

## Reimagining Biblical Women: Deconstructing Patriarchal Power Relations in Jeet Thayil's 'Names of the Women' through a Feminist Lens

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**Abstract:** Creating a counter-culture through literary spaces has been a mark of a post-modern society, where the exchange of ideas is possible by deconstructing established power relations. Biblical retellings highlight the need to reassess the representation of women in the Bible. Such retellings offer a newer perspective and invite the reader to create a new identity for Biblical women. Jeet Thayil's *Names of the Women* questions the established patriarchal power relations of the New Testament. Thayil retells the stories of fifteen women who were presented as trivial characters in the scriptural spaces. This paper argues that when the stories are told from women's perspectives, their power definitions attain a newfound realm and thus become a tool for further readings and empowerment. Employing the Biblical feminist framework, this paper provides insights into reclaiming women's agency, power and leadership in the New Testament from a feminist perspective.

**Keywords:** Jeet Thayil, Biblical Women, Feminism, Patriarchy, Christianity.

### Introduction

Biblical retellings always emerge as the revision of the Bible. Every retelling indicates different meanings and perspectives to interpret the meta narrative of. As Exum asserts, Retellings are interpretations of texts, and as such, they merit study for their unique insights into and culturally specific perspectives on the texts they represent <sup>1</sup>. Biblical retellings often do not merely narrate an old story from a fresh perspective, but effectively interpret the fault lines of the accepted narrative. One of the significant factors of such retellings is not to minimise the sanctity of the Holy Scripture, rather to emphasise the unequal relationship between meta- and micro-narratives. Micro-narratives suggest the constant shifting of power in a post-modern society invoking Lyotard's idea of questioning the meta-narrative<sup>2</sup>. Historical truth, objectivity, facts, events and knowledge are all targets for revision <sup>3</sup>. Hence, many Biblical retellings reassess what Biblical representations ignored in the past. The constructed history of the past is interconnected with the emergence of

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<sup>1</sup>Exum, Cheryl, *The Bible in Literature, Music, art and Film*: Reprinted from *Biblical Interpretation* Volume 15,4-5 (ISBN 9789004165724), RILL, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/christuniversity-ebooks/detail.action?docID=468056>. Created from christuniversity-ebooks on 2023-05-29 04:56:10.

<sup>2</sup>Lyotard, *Post Modern condition* xxiv

<sup>3</sup>Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling* :and Southgate, History have excellent discussions on these matters

Biblical retellings. Because all discourse is a dialogue with the past, and all literature is intertextual and intermixed<sup>4</sup>.

## 1. Biblical Historical Fiction in Indian Scenario

The legacy of Indian writers in Biblical historical fiction is minimal. Therefore, Jeet Thayil's novel, *Names of the Women*, deserves a special mention. This is the first attempt by an Indian author of the kind. Notably, it is the first feminist retelling of the Bible in the Indian literary scenario.

Jeet Thayil is a poet, liberalist, fiction writer and musician from the Southern state of Kerala, India. He inherits the literary tradition of writing from his father, TJS George, who was a famous editor and writer<sup>5</sup>. Thayil was educated abroad, which has influenced his liberal ideas presented in his writing. He has four collections of poetry to his credit; *These Errors are Correct* (2008), which won Adithya Academy Award, *English* (2004), *Apocalypse* (1997), and *Gemini* (1992). His first novel *Necropolis* (2012), won the DSC prize for South Asian Literature. Thayil is best known for his debut novel "Necropolis," which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2012. He is known for his distinctive writing style and exploration of themes related to addiction, identity, and urban life<sup>6</sup>. His later novels are *Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017) and *Low* (2020). *Names of the Women* (2021) is his most recent work. He has edited *Bookaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008), *60 Indian Poets* (2008), and one essay collection, *Divided Time: India and the End of Diaspora* (2006).

Whereas, *Names of the Women* (2021) is Thayil's first feminist stand, which essentially introduces the Indian perspective to the contemporary Biblical retelling tradition. Thayil's works often explore marginalised or unconventional characters and their struggles. His writing delves into society's gritty and dark underbelly, exposing the realities of drug addiction, sex work, and the complexities of human relationships. He tackles these subjects with a raw and unflinching approach, challenging societal norms and expectations.

According to Bruce, Jeet Thayil is also a major contributor to the modern art landscape and is inherently critical, sardonic, and oppositional<sup>7</sup>. *Names of the Women* focuses on women who were left out or marginalised from the New Testament and the early days of Christianity. Mistreatment of women is not simply political as it is a misinterpretation of Jesus' teachings. Thayil upends the narrative through his writings to correct the injustice of political systems. He updates the Four Gospels by proposing to rewrite that history in which the disciples are women and thus are subjects of the Gospel. Perhaps unintentionally, this narrative lends credibility to those who believe that Christianity originated as a reformist movement inside Judaism.

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<sup>4</sup>Shepherd, David: "Dialogism". In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *the living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University.

<sup>5</sup>King, Bruce. "Names of the women: by Jeet Thayil, London, Jonathan Cape, 2021, 184 pp.,£ 15.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781787332928." (2022): 141-142.

<sup>6</sup>English-language fiction publishing in India", *Logos* 22, 3 (2011): 26-36.

<sup>7</sup>King, Bruce. "Names of the women: by Jeet Thayil, London, Jonathan Cape, 2021, 184 pp.,£ 15.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781787332928." (2022): 141-142.

The book is sort of a footnote because Thayil frequently ends his chapters with references to his sources<sup>8</sup>. Thayil's women, except Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, all other women were invisible in the traditional patriarchal society of Jesus' time. They don't have an identity of their own, and even in the Gospels, they are used to accentuate the male characters and events from a male point of view. The fact that women tell the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection makes explicit something that ought to have been obvious: that women were constantly present in early Christianity from the time of Christ's birth until his crucifixion and resurrection. Through their eyewitnesses, the Gospel accounts are known to us.

Particularly, Jeet Thayil's novel *Names of the Women*<sup>9</sup> looks at the lives of women who followed Jesus in his crucifixion. He gives voice to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and her sister Martha, Lydia, Susanna, Assia, Salome, Herodias, Ariamma the Cannennite, Shoshamma, and Juana. Marcel's<sup>10</sup> argues that Thayil's narrative examines the New Testament's female characters who have been historically marginalised and misrepresented. This argument correlates with the main thread of the argument of the narrative itself. They were hidden in gospel narratives. The systemic misogyny that has marginalised and misrepresented the female figures in the New Testament is the subject of Thayil's novel.

Latha Antharaman<sup>11</sup> critically evaluates *Names of Women* as a textual space for female voices, those once silenced in history. She employs the word 'prophetic' to emphasise the nature and challenges of the *Names of Women* for its readers. Thayil's book successfully offers new dimensions on gospel women. It rightly positions women's role in Christianity. Arora discusses that the writing process of the *Names of Women* is like digging for unseen faces and voices of women from hidden history. Bhardwaj's<sup>12</sup> review supports the same reading of Arora and critically examines how Thayil debunks the frames of patriarchy in his work by allowing women to speak.

Wouter's<sup>13</sup> review critically examines the construction of the character of Jesus without any heroic aura. In *Names of Women*, Jesus is portrayed as an emotional human

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<sup>8</sup>ibid

<sup>9</sup>Thayil, Jeet. *Names of the Women*. 2021

<sup>10</sup> Theroux, Marcel. "Names of the Women by Jeet Thayil Review – Bible Stories Reclaimed." *The Guardian*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/24/names-of-the-women-by-jeet-thayil-review-bible-stories-reclaimed>.

<sup>11</sup>Anantharaman, Latha. "Latha Anantharaman Reviews Jeet Thayil's 'Names of the Women,'" May 23, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/the-gospel-according-to-the-women-latha-anantharaman-reviews-jeet-thayils-names-of-the-women/article34606399.ece>.

<sup>12</sup>Bhardwaj, Ashutosh, "A Sacred Retelling | Book Review — Names of the Women by Jeet Thayil." *Financial Express*, August 14, 2021. <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/a-sacred-retelling-book-review-names-of-the-women-by-jeet-thayil/2310855/>.

<sup>13</sup> Wouter, Goodreads. "Names of the Women," n.d. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/53488280-names-of-the-women>.

being who is accompanied by women in his journey to Calvary, which was against the ideologies of Jewish culture. Fi Ward<sup>14</sup> critically analyses that *Names of Women* disturbs the reader in how the author introduces paradigm shifts in character perspectives. Thayil's women and their stories strengthen faith, and their retelling can bring back people who have faith<sup>15</sup>. The narration of the text deserves special attention. Stuart Kelly<sup>16</sup> argues that the narrative style shows the complexity and challenges of the text. Thayil employs first-person narrative for all voices in the texts. Jesus' voice is interwoven in a sandwich model, similar to the postmodern method Loris Lessing used in her *Golden Notebook*. Watkin's discussion on the *Names of Women* focuses on reassessing women's identity from scriptural spaces. The scope of Thayil's work does not depend on its use of shifts in point of view, but in recapitulating the existing ideologies with fresh thoughts<sup>17</sup>. With the above critical examiners, Watkin asserts that women were significant during Jesus's time. All the above reviews help to understand the depth of *Names of Women* for a feminist discussion of the novel and to create a new scholarship on Biblical retellings. The omissions, silences, contradictions, and ambiguities in the Gospel are regularly brought up in all literature evaluations. Thayil's innovative retellings of women's stories from the New Testament can help with addressing and bringing attention to these<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, there isn't any particular scholarship in the literary field that would highlight Thayil's strategy in his retelling to close the representational gaps in the Gospel. This paper uses the framework of Biblical feminism to outline this specific gap.

## II. Literature Review

The second session discussed about the related articles of the topic, "Reimagining Biblical Women: Deconstructing Patriarchal Power Relations in Jeet Thayil's 'Names of the Women' through a Feminist Lens".

The article<sup>19</sup> illustrated about the feminist methods of overview from New Testament during the 2000 to 2021 period. Feminist widely expressed here basically on female or women problems presented in biblical text and further New Testament definition provided here as

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<sup>14</sup> Fi Ward, Goodreads. "Names of the Women," n.d. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/53488280-names-of-the-women>.

<sup>15</sup> July, Goodreads. "Names of the Women," n.d. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/53488280-names-of-the-women>.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, Stuart. "Book Review: Names of the Women, by Jeet Thayil." *The Scotsman*, April 1, 2021. <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/book-review-names-of-the-women-by-jeet-thayil-3186276>.

<sup>17</sup> Watkins, Emily. "Names of the Women, by Jeet Thayil, Review: A Long-Overdue Reinstating of Female Voices in the Bible." *Inews.Co.Uk*, April 8, 2021. <https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/names-of-the-women-by-jeet-thayil-review-947171>.

<sup>18</sup> Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 3.2 (May 1983), pp. 131-155 (144).

<sup>19</sup> Howard, M. A. (2021). Recent Feminist Approaches to Interpreting the New Testament. *Currents in Biblical Research*, 20(1), 65-96.

includes as texts which are taken from Canon, New Testament but not greater extracanonical literature or socio-historical studies. Trends in feminist scholarship on Gospel and Acts, Revelation, Epistles and Hebrews and Pauline epistles characterized as collaborative, centered and diverse on female characters in New Testament texts. A greater future for feminist related studies is there which can be studied according to New Testament. Moreover another article<sup>20</sup> discusses about Stephen speech as counter cultural discourse on dislocation and migration. It relates with the biblical story telling in association with polemical upshot and relates with Lucan narrative choices with Mosaic discourse and Jewish Hellenistic literary cycles joined with patriarchal. It focuses on ancient description of dislocation and migration in debates of ethnicity, and identity. The speech has compared with Graeco-Roman contexts, intra-Jewish dimensions and thus Stephen emerges as counter cultural speaker whose sermon pleads to human–divine intersectionality particularly associated with justice cause for ill treated stranger similarly avoids cultural stereotyping based on categories of Graeco-Roman elite standards vs supposedly “non-European profiles”, Jews vs Christians, and Hebrews vs Hellenists.

Alternatively, concept of taboo, feminism, and others are introduced from *The Scarlet Letter* elaborately and viewed in multiple states which are described in the paper<sup>21</sup>. According to letter, from the moment the Hester left the prison to face her punishment at the starting of novel to the example when Hester was in Dimmesdale in forest even till the end, the diverse empowerment range has witnessed from Hester’s side and rejection towards her. It’s able to capture the Hester fierceness resulted to taboo and this taking to consideration the association has described clearly regarding society in which the storey unfolds. Subsequently, Patriarchal mechanism casts a long shadow for woman’s reality in the Church. Exceptional Hebrew female exemplars as well as Jesus’ female disciples overthrew the historically based belief that women are spiritually inferior to men and demonstrate how faith transcends gender. The article<sup>22</sup> has attempted to present an overview of feminist biblical scholarship and examples of feminist reconstructionist interpretation to restore the perception cast on women from the effects of patriarchy. “Reconstructionist feminist theology not only brings to consciousness the experiences of discrimination and subordination that patriarchy and androcentrism promote, but also unmasks them as not of God and therefore sinful.” Altogether these approaches are a source of liberation and spiritual nurturance for women in the Church. The contemporary Church, by the help of feminist biblical scholarship, recognizes the complex and evolving reality for female members in relation to the Church. Withal, the established androcentric biblical consciousness of the past two thousand years is now being critically reexamined in an effort to reflect the inclusivity of the reign of God

### III. An Approach of Biblical Feminism in the *Names of the Women*.

The third session of this paper deals with the textual analysis of the novel by using the framework of Biblical feminism. Biblical feminism explains feminist perspectives in

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<sup>20</sup> Hogeterp, A. L. (2021). Reading Stephen’s Speech as a Counter-Cultural Discourse on Migration and Dislocation. *Open theology*, 7(1), 289-316.

<sup>21</sup> Vielma Antivil, R. (2019). Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*: Hester Prynne’s counter cultural feminism.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, H., & Iozzio, M. J. (2021). Feminist Biblical Scholarship and Its Important Contributions to the Portrayal of Women in the Life of the Church.

retelling the Gospel story (*Names of the Women*). This methodology establishes textual space for new feminist scholarships from a Christian dimension. Although Biblical feminism is different from secular feminist views, it also stands for equality and justice for women. Biblical feminist sees feminism not only as a social-justice issue but as connected with religious freedom and the aspect of the complementary nature of genders<sup>23</sup>. To the goals of political, social and economic justice of genders, the biblical feminist adds religious quality. This paper also keeps the feminist views of Elizabeth Schuller Fiorenza as a theoretical framework because she is a feminist theologian of the New Testament of contemporary times.

For this purpose, Biblical feminism is an appropriate critical lens to understand the analytical, feminist world of *Names of the Women*. Hull discusses the goals of biblical feminism as ..., in rejecting the traditionalists' patriarchal teaching that male is the norm, biblical feminists also reject any reactionary matriarchal notion that female is the norm. For biblical feminists, only Christ is the norm"<sup>24</sup>. Biblical feminism helps women to find their identity in God, who created both men and women. Esther Fuchs's "Biblical Feminisms: Knowledge, Theory and Politics in the Study of Women in the Hebrew Bible" also informs the theoretical background for the study. The methodology of Biblical feminism is apt for this study because *Names of the Women* deals with the inequality of gender representations in the Gospels. In this novel, Thayil's Jesus is a feminist, and he takes the initiative to write a her-story from Mary's perspective. Rather than offer particular political readings, the novel focuses on the position of women in religious frames within the church and scriptural spaces.

In the first instance, the opening line of the novel "Mary, write that they nailed the left first"<sup>25</sup> foregrounds the significance of Mary in recording the events that happened in the life of Jesus, especially during the time of the crucifixion. Mary is one of the names Jesus addresses from first to last in the novel, and Thayil's Jesus is always keen to establish Mary's duty to write what she witnessed. "Write Mary, that everything follows from that moment, the death, the return, the centuries of turmoil and ecstasy at the moment I fell into the dream and the dream become real"<sup>26</sup>. While giving agency to Mary to write, Thayil's Jesus accentuates the idea of females writing a gospel according to women who witnessed Christ. Furthermore, Thayil uses the Cixousian idea of 'Écriture féminine' to get a different plot of events of the crucifixion from women's perspectives. Jesus' understanding of female agency to write their history directs the entire discussions in this paper. Mary of Magdala narrates her witnessing of Jesus' passions and resurrection, followed by Jesus' order to write the incidents. Jesus is instrumental in directing the narrative in its course, thus legitimising the agency of Mary and the narrative written by her. Such perspective helps us to accept the feminist Jesus, validate questioning the authority of the meta-narrative, the Bible.

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<sup>23</sup> H. Amador, J. D. "Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: A Failure of Theoretical Nerve." Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://doi.org/1466240>.

<sup>24</sup>Hull, Gretchen, "Biblical Feminism: A Christian Response to Sexism - CBE International," June 15, 2022. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/biblical-feminism/>.

<sup>25</sup> Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

Indeed, the portrayal of the visit of Mary and her female companions to Jesus' grave before dawn is an act of bravery, a grave where Jesus was not accompanied by his male disciples. Mary's determination was so high, and even her grandmother's comment, "You spent more time out of the house than the master does. This is not the way of good women"<sup>27</sup> couldn't stop her. Her journey in search of the Jesus' tomb early in the morning can read as the path-breaking departure from the patriarchal frames of Jewish culture into the state of a free woman who moves forward with her search. Mary's leadership in gathering Joanna, wife of Chuza, Sussanna the barren, Mary, mother of Jesus, Salome, Amasa, Leah and Aquila on the way to the tomb of Jesus is noticeable. As the text mentions, "She is the head of a small group of determined women, those who stayed with him through the hours of agony and followed after, and his body was laid in another man's tomb, as a great stone rolled against the mouth of the cave"<sup>28</sup>. By including the debate Mary Magdalene has with the apostles, Thayil advances the gospel narrative of Mary discovering the empty tomb to the next level of feminist viewpoint. Thayil fills the gap the gospels suffer from due to a lack of opinions by women through Mary Magdalene's account, and he adds a twist to the canonical version that elevates this to a new level. In the argument between Peter, (the leader of the apostles), and Mary Magdalene, she embarks the counter-culture by asking questions to Peter. Thayil explains this through the following lines,

"What you see you become", she says calmly. "If you see spite, you are spite. If you see spirit, you are spirit. If you see the Christ, you become Christ", her own words take over: "But not you Peter. you see everything and nothing because you do not see yourself. you are everything and nothing. this is why you ran to Galilee--all of you left him and ran away when the Romans came"<sup>29</sup>.

In addition to that, the novel continues this argument as follows, "What she wanted to make clear was that men were not with them. They did not see him (Jesus) laid in the cave and it was not they who returned to find him gone. It was the women, only the women"<sup>30</sup>.

The novel suggests that, it is the first time, we see someone questioning the absence of the male disciples of Christ during his persecution and death. In the Gospels, no one questioned it and their absentia didn't make any difference in their agency to hold the title, 'the disciples of the Christ'. But Thayil spaces out the gaps, silences, inconsistencies, and ambiguities in the biblical text through his retelling. , Thayil carefully chooses for the women to raise questions concerning these gaps through their lived experiences and voices. Hence, one can say that Thayil's characterising of Mary Magdalene fulfils the trajectories of biblical feminism by equating her presence with that of her male counterparts.

Hence, Thayil's Mary Magdalene, is a brave woman, with courage to find the truth. She is daring enough to question the injustice. Her rationale here for a counterargument to male hegemony is symbolic of the feminist approach of the text itself.

"Later, on the next day and the days to come, when they tell the story of the risen body, they will paint themselves as brave men who went to the tomb to see for themselves. They will leave out the story of the woman who was the first to enter the tomb. but they will be able to erase completely the name of the woman"<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 6.

<sup>28</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 9.

<sup>29</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 13.

<sup>30</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 14.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid

Nonetheless, Thayil countering this play of creating histories by those who have power, by writing *Names of the Women*. This novel acknowledges the women as representatives of the counter culture to the high culture of the patriarchy in creating history. Thayil's Mary becomes the authentic voice to preach the risen Christ as a person with the legacy of having encountered the risen Christ. Undoubtedly, approval of agency to women within the church is one of the main goals of the Biblical feminist ideology.

Correspondingly, Mary's account follows the account of Susanna, the next woman character in the novel. She reflects the agony of women within the frame of stubborn Jewish patriarchal thoughts. Susanna was barren which was considered a curse. She knows what men say of her, that she is unlucky, born under the wrong star and barren as a blighted field. Why do they assume it was she who was at fault? Why do they not suspect her husband? Who married again but is still childless? <sup>32</sup>. Susanna becomes the symbol of all women unable to bear children and Susanna achieves the state of worthiness through her faith, her ability to speak for herself and her courage to follow Jesus in his worst times. Thayil depicts her as one of the strong women fearless of going with the disciples to Emmaus. This was not acceptable to patriarchal minds and they did not acknowledge the woman who followed them at a distance. "There is a hierarchy in the world. The men are true disciples, and she is not. Further, she is barren, a woman whose husband left her; they do not see her" <sup>33</sup>. Thayil's Susanna deconstructs this power hierarchy by joining in the Emmaus journey and explains the account of Jesus' resurrection.

The Emmaus event in the Gospel is about the journey of disciples of Jesus in despair after his death. Their journey to Emmaus symbolises the disciples' failure to believe in Jesus after his death because they thought they had lost everything after the crucifixion. For them, Jesus had been the centre of their call. Jesus called them and gave them a purpose in life. Jesus' disciples were with Jesus only for three years during his public ministry. Their first-hand experience with Jesus for three years didn't help them remain in their belief after hearing about the crucified Christ. In this moment of crisis, the risen Jesus joined them in the journey and opened their eyes, and he revealed himself as the resurrected Christ, who won the victory over death. That led to the return of the disciples to Jerusalem. But in Thayil's story, he articulates the failure of disciples of Jesus to believe in the resurrection is an interpellation to the power dynamics of their agency as disciples. Thayil is strict enough to present the story as, women initiated the witnessing of resurrection event. Here, Thayil uses a biblical feminist approach, especially the discussion of the patriarchal nature of biblical texts, intersectional identities and portrayals of women, and the ethics of biblical interpretation contextualise feminist interpretation<sup>34</sup> to give sense to their discipleship through the voice of Susanna.

In contrast, the plot of this event is different in *Names of the Women* compared to the corresponding Gospel accounts. When St. Luke explains this incident in Chapter 24 of his Gospel, it is Jesus who joins the frightened disciples, strengthens them, and opens their eyes by breaking the bread and explaining the word of God. But in Thayil's story, that role is played by Susanna, who witnessed the risen Christ firsthand and takes the initiative to explain

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<sup>32</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 21.

<sup>33</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 20.

<sup>34</sup>Shaner, Katherine A., 'Feminist Biblical Interpretation', in Benjamin H. Dunning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, Oxford Handbooks (2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 4 Oct. 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190213398.013.3>, accessed 19 June 2023



things adequately to the disciples. Since the resurrection of Jesus is a crucial incident to the faith of Christianity, Thayil subverts the gospel story by including Susanna's witness as central in his work. The discourse between Jesus and his friends on the resurrection account would be another good example of how Thayil's Jesus deconstructs the patriarchal stereotypes.

"You must allow women to speak," he says quietly, as if only to himself. "But you won't; I can see it in your eyes."

Which women?" one of the men asks, and why must they speak?

"Because if not for them, my teaching would amount to nothing. Mary of Magdala, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and Susanna and Joanna and the other women provided me out of their resources - without them, I could not have continued."<sup>35</sup>

It follows the possible interpretation that, Thayil portrayed Jesus as a feminist who raised a voice for gender justice in his time in this novel. According to the perspective of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Thayil's retelling reassess women in history with power. Here Jesus promotes women's witnesses as an authentic source to believe his resurrection.

As a result, through Susanna's voice, Thayil makes his most provoking statement on patriarchal powers.

"With time, elders of the church will ignore or forget this teaching concerning women. They will build the church on the witness of the women. But they will refuse to record their names.

But this they cannot change, that the risen Christ first appeared to Mary Magdala and it was the women who were first leaders of the Church."<sup>36</sup>

As one can see here, one becomes an individual with a voice to create history. Women need to speak for themselves about the multiple injustices that she faces across cultures. In alliance with the biblical feminist thoughts, one can say that women's equality must be ensured in all power relations, especially within the church and Christianity.

Subsequently, Susanna's voice set back the ground to explore the story of Old Mary, the mother of James and Salome, who is an ambassador of kindness in the *Names of the Women*. She silently witnessed the terrible punishments given to Jesus on his way on the cross to Calvary. Her psyche laments over the inhuman treatment of society on innocent people. Her narration portrays the agony of witnessing the pain of Jesus. Her thoughts against society, which lost its kindness, echoes a philanthropic women's consciousness in the novel. Her decision to follow Jesus on his way to the cross is an act of courage, which the other disciples of Jesus failed to do. The ability of a woman to be with the suffering is one of the excellent qualities which was not pronounced in the Jewish community. Old Mary finds her name called first by an outsider, "dizzy, she tilts her head, looks up, and notices that his lips are moving. She hears the name Mary, but she is not being addressed"<sup>37</sup>, and Jesus called her name from the cross.

Hence, Thayil gives voices to many hidden women in the gospel and Christian traditions, and they attain their own identity with their revealed names. It dismantles the power relations of patriarchy by re-representing gospel women from stereotypes of

<sup>35</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 26.

<sup>36</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 26.

<sup>37</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 36.

androcentric landscapes of gender. “Identifying all the named women and women’s names in the Bible is a process of establishing epistemological essence to the Biblical women”<sup>38</sup>. “The omission of women’s names may result from literary strategy, biblical androcentrism, concern with patrilineality, or other reasons”<sup>39</sup>. Whatever the reason for anonymity in the Bible, Thayil found it as a gap and filled it by producing micro-narratives. Old Mary’s voice, which follows the conversation of Aquila with Bilhah, is where one can see a continuum of feminist voices, which is passing over from one character to another. By detailing this order of progress in the representation of characters, the analogy of a train’s bogies connected with an engine is probably a good image. Here the train is a novel, each bogie is character and all bind with the perspectives of feministic voices of all women present in the novel. Aquila was a maidservant in the palace of Caiaphas who judged Jesus to death. Thayil presents a conversation between Bilhah and Aquila about the unjust pronouncement of Jesus’ verdict. They conclude that Jesus was ever with the marginalised people in the community.

“Is that why they arrested him because he is poor?”

‘Yes, and because his friends are fisher folk and thieves and women.’

‘Women- what kind of women?’

‘Women like you and me’

‘Is that why they arrested him because his followers are women?’

‘Yes, they are afraid of us’<sup>40</sup>.

In the same way, their discussion reiterates the fact that women were considered wretched in Jewish society. Aquila comments, "it is easier for a woman to enter heaven than for a man"<sup>41</sup>. Her opinion is sarcastic. She criticises the hypocritical mentality of religion as well as society. She could speak like this only because Thayil gives a textual space for them to speak. It is identical to Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. This Mary sits at the feet of Jesus when he visits their home, and she is “the only woman who had dared to do so”<sup>42</sup>. Sitting at his feet, “she was proclaiming that she too was a disciple equal to any of the fishermen, the discipleship of Jesus”<sup>43</sup>. This incident was followed by a serious discussion on how a woman could sit at the feet of Jesus like this. Mary breaks the stereotypes of discipleship that should only be to the man’s credit. The disciples of Jesus grunt and disagree with Jesus’ concern for ‘the female disciple’ who sat near his feet. Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus’ feet with costly oil. Here, Thayil brings a new interpretation of the use of fragrance, which Mary pouts at the feet of Jesus. “In most of the cases, the woman’s name is unspoken. Some will mention that as the fragrance of the perfume filled the house, the woman washed

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<sup>38</sup> Meyres 14.

<sup>39</sup> Craven 14

<sup>40</sup> Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 53.

his feet and tried them with her abundant wiry hair. They will say this was an act of wantonness”<sup>44</sup>.

Further, Thayil gives voice to Junia, the widow from Jerusalem, after Aquila. She represents the state of a widow in the patriarchal setup, another specimen of a suffering woman in the society, who also lost her voice in the grant narratives. In Thayil’s story, she could witness the passion and death of Jesus along with the other strong women. When Thayil gives her the agency to speak about her story, one sees what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society like Jewish culture. She offered her support within the constraints of her poor background, and Jesus focuses in on it before those for whom it is only “a small measure, as much as a widow is a worth”<sup>45</sup>. Widows were a doubly marginalised category in Jewish culture. The poor widow’s generosity has been mentioned in the Gospels. Although her name has been lost, she finds it here in Thayil’s textual space.

Later comes the sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus, appears in Thayil’s *Names of Women* with strong feminist undertones. Her narration mentions the story of Abigail, King David’s wife from the Old Testament. She was the wife of Nabal first, then through her wise actions, she rescued her husband from danger, and finally, King David took her as his wife after Nabal’s death. Because of Abigail’s story, Mary praises her sister, Martha, “you are that kind of woman. You will do what needs to be done. You won’t hesitate”<sup>46</sup>. Their conversations go back and forth from King David’s heroic acts to marrying Michal, King Saul’s daughter. Martha’s brother, Lazarus’ death, broke her, but Jesus raised him from death. Martha and Mary of Bethany witnessed the miracle of resurrection done by Jesus. Thayil’s textual platform gives them more chances to speak than in the Gospels.

Yet another character who gets agency to speak is Arianna. She was from a marginalised section and considered to be a fallen woman in Jewish society. Arianna, the Canaanite, is a prostitute by profession and her husband is her reason for doing that job in her society. Because he was a poor man he finds a solution to his poverty by sending her wife as an object of pleasure for the men in his society. She was named Huldah by her greedy husband. Her voice in the *Names of the Women* sheds light on the commodification of women. When she meets another prostitute in the city, she reminds her, “I am a woman speaking to a woman, and I wish to tell you only this, we shall endure, we shall endure longer than the man”<sup>47</sup>. Her struggles as a fallen woman ends when she is encountered by Jesus, as the man who shared her bed was starting to stone her to death. Jesus, in Arianna’s story, is a feminist who gives significance to women’s contributions as equal to men.

The description of Mary of Magdala appears again towards the end of the text, along with the other women who accompanied her to the tomb of Jesus. Thayil deconstructs the numerical of the “twelve” apostles by claiming that “She would be the first disciple of the travelling church. After her, there would be another, another. Women among the disciples”<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 60.

<sup>45</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 66.

<sup>46</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 75.

<sup>47</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 88.

<sup>48</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 92.

The history of Christianity didn't register any woman's name as his true apostle officially in any records of church teachings. But here, Thayil canonises Mary Magdalene as the first apostle of the travelling church. In the text, the reader feels the interpellation of the legitimacy of written history by the church's patriarchy. Followed by Mary's description, Jesus speaks this same point again about discipleship in the novel. He says, "Below me, I saw you, Mary. And I saw my mother, whom I had set far from me. I saw that my true disciples had never left me—Mary, my mother and Mary Magdala"<sup>49</sup>.

We can say that making Mary the disciple of Jesus is a paradigm shift and a deconstruction of the gospel stories. Thayil's act of writing a retelling is also an active attempt to proclaim the worthiness of women in becoming Jesus' disciples. After establishing the turn in the new concept of discipleship, Thayil presents the story of Herodias and Salome, those two strong women who caused the beheading of John the Baptist. In the Gospels, these characters are not related to the death of Jesus, but here in Thayil's novel, they are. Herodias, the mother of Salome, took revenge against John the Baptist by means of Herod's promise to her daughter to grant her any wish she might make. Her desire for revenge was because John had accused her of her illegitimate alliance with King Herod. Salome uses her body performance as a dancer to seduce the king, and as a reward for her performance, she asks John's head. Herodias told Salome, "Imagine and create a dance that will make every man in the room hold his breath"<sup>50</sup>. As a feminist reading of the text, one can say that Salome uses her ability to please the king through her body. For Salome, her performance is a weapon. Thayil writes, "She does not see the dance, but the aftermath"<sup>51</sup>. Here, Herodias uses her female genius to fight against her enemy as an agency to exert over a King. This incident reminds the same sexual power politics used in the play *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes.

In addition to the above character discussed, Thayil's chronology of women characters follows the voice of Joanna. The story of Joanna, the wife of Chuza, also accentuates the feminist reading of this character; her name has been hidden in the Gospels. She was among the many women who followed Jesus in his last hours by witnessing the torment of his torture. It is evident in the novel that, she accompanying Jesus "on Golgotha, and beyond, to the tomb"<sup>52</sup> made her one among the first to witness the return/ the second coming of Jesus. The characters of Asia and Lydia also prove their power and courage as women by following Jesus till his death and beyond. Thayil presents them as Jesus' sisters who share the common memories of their past days as siblings. Soshamma, the wife of Dismas, the penitent thief, is yet another strong woman who speaks for justice in the *Names of the women*. Dismas is the thief who was crucified next to the Jesus. He was a wicked man who died on the cross without repentance. Shoshanna deeply regrets the death of Jesus. Her voice in the *Names of the Women* stands for a consciousness of justice, which was lacking in the patriarchal culture then.

Finally, Mary, the mother of Christ, is the last voice in the *Names of women*. As the mother of Jesus, she went through the same agony as Jesus in her mind. His narration gives space for how her memories of Jesus are traumatising her mind now. Thayil details Mary's

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<sup>49</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 100.

<sup>50</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 113.

<sup>51</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 123.

<sup>52</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 130.

upbringing in the temple under the priest's direction and the Jewish culture. Following her son's passing, she becomes the most powerful mother in the world. She follows her son even till his cross and witnesses his death on the cross; she makes his disciples prepare for the future mission. "She knows she is alone now. A woman who lost her husband and son to the new world, where the city has become the palace of war where soldiers rehearse their killings."<sup>53</sup> When the *Names of the Women* ends with Jesus' concluding remarks to the women who followed him faithfully, Jesus continues his command to, "Write Mary, that when I come out of the dream, I am no longer a child..."<sup>54</sup>.

#### IV. Thayil's Strategy of Reclaiming the Power of Women in the Literary Space

The fourth part of this paper focus on the feminist scholarship emphasised through the novel to understand Thayil's approach to reclaim the agency to Gospel women. Thus, this paper seeks to contribute to and highlight the importance of creating histories for hidden women of the gospel. Thayil's contribution is one of 'transvaluation' in this context. Transvaluation is a term proposed by Mary Daly, one of the most significant feminist philosophers in her studies on feminism and Biblical women. Transvaluation of faith from patriarchal frames helps to foreground the feminist approach in the world of male authority over authorships.

As one can see, Thayil's Jesus breaks the notions of power hierarchies in this novel. Jesus prioritises the female disciples more than the others in this novel. Thayil's character of Jesus is crucial in establishing the female agency in the church and his life. As Andrean Rich points out, 'Re-Vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it's an act of survival'<sup>55</sup>. Thayil revisits the gospel of women, and his act of looking back constructs a critical reading against patriarchal representations of women. Marla Selvidge's<sup>56</sup> feminist readings of the Bible establishes the philosophical reading of the Bible, and according to her scholarships, Thayil's novel *Names of Women* justifies the exegesis of feminism in contemporary times.

For this reason, even before addressing the substance, feminist readings—typically those of women—were difficult because they questioned the pre-existing interpretive authority. As Oakland quotes,

"The change in the status of reading subject; feminist readers in the academy, the feminist readings after the 1970s aimed specially to address and to critique bias blind spots in the discipline due to hitherto narrow recruitment base of its practitioners; to point out androcentrism and patriarchal values inherent in some of the biblical texts, and to point out how other passages often turn out to be much more 'women - friendly' than later male interpreters have allowed them to be. Thus, a more nuanced picture of 'the biblical view of women' emerges"<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>53</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 181.

<sup>54</sup>Thayil, *Names of the Women*, 183.

<sup>55</sup>Rich, 1972, p.18

<sup>56</sup>Selvidge, Marla, *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical interpretation 1500-1920*

<sup>57</sup>Koosed, Jennifer L. "Reading the Bible as a Feminist", *Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation* 2, 2 (2017): 1-75, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24057657-12340008>

Consequently, Thayil's novel justifies Oakland's statement because he looks at the Gospel women to fill the gaps in the portrayal of women, which can be considered a women-friendly approach by a male writer. One must move beyond the stage of feminist historiography where there are calls to find 'another forgotten woman and throw her into the historical mix'<sup>58</sup>. What Thayil does in his novel is a process of "finding" the women in the Gospel, and it sets a space for further discussion of women in the church leadership and family structures.

## V. Conclusion

In summary, the feminist scholarship in *Names of the Women* helps the readers to understand the inequality of gender within the Gospels. The novel re-locates the hidden identities of women and creates a new counter-cultural movement in Biblical literary space as a breakthrough in Biblical contemporary historical fiction.

Therefore, one can observe the paradigmatic shift in the status of women in history by travelling with the female characters in the book. Even Christ's teachings are changed in the story, casting doubt on the veracity of the traditional epistemological view of truth derived from meta-narratives. All women are given a voice in the feminist interpretation of how Thayil transformed as a result of their own lived experiences with the accuracy of historical sources. The novel's feministic progression can be seen in the characters' gradual transformation from being oppressed and ambiguous in the gospel settings to becoming autonomous persons with a voice. As these characters grow, so do the views, which are altered by their actions. The trajectory of Biblical feminism is this shift from constructing patriarchal thinking to a gynocentric approach to gospel women, where the power dynamics get transformed. Each chapter of the book has evidence of the seeming transfer of this power exchange. Altogether, the relationship between the gospel and the novel seems to be contrary in terms of the perspectives and focus of the characters. Notably, the novel presents a gynocentric, feminist take on viewing the crucifixion and the subsequent events of Christ, in contrast to Gospel's androcentric approach from a patriarchal standpoint. The authority is thus given to the protagonist Christ in the Gospels, whereas it is equally divided to all women in the novel. A feminist scholarship for re-reading Gospel women draws from this division of power from the core to the periphery, from the dominant male society to the female. Biblical feminism's basic message is one of equality, which is its main focus. On the whole one can say that, it is possible to demonstrate that Thayil's narrative produces a new critical reading of gospel women from a feminist perspective and so creates a new horizon of interpreting women's experiences, which is still novel in the Indian literary scene and in biblical historical fiction.

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<sup>58</sup>Stefaniw, Blossom. "Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past." *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 260–83. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sla.2020.4.3.260>.

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