Hannah’s Suffering

Subjects: Sociology | Womens Studies

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Hannah's story can serve as a complex narrative of agency, self-advocacy, and liberation for minoritized women. Using Chela Sandoval's Theory of Oppositional Consciousness, Dorothee Solle's Theory of Suffering, and Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," the piece analyzes the audacity of Hannah to correct a prophet, fight for her valid desire of motherhood, and determine her own happiness is evidence of an empowerment ethic that is necessary for present-day minoritized women in a climate that seeks to suppress and erase all forms of difference and agency.

old testament womanist differential consciousness suffering sociology of religion gender race

1. Introduction

Hannah’s story, which evokes themes of motherhood, agency, religious custom and intercessory prayer has allowed scholars to write extensively about Hannah and her transformation, seeking to understand her from a feminist or womanist perspective instead of seeking to understand her through patrilineal norms (Bird 1983; Bronner 1999; De Andrado 2021; Fentress-Williams and Knowles 2018; Hamori 2015; Klein 1994; Meyers 1994; Murphy 2020; You 2019). Because of her gender, childlessness, and ethnic lineage, Hannah holds multiple minoritized identities, making this story even more important to understand and consider for minoritized women and mothers (Williams 1993; Klein 1994).

The Hebrew Bible, according to Cook, serves as a larger narrative about the divine intervention of God in Israel, and Hannah’s story is just one example of this divine intervention as she moves from a grief-stricken and barren sister wife to a joyous mother of six children by the end of the second chapter in I Samuel (Cook 1999; The Holy Bible 2011). In this case, the focus of divine intervention in this story is through Hannah’s first son, Samuel, who grows up to be a prophet. Generally, because Samuel is the focus, much of Hannah’s role in the story is overlooked, or as Gafney notes about many Old Testament women, Hannah is not typically seen as anything more than a “womb pressed into service” (Gafney 2021).

Hannah’s story is set in a time that is not wholly the same but not entirely dissimilar from present-day society (You 2019). It is still sexist in that men are prioritized no matter their age or position, often over women who are the obvious focus or protagonists of the narrative or experience. While some scholars de-emphasize some of the Hebrew Bible’s patriarchal presentations of women (Fentress-Williams and Knowles 2018), they do acknowledge

that Hannah’s story is set in an era where the value of a marriage and personhood was heavily decided by the number and gender of the children born to the family (Breyfogle 1910).

Scholars have also argued that Hannah’s story is a rare narrative in which researchers get to witness a woman in the Old Testament participating in religious customs and acts. Further, because she is marginally positioned, her narrative offers a perfect opportunity for transformation in the story (Kim 2008). Of the nine female characters featured in the Old Testament, Spangler notes that Hannah is considered one of the good girls in the bible (Murphy 2020), likely because at a quick glance, Hannah desires to fit in with the social norms of her environment in asking for a child. For the purpose of this essay, I am paying explicit attention to Hannah’s transformation in alignment with the womanist tradition of centering the most marginalized people first (You 2019).

2. Hannah’s Story

Hannah is the first of two wives to a wealthy husband. Hannah is barren, yet her sister wife (Peninnah) has several children. Per the Jewish custom, families made an annual visit to the temple where they offered sacrifices to God, if they could afford to make the trip. Hannah and her family made this pilgrimage every year. In one particular year after the sacrifice was complete and the family was eating dinner, Hannah’s sister wife was particularly irritating. The story tells researchers that she regularly boasted about her fertility, knowing it was hurtful to Hannah. As a result, Hannah would not eat and left the table weeping. However, before she left, the text mentions that Hannah’s husband “loved her”, and during dinner he inquired, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons”? (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:5, 8). Hannah leaves the house and walks to the temple, praying fervently. She prayed so hard that eventually, no words were audible. The text says that the temple prophet, Eli, noticed her, assumed that she was drunk, and yelled at her, asking, “How long are you going to stay drunk?”, commanding her to “put away [her] wine” (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:14).

Quickly, she corrects him, saying that she is grief-stricken and “deeply troubled”; she is not drunk. The prophet then tells her to “Go in peace” and he hopes that her prayers are answered (Holy Bible, 1 Sam 1:15). Afterwards, Hannah was soon pregnant with a son who she named Samuel, because she “asked the Lord for him”, and the text paints a picture of a biblical happily ever after for Hannah, one and all (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:27).

Kim writes that Hannah’s transformation from embodying nothingness to and empowered agent allows researchers to believe in infinite possibility and the relief of her suffering [16]. Minoritized women can use Hannah’s narrative as a road map to aid in relieving their own suffering. Hannah’s story can also be used to explore new insight into liberatory suffering, as discussed by Dorothee Sölle which will be discussed in the next section.

3. Theory of Suffering

Dorothee Sölle is a theologian who offers a new perspective on Christian suffering. This different theoretical approach to Christian suffering empowers the individual amid their pain. Sölle’s liberatory theory of suffering contains three phases which are simply called Phase One, Two, and Three.

Phase One is marked by powerlessness, isolation, and mute pain. In this phase, the individual does not have language for the pain and suffering they experience. Sölle notes that this is the first hurdle of the sufferer: to find language for their experience through "learn[ing] to formulate things for themselves" (Sölle 1973, p. 71). Sölle emphasizes the importance of the individual arriving to this language on their own, it cannot be given to them. A second component of this first phase is a feeling of "meaningless" which is characterized as confusion of one's beliefs, determining which reality they should believe and what they should do about their circumstance.

Acceptance of the surrounding social structures is one characteristic of the individual who has moved into the second phase of suffering. Sölle frames acceptance as the first step to determining a plan of action. The individual has explored the current structure and accepted the truth of its impact on their lives. In this phase, the individual has moved from confusion and an inability to accurately name their experience to having language and a desire to act. This phase is marked by expression and communication, so much so that the individual in this phase "produces new conflicts" (Sölle 1973, p. 72).

Phase Three is described as the phase of solidarity, organizing, active shaping of the situation and active behavior. To a casual observer, the individual in this phase likely does not seem that they are actively suffering because they now have language and have shifted from experimental testing and lamenting the circumstance to actively deciding what will be done about it. This phase asks for action now that the structures have been analyzed and understood to be firm in their roots. Most importantly, Sölle tells that "active behavior replaces purely reactive behavior" which is found in the acceptance and exploration of the social structures surrounding the individual (Sölle 1973, pp. 72, 73). Now that the individual has language and has seen what action looks and feels like, they can more comfortably explore "the conquest of powerlessness" which is best defined as coming into "know[ing] that the suffering that society produces can be battled". They can then create change (Sölle 1973, p. 73).

Next, I will outline the theory of oppositional consciousness by Chela Sandoval. It is unusual to have multiple theories applied to one concept, but for the purpose of this essay, I find it critical to discuss them both. While Sölle, a theologian, expresses liberation in a religious context, Sandoval discusses a developmental theory that expresses sociological liberation in language that may be more readily accepted by those outside of a directly religious context. I will then highlight and thread these two theoretical approaches with Audre Lorde's essay, "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", which serves as a direct call to action for minoritized women and people.

4. Theory of Oppositional Consciousness

Sandoval argues that there have been barriers (which she names as the "racialization of theoretical domains" in academia) to the reach of the many forms of what she calls differential or oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 2000, p. 70). It is this personal, political and cultural configuration that permitted feminists of color from very different racial, ethnic, physical, national, or sexual identities access to the same psychic domain, where they recognized one another as "countrywomen" of a new kind of global and public domain, and as a result generated a new kind of coalition identity politics, a "coalitional consciousness" (Sandoval 2000, p. 70).

What links each theoretical domain is that "each is grappling with the hope—or despair—of globalizing postmodern first world cultural conditions by seeking, willing, or celebrating some aspect of the meaning or operation of a differential form of oppositional consciousness" (Sandoval 2000, p. 71). Most important to the implementation of an oppositional or differential consciousness is to assume it in everyday life under present conditions. Sandoval believes that researchers need to detail the technologies of oppositional consciousness because previous forms of resistance are not sufficient anymore.

There are five elements of Sandoval's oppositional consciousness: first, to name or diagnose the system of power in which the individual finds themselves. Fanon argues that those in the margins need to take full inventory of their circumstance so that they can adequately assess the problem (Sandoval 2000). The next element of developing oppositional consciousness is to disrupt the ideology within oneself. If the internal myths and beliefs about the oppression are not adequately addressed or understood, it is difficult to address the manifestation of the oppression. Minoritized communities have always had to understand signs and symbols in at least two ways: one that is natural to their way of knowing, and another as the dominant paradigm understands and frames it. This is what is meant by Enrique Dussel when he writes, "The slave, in revolt, uses the master's language; the woman, when she frees herself from the dominative male, uses macho language" (Dussel 1985, p. viii). Hill Collins (2000) shares the Outsider/Within paradigm which rests on the premise of a unique position and access to power held by Black women. Recognition and utilization of this power is a critical component of developing and maintaining oppositional consciousness.

The third element of Sandoval's theory is meta-ideologizing, which means to build and create new symbols to help with interpreting oppressive structures. Sandoval admonishes that this element can be contaminated by the dominant paradigm, if not done with intentional and meticulous effort (Sandoval 2000). While it is supposed to renew the perspective and set the agenda for the marginalized, meta-ideologizing is also intended to gain the attention of the dominant paradigm. That it is intended to impact those in power is why Sandoval offers the warning. By the time an individual has reached the fourth element or component of oppositional consciousness, Sandoval names it as differential movement. Differential movement takes the established consciousness and allows for challenging within its own perimeters. This is a built-in check and balance system so that, as warned, the movement and the development of oppositional consciousness is not tainted by the dominant ideology.

The last element serves as an indicator or marker of the success of the previous four elements: an ethical ideological code that is committed to social justice categories such as race, gender, sexuality and other identities.

As with any theory that has liberatory potential, a critical understanding of power is key. Sandoval encourages a global post-modernist illustration of power which is much less traditionally hierarchical (vertical) and more circular in nature and allows its citizens to "access their own racial-, sexual-, national-, or gender-unique forms of social power" (Sandoval 2000, pp. 109–10).