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# JOHANNINE WOMEN AS PARADIGMS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

## ABSTRACT

John's portrayal of women is unique as they are viewed as paradigms over against the negative perceptions concerning women in the Mediterranean world. The Johannine women demonstrate their leadership qualities, brave movements, apostolic roles, and devotion to Jesus even in the challenging situations. Women's positive role and status in the Gospel of John enable us to understand them not merely as passive actors, but as active interlocutors and dialogue partners. Persons such as the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene appear in the Gospel of John as representative figures and rhetorical characters. The Johannine narrator foregrounds the women characters as they use their freedom in both the *Sitz-Im-Leben Jesu* and the *Sitz-Im-Leben Kirche*. The Gospel of John is also interlocked with the *Sitz-Im-Leben Indien* to exemplify the evangelist's gnomic linguistic and literary artistry.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to examine the female characters within the narrative framework of the Gospel of John and intends to foreground their role and status in relation to Jesus and other characters of the Gospel, by employing principles of characterisation and narrative analysis. The final section of the article scrutinises the relevance of the study in the contemporary Indian context. In the process of finding the implications in the Indian context, the author deems it necessary to develop an Indian Christian feminist methodology and demonstrate the aspect of "woman power" as

a hermeneutical key to exploring the text. The following questions will play a significant role in the process of interpretation. How do the women play their role and status within the narrative framework of the Gospel of John? What are the ways and means whereby one can demonstrate “women power” in the Gospel of John? How can John be presented as a paradigm in the contemporary Indian context? What message can the Indian women derive from the characterisation of women in the Gospel of John? The author analyses the following texts and characters in that process: the mother of Jesus (vv. 2:1-5; 19:25-27); the Samaritan woman (vv. 4:1-26, 39-42); Martha and Mary of Bethany (vv. 11:1-45; 12:1-8), and Mary Magdalene (vv. 19:25; 20:1-2, 11-18). As a Johannine researcher, the author develops a Johannine paradigm of women characters. As an interpreter with a gnomic intent, the author attempts to bridge the gap between the 1<sup>st</sup>- and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century CE contexts. As an Indian, the author researches the impact on, and influence of the Johannine text in the contemporary Indian scenario.

## 2. RE-READING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John develops its feminist concerns over against the Graeco-Roman and Jewish contexts where women were not permitted to share the privileges and opportunities alongside their male counterparts. Ancient societies of the Mediterranean world were not only shaped by the basic differentiation between upper and lower strata (for example, elite and masses). Of great significance was a person’s gender (Kroeger 2000:1276-1280). This outlook of society reflects the cultural and anthropological insight that gender is a social construct in which female feelings were considered inferior to male role and status. Gender-specific behaviour was generally embedded in the fundamental values of the Mediterranean societies and was oriented toward the concepts of honour, shame, and disgrace (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:361-362).

In very general terms Jesus lived in social-cultural contexts (the Jewish context and the larger Greco-Roman society) in which the male view of women was usually negative and the place of women was understood to be limited for the most part to the domestic roles of wife and mother (Scholer 1992:880).

In a context in which women’s role and status were considered negative and limited, the Gospel of John develops as a paradigm in which women are treated on par with men (Kroeger 2000:1276-1280). Although the community of John adopted its ethos and pathos from the Mediterranean cultural contexts, the women of the Johannine community enjoyed considerable

freedom (Chakkuvarackal 2002:58-77). The stories of the Gospel of John demonstrate that the Johannine women acted with a prophetic spirit and clear vision. Since Christ had liberated them from male-dominated culture and set them as model leaders, the women became challenging figures (Kanagaraj 2001:75). The following sections clarify the role and status of the Johannine women characters.

## 2.1 The Mother of Jesus (2:1-5, 12; 19:25-27)

Mary appears on two different occasions within the narrative framework of John, one at the beginning (2:1-12) and another at the climax (19:25-27) of Jesus' public ministry.<sup>1</sup> The narrator describes her as "mother (μήτηρ) of Jesus" (2:1, 3) and "his mother" (2:5, 12; 19:25, 26a, 26b).<sup>2</sup> In both passages, Jesus addresses her as "woman" (Greek γυναίκα, 2:4; 19:26).<sup>3</sup> While the narrator mentions her as μήτηρ to make her identity known to the reader, Jesus addresses her as γυναίκα. The Johannine Jesus addresses her as "woman" in order to de-emphasise his earthly origin.<sup>4</sup> As the incarnation of Jesus is made obvious in the human sphere, he emphasises his divine identity and prepares to fulfill the "hour" of the Father (Moloney 1989/1998:67).<sup>5</sup> In the process of emphasising the heavenly origin, hardly any attention is paid to his earthly origin. Jesus' addressing Mary as γυναίκα should be understood within this ideological framework of John. The narrator makes it plain that the mother of Jesus was at the wedding in Cana, Galilee (v. 2:1). Mary's being with the family during this

- 1 The Synoptic Evangelists mention her name in Matthew 1-2; 13:55; Mark 6:3; Luke 1-2, and Acts 1:14. See Scholer (1992:884-885); Gaventa (1999:81-95).
- 2 Jesus' mother is mentioned in the discussions of the Jews in verse 6:42. According to Blomberg (2001:86), "[t]hat John calls Mary simply 'Jesus's mother' fits ancient practice in referring to well-known figures and presupposes some knowledge of her within the Johannine community."
- 3 Bruce (1983:69) states: "Our Lord addressed his mother by this same term (Gk. γυναίκα, vocative of γυνή) when he hung on the cross (19:26); and indeed the term was consonant with the utmost courtesy, being translatable as 'madam' or 'my lady.'" See also Stibbe (1993:44); Brown (1966:98); Borchert (1966/2002:154-155); Milne (1993:64).
- 4 Scholer (1992:885) observes that "Jesus's conversation with her [Mary] in John 2 does not indicate disrespect, but rather shows John's emphasis on Jesus's own authority and responsibility for his mission and implies Mary's discipleship. Mary is understood as a disciple (see John 19:25-27; Acts 1:14)." Morris (1995:158) mentions the following: "That Jesus calls Mary 'Woman' and not 'Mother' probably indicates that there is a new relationship between them as he enters his public ministry." See Köstenberger 2004:94; Coloe 2013:210; Stagg 1978:236.
- 5 See Stibbe (1993:44); Beasley-Murray (1999:34-35).

auspicious occasion is noticeable. She is introduced as the initiator of a dialogue with Jesus to solve an important problem. The dialogue begins as she brings an important concern to Jesus, namely the lack of wine at the wedding banquet (Thomaskutty 2015:79).<sup>6</sup> The presence of Mary as the first reported character (2:1), Jesus and his disciples as invited guests (2:2), and the brothers of Jesus as walk-on characters (2:12) strengthen the argument that the wedding was of one of the closer relatives, or at least one of the friends of the family (Kanagaraj 2005:98-99).<sup>7</sup> Although Jesus attempts to emphasise his heavenly origin, his earthly mother receives attention at the crucial junctures of his public ministry.

Mary's presence and her speech in verse 2:1-5 are to be understood as the first female presence and voice within the narrative framework of John.<sup>8</sup> As she appears at the outset of Jesus' public ministry, she expresses her voice in order to invite Jesus' attention.<sup>9</sup> When she mentions that "they have no wine" (2:3b), she reflects her attachment to the family and her knowledge about the top secrets of the banquet room.<sup>10</sup> As the woman approaches Jesus with her request, expresses her expectation (2:3b), and instructs the servants (2:5), she lavishes her trust in Jesus (Bruce 1983:70).<sup>11</sup> Mary's implied thoughts are made explicit through her performative speech in verse 3b and the subsequent instruction to the servants in verse 5.

The Mother's apparently neutral comment, "they have no wine," can be understood as a linguistic strategy of indirectness where without making an explicit request, she presumes, because of her relationship with her son, that he will hear the implied request (Coloe 2013:205).

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6 See Köstenberger (2004:93-96); Culpepper (1983:133-134).

7 See also Chatman (1978:173-195).

8 According to Bruce (1983:69), "Mary may well have had some responsibility for the catering; at any rate she knew that in such a crisis she could not do better than call upon her Son's resourcefulness. Probably she had learned by experience that to draw his attention to a need was a sure way of getting something done."

9 As Moloney (1989/1998:67) states: "She [the mother of Jesus] was the first character introduced and she initiates action with her statement." Morris (1995:158) observes that "[s]he [Mary] knew, in short, that Jesus was the Messiah, and it is not unlikely that she now tried to make him take such action as would show him to all as the Messiah she knew him to be."

10 In 2:1-11, Mary, the mother of Jesus, makes her son aware of the wedding party's need. See Thomaskutty (2016:12; 2017c:59-60); Milne (1993:63). Bennema (2005/2007:38) comments that "[t]he statement that Jesus's mother makes, 'they have no wine' (v. 3), is actually a request for Jesus to do something about it."

11 Köstenberger (2004:92, 96) comments that "Mary may have been a friend of the family, helping behind the scenes."

When Jesus tells Mary (v.4) and his brothers (7:6) that his hour has not yet come, the reader can infer a conflict within his family set-up about the concept of hour.<sup>12</sup> While the hour of his earthly family members is scheduled according to worldly standards (7:6b), Jesus works according to the hour of his Father in heaven. The story should also be viewed from the cultural dynamics of “honor and shame” (Neyrey 2007:16-21). While the so-called honourable are seated at the table as guests, a woman, in the role of a host, is concerned about extending hospitality to them and sustaining the dignity of the family. As wine was metaphorically equated to joy in Jewish culture, she is instrumental in bringing the lost joy of the family back in place.<sup>13</sup> Verse 12 also mentions Jesus’ going down to Capernaum with his mother, brothers, and disciples and their staying together for a few days.<sup>14</sup> While Mary’s trust in, and devotion to Jesus are conspicuous in verses 2:1-5 and 19:25-27, his brothers’ unbelief is made obvious in verse 7:1-9.

On a second occasion, Mary appears near Jesus’ cross (19:25-27). As the narrator positions her presence right at the beginning and the end of Jesus’ public ministry, the reader can conjecture her association with Jesus throughout the Johannine story (Milne 1993:278; Calvin 1553:53). In 2:1-11, the suspense concerning Jesus’ relationship with his “worldly mother” is resolved when Jesus’ “hour” comes into a full circle in 19:25-27.<sup>15</sup> While she appears in the Galilean context for the first time in 2:1-11, she appears in the Judean setting in 19:25-27. As Jesus was at the point of a shameful death, standing near the cross was also considered

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12 Neyrey (2007:63) observes that, “[w]hen Jesus declares that ‘my hour has not yet come,’ this speaks of God’s providential orchestration of Jesus’s high status as he returns to God and glory.” For more syntactical aspects of verse 4, see Wallace (1996:150-151).

13 Borchert (1996:155) mentions the following: “In the context of the wedding, which normally was a combination public-private affair, the two worlds often merged. In this particular case how Jesus’s mother became involved in this wedding is not explained.” Milne (1993:63) comments that “Mary’s sharing her dilemma with Jesus was possibly a habit bred of long years of family dependence, in the apparent absence of Joseph (Mark 6:3).” See Brown (1966:97-99); McReynolds (1995:446).

14 Brashler (1992:3:820) states that “John 2:12 mentions that the brothers of Jesus accompanied him to Capernaum and they later tauntingly suggest that Jesus should publicly demonstrate his great deeds at the Feast of Tabernacles (7:3, 5, 10).”

15 Coloe (2013:207) states that “[t]he importance of her relationship as mother of Jesus, in this Gospel, will only be revealed in ‘the Hour.’ The Cana miracle happens, but Jesus’s apparent reprimand creates a puzzle that will not be resolved until the Passion.”

shameful.<sup>16</sup> Jesus' brothers are settled in Galilee (7:1-9) and there is no mention about their presence near the cross.<sup>17</sup> Mary's association with the crucified Jesus is intriguing. Jesus tells his lonely mother, "Woman, here is your son" (19:26), and thus he extends his care and protection to her.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it is surprising that there was no second view from his brothers when Jesus entrusted their mother under the care of the Beloved Disciple. According to Stagg (1978:236),

[h]is brothers in the flesh were not there; but for Jesus a 'soul brother' was there who could be a 'son' to Mary and Mary a 'mother' to him.

The Johannine narrator does not indicate the role and status of James, the so-called brother of Jesus,<sup>19</sup> and Joseph, the father (1:45; 6:42), at this point.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the Beloved Disciple is responsible for taking care of his Lord's mother (v. 27; Moloney 1989/1998:503). According to Morris (1995:718), "[i]t is perhaps a little strange that Jesus commends Mary to the beloved disciple rather than to his brothers. But they did not believe in him (7:5) and Mary did."<sup>21</sup> Jesus' mother was welcomed into

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16 Stibbe (1993:44) mentions that "Jesus's reference to his 'hour' here (the hour of his return to the Father, embracing his death), links the Cana episode to the crucifixion where the mother of Jesus is also present."

17 The Synoptics also associate the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Galilean context. See Mark 6:3 = Matthew 13:56; Mark 3:31-32 = Matthew 12:42 and Luke 8:19-20 (Brashler 1992:819).

18 It is stated that her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, was with her. Beasley-Murray (1999:349) comments that "[h]is [Jesus's] brief words to his mother and the disciple are not just a commendation or suggestion; they are more like a testamentary disposition, in language reminiscent of adoption."

19 Gillman (1992:620) reports different views. Some hold, following the most normal interpretation of the NT language, that James was a son of Joseph and Mary, evidently born after Jesus. Others, with reference to various apocryphal sources, maintain that James was an older foster brother of Jesus, a son of Joseph by a previous marriage. A third interpretation theorises that James and Jesus as brothers were, according to Semitic idiom, cousins.

20 Porter (1992:974) mentions that, "[a]part from John (1:45; 6:42), where Jesus is twice referred to as the 'son of Joseph,' Joseph is only mentioned in the birth and childhood stories of Jesus."

21 Borchert (2002:269) mentions that "[t]he traditional role of the oldest son in a Jewish family was to provide for the care of the mother when the husband or father of the house was no longer around to care for the mother. It seems clear that Jesus here fulfilled his family responsibility as a dutiful son." Brashler (1992:3:820) states that "Acts 1:14 ... includes the brothers of Jesus as part of a group praying together after the crucifixion with the 11 disciples and some women, including Jesus mother Mary."

the company of the believing rather than being under the care of her unbelieving children.<sup>22</sup> Mary's character demonstrates her leadership role at the wedding place and her deep devotion to Jesus near the cross.

## 2.2 The Samaritan woman (4:1-26, 39-42)

Jesus crosses the existing social, racial, and moral barriers when he engages in a dialogue with the Samaritan woman (4:1-26).<sup>23</sup> In his analysis of the pericope, Stibbe (1993:66-67) observes both *realistic* and *representative* aspects in the portrayal of the woman.<sup>24</sup> In the episode, she is presented in a more favourable light than her male counterparts (Stibbe 1993:62).<sup>25</sup> The woman's coming to the well at midday and her presence in the scorching sun reflect her social status as a person who was rejected in society due to her shameful past (vv. 16-18; Kanagaraj 2005:142). After crossing all the human-made boundaries, Jesus asks her for a drink (v. 7). The woman's surprising answer to Jesus enables the reader to understand how the Jews have treated the Samaritans for centuries (v. 9).<sup>26</sup> As a representative figure, her response to Jesus cannot be considered insignificant; rather, it must be construed as her voice for justice and equality with a gnomic and universal intent.<sup>27</sup> Jesus' response concerning the living water and her misunderstood response reveal the conceptual conflict between Jesus' eternal perspective and her temporal point of view (vv. 10-12).

Jesus' speech in verse 10 makes it obvious that his interlocutor was unaware of God's gift and its provider (Köstenberger 2004:149-150). But her inquisitive nature enables Jesus to make his identity progressively

22 Culpepper (1983:133) views Mary as symbolically representing Judaism, Jewish Christianity, the new Eve, and the church. See Kanagaraj (2005:98).

23 For more details about Samaria and Samaritans, see Purvis (1992:914-921); Anderson (1992:940-947); Thomaskutty (2016:12).

24 The woman appears as a realistic person without any mask and representative value as the narrator presents her even without mentioning her name.

25 The dialogue between Jesus and the woman educates about the universal, inter-religious and cross-cultural mission initiatives as the protagonist breaks the ethnic, cultural, religious, and sexual boundaries in order to speak and engage in the *Missio Dei*. See Kok (2010:168); Thomaskutty (2015:167-168).

26 Williamson (1992:728) comments that "[t]he parenthetical comment in verse 9 about Jewish-Samaritan relations following the woman's expression of surprise that Jesus should ask her for a drink is probably not a general statement, but reflects a halakhic ruling (mid-first century?) that 'the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle' (*b. Nid.* 31b) and hence that the vessels which they handle are unclean." See also Neyrey (2003:110).

27 In this instance, "gnomic" means "timeless" facts, which works efficaciously with an "everywhere" and "ever" sense. See Thomaskutty (2017b:66); Brown (1966:168-172); Köstenberger (2004:149).

known to her. The conversation reveals the underlying contrast between Jacob's well and Jesus' provision of the water that gushes up to eternal life (vv. 12-14). In verse 15, the woman's perplexity is once again made explicit, as she expresses her views from a parochial perspective (Bennema 2009:88). The *all-knowing* perspective of Jesus and the *unknowing* perspective of the woman are in sharp contrast in the story. In verses 7-15, the metaphor of water is used to distinguish between the "from above" and "from below" perspectives. Even when she was continually misunderstanding, she was in a progressive mode in her encounter with Jesus (Bennema 2009:88). Verses 16-19 focus on the woman's personal identity. When Jesus enquires about her husband, she responds to him that she does not have one (vv. 16-17). Jesus mentions the realities behind her personal life (v. 18) and she acknowledges him as a prophet (v. 19).<sup>28</sup>

The dialogue develops further as the theme shifts from "water" (vv. 7-15) and "woman" (and her personal identity, vv. 16-19) to the theme of "worship" (vv. 20-26; Thomaskutty 2015:145-147). The woman reflects her wider knowledge in matters of worship, as she distinguishes between her ancestors' worship on "this mountain" and the worship of the Jews in Jerusalem (v. 20; Morris 1995:237). Jesus' response directs her attention away from the "first space" (Mount Gerizim) and the "second space" (Jerusalem) to a "third space" ("worship in spirit and in truth," v. 23; Thomaskutty 2015:147-149; Brown 1966:180-181). Jesus' intention of the "worship in spirit and in truth" is to direct her attention toward the experience of eternal life. This equips her to express her expectation and knowledge about the coming Messiah (v. 25).<sup>29</sup> Borchert (1996/2002:209) states that

[t]he woman's expectation of the coming messianic figure was of one who would reveal 'all things,' consistent with the Samaritan expectation of a Mosaic-like Prophet or *Taheb* (Keener 2003:619-620).

The woman's statement about her expectation persuades Jesus to reveal his messianic identity (v. 26; Borchert 1996/2002:209-210). Thus, the

28 Moloney (1989/1998:131-132) states that "[m]uch is made of the five husbands, a number beyond the possibilities allowed by Jewish practice, as a possible symbolic use of the number five to refer to the five gods of Samaria (cf. *Ant.* 9.288), or the five books of the Samaritan Pentateuch, or the five foreign cities that brought their gods with them (cf. 2 Kings 17:27-31)." See also Brown (1966:171); Carson (1992:221).

29 Morris (1995:236) comments that "[t]he Samaritans acknowledged no prophet after Moses other than the one spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:18, and him they regarded as the Messiah. For her to speak of Jesus as a prophet was thus to move into the area of messianic speculation."

dialogue as a whole develops in a triadic fashion: the “water” that Jesus provides is introduced (vv. 7-15); the “woman” and her personal identity are revealed (vv. 16-19), and the “worship in spirit and in truth” is prophesied (vv. 20-26; Thomaskutty 2015:145-147).

The water jar that the woman leaves is a *prop*.<sup>30</sup> It symbolically speaks of her leaving the worldly water in order to proclaim about the living water (v. 28). The woman proclaims about Jesus to her own people in a persuasive manner (v. 29) and drives them from the city to the saviour (v. 30; see Scholer 1992:883, 886).<sup>31</sup> Culpepper (1983:137) comments that “[t]he woman becomes a missionary to her people. She evokes, therefore, the mission to the Samaritans.” The narrator states that many Samaritans from the city believed in Jesus because of her word about him (v. 39).<sup>32</sup> After their personal encounter with Jesus, the Samaritans are believing not only because of the woman’s words, but also because of their own personal witness about him (vv. 40-42; Anderson 1992:5:940-947; Köstenberger 2004:163-164).<sup>33</sup>

The woman, who had been confined to her own house, realised a sense of freedom after her encounter with Jesus to face her own people and introduce the saviour to them (Kanagaraj 2001:63-64; Chakkuvarackal 2002:71). Their final utterance that Jesus is “truly the Saviour of the World” is the paramount utterance of the story (v. 42b).<sup>34</sup> Although the woman is considered an outsider, an unclean, and shameless person, she is a representative character who turns to be a proclaimer.<sup>35</sup>

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30 The woman’s leaving of the “water jar” is a *prop* used to reveal the symbolic activity of leaving “Jacob’s water” and proclaiming the “living water.” See Thomaskutty (2015:152).

31 See also Köstenberger (2004:152-154); Keener (2003:622).

32 Bauckham (2002:292) states that, “[t]hough the Samaritan woman in John 4 is not a model of respectable women’s behavior, there is probably nothing improper about the way she spreads her news throughout her village (John 4:28-30, 39).”

33 Stagg (1978:237) comments that, “[w]ith dramatic skill, the storyteller moves the Samaritan woman from a very shady character to one of great stature. Next to Jesus, she dominates the story.”

34 The inter-religious nature of the dialogue sharpens the woman’s existent views and directs her to the Saviour of the World. See Koester (1990:665-680); Thomaskutty (2017b:66).

35 According to Neyrey (2007:95), “[t]he cultural world of the Gospel highly valued female sexual exclusivity, the core of a female’s virtue and worth. Thus a female with five husbands and a current companion not her spouse mocks this criterion; hardly virtuous, she is instead a *sinner*, an *adulterous*, a *shameless person*.”

### 2.3 Martha and Mary of Bethany (11:1-45; 12:1-8)

The sisters in 11:1-45 and 12:1-8 reflect their devotion to Jesus and demonstrate their unique model of discipleship. Not only was Bethany known in their names, but Lazarus is also introduced as their brother.<sup>36</sup> While the disturbed sisters sent a message to Jesus about Lazarus' illness (v. 3), they showed their trust in him and Jesus showed his love for the family. Their message persuades Jesus to declare one of his glorification motifs in verse 4 (Borchert 1996:350). While Martha went out to meet Jesus, Mary stayed at home deeply distressed (v. 20; Brown 1966:423). In both Luke and John, Martha is represented primarily as a rather determined worker (Luke 10:41; John 12:2) and Mary as the worshipful one (Luke 10:39, 42; John 11:2; 12:3).<sup>37</sup> Verses 20-27 focus on Martha as she engages in a dialogue with Jesus.<sup>38</sup> She begins the conversation with Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 21).<sup>39</sup> She is assured of the fact that God can give whatever Jesus asks (v. 22). While Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again in the present life, she states her assurance about its happening on the last day (vv. 23-24; Köstenberger 2004:334-335).

Martha's utterances reflect her complete trust in Jesus, but she is oriented toward the "future" rather than the "present". Jesus reveals his identity: "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25; Borchert 1996:356).<sup>40</sup> On one occasion when Jesus tells her about the necessity to believe (vv. 25b-26), she affirms her faith in a most profound fashion, addressing

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36 Köstenberger (2004:326) states that "Martha was the older of the two, since she acts as the hostess in the Lukan passage". See Stagg (1978:238); Luke 10:38-42.

37 Stibbe (1993:125) states that "[s]he [Martha] goes out alone to meet Jesus and, like the Samaritan woman, is portrayed as one who grows in faith and understanding." See also Borchert (1996:349).

38 Neyrey (2007:197) states: "We know that Martha is a 'beloved' disciple along with her sister and brother. Like the Samaritan woman Jesus catechizes her, moving her from commonplace notions of afterlife to elite knowledge of Jesus as a unique source of imperishability: 'I am the resurrection and the life.'"

39 Bruce (1983:243) mentions that "Martha uses the language of faith. If Jesus had been there at the time, Lazarus would not have died: this is not a complaint; it is an expression of her faith in Jesus's power. It is the same faith that finds voice in her assurance that God will grant Jesus whatever request he makes."

40 Dodd (1952:366) states: "Now the resurrection to which vv. 28-29 refer is the general resurrection 'on the last day' (cf. 6:54); but the raising of Lazarus is set in contrast with the resurrection on the last day, to which Martha had pinned her faith."

him as “Lord,” “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “the one coming into the world” (v. 27).<sup>41</sup> Köstenberger (2004:336) states that

Martha’s almost creed-like confession of Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of God – the one who is coming into the world’ strikingly anticipates the purpose statement at the end of the Gospel of John 20:30-31.<sup>42</sup>

Martha’s return home and her call of Mary reflect her witnessing attitude (v. 28).<sup>43</sup> In performing this, she moves from being a confessor to being a witness (Brant 2011:175-176; Stibbe 1993:125).

Mary is introduced as the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair (vv. 11:2; 12:1-8).<sup>44</sup> She kneels down in front of Jesus and uses the same utterance Martha used in verse 21 (v. 32). This shows that the declaration “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have been died” (vv. 21, 32) was their family confession. Jesus was deeply moved and his spirit greatly disturbed when he saw Mary and the people weeping (v. 33; Brown 1966:424-425).<sup>45</sup> According to Borchert (1996:359),

Mary expressed her loss differently from Martha. Mary’s tears have in fact taken the place of most of Martha’s words (Culpepper 1983:140-142; Stibbe 1993:126).

Jesus’ inner movements and outer expressions enable the Jews to ponder the depth of his love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (vv. 35-37; Brown 1966:424-425). After introducing Mary’s entry on the stage, Martha once again appears as a dialogue partner with Jesus. Upon Jesus’ request to move the stone from the entrance, Martha responds by mentioning the time when Lazarus’ body was laid inside the tomb and the aspect of stent (v. 39; Bruce 1983:247-248). At that point, Jesus once again stabilises Martha’s belief prepares her to see the glory of God (v. 40).<sup>46</sup> While Martha

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41 Neyrey (2007:196) states that, “[i]n a Gospel where confessions are rare and reserved for elite people, Martha declares that she ‘knows’ that Jesus is Messiah, Son of God, and the one coming into the world.”

42 Neyrey (2007:197) mentions that “the narrative attributes to Martha very high status by virtue of Jesus’s revelations, but not a formal role.”

43 Mary and the people consoling her go to the place where Jesus was. The people consoled her and, following her, thought that she was going to weep at the tomb (v. 31).

44 Esler & Piper (2006:17-22) attempt to understand Lazarus, Mary and Martha as prototypes of identity for followers of Christ. See also Thomaskutty (2017c:61).

45 See Köstenberger (2004:339); Neyrey (2007:198-199).

46 As the episode begins with a glory proposal (v. 4) and ends with a glory fulfilment, it can be considered a *glory-focused revelatory dialogue*. See Thomaskutty (2015:368-404); Brant (2011:176); Culpepper (1983:140-142); Witherington (1995:204).

expresses her faith based on her “future” eschatological hope, Jesus shapes her faith based on the “present” realities. The sisters’ message to Jesus (v. 3), their family confession (vv. 21, 32), constant conversation, expression of emotion, and growth in faith in Jesus makes him glorify the name of the Father (vv. 40; 4; Culpepper 1983:140-142; Thomaskutty 2015:403). Stagg (1978:238) states that

John gives great prominence to Mary and Martha throughout the story. Jesus dominates the story, but otherwise the sisters command the center of the stage.

Martha and Mary are, in their own way, genuine disciples and demonstrate their faith in Jesus (Thomaskutty 2015:400-404).

In 12:1-8, the sisters, along with their brother who was raised from death, enter the stage once again (Witherington 1995:203-205; Stagg 1978:238-239). The three members of the family are involved in different ways in the story: Martha is serving (v. 2a);<sup>47</sup> Mary anoints the feet of Jesus (v. 3), and Lazarus is reclining at the table with the guests (v. 2b; Dodd 1952:368-370). The narrator foregrounds the character of Mary over against Judas Iscariot.

There are five contrasts between Judas Iscariot (a male disciple) and Mary of Bethany (a follower of Jesus): while Judas *speaks* like a concerned person (vv. 4-5), Mary *acts* in a gentle way (v. 3); while Judas betrays Jesus for *thirty* pieces of silver (Matt. 26:15), Mary spends *three hundred* denarii and shows her superabundant generosity (v. 5; Schnackenburg 1980:3:368); while Judas *fills his heart* with evil thoughts (vv. 5-6), the woman *fills the home* with the fragrance of perfume (v. 3b); while Judas, as a *guest*, accuses the woman, Mary is lavishly an honourable *host*, and, while Judas betrays Jesus which led to his *arrest* (18:2), Mary prepared herself for the day of her master’s *burial* (v. 7; Blomberg 2001:175-178). Schnackenburg (1980:370) comments that

Mary has recognized the dignity and greatness of Jesus and, in an exemplary action, has shown the others who they have in their midst.

While special attention is paid to Martha in Chapter 11, Mary receives more attention in 12:1-8. The role and status of both Martha and Mary are established above several of the male characters in the Gospel of John (Brant 2011:179-180). Both of them are paradigms for ideal discipleship and for effective leadership, because they exhibit the qualities of devotion,

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47 Schnackenburg (1980:366) states that “[t]he remark about Martha’s waiting at the table resembles Luke 10:40, but the evangelist may also have been familiar with this tradition in some way.”

sacrificial attitude, service, belief in Jesus, and apostolic witness.<sup>48</sup> They are closely bound to Christ and to his mission of accomplishing God's redemptive plan (Kanagaraj 2001:70).

## 2.4 Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:1-2, 11-18)

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene appears for the first time in the company of a group of women under the cross, namely the mother of Jesus, her sister, and Clopas' wife. Mary's presence reveals her association with some of the significant women of the early Jesus movement (19:25). Her appearance is revealed in 20:1-2 and 20:11-18 during the post-resurrection period. At Jesus' tomb, Mary witnesses that the stone had already been removed from its entrance (v. 1; Schnackenburg 1980:307-308). She reports to Peter and the Beloved Disciple that Jesus' body has been taken away from the tomb. Brant (2011:266) comments that

[a] woman who comes alone in darkness to such a place abandons propriety and safety in order to commemorate Jesus with her grief. John represents her anxiety by focalizing the setting through her eyes: she sees the stone has been removed from the tomb (20:1).

Her statement in verse 2, "we do not know where they have laid him," mentions her misapprehension. After testifying about the empty tomb to the disciples, the woman stands outside the tomb and weeps (v. 11).<sup>49</sup> This incident reveals her lamenting attitude when it was not expected from her.<sup>50</sup> Like Jesus was weeping outside the tomb of Lazarus (11:35), Mary Magdalene weeps outside her Lord's tomb.<sup>51</sup> As Stibbe (1993:205) states: "This echo effect suggests a Christ-like quality to Mary's characterization." The conversation between the woman and the angels makes it once again

48 Witherington (1995:207) states that "Mary also seems to be assuming the role of a servant, for it was the servant's task to anoint the master's feet when he came off the dusty highways of Judea."

49 Witherington (1995:330) observes: "From the very beginning of this story in v. 11, we can perceive a gradual process of revelation to Mary, which goes for naught until the crucial moment of recognition and the even more crucial teaching that follows it." See also Kanagaraj (2005:643-649).

50 Moloney (1989/1998:527) states that "[t]he introduction of Mary at the tomb is strange. In almost every case the narrator of the Fourth Gospel indicates movement of characters from one place to another (e.g., 2:1, 13; 3:22; 4:3-6; 5:1; 6:1; 7:10; 8:59; 10:22; 11:5, 17, 38, 54; 12:1, 12, 26b). The present state of the text is probably the result of the insertion of the passage on the two disciples into what was originally a Mary Magdalene story."

51 Schnackenburg (1980:315) mentions that "[h]er [Mary's] 'weeping' is not the lament for the dead, but is an expression of her personal pain and her sadness, that she does not find her dead Lord."

explicit that she was deeply disturbed within (vv. 12-13). Her devotion to Jesus is made clear as she attempts to regain the corpse of her Lord (Culpepper 1983:144).<sup>52</sup> Her turning around to see and unrecognition of the identity of Jesus reveal some of the realistic aspects of Johannine storytelling (Schnackenburg 1980:314-320).<sup>53</sup>

The character of Mary captures the reader's attention, as she progresses in her faith in Jesus. There are several reasons for her unrecognition of Jesus in verse 14: as Mary was settled in her mundane and "from below" perception that Jesus was indeed dead, she was unable to understand the supernatural and "from above" aspects; she already witnessed the death of Jesus, noticed that the stone was rolled away, perceived that the body was taken from there, and saw that the disciples themselves confirmed it, and the tears from her eyes would have blurred her eyes from recognising Jesus (v. 14; Bauckham 2002:262-276). While Jesus asks her the reason behind her weeping and about the identity of the person whom she seeks, she responds naturally (v. 15). Mary's response to the disciples (v. 2b), to the angels (v. 13b), and to Jesus (v. 15b) reflects her settled view that someone removed Jesus' body from the site.<sup>54</sup> Mary's words and actions fill the narrative with a great deal of reality effects (Jones 2008:58-59; Bennema 2005/2007:213-215).

In verse 16, John narrates that Jesus calls the woman by her name (that is, "Mary") and that she recognises him in return (that is, *Παββουι* in v. 16; Neyrey 2007:321-325). Jesus' address and her response reflect the acceptance and recognition of the story (Brant 2011:270).<sup>55</sup> As Jesus' ascension to the Father is imminent, he requests the woman not to cling onto him (v. 17a). The resurrected Jesus appoints Mary as the first person to proclaim the good news to the disciples and to others (v. 18a; Culpepper 1983:144; Jones 2008:58-59). The woman's personal conviction and proclamation ("I have seen the Lord") to the disciples later becomes the early Christian community's conviction and proclamation ("We have seen the Lord," v. 25a; Stibbe 1993:204-206). Jesus appoints Mary as a witness

52 Stagg (1978:239) comments that "[h]er [Mary's] single-hearted devotion even when it appeared that all was lost is portrayed in her manner and words."

53 Stibbe (1993:205) mentions that "[s]he [Mary] is portrayed in a stylized fashion."

54 Bruce (1983:387) states that "Mary was determined to find out what had happened to the body of Jesus; she reckoned, probably, that if she stayed around someone might come along who could give her the information she wanted."

55 Moloney (2007:528) observes that "[t]he name Jesus calls Mary and her response are Greek transliterations of Aramaic, although the narrator explains that it is Hebrew. There is a level of intimacy implied by the recourse to an original language in both the naming and the response." See Blomberg (2001:264).

to announce the good news of his resurrection and his imminent ascension to the Father (Bennema 2005/2007:214; Beasley-Murray 1999:376). Mary's proclamation to the male disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18), has apostolic significance (Kanagaraj 2001:37; Chakkuvarackal 2002:72). This would have persuaded many to hail her as an "apostle to the apostles" (Thomaskutty 2017:61; Haskins 1993:55-94).

### 3. JOHANNINE WOMEN IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

As analysed and identified earlier, Johannine women show devotion to Jesus and affirm their faith with profundity more so than some of their male counterparts (Beirne 2003:1-41). As part of the community of John, they seemingly enjoyed considerable freedom in exercising their spirituality, expressing views openly in public places, and developing faith in Jesus as a powerful means to escape from their parochial worldviews (Witherington 1988:175-182). Jesus' position as the protagonist of the story and the Johannine community's reinterpretation of the events from the *Sitz-im-Leben Jesu* to address the existential struggles of the *Sitz-im-Leben Kirche* enable the narrator to sustain some of the values and virtues of the Jesus movement.<sup>56</sup>

John supports women's representation on various levels of life: Jesus' mother appears in the context of both a celebrative mood (2:1-5) and a lamenting situation (19:25-27); the unnamed woman appears at a public well in the Samaritan context (4:1-42); Martha and Mary both appear in a bereaving situation (11:1-44) as well as in a context in which they show superabundant generosity (12:1-8), and Mary Magdalene laments at the tomb of Jesus and proclaims the resurrected Jesus (20:1-2, 11-18; Witherington 1988:175-182). These indications reveal that Johannine women exercised their faith in both the public and the private sectors of life. Their representation of various levels in the life of Jesus and their reinterpretation of the quintessential life of the Johannine community reveal their openness, even as far as the women's status and role are concerned.<sup>57</sup> In the process of interpreting John in the Indian context, one needs to adopt a third life situation (*Sitz-im-Leben Indien*), in order to further re-interpret the story of the Gospel of John (Thomaskutty 2017:158; Martyn 1968:24-151).

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56 These expressions mean the life situation of Jesus and the life situation/s of the early Christian community/ies. See Marxen (1959/1969).

57 John, the narrator, captures the story of Jesus as the protagonist in order to re-tell and re-interpret that with greater efficacy. See Thomaskutty (2017a:141).

In the Indian context, atrocities against women are on the rise and the rights of women are not protected. Women are considered inferior to men and are treated with low esteem. These contextual realities persuade the attention of the reader of the Gospel of John to view the text from a *gnomic* rather than a *descriptive* perspective.<sup>58</sup> While Martyn perceives the Gospel of John as a *two-level* drama, an Indian reader who interprets the text from her/his existential realities can better understand it as a *tri-level* drama (Thomaskutty 2017:158). John frequently describes Jesus as empowering women, and contrasting their belief with the unfaithfulness of men (Kanagaraj 2001:60-61). In the Indian context, the empowerment of women is of significant concern, as they are often illiterate, have no political power or voice in religion, and are ostracised by leading elements of society.

Like the Johannine women, the women of modern India can be effective agents of liberation and transformation (Thomaskutty 2016:13). The following roles of Johannine women are influential in the Indian context. As Mary the mother of Jesus was playing significant roles at the wedding banquet and near the cross, Indian women should take the initiative to lead the country in order to fulfil divine tasks; as the woman at the well was instrumental in bringing the gospel to her own people, the village women of India can play transformative roles in their respective areas of life; as Martha and Mary were believing and ministering to Jesus in Bethany, Indian women should take the challenges in fostering the missionary tasks and ministerial duties entrusted unto them, and as Mary Magdalene was sharing the good news of Jesus' resurrection with her male counterparts, the women of India should take active steps in propagating the gospel (Thomaskutty 2017:62). Women figures such as Pandita Ramabhai (1858-1922), Mother Teresa, and others devoted themselves to the tasks of Christ and used their intrinsic power in leadership and missional engagements. They followed the path of Johannine women and introduced radical transformation in their respective areas of life (Chakkuvarackal 2002:88).

Discriminatory thought and practices against women persist in Indian society, although the Indian Constitution guarantees equality of sexes. India is also a signatory to the UN Charter affirming equal rights (Das 2001:160). Against such contextual realities, the experiences of the Johannine women and the Johannine community suggest alternative views. The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus resulted in her acquiring greater knowledge. This unique experience enabled her to lead

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58 While *descriptive linguistic phenomena* guide the reader to the *there and then* aspects, *gnomic linguistic phenomena* guide the reader to the *everywhere and ever* perspective. See Thomaskutty (2017b:64-68).

her people toward the “true Saviour of the World.” The Samaritan woman’s involvements can be introduced as a paradigm for Indian women so that they may develop themselves from misunderstanding situations to greater understanding and awareness of the “past,” to a transformative living in the “present,” and emphasising the older traditions to life-affirming newer experiences. Martha and Mary of Bethany can serve as models to move away from future-oriented eschatological hopes to present-affirming and living experiences. The sisters’ positive qualities such as hospitality, generosity, and devotion to Christ should be exercised for transformative living within the contemporary Indian context.

Mary Magdalene outsmarts her male counterparts as she exemplified her devotion to Jesus by means of proclamations and actions. As she was demonstrating her most profound proclamation, keeping up fellowship with the community of God and being dynamically involved around and beyond Jesus’ tomb, her character can be hailed as a model for women in oppressive socio-religious structures. Just as these Johannine women exemplified their leadership roles, devotion to Jesus, progress in understanding Jesus, and witnessing Christ in diverse walks of life, Indian women in general can demonstrate their intrinsic qualities in order to transform themselves and society. Chennattu (2017:200) proposes that Indian interpreters of the text should emphasise “an ethics of giving life in abundance as a hermeneutical key” for interpreting John. She further states that

such a premise presupposes a principle of combined radical equality and inclusiveness and a process of dialogue at all levels (Chennattu 2017:200).

Chennattu’s suggestion is significant in the Indian context as the people as a whole expect a paradigm to liberate the ostracised communities of the nation.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above analysis shows the character of women in the Gospel of John in relation to Jesus and other characters of the macro-story. Although they were considered powerless in their own socio-religious and politico-cultural contexts, they assume power within both the *Sitz-im-Leben Jesu* and the *Sitz-im-Leben Kirche*. In this study, the researcher employed the method of a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to foreground the characters within the narrative annals of John. As part of the Johannine community, the women in John enjoyed considerable freedom. Mary, the

Mother of Jesus, demonstrates her leadership quality at the wedding in Cana and her deep devotion to Jesus near the cross. Although the woman at the well was, by nature, misunderstanding and parochial, her progress in realising the prophet Messiah and guiding Samaritans toward the “true Saviour of the world” is persuasive. Martha and Mary of Bethany show their family confession that, if Jesus were with them, Lazarus would not have died. They progress in their faith in, and devotion to Jesus. While Martha shifts from her future-oriented eschatological hope to the present-oriented realisation of the Messianic age, Mary demonstrates her identity through her superabundant generosity.

Mary Magdalene’s speeches and actions reveal that she was a paradigmatic personality for the early Christian communities, including the male characters of the story. Her personal proclamation (“I have seen the Lord”) became the community proclamation (“We have seen the Lord”). In their encounter with Jesus, all these women showed their love for, and devotion to their Lord. They all used their intrinsic “woman power” to come out of their narrow confines of life. These women of the Gospel of John can be viewed as paradigms in the Indian context, as the women of India are eagerly awaiting a message of liberation and transformation.

By developing a hermeneutics of suspicion and an Indian feminist methodology, today’s Indian feminists should foster gnomic interpretative strategies over against the prevailing descriptive strategies. As Jesus liberated women from the confines of social, religious, geographical, moral, and sexual barriers and the women of John are living examples of such a movement, one should attempt, within the contemporary Indian context, to develop new hermeneutical keys in order to unlock the grand narratives of the text.

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