a kinsman of Elimelech's, as the narrator does in verse 1, corresponds with the idea that the main theme of the book of Ruth is not the perpetuation of a male line, but the survival of two women. This will be made clear in chapter 3. The perpetuation of a male line is necessary in order to ensure the survival of the two women. By naming Boaz "their" (Naomi and Ruth's) kinsman Naomi is once again reappropriating reality in terms of the female experience.

use of the resources available to her in order to ensure that neither she nor Naomi goes hungry. The character of Ruth, therefore, comes across as being not only kind and selfless but resourceful as well.

The appellation of Moabitess which both the narrator and the foreman attach to Ruth at several points in the story is related to character development. The narrator uses it even at 2:2 when Ruth tells Naomi, that she is going into the fields to glean. The naming of Ruth as a Moabitess is a continuation from the first chapter where she is also identified as such. The significance of the term is to highlight to the reader that Ruth is a foreigner and therefore has a low status. As Nielsen (1997:52) states, "[N]o one must expect that her decision to share country, people, and God with Naomi, has changed her status. She remains a Moabite." However, by the end of the narrative, in the same way that Naomi has developed as a character, so has Ruth. I will return to this notion of character development later.

Ruth's encounter and consequent dialogue with Boaz also sheds some light on the character of Ruth. The first question that Boaz asks when he sees Ruth in his fields is: "Whose maiden is this?"[39] This kind of question is typical of patriarchal culture. As we have noted before a woman was only given an identity in terms of the males in her life.[40] Therefore, the question implies "to which male does this maiden belong?" Boaz does not ask *her* name but that of her owner (Trible 1978:176). However, the foreman cannot answer this question in the way that would normally be expected because Ruth does not belong to anyone. She is an autonomous figure, independent of any males. Her attachment or her alliance is with a woman, Naomi, and this is precisely what the foreman tells Boaz. Not only is she an autonomous and independent woman, but the

[39] Campbell (1975:94) translates Boaz's question as "Where does this young woman fit in?" instead of Trible's (1978:146) translation of " Whose maiden is this?" Although Trible argues that the question is typical of patriarchal culture, Campbell asserts that it is simply a convention that is used to drive the action forward.

[40] We are also reminded of Naomi's bereft status, when she loses her husbands and her sons, and her consequent bitterness at having lost her identity.

foreman also emphasises that she is also a foreign woman, by identifying her as a "Moabite," in 2:5-7.

> Then he asked his servant in charge of the reapers, "Whose girl is this?" "She is a Moabite girl," the servant answered, "who has just come back with Naomi from the Moabite country. She asked if she might glean and gather among the swathes behind the reapers. She came and has been on her feet with hardly a moments rest from daybreak till now."

From this passage it is clear how, once again a minor character could be used to assist in the characterization of a major character. In this case it is the foreman who helps characterize Ruth. The foreman not only answers Boaz's question, but he indirectly implies that Ruth is a hardworking and dedicated person, since he comments about the fact that she has been working in the field from daybreak until the time that Boaz has arrived without resting.

A number of commentators have suggested that Ruth had not hitherto gleaned until Boaz had arrived implying that she was waiting for his permission, before she could start.[41] However, the narrator informs us in vs. 3, in what is a summary of Ruth's actions before Boaz arrives, *"vatalaket basade acharei hakotsrim"* which is literally translated as "she gleaned in the fields behind the reapers." This, therefore, implies that she had already asked the permission of the foreman and had begun gleaning behind the reapers when Boaz arrived. The foreman is reporting in indirect speech the conversation that transpired between Ruth and himself. He reports that she asked if she could gather *among* the sheaves. This was certainly an unusual request, since the law dictated that people could glean behind the reapers but not among them. The foreman could obviously not grant this request himself. However, Ruth could certainly glean

[41] See, for example, Sasson (1979:40) who suggests that Ruth is only preparing to glean and does not start until Boaz gives her permission.

behind the reapers since the law did not require permission for that. Therefore, it seems that Ruth had hitherto only been gleaning *behind* the reapers.

With the arrival of Boaz the situation changes. Although he does not grant her request directly and immediately, he does later on in verse 15, when he commands his workers to allow her to glean *among* the sheaves. From the foreman's dialogue concerning Ruth's request, and the fact that she worked from the morning without taking a break, we can infer a number of important characteristics of Ruth. Not only is she determined to provide food, but also she is extremely daring. She requests something that is beyond the norms of the societal structures of that age.

If we interpret the text in the way suggested above, then Ruth's first statement to Naomi in 2:2 also makes sense: "I am going to glean *among* the ears of grain in the fields after one in whose eyes I find favour." My initial argument that the phrase "to find favour in one's eyes" means permission to glean fits in with this latter assertion because Ruth was aware that in order to do what she wanted to do, she needed permission. If she planned only to glean behind the reapers then, as the law stated, she would not need permission. However, as Berquist (1993:280) points out:

> [G]leaning provided subsistence for those lowest in social status. In Ruth's case, with two persons eating one's gleanings, even survival would be questionable. Ruth must find another solution to hunger and poverty.

Berquist suggests, accordingly, that Ruth means more than gleaning by the phrase "find favour in one's eyes," and that what she is actually looking for is a husband and provider. He argues that Ruth's intention here is to seduce the man who allows her such a privilege, first the foreman, and then Boaz.

Contrary to Berquist's argument I want to argue along the lines of my previous argument that Ruth herself is taking on the role of husband and provider. She cannot provide for both her and Naomi by just gleaning *behind* the reapers because then she will only collect what might amount to a handful of grain. She has to find another way of getting more food, and she does this by making the request that she be allowed to glean *among* the reapers. Therefore, she is shaping her own destiny, by being innovative. Although this request can only be granted by someone in whose eyes she finds grace, and this someone just happens to be Boaz, the action of Boaz must be understood as a *reaction* to Ruth's request and to Ruth's *hesed* which she has shown to Naomi. In all respects, therefore, it is Ruth that is the initiator of the action. Boaz is a kind and generous man but only in response to Ruth's kindness towards her mother-in-law.

Boaz himself concedes to this in his dialogue with Ruth in 2: 10-11:

> Then she threw herself on the ground and said to him, "How is it that I have won your favour, that you acknowledge me even though I am foreign?" Boaz answered her, "I have been told about all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, how you left your father and your mother and your native land and traveled to a people you did not know beforehand."

In this passage Ruth acknowledges herself as a foreigner, and asks Boaz why he is so kind towards her when she is a foreigner. She is extremely respectful as is indicated by the narrator's information that she falls on her face. But as Trible (1978:176) notes her deferentiality is ironically subtle because she, an inferior foreigner, is speaking to a superior in a situation that she herself has set out to create and achieve. She tells Naomi that she will glean among the sheaves after one "in whose eyes she finds favour," and now she uses the same phrase "Why have I won your favour?" in speaking to Boaz. Therefore, the irony lies in the

fact that Ruth has accomplished here exactly what she set out to do, to win someone's favour, and yet she responds with surprise. Ruth's surprise is motivated by the fact that the foreman has informed Boaz that she is a foreigner, and yet he still shows her kindness, by giving her protection from the young men and allowing her to drink from the jars. This is more kindness, more "favour," than Ruth had expected.

Boaz then explains that his kindness is motivated by the fact that Ruth has shown *hesed* to her mother-in law beyond the call of her duty. He also explains that Ruth had acted in a way that was selfless in that she left her home and her family to come to a land that she did not know. Boaz transposes her "foreignness" here into a positive aspect of her character. Through the narrative and dialogue the character of Ruth has emerged as admirable. She controls her own destiny, not Boaz. She is the initiator of his (re)actions. Her request to glean among the reapers, gives her as Trible (1978:177) notes "independence as a human being in the midst of dependence as a needy case. That a patriarchal culture restricts her options makes her initiative all the more remarkable."

In this chapter we find another dimension of the character of Ruth emerging. She is not just a kind and selfless character as was established from the examination of her character in chapter 1, but she is strong-willed, determined, daring, resourceful and innovative. Her daring and innovative act as presented in chapter 2 sets the scene for an even more daring act that she will perform in chapter 3.

Ruth 3

In chapter 3 Naomi has developed a strategy which she hopes will help solve their problem. She asks Ruth to wash and perfume herself, put on her cloak, go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be, and after he has eaten and drunk, and proceeds to lie down, she should uncover his feet and wait for his response.

Naomi precedes this instruction with the statement that she wants to find a home for Ruth (3:1) and that "Boaz is our relative" (3:2).

Naomi's interest is clearly to get Ruth married in order to ensure her own and, in the process, Ruth's survival. She finds Boaz to be a suitable suitor, but there are two things working against this marriage. The first is that Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech, not a brother of Machlon. Therefore, if the possibility existed for a Levirate marriage to be undertaken, it had to be undertaken between Naomi and Boaz. But Naomi was too old to have children, and since this was the point of a Levirate marriage, such a union would be fruitless. Therefore, Ruth would have to act in a way that makes the Levirate marriage work to ensure Naomi's survival. The second obstacle follows from the first in that if the marriage were to take place between Ruth and Boaz, consideration would have to be made for the fact that Ruth was a foreigner. The Levirate marriage was applied to Israelites, but there was no mention of foreigners, and since there were laws forbidding the union of foreigners with Israelites, it did not cater for the redemption of the foreigner.[42]

Therefore, even though Boaz is established as a kind and generous man in the preceding chapters, neither Naomi nor Ruth could claim that he marry Ruth out of duty as a relative because that would mean that the rule of the law would have to be bent. However, if Ruth went to Boaz with the intention to seduce him and used the fact that he was a close redeemer as well, then Boaz had two choices. He could have sexual relations with her and in so doing take her for a wife, or he could assume the role of redeemer and take her as a wife. Naomi clearly thought that the former option was more viable, but as we shall see later Ruth was keeping her options open.

[42] These obstacles are precisely what makes the plot so interesting, and builds tension in the readers to see how the plot will eventually unfold to overcome these obstacles.

What is surprising though is that Ruth agrees to Naomi's plan very readily and openly without even so much as a dissuasion as was done in the first chapter, where Naomi tells her twice that she must return, and twice she says no. The fact that Ruth so readily agrees to the plan could mean that she recognised the plan afforded a permanent solution to their problems. Ruth's concern has not been to remarry. She gave up that dream in order to take care of Naomi as is demonstrated by her refusal to go back to Moab and find rest in the home of a husband (1:6-18). Her main concern in the plot up until now has been to provide food for Naomi and herself. She has not once indicated that she wants a husband. Now that the opportunity arises for her to have a husband, and in the process ensure the survival of both Naomi and herself, she takes it on.

Although Ruth is determined and says to Naomi that she will do all that she tells her, she does not. This is evident in 3:9 when Boaz asks Ruth:

> "Who are you?" and she answers, "I am Ruth your maidservant. Spread your wings over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer."

Naomi told her to lie at Boaz's feet and wait for him to tell her what to do. Ruth, on the other hand does not wait. She takes charge of the situation by telling Boaz what she wants him to do (Trible 1978:184). Also by a wordplay Ruth calls Boaz to act on Yahweh's behalf. In the fields Boaz said to Ruth in 2:12

> "May Yahweh repay you for what you have done, may you have the full reward of Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought shelter."

Ruth uses the same word that Boaz has used earlier to indicate Yahweh's protection (*kanaph* - which literally translated means wings) now when she tells him to spread his "wing" over her. In other words Ruth is challenging Boaz to act on behalf of the Lord God of Israel, to act on his religious commitments. It

is highly likely that Boaz would be open to such an invitation since his character has been developed as that of a deeply religious man. His portrayal as a devout Israelite is indicated in both his greetings with his workers and his dialogue with Ruth. Therefore, Ruth very cleverly reappropriates Boaz's religious language as "she challenges Boaz to be the occasion of divine blessing in her life. And the man who asked it for Ruth is himself capable of fulfilling it" (Trible 1978:184).

Another important characteristic of Ruth also emerges here. As was explained previously, legally speaking, Boaz had no obligation to marry Ruth or Naomi. He is not a *yabam or a levir;* he is, as both Naomi and Ruth calls him, a *goel.*[43] By asking Ruth to go to the threshing floor Naomi was hoping that Ruth would be able to seduce Boaz and, consequently, manipulate him to redeem Naomi's inheritance, and in so doing redeem Naomi.

However, Ruth does not do as Naomi tells her. She does not use seduction as her first appeal. Instead she uses her leverage as a childless widow and Boaz being a kinsman to her first advantage. Before attempting to seduce Boaz she actually uses the other option available to her first, thereby keeping seduction as her option of last resort. This says that even though she might have wanted a permanent solution to Naomi's and her problems, she did not want to prostitute herself in order to get it. She would have gone as far as prostitution if she had to as is indicated by her readiness to accept Naomi's proposal and the fact that she did wash and perfume herself. If Boaz wanted to marry her, however, on the basis of her being a relative, then that would mean that she would be fully integrated into the Israelite community as one of their own. We know already from the second chapter that Ruth was familiar with Israelite practices such as that of gleaning. Therefore, as Nielsen (1997:76) maintains, it is not through ignorance of an Israelite custom that Ruth makes such a request of Boaz. Rather

[43] The requirements of the *goel* did not stipulate that he would have to redeem the woman, only the property. However, Naomi, assumes that Ruth can act in a way that will make Boaz want her and then in the process Boaz will redeem the land as well.

Ruth is manipulating an Israelite custom to her advantage in a difficult situation.[44]

From Ruth's perspective there is also another advantage if Boaz would marry her. If Boaz would marry her on the basis of a Levirate marriage, then she would be welcomed as part of the community because he would be applying an Israelite custom to her. We also know, from the narrator's use of the appellation Moabitess at several points in the text, (she is referred to as a Moabitess six times in the text 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21, 4:5, 10 and once as a foreigner 2:10 by Ruth herself) that Ruth was still considered an outsider. This was her way of being accepted into the Israelite community by claiming an Israelite law for herself. Sasson (1987:320) asserts that when Ruth proposed gleaning that she was looking to change her situation from that of outlander (*nokriya*) to that of household servant (*shifah*) in Bethlehem. Now, she wants to change her situation from foreigner to Israelite wife.

Hence, Ruth is undertaking an even more daring act than seduction when she calls on Boaz to spread his wing over her because she is a foreign woman calling on an Israelite man to accept a responsibility to which by law he does not have to answer. Ruth is manipulating the situation to ensure her own survival without her having to sacrifice her own dignity in the process, while simultaneously ensuring her rightful place in the Israelite community. Ruth is ensuring that she can progress from being an outsider to being an insider.

Boaz also makes two other characteristics of Ruth manifest in his response to her proposal. In 3:10-11 Boaz highlights the noble character of Ruth by saying that even though she could have gone after younger men, whatever their financial circumstances, she did not. Once again her interest is for her mother-in-law for if she can secure a Levirate marriage for herself, Naomi inevitably

[44] See also Campbell (1975:132-137) who argues that it is Ruth who combines the function of *goel* with that of *yabam*.

benefits as well. Boaz praises Ruth for such loyalty and refers to her act as an act of *hesed.* At the beginning of the chapter it seems as if Naomi wants to care for Ruth , but Ruth's decision to take matters into her own hands shows that it is Ruth who wants to take care of Naomi (Nielsen 1997:76).

The second characteristic of Ruth is stated indirectly by Boaz. He says that everyone at the town gate knows that she is a "worthy woman." Nielsen (1997:77) notes that the words (*eshet chayil*) match the words used to describe Boaz at the beginning of chapter 2 (*ish chayil*). She asserts that the choice of words used to describe Ruth as a worthy woman has the effect of highlighting the fact that she is a suitable partner for Boaz. Fewell and Gunn (1990:87-93) emphasize the fact that Boaz is embarrassed by Ruth's proposal because she is a Moabite woman and is afraid of what the townspeople might think if he, an Israelite, married a foreign woman. However, once again Ruth's acts of *hesed* comes into play, and Boaz consoles himself with the fact that all the townspeople know that Ruth is an "*eshet chayil.*" Therefore, if Boaz could marry Ruth as a redeemer then the situation might not seem so bad. Nonetheless, it must be noted yet again that even though Boaz is acting kindly, and even though he is acting beyond the call of duty, he is doing so not of his own initiative but through the initiative of Ruth.

The last time we hear Ruth speak in the narrative is at the end of chapter 3. The narrator tells us that Ruth relates to Naomi all that happened on the threshing floor. Once again this is not true since Ruth says to Naomi that Boaz gave her the grain because he did not want her to go empty handed to her mother-in-law. But, we have no narrative record of Boaz saying this. Commentators have suggested various reasons for this. Berlin (1983:98) suggests that Ruth is not fabricating this information. Instead her statement should be seen as a poetic device to highlight the reason she thinks Boaz has given her the grain. In other words this is Ruth's perception, psychologically and ideologically, of Boaz's action. If we accept this interpretation then once again we see how Ruth views

her future as intricately joined with Naomi. She does not see Boaz's act of kindness merely as an act of kindness towards her, but she sees his act of kindness as directed toward her mother-in-law as well. In the same manner, even though Ruth could go after any man she chose, as Boaz points out in 3:11, she went after Boaz because she knew that he would not only provide for her but for Naomi as well. Ruth's concern, therefore, is a selfless one. She has deliberately entwined both her and her mother-in-law's fate together so that her mother-in-law could survive.

Nielsen (1997:80) also asserts that the phrase "come empty handed" is meant to remind us of Naomi's words in 1:21 where she bemoans her situation to the women of Bethlehem, and complaining bitterly that she has come back empty even though in actual fact she has returned with Ruth. Now we hear from Ruth's own mouth that she has not come back empty. In the previous chapter Ruth is able to bring something back to her mother-in-law, because of her gleaning. This time her daring actions have also resulted in her once again bringing food for her mother-in-law, but now there is also hope of the provision of an heir as well. Naomi, then, should have acknowledged that she had not come back empty handed. She had in fact come back with Ruth who had proven to be much more of an asset than Naomi had thought. Instead of bringing misfortune, as Naomi might have assumed, Ruth has brought prosperity in terms of seeds of grain and possibly seeds of fertility as well. This is in line with her dedifferentiation of role from ordinary foreign woman to loyal provider.

Ruth 4

Chapter 4 contains the actions of Boaz in reaction to Ruth's initiative. He now goes to the redeemer and tries to sort matters out. We do not hear Ruth speak directly in chapter 4. She is only spoken about. The first we hear of her is when Boaz tells the other kinsman-redeemer that on the day he buys the land he also has to take Ruth, the Moabite, as his wife to raise up seed for Machlon's

inheritance. The kinsman-redeemer declines this. Once again Ruth is proclaimed as the Moabite. However, in this case Boaz is using her foreignness, and the stigma attached her foreignness to his advantage. When he spoke about Ruth in chapter 2 he had only good things to say about how she left her home and came to a foreign land even though she knew nobody. Now he uses her foreign origin to remind the other redeemer that she is a foreigner, and therefore, there might be some problems. He himself wants to marry Ruth. Therefore, he does not tell the other kinsman-redeemer about Ruth, until the end. So in this case Ruth's foreignness works and is used to his advantage by Boaz to ensure that he will be able to marry Ruth.

The next time we hear Ruth's name in this chapter is again via Boaz. In 4:9-10, Boaz declares that he will be taking over as redeemer:

> Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses today that herewith I acquire all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Machlon and Chilion, from the hand of Naomi. that herewith I also acquire Ruth as my wife, the Moabitess, the wife of Machlon, in order to maintain the name of the deceased in his inheritance, so that the name of the dead is not cut off from his family and the gate of his city. You are witnesses today.

Here, once again, Boaz refers to Ruth as the Moabitess. This time he is using her name in juxtaposition to Machlon. He is justifying the fact that he can be a redeemer to Ruth because she married into an Israelite family, and therefore, in order to preserve the name of the Israelite family she can also be redeemed. Van Wolde (1997:102) notes that "Boaz makes the name of the dead men of Judah live on through a foreigner." This is true, but van Wolde fails to mention that Ruth, not Boaz, initiates the process for it is only through Ruth's actions that we have Boaz's reaction. It is the foreign woman that has called an Israelite man to act in the spirit of the Israelite law regarding redemption. So daring is Ruth's act

that she calls a man to act, even when it is beyond his obligation to do so. Nielsen (1997:76) notes that

> Ruth's unexpected interpretation of the kinsman-redeemer's duty... is an expression of her resourcefulness in a difficult situation. It does not follow existing law, but it interprets the spirit behind the redeemer concept: care for the survival of the family. We could say that Ruth acts more like an Israelite than her new fellow countrymen do.

Nielsen's observation points to the fact that Boaz is merely acting on Ruth's initiative. Even though Boaz might have taken a keen interest in Ruth, he does not act to ensure that they end up together. It is through Ruth's initiative that Boaz can declare all that he is declaring to the elders and the witnesses. It is through Ruth's initiative that they end up getting married.

Trible (1978:192) also notes how Boaz switches perspectives. When speaking to the male elders, he asserts that he is marrying Ruth "to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance." However, when alone on the threshing floor with Ruth and in response to Ruth's proposal, he says that he will redeem *her*. Trible concludes that "thus in a private conversation with Ruth, Boaz made her welfare the sole object of his concern, but in a public discussion with men he makes Ruth the means for achieving a male purpose." Nowhere does Ruth imply that her intention is to restore the name of the dead. Her intention was merely to ensure survival for the living, even if she had to use a patriarchal structure to do so.

The elders and the people who are at the gate in 4 characterise Ruth next through a blessing in 4:11-12 -

> And all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses! The Lord grant that this woman who goes into your house may be like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel. Be strong in Ephrathah and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. May your house be as the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, by the seed that Yahweh may give you through this young woman.

Through their blessing the elders indicate that Ruth is now a fully integrated member of the Israelite community. They acknowledge this by comparing Ruth to the great matriarchs of Israel.

The next time we hear of Ruth is via the narrator. This time the narrator does not use the expression Moabitess to describe Ruth. We are told in 4:13:

> Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went into her. Yahweh gave her conception and she bore a son.

Whereas Ruth has been the active initiator of plans to survive throughout chapter 2 and 3, here she has become the passive recipient of the rewards. Boaz takes her as a wife, and Yahweh gives her a son. She is no more called the Moabitess, because she is now fully integrated into the Israelite community. She has been the recipient of an Israelite law, and it is even the God of Israel who gives her conception. Notably, the text very clearly shows that it is not just Boaz that causes her to become pregnant but God as well. As Van Wolde (1997:102) notes, this is the first time in the whole book that the narrator writes that Yahweh acts directly.

Ruth does not wait as Naomi cautions her for Boaz to act. She took matters into her own hands, and she told Boaz to act. She did not ask him in the same way that she did not ask her mother-in-law for permission to glean. Her dedication and strategic action coupled with Yahweh's mediating grace is what makes the

story end the way it does. So even when Boaz declares that he is raising up the name of the dead to his inheritance by marrying Ruth, it is not him, but actually Ruth that is doing so. Ruth is marrying Boaz, and in the process raising up the name of the dead though we are never told once in the entire book that Ruth's intention is to preserve the name of the dead. The raising up of the name of the dead is a by-product of Ruth's plan. Her main concern at all times was to help provide for Naomi. Ruth is the one who proposes marriage, and thereby sparks off the whole process of name preservation which is so important to the males in the narrative.

In 4:14-17, it is only the women of Bethlehem that speak, and they characterize Ruth in a completely different way from that of the male elders and the people at the gate. Their blessing does not seek to view Ruth as simply a vehicle for preserving an Israelite name. Instead, they choose to focus on the personal qualities of Ruth that have resulted in this joyous celebration. 4:14-15 captures their praises eloquently:

> And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be Yahweh who today has not left you without a redeemer. May his name be proclaimed over Israel. He shall be for you a restorer of life and fullness for your old age.
> For your daughter-in-law who loves you bore him, she who is better for you than seven sons."

Verse 14 is a resounding antithetical rendition of Naomi's speech by the women of Bethlehem, who were the recipients of her bitter speech in 1: 21 :

> "I went away full, and Yahweh has made me return empty. Why do you call me Naomi, when Yahweh has witnessed against me, and the Almighty has brought misfortune over me?"

Because Naomi had spoken directly to the women and complained to them about her bitter situation, they are in the best situation to comment on Naomi's reversal of fortune. In 2:21 Naomi had expressed a deep resentment toward Yahweh who had caused her misfortune. Now the women, show Naomi, that Yahweh had not abandoned her completely and that she has a redeemer. This statement is speaking directly to Naomi's need for identity through a male. She equates emptiness with having no males in her life because even though when she returned she had Ruth with her, she did not view Ruth's company as an asset. She still declared that she was returning empty.

Now, though, the women go beyond attributing Naomi's reversal of fortune to the male child and to Yahweh. They attribute Naomi's reversal of fortune directly to Ruth. It is because of Ruth's actions that Naomi is restored to fullness and to life. Obed is the product of Ruth's initiative in changing her situation. Therefore, it is not the male child that is the restorer but Ruth. What the women significantly point out is that Ruth has restored life to the living, not a name to the dead, as is the concern of the elders. She has restored life to Naomi. The women notice that Ruth through her initiative has taken an Israelite law that sought to preserve male progeny and has interpreted it in such a way that it not only seeks to preserve a male line, but it serves to ensure the survival of women whose options are restricted by patriarchal laws. As Van Wolde (1997:112) notes "by bearing her son, Ruth sees to it that Naomi returns from her situation which is characterized by emptiness, not-living and dying to full life."

It is not the bearing of the son that is the women's focus. It is the fact that Ruth is worth much more than a son, in fact in their own words in 4:15 Ruth is worth more to Naomi than not one son but seven sons. The elders in the preceding verses see it fit only to compare Ruth with other Israelite women, but the women dare to compare Ruth's worth not only with the male child that she has borne, but to seven males as well. The elders through their blessing, and

therefore their characterisation of Ruth, allow Ruth to transcend only her ethnicity. In other words she is no longer "Ruth the Moabitess," but now she is compared with the great matriarchs of Israel, and it is hoped that she will be like them as well.

The women take this a step further and note that Ruth has not only transcended the restrictions placed on her by her foreignness, but she has also transcended the restrictions placed upon her by her gender. Hence, Ruth has proved that she is worth more then seven sons, in that she has redeemed both Naomi and herself. As Trible (1978:194) notes "Ruth, the daughter-in-law faithful beyond death, is the mediator of this transformation to life." It is the function of the male to be the redeemer. Ruth, however, has subverted this notion through her initiative, and she becomes the redeemer. The birth of Obed is not attributed to Boaz, but to Ruth "she has borne him"- therefore she is better than seven sons who are able to redeem.

Nielsen (1997:93) asserts: "In one sense Ruth takes Naomi's place when she marries Boaz to perpetuate Elimelech's family. What the aging widow was unable to do for her deceased husband the young, still fertile, Ruth can achieve." Although Nielsen here is suggesting that Ruth has indeed taken the initiative in changing Naomi's situation, she is at the same time suggesting the perpetuation of the male line as Ruth's motivation. However, the undercurrent of the narrative voice speaks differently. Although the male elders see it this way, the women of Bethlehem, who ultimately name the son assert that Ruth has restored life to Naomi, not a name to the dead, and accordingly state that "a son has been born to Naomi," (4:17).

Also, as was indicated before, nowhere in the text does Ruth ever say that her interest is in preserving the male line. In fact through all Ruth's actions and dialogue we can conclude that she acts solely in the interests of Naomi, and not herself, and not even the dead, as is suggested by commentators such as

Nielsen.[45] Therefore, even though chapter 4 ends with a male genealogy, the women have the final say as to who is responsible for the genealogy that follows. It is not the men themselves, but the women who have instigated the process to change their fates. It is Ruth's actions that are responsible for the entire process. Also what is interesting to note is that throughout the book of Ruth, the narrator steps aside and allows Ruth to be characterized by the other characters and through her own actions (indirect presentation as opposed to direct definition). After allowing the women to characterize Ruth in a way that undermines the patriarchal order of the way in which males and females behave, the narrator steps in to give a rather mundane account of a male genealogy. The powerful discourse of Ruth throughout the narrative, and finally the powerful statements made by the women of Bethlehem, stand in direct contrast to, and I would suggest undermines, a genealogy that is given by the narrator in a "matter-of-course" tone. There are no exclamation marks, there are no feelings and emotions, and there is no feeling of celebration in the genealogy. There is a monotonous tone present in the genealogy as opposed to the vibrant voices of the women of Bethlehem who characterize Ruth as being "better than seven sons," and therefore better than seven males.[46] The fact that Ruth is better than seven males resounds in the reader's mind and although those lines are juxtaposed with a male genealogy, it is the women's' voices that remain in our minds. As Rashkow (1993:40) notes "the exuberant words of the townswomen close the narrative."

[45] For a similar viewpoint see also Loretz (1960: 391-399) who argues extensively the point that the theme of the story of Ruth is about the preservation of an Israelite name.

[46] Rashkow (1993:41) asserts that "Ruth and Naomi know what they want and go after it. Their discourse is that of power; the power of their discourse is that they succeed." I want to suggest that the women of Bethlehem also share in this discourse of power, because even though their discourse is evaluative in nature, it contains some of the most powerful, subversive statements in the entire narrative. The fact that their discourse and not that of the elders, closes the narrative is indicative of that power.

Role Dedifferentiation and Character Development

Humphreys (1985: 84-85) asserts that the genre of the Biblical short story requires that characters do not develop. This is in comparison to the novel, where characters are seen to

> evolve as they shape and are shaped by events and situations...Jonah, Ruth, and even Daniel and his companions are essentially the same at the end of each story as at the outset; they do not grow or develop before us.

From the above examination of the character of Ruth, it is apparent that Humphrey's argument can be seriously challenged. We have seen Ruth develop as a character from a childless widow and a foreigner with virtually no status at all, to one that is ranked among the great matriarchs of Israel, one of the highest statuses that could be accorded to a woman. Her development of character can be inferred from a number of characterisation techniques not the least of which is the way in which Ruth is named.

The most striking name that is used of Ruth and the one occurring most often in the narrative, is Moabitess. We have established that the narrator in Ruth plays a minimal role in providing clues about characters in the narrative. Therefore, when the narrator assigns names to a character we can infer immediately that such information is significant. The constant naming of Ruth as the Moabitess points to the fact that there is an underlying tension, "an opposition in the story between foreignness and familiality" (Berlin 1983:88). In the light of the foregoing discussion of the character of Ruth, especially in terms of her independent initiative, her designation as a foreigner makes her achievements all the more remarkable. Ruth is able to overcome the restrictions placed on her by her foreignness and through her own initiative becomes a fully integrated

member of the Israelite community, so much so that she claims an Israelite law for herself by calling an Israelite man to accept his responsibility. The elders recognize Ruth as not only an ordinary member of Israelite society, but they even compare her with the great matriarchs of Israel. As a character Ruth has developed from being an outsider to an insider.

We sense this development of character from Ruth's naming of herself as well. Ruth uses three terms to refer to herself when speaking to Boaz. At first she calls herself a foreigner (*nokriya* [2:10]). Then she refers to herself as a maidservant (*shifka* [2:13]) and finally as handmaid – (*ama* [3:9]), since even a woman of high rank would use the term handmaid, in a context where she had to put herself into a subordinate position.

Finally Boaz says in 3:11 that Ruth is a worthy woman, an "*eshet chayil*" and it is not just he that feels this way but all the people at the town gate. What is significant to note is that it is not Boaz that elevates Ruth to this status, but her own deeds and characteristics, especially that of *hesed*, that has elevated her to her position. In the end she is no longer a foreigner or a maidservant: she becomes the wife of a prominent Israelite man, a wife who is ranked among the great matriarchs of Israel[47]. The character of Ruth has developed from one of lowly status to one of high position in the Israelite community.

[47] Through the technique of manifest intertextuality (that is where one text is directly referred to in another) Ruth is compared to Rachel and Leah and Tamar in 4:11-12. But, through the technique of interdiscursivity (when another text is indirectly referred to without any formal indicators or boundaries), like Alter (1981:59) has observed Ruth can also be compared to one of the greatest patriarchs as well, namely Abraham. Alter compares the text of Abraham in Genesis 12:1 – "Go you from your land and your birthplace and your father's house…" to Ruth 2:11 where Boaz says: " You have left your father and mother and the land of your birth and gone to a people you never knew." Alter concludes that "Ruth is conceived by the author as a kind of matriarch by adoption. This particular movement links her with the movement from the East to Canaan at the beginning of the patriarchal enterprise." The elders' allusion at the end of the text to Rachel and Leah suggest her connection to the matriarchs. Trible (1978:166) notes that unlike Abraham who was called by God to leave his birthplace and go to a foreign land, Ruth was neither called by God nor promised a blessing. She herself risked "bold decisions" and "shocking acts" in order to ensure her survival "in the midst of the alien, the hostile and the unknown."

The way in which the character of Ruth has developed is directly related to the process of role dedifferentiation which she has undergone from the first time we meet her in 1:4 to the end when she is ranked among the great matriarchs of Israel. The process of role dedifferentiation began when Ruth accepted the male role of providing for Naomi in chapter 1 and chapter 2. Indications of this addition of a male role is signified by the word "cling" and through Ruth's dialogue in 2:2 where she tells Naomi that she is going to the fields to glean.

This sparks off a second role dedifferentiation in that Ruth not only asks to glean *behind* the reapers, but *among* them. Here she is asserting herself in order to become one of the reapers so that she might glean enough for both Naomi and herself. By taking on the role of gleaner Ruth provides a short-term solution to their need for food. Berquist (1993:29) asserts that "for the proposed long-term solution, Ruth adds another role : seducer." I have argued that Ruth is willing to take on the role of seducer if she needs to, but the way in which she makes her proposal to Boaz illicits a response from him that ensures that she does not. The language that Ruth uses to propose marriage to Boaz is highly ambivalent. She says in 3:9, "Spread your wing over your maidservant for you are a redeemer." As Fewell and Gunn (1989:50) note, the phrase means: "either an invitation to have sex[48], or an appeal for marriage and security or both." In

[48] The word "kanaph" which literally translated means wings, has also been taken to mean "cloak," or "skirt." If one accepts that the translation means "skirt" or "cloak" then one has to agree with Beattie (1978:43) who asserts that "such a close physical proximity is indicated that the expression readily connotes an invitation to sexual relations, just as would an invitation, in English, to go to bed, but I cannot see how the idea of marriage may be found in it." However, other scholars accept the expression as a figurative one of marriage, but one that employs sexually explicit language. Kruger (1984 : 79-83) suggests a connection between Ruth 3:9 and Ezekiel 16:8 where there is a "marriage covenant" made between Yahweh and Israel
8. "And I passed by you and saw you and behold your time was a time for love. I spread my skirt (wing) over you and covered your nakedness. I swore to you and entered into covenant with you, says the Lord Yahweh, and you became mine." Bush (1996:165) argues that we should reject Beattie's assertion that the expression is a sexual invitation, and accept along with Kruger that it is a figurative marriage proposal based on the fact that Boaz's response. He suggests that Boaz heard something different than a sexual invitation, because his response contains a compliment about Ruth's *hesed. Hesed* in this sense cannot be related to sexual relations. A counter-argument can be that Ruth washed and perfumed herself as her mother-in-law told her, therefore, the scene was already set for seduction and heavily laid with sexual overtones. Whatever, the term is meant

line with my previous argument that Ruth was keeping her options open and did not do everything her mother-in-law told her to do (that is set the scene for seduction and wait for Boaz to act), the deduction can be made that "the choice of interpretation is offered to Boaz. That is the risk that Ruth takes and a measure of her courage" (Fewell and Gunn 1989:50). Either way Ruth gets what she wants. Boaz can either have sexual relations with her and in so doing take her for a wife, or he can act as *yabam* (albeit that this is bending the law of the Levirate marriage) and thus take her for a wife. The ambivalence of Ruth's discourse points to the power of her discourse. Rashkow (1993:41) points out that Ruth knows what she wants and goes after it. Her discourse is that of power; the power of her discourse is that she succeeds.

By accepting his role as redeemer Boaz in effect makes Ruth the redeemer. This is another example of role dedifferentiation. It is Ruth that is given the ultimate credit for provoking Boaz to take up the role of the redeemer. Even though Boaz is the redeemer, he makes no attempt to redeem until prompted by Ruth. The women of Bethlehem note in 4:15-16 that it is Ruth who restores life to Naomi. Therefore, Ruth is the redeemer.[49] It is Ruth that is better than seven sons who can redeem. Hence, as Berquist (1993:35) observes, Ruth's dedifferentiation is active, leading to the solution of the story's problems. By taking on the final role of mother Ruth brings fullness to Naomi's emptiness and restores life to the living. The name Ruth is derived from the root rwh (water to saturation).[50] As with the other characters in the narrative, Ruth lives up to her name. She indeed fills up Naomi's emptiness and restores life.

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to mean, I think the ambiguity is deliberate. We are meant to see that Ruth is determined to do whatever it takes to ensure her and Naomi's survival.

[49] Cf. Bush (1996:11) who argues that it is not Ruth that is the "agent of redemption" but the child born of Ruth and Boaz. I disagree on two accounts. The first is Bush's inclusion of Boaz in the woman's words. The women do not declare that the child is borne of Boaz and Ruth. They indicate that the child is born of Ruth. Secondly, the ultimate agent of redemption is Ruth for even though the women declare that the child is the redeemer, their last words on the matter is that Ruth has borne him.

[50] So Lacocque (1990:115) who asserts that "the name 'Ruth' makes clear the role of the nations in the restoration and, beyond, in the advent of the eschatological messianic era." I offer a

The character of Ruth is at the heart of the narrative. Therefore, it is not surprising that the book is named after her. She is the bold initiator of change, and it is through her character that the denouement of the plot is achieved. Ruth is a subversive character, in that she subverts gender and ethnic boundaries through her actions. Given the nature of Ruth's character and the centrality of her character to the plot, it is clear that this story is neither about male progeny nor about Boaz the hero and redeemer who saves two needy women through an established social custom. Although in Biblical narrative it is usually the male figure that emerges as the hero, in this narrative it is not the male who is the hero but Ruth who emerges as the heroine. As was shown in the previous chapter Boaz is actually very far from being the hero precisely because he never acts of his own will: he only acts when prompted by Ruth. Therefore, this story is about "a disadvantaged foreigner's deconstruction of gender boundaries in order to save herself and her woman" (Berquist 1993:36). I would add, as I have shown, the story is also about Ruth's deconstruction of ethnic differences. At the beginning of the narrative, Ruth is seen as oppressed in every sphere of her life. She is a woman, a foreigner, a widow and childless. By the end of the narrative, we see that Ruth has managed to cast aside all those oppressive roles that were assigned to her at the beginning of the narrative through both dexterity and intelligent action.

different interpretation, one that is linked to the fate of two women, not to the fate of a male dynasty.

CONCLUSION

The central aim of this dissertation was to explore ways of reading the book of Ruth from a literary-womanist perspective. There were two methodologies involved in this process of interpretation. The first was on the level of the text itself (literary criticism) and the second was on the level of the reader (autobiographical criticism). What emerged in the process of writing this dissertation is that the two methodologies could not always be separated. Instead they fed into and informed each other. Fish (1995:1) questions "the possibility of transforming literary study so that it is more immediately engaged with the political issues that are today so urgent."[51] This study has shown that it is possible to do precisely that, because that is what automatically happens. The political issues such as the oppression of women and ethnocentrism which Fish argues literary critics should avoid are the driving contemporary issues behind the writing of this dissertation. My argument has been that it is not just the reader, but the reader's ideological location as well that influences interpretation. Therefore, for me the central issues of ethnicity and gender in the narrative have been significant. In this study I have used the concepts of postmodernist literary analysis to show how the book of Ruth can be read as a liberating text by reading it as a text that deviates from androcentric and ethnocentric norms. This was achieved in the following ways:

In chapter 1 an exploration of the plot of Ruth revealed that in order for the end-goal of the plot to be achieved "emptiness has to return to fullness." It was shown that Ruth's actions (her decision to return with Naomi) is the catalyst that begins this process that ultimately leads to the denouement of the plot. The fact that it is the two women, Ruth and Naomi, who drive the plot forward indicates that the book of Ruth is a woman's story.

[51] Fish's argument here is certainly surprising, since he was one of the first scholars to acknowledge the role of the reader in the process of interpretation, by arguing that meaning is not derived from the physical words of the text itself, but from the temporal process of reading (1980:67).

Chapter 2 demonstrated that the significance of narrative time for any literary analysis lies in the fact that the amount of time allowed for the retelling of the events rarely corresponds to the time it took for the events to happen. Since Ruth is a short story the choice of what to tell and what to omit, as well as how long to dwell on details, are indeed significant. In other words it was shown that literary time was only spent on those aspects which were crucial for the advancement of the narrative. Since the reader's main goal is to see how the conflicts are resolved the literary time spent on the resolution of the conflicts is an indication of where the weight of the story lies. In this case it is certainly with Ruth and Naomi judging from the amount of time spent on dialogues between the two women. They are, therefore, the ones that contribute to the resolution of the conflicts of the plot. It was also shown that the most amount of literary time was spent on Ruth in describing her loyalty and resourcefulness in overcoming her and Naomi's unfortunate circumstances. This was a clear indication that it is Ruth who is the focus of the story, and it is the women's plight that needed to be identified with.

Chapter 3 showed that in the book of Ruth the narrative voice or the perspective of attitudes, conceptions and worldview was that of a woman. The fact that the book of Ruth is named after a woman, the fact that at the very outset the males in the story die and it is the women that take over the narrative, the fact that in the end the women of Bethlehem declare that Ruth is better to Naomi than seven sons, are just some of the reasons why it was concluded that the narrative voice in the book of Ruth was that of a woman. It was also shown that this narrative voice (whether overt or covert) subverted gender and ethnic expectations.

Chapter 4 dealt with the characterisation of the three major characters, Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth. Chapter 4 was the longest chapter since it is difficult to evaluate characterisation without engaging the other facets of literary criticism as well, such as plot and dialogue.

An examination of the character of Naomi revealed that she was portrayed as a selfish character but that her selfishness was not meant to be a negative aspect of her disposition. In fact given the virtual insignificance of her status as an aged childless widow, her selfishness is understandable. She goes through a process of role dedifferentiation by initiating a plan that is so daring and outrageous that it undermines the patriarchal notion of female passiveness. She is also at the outset very prejudiced against Ruth because she is a foreigner. However, Ruth's loyalty and determination force Naomi to overcome her initial apprehension concerning Moabites and accept Ruth as a member of the Israelite community.

The analysis of the character of Boaz revealed that, unlike in conventional patriarchal narratives where the cardinal male figure is the hero, Boaz is not. He does not act to change the situation or drive the plot. Boaz, although called *ish chayil* (a strong and mighty man) only acts in response to Ruth's actions. Boaz was also portrayed as a selfish character. His main aim was to protect his reputation in society. He wanted to marry Ruth but was afraid of criticism from society since Ruth was a foreigner and the tension surrounding foreigners were made clear both by the text itself and the intertexts. He therefore found a legitimate excuse to marry Ruth by combining the laws of redemption and Levirate marriage. As such, he both uses and transcends the patriarchal system in order to get what he wants. Despite the fact that he does contribute to the denouement of the plot, he does not emerge as the hero in the end.

From the examination of the character of Ruth, it was concluded that Ruth is at the heart of the narrative. She is not as some commentators pointed out a docile and submissive character. Ruth, stubbornly and determinedly, with all the odds of being a childless foreign widow against her, turns her fate around and manages to sustain both her mother-in-law and herself. In fact, she is a subversive character and one that womanists can use as a role model since her

subversion of both gender and ethnic boundaries is what leads to the denouement of the plot.

Fish (1995:2) argues that "if you want to send a message that will be heard beyond the academy, get out of it." I don not think that womanist interests or any of the other political interests which Fish points out are out of the scope of the academy precisely because it is "flesh and blood readers" who interpret, and therefore, they cannot divorce themselves from their own realities. For Fish the only reality might be the academy. However, reality is multifaceted and forms inseparable parts of our personalities and our consciousness. These realities inform our perceptions of the world as well as our interpretation of texts. Also our past realities do not fade into insignificance. Instead they become a dynamic driving force that affects all aspects of our lives including our interpretations of text. For example when Bronner (1993:168) interprets Ruth as docile and submissive it is clear that she is reading as a white feminist. Her reality does not require that she read beyond that in order to see Ruth as a survivor, and in both Fish's and Bronner's case that is perfectly acceptable and understandable.

However, for someone reading from my ideological and cultural location where there are many "Ruth situations," Ruth emerges as a woman who takes control of her destiny and changes it from hopelessness to happiness. She is a survivor, not a victim of circumstances waiting for a man to change her situation. As this work has shown reading in this way does not imply that one has to find aspects of the text that are not really there nor attempt to presume that our modern perceptions are directly compatible with those of Biblical times. Aschkenasy (1998:21), asserts:

> [T]he conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent that the past's awareness of itself cannot show. Thus the question of what the original narrator meant should be changed to what the text betrays – intentionally or not.

In conclusion, the foregoing literary analysis of the text of Ruth has shown that it certainly can be read as a text which provides a positive role model for women, such as Indian Christian women, who like Ruth, experience the "triple oppression" of gender, class and ethnicity. The text is aligned with overturning these oppressions by allowing Ruth to emerge as a true *eshet chayil*, one that is able to rise above any circumstances. For a womanist reader like myself within the academy, and for those women outside the academy who seek identification with Biblical characters, there is no better role model than Ruth. Therefore, through a careful postmodernist literary analysis, employing the necessary methodological tools, this dissertation has shown that it is certainly possible to read academically while simultaneously engaging with contemporary social and political issues which are an integral part of the reader's own life. In fact it is my contention that it is impossible to do otherwise.

Appendix1

Ruth and the Midrash

One of the central concerns in this thesis has been to show how meaning is a matter of perspective. In this appendix I will very briefly examine the character of Ruth as interpreted by a few midrashic texts. My goal is to show how their ideological positions on patriarchy colour their interpretations, and how their interpretations have influenced even modern scholars. Bronner's interpretation as cited at the beginning of the chapter on Ruth is a case in point. She accepts the sages' characterization of Ruth as a reason why the modern feminist reader should not accept Ruth as an autonomous and independent figure. She suggests that when the sages view Ruth as submissive and without will, they rightly do so. "Ruth is not independent, autonomous, and free of male control; on the contrary she is docile and submissive and this is why the sages laud and honour her" (Bronner1993:168). The analysis of the characterisation of Ruth, however, shows otherwise.

The Midrashic sources place great emphasis on Ruth's conversion, and therefore, she is seen as a "righteous proselyte." Moreover, the emphasis is placed not just on her conversion but her conversion for the purpose of perpetuating an Israelite name since this culminates in the birth of the great King, David. In Ruth Rabbah 1:14[52] Ruth is counted among the matriarchs of Israel, and in Ruth Rabbah 8:1, it is said that David complains bitterly that he is being harassed by people who claim that he has a Moabite ancestry. Therefore, the Midrash serves to justify Ruth's foreignness by emphasizing that she was fully Jewish before she married Boaz, because she converted. Evidence of this can be found in Ruth Rabbah 20 where Naomi says,

"The daughters of Israel dwell in homes that have a mezuza."

The Midrash says that Ruth indicates her acceptance of this by saying:

[52] All midrashic references are cited from Neusner (1990).

"Where you lodge, I will lodge."(1:16)

She is fully converted, according to the Midrash, because she says

"Your God will be my God." (1:16)

The spirit of the rabbis' motives in emphasizing conversion as a mitigation of the Moabite ancestry of David is noted by Goldin (1958:7). She says that according to the Rabbis "Ruth could not have possibly died without experiencing in full her reward for converting to Judaism, she must see with her own eyes David on the throne of Israel." Modern day commentators, such as Nielsen (1997:93) also suggest, like the rabbis, that Ruth's main motive is to perpetuate male progeny. Ruth is seen as merely an agent in a bigger story of the perpetuation of a male line, and therefore, she is not regarded as autonomous.

The Midrash also relates Ruth's conversion to her conversion to modesty and to female values, the implication being that she did not possess these qualities before. For example in the Midrash Ruth Rabbah 20 Naomi says to Ruth:

> "My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theatres and circuses," to which she replies "Whither thou goest, I will go"

Bronner (1995:152) concludes that the rabbis' interpretation of the characterization of Ruth as a "paragon of docile, loyal, compliant female behaviour" is in keeping with all other depictions of her in Biblical sources, and in rabbinical retellings. She herself finds evidence in the text to suggest that Ruth is obedient and docile. She cites Ruth 3:2 where Ruth says, "I will do all that you say to me," as an example of Ruth's submissiveness and obedience. In other words Bronner finds justification for the rabbis' retelling of the narrative in the text itself, without taking cognizance of the fact that the rabbis' ideological location might have actually influenced their interpretation. She

does admit, however, that the reference to circuses is a betrayal of the context of the rabbis rather than the context of the text. Our examination of the character of Ruth, shows that Ruth is neither docile nor submissive to Naomi's will. With respect to the example that Bronner cites, I have shown that Ruth was not obedient and actually did more than Naomi had instructed her indicating once again that Ruth is an independent and autonomous figure.

From our brief examination of the character of Ruth as interpreted by the Midrashic texts it is clear that their different interpretations have been shaped by their own ideological assumptions. I have employed my own ideologies in my interpretation of the character of Ruth, and hence have reached a different interpretation from those cited above. This demonstrates once again that meaning lies between the interaction of the ideology of the text and the ideology of the reader.

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