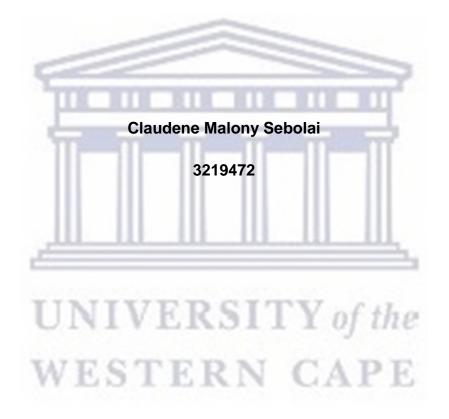**M.Th. - New Testament**
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'Was Her Worth *Only* in Her Womb?' A Feminist Reading of Revelation 12:1-6 in the Context of Women's Bodies as Reproductive Capital

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Abstract

A heteronormative reading of certain biblical texts pertaining to procreation perpetuates the notion that femininity is closely related to reproduction. It was common practice for the patriarchal biblical tradition to mention women only in their capacity as "wife" or "mother" – her primary value residing in her ability to reproduce (preferably male) offspring. Christian women and their bodily *hexis* are, therefore, inscribed by patriarchal culture through heteronormative readings of biblical texts such as Revelation 12:1-6. This thesis offers a feminist Sociorhetorical Interpretation (SRI)[1] of the text and utilizes the hermeneutical key of "body" as a crucial thinking technology. The thesis asserts that a feminist SRI of this text offers possibilities for alternative readings that go beyond limited views of women's bodies as merely reproductive capital.

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[1] Hereafter the abbreviation SRI, for sociorhetorical interpretation will be employed throughout the thesis.

<center>**Chapter One**</center>

<center>**Introduction**</center>

1.1 Background and Rationale

Patriarchal culture inscribes the *bodiliness* of Christian women through heteronormative interpretations of specific biblical texts pertaining to procreation (Nortjé Meyer, 2011:1). According to McCann et al. (2019:39), heteronormativity is defined as a firm view that heterosexuality is the "only" natural sexual orientation and that the differences between men and women are unique, inescapable, and reciprocal. Culture, according to Jonker and Lawrie (2005:51), is what shapes how people find and define meaning in their lives. Alternatively, as De Silva (2000:17) describes culture, it refers to the shared beliefs, "ways of relating," and perspectives on the world among its members, which serve as the foundation for all communication. Moreover, culture is represented by symbols that reflect the lives and experiences of a specific community of people (Jonker & Lawrie, 2005:1). These symbols help people inside the community make sense of their experiences and interact in a meaningful way with one another (Jonker & Lawrie 2005:1). It should be noted, therefore, that the Bible as a text that originated in a patriarchal culture, "has functioned throughout its history to inculcate androcentric and patriarchal values" (Fiorenza, 1993:5). This indicates that the book of Revelation emerged within a culture that was deeply ingrained in the patriarchal ethos of its time. Its symbols, when perceived and appropriated via the lens of heteronormativity, contribute to the perpetuation of the idea that women's bodies are solely reproductive resources.

Christianity and patriarchy are inextricably linked, and they both hold to the same philosophical position that true spirituality can only be discovered through disembodiment. The consequence of such a point of view is that it endorses the subjugation of human bodies in the name of religious belief. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:19) assert that Christianity and patriarchy are "bed-fellows" who are "highly compatible." They argue that Christianity did not start out this way, however, due

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to predominantly Greek philosophical influence, Christology[2] evolved along "dualistic lines" (Isherwood & Stuart, 1996:16). Consequently, Christianity evolved into a disembodied religion believing that true spirituality has to do with "removing oneself as far as possible from the reality of [the] body" (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:16). Concerning the women's bodies, Isherwood and Stuart (1998:23) contends that it "offers a new paradigm, a new knowledge, one that challenges the traditional Word." Furthermore, Isherwood and Stuart (1998:10) argue that "women's experience" is not only essential but also crucial in the development of theology (1998:10). The notion of separating women from their lived experiences in the pursuit of authentic spirituality is oppressive and disempowering in and of itself. Thus, through a feminist SRI of Revelation 12:1-6, this thesis employs the hermeneutical key of body as a primary thinking tool.

In order to justify women's subjugation, heteronormative interpretations of biblical scriptures on reproduction are often employed. Thus, in contrast to the type of biblical engagement advocated for by Isherwood and Stuart (1996), which acknowledges the importance of women's lived experiences in the development of theology, "compulsory heterosexuality," which is deeply rooted in patriarchy, leads to heteronormative interpretations of some biblical texts (Nortjé Meyer, 2010:144). As a result, this approach of understanding and appropriating scripture incarcerates and subordinates women (Nortjé Meyer, 2010:144).

An example of how compulsory heterosexuality operates within Christian churches is evident in a study done by Mate (2002), *Wombs as God's Labouratories: Pentecostal Discourses of Femininity in Zimbabwe.* Mate (2002:550) notes how biblical texts like Revelation 12:1-6 are often used to "exalt motherhood." Not only is motherhood praised, it is "compulsory" for Christian women as it is "part of faith," (Mate, 2002:560). She uses the term "Christianized patriarchy" to refer to the exaltation of motherhood, from church pulpits, based on certain biblical texts pertaining to procreation (Mate, 2002:563). Moreover, she argues that "Christianized patriarchy" is used to make "patriarchal control look attractive and legitimate; and gives it a new impetus in contemporary churches" (Mate, 2002:563). Thus, it is evident that biblical discourse played and is still playing a crucial role in the gendered coding of theology and church.

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[2] Christology is the study of Jesus' divinity and humanity, as well as how these relate to notions of salvation (Koester, 2014:39).

Gerald Loughlin (2012:381) likewise argues that Biblical discourse has had an immense impact on how women's roles are constructed and restricted. He contends that biblical interpretation and appropriation have contributed significantly to both negative and positive views of women over the centuries (Loughlin, 2012:381) This ambivalent reaction to Biblical texts is better summed up in a statement made by Fiorenza (1988:15):

> [i]f scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogynism, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then [also] biblical scholarship must take the responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values.[3]

The book of Revelation, which serves as the conclusion of the Christian canon, is no exception when it comes to its intrinsically patriarchal character. There is a wide variety of paradoxical responses elicited by reading the book of Revelation. Revelation, which has been criticized for its negative portrayal of women, has the ability to arouse not just "curiosity and apprehension," but it also paves the way to a plethora of interpretation alternatives, according to Koester (2014:xiii). Furthermore, what interpreters bring to the text contributes to the multiplicity of interpretive options (Koester, 2014:xiii).

The narrative of Revelation 12:1-6 appears to offer a positive depiction of a woman; nonetheless, the question remains as to whether or not the text is advocating hetero-patriarchal ideology at the expense of women's dignity. Heteropatriarchy, as defined by Nortjé Meyer (2011:2) is a "system of systemic male dominance." She contends that in a hetero-patriarchal society, all males have power over all women, regardless of whether they choose to exert that dominance or not (Nortjé Meyer, 2011:2). According to Levine (2010:2), when it comes to the ambiguous character of Revelation, the book has been and can continue to be understood either as an empowering and liberating narrative or as a disenfranchised literary work. In view of the above, it is clear that

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[3] In a subsequent publication, Fiorenza (1993:5) maintains, "the Bible is written in androcentric language, has its origins in patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned throughout its history to instil androcentric and patriarchal values." The Bible has also served to authorize women and other nonpersons in their struggles against patriarchal oppression."

biblical passages may be understood in ways that can both silence and empower those who are disadvantaged and oppressed. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which a combination of feminist and sociorhetorical readings of Revelation 12:1-6 provides opportunities for contesting hegemonic views of women's bodies as only valuable as reproductive capital. While the book of Revelation 12:1-6 was written in a patriarchal society and contains androcentric language, it will be demonstrated that it may "serve to authorize women and other nonpersons in their struggles against patriarchal oppression" (Fiorenza, 1993:5). Hence, I will demonstrate how the narrative of Revelation 12:1-6 transmits an essential message of hope while simultaneously being critical of patriarchal bias in its representation.

1.2 Literature Review

Feminist biblical scholars have made significant contributions to the reading of Revelation. For example, Adela Yarbo Collins (1984, 1996) *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, *Cosmology, and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism;* Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1985, 1991) *Revelation: Justice and Judgement, Revelation: Vision of a Just World;* Tina Pippin (1992) *Death and Desire: Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John;* Susan Garrett (1992) *"Revelation"* in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Amy-Jill Levine (2010) *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, Shanell T. Smith (2014) *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambi-veil-ence*, etc.

The woman of Revelation 12:1-6 can be identified in a variety of ways (Collins, 1984, 1993; Fiorenza 1991; Pippin 1992, 1994; Sumney 2001). Some scholars depict her in an exalted fashion, resembling a goddess (Collins, 1993:21, Garrett, 1998:471). According to Sumney (2001:103), John may have used these myths to refute the Roman emperor's claim to imperial legitimacy and power. Fiorenza (1991:81), views the woman of Revelation 12:1-6 as reflecting the "messianic community," who were the outcasts at the time of Revelation. Pippin (1994:120) focuses her attention on the "sexism in Revelation" and argues that the ideology of gender is a "neglected area in studies on Revelation." This leads her to assert that on two occasions the woman is identified by her "reproductive event," thus reaffirming her sexual identity (Pippin, 1992:75). Pippin

(1994:119) further laments that Revelation has an oppressive function in women's lives, and adds that the text is not a "safe space for women". She ultimately argues that "Revelation is decolonizing literature that turns around and recolonizes," and that a "feminist reading of Revelation is necessarily deconstructive (Pippin, 1994:123). Both Collins (1993) and Fiorenza (1991) engaged the text on the level of "reconstruction rather than deconstruction," yet I concur with Pippin (1994:116) that although such readings are important, even before interpretation, "the original representation of women in Revelation needs to be examined." According to Pippin (1994:116), Revelation's exploitation of women's bodies exposes profound sexism. Moreover, as she points out that today's misogyny is more technologically advanced, however, "the roots and results of women-hatred are the same" (Pippin, 1994:116).

Since I am reading Revelation 12:1-6 using SRI, which is a multi-dimensional approach to the text,[4] developed over the past thirty years or so, it is only fitting to provide a brief historical overview of Revelation that seeks to contextualize the scholarship on the text and will add the necessary grounding for this study.

1.3 Historical Overview

For John Gager (quoted by Tina Pippin 1992:19) the "apocalypse is therapy." The nature of the book is such that it could awaken "either passionate commitment or puzzlement," notes Collins, (1984:12). For most Christians, however, it remains a book with "seven seals that still remain unopened" and is often demoted to a "curiosity" in the Bible (Fiorenza, 1985:1). According to Chung (2007:107), John's Revelation has often been "mis/used hermeneutically and theologically." She claims that Revelation frequently ignited "sectarian movements and conflict," while also providing hope to the beleaguered church by giving new historical and prophetic meaning to generations of Christians as a source of spiritual and moral renewal (Chung, 2007:107).

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[4] According to Jonker & Lawrie, a multi-dimensional approach to a text should be regarded as a "communal human practice of gaining meaning from texts. […] Such an approach does not render existing exegetical methods superfluous […]" It has to consider the following: Biblical texts are ancient texts and needs a historical consciousness. Biblical texts are literary texts and needs a literary consciousness. Biblical texts are religious texts and needs a theological consciousness (Jonker & Lawrie, 2005: 235-237). Biblical texts are rhetorical texts and needs a rhetorical consciousness?

1.3.1 Authorship

Due to the fact that this thesis aims to provide a sociorhetorical interpretation of Revelation 12:1-6, the question of authorship is not a key concern, as the text designates John as the author in the apocalypse's prescript (Rev. 1:4, 9). For a discussion of the issue of authorship, see Botha, De Villiers & Englebrecht (2004:1); Collins (1984:12); and Oropeza (2012:175) among many others.

1.3.2 Dating

There is no consensus amongst scholars concerning the dating of the text. Two dates are proposed, namely, toward the end of the reign of Nero as emperor (54-68 CE), and a later date towards the end of Domitian's reign (81-96 CE) (Marshall et al., 2011:326). Others believe that the book may have been written in stages during both of these periods (Oropeza, 2012:178).

When opposing historical research for presuming that Revelation was written during the persecution of Domitian, Koester (2014:64) points out how other scholars uncover a more complex social milieu. Collins (1984:110), for example, noticed the "lack of evidence for imperial persecution in the late first century" while highlighting other concerns such as local conflict with Jews, conflicts over assimilating Graeco-Roman religious traditions, wealth disparities, and restlessness under Roman rule. Furthermore, since early Christians were not persecuted during Domitian's reign, John's viewpoint differs significantly from that of his readers (Koester, 2014:64). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to elaborate on or discuss these debates in detail and as such, I am only pointing to this discussion here.

1.3.3   Background: 'Real or Perceived Crisis'[5]

Much like the uncertainty around authorship and dating, so too the crisis that the text seems to address does not have any consensus among scholars. Loader (2007:175) advocates the view that the communities to which John was writing were under serious threat from Roman authorities and Jewish opposition. Oropeza (2012: 180) on the other hand, asserts that it can be deduced from the seven churches that the conflict John's readership faced was both "external and internal…different and overlapping problems including assimilation, apathy, social, economic and religious clashes." However, Marshall et al. (2011:327) points out that the "historical evidence for the persecution of Christians in the first century is now much disputed." It is believed by some scholars that the text is "creating a crisis rather than responding to one" (De Silva, 1999:68; Marshall et al., 2011:327).

1.3.4   Genre: Revelation as Epistle, Apocalypse,[6] and Prophecy

Revelation comprises a plethora of genres[7] with apocalyptic being the most dominant (Marshall et al., 2011:326). The book asserts the authority of Jesus Christ, who sent an angel to John to "reveal the things which must soon come to pass" (Rev. 1:1), unlike other Jewish and Christian apocalypses in which pseudepigraphy is a common feature. The story begins with an epistolary prescript in which John recounts what should be written to the seven Asia Minor churches. During times of tribulation, the churches are either praised for their perseverance in faith or admonished for their actions, such as their acceptance of Roman practices (Koester, 2014:269). Hereafter, it is suggested that John has ascended to heaven, where he stands before the throne of God (Koester, 2014:366).

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[5] For a thorough review of "scholarly interpretations of persecution" in Revelation, with a focus on their theoretical, hermeneutical, and theological implications, as well as proposals for a different approach to persecution, see for example: de Villiers, P.G.R. (2002). 'Persecution in the book of Revelation'. *Acta Theologica.* Volume 2. Pp. 47-70.

[6] Revelation makes the most extensive use of apocalyptic tradition (Childs,1992: 321-322).

[7] Within the first chapter of the book, different genres such as apocalypse (Revelation 1:1), benediction (Revelation 1:3), and letter (Revelation 1:4) amongst others can be noted.

The apocalyptic aspect of the discourse and its widespread use of symbols and imagery further intensify the interpretive possibilities of a text like Revelation. According to Oropeza (2012:176), apocalyptic as a genre is "heavenly communication of what was previously hidden." John informs his readers right at the beginning that what they are about to hear or read, is not his own vision. He claims that it is a "revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants" (Revelation 1:1a). In addition, this revelation was given to John by an "angel" (Revelation 1:1b). At the end of the book, the same words are attributed to Jesus, who confirms John's introductory statement namely: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches" (Revelation 21:16a). A stern warning is then issued to every reader or listener of the book, as John states:

> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 21:18,19).

According to John J. Collins (1998:5), a standard definition of apocalypse is:

> a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendental reality which is both temporal, in so far as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial in so far as it involves another, supernatural world.

The initial word in John's book is *apokalypsis*, which means "revelation" or "disclosure" (Koester, 2014:104, Childs, 1992:317). According to Childs (1992:317), the term "apocalyptic" refers to a theological event as well as a collection of literature that shares this eschatological outlook. As stated by Collins (1998:8), a common conceptual structure of the world shared by all apocalypses is that the world is mysterious and that meaningful revelations are sent from the unseen realm above via angelic mediators. Likewise, Koester (2014:105) argues that apocalypses reflect a divine or ethereal dimension that exists beyond what can be seen but impacts life in this world. Furthermore, while the realms above and below are distinguished in Revelation, they are all a part

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of God's universe. Apocalypses, according to Koester (2014:107) have an impact on how people perceive and react to their surroundings.

Koester (2014:64) further notes that the form and function of Revelation received renewed attention as part of the broader interest in apocalyptic texts. The Revelation of John may have urged those comfortable with the current order, to resist the behaviours he considered incompatible with the Christian community while also providing solace to those readers who were facing social conflict (Koester, 2014:64). The writer of Revelation refers to his book as "prophecy" (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) and to his own "commission to prophesy" (10:11) (Koester, 2014:107). It is difficult to tell the difference between prophecy and a literary apocalypse, according to Childs (1992:317), since both contain vision records. Childs (1992:317) also points out that there is a consensus that apocalypticism arose from Old Testament prophecy, went through a "radicalization process," and reached its pinnacle in the Hellenistic era. Revelation's prophetic components confront readers with what "John understands" to be God's living message, notes Koester (2014:109). Whereas apocalypses have a transcendent viewpoint on the universe by visions told in the third person, Revelation's oracular elements have the divine speaker talking directly to the readers (Koester, 2014:109). The book's "prophetic framing," as well as the elements inside it, offers the work a sense of "immediacy and urgency" argues Koester (2014:109). Thus, according to Fiorenza (1986:139), the prophet John takes an "uncompromising theological stance" against imperial religion and Rome's "dehumanizing" forces. However, as apocalyptic, John creates a "symbolic universe that is mythological insofar as it represents a conception of reality that points to the ongoing determination of the world by sacred forces" (Fiorenza, 1986:139).

1.3.5   Symbolism[8]

As previously stated, the apocalyptic discourse of Revelation, as well as its extensive use of symbols and imagery, contribute to the text's wide range of ambivalent responses. Botha, De Villiers & Englebrecht (2004:9), congruent with this statement, regards Revelation's symbolism

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[8] According to Botha et al. (2004:9), even if we do not find any significance in symbols that we want to find, it is important to note that the author used symbols in his text to talk about a situation he shared with his readers. Thus, they suggest that any symbol must be interpreted in relation to other symbols in the book (Botha et al. 2004:9).

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as "unusual and fantastic" with an ambiguous nature which contributes to its "many interpretations." According to Koester (2014:64), "the evocative quality of Revelation's imagery continues to generate differing responses."

These divergent reactions to Revelation's symbols can be seen, for example, in feminist interpretations of the text. Some feminist scholars argue that Revelation's symbols perpetuate preconceptions about women's roles, while others regard them as literary norms to inspire opposition to Roman imperialism (Koester, 2014:64). On the other hand, John's negative portrayal of women could have been an attempt to persuade his audience to reject the Imperial cults' "symbols of dominance" (Fiorenza, 1986:134). Alternatively, as Botha et al. (2004:9) asserts, John's use of symbols stems from a topic that is difficult to express in human language. Thus, Fiorenza (1986:130) asserts that the intensity of Revelation's propaganda for action lies not in its "theological reasoning or historical argument, but in the evocative power of its symbols and its hortatory, imaginative, emotional language and dramatic movement."

1.3.6   Socio-Political Background

John envisions an audience of seven congregations facing different types of challenges (Chapters, 2-3). According to Oropeza (2012:182), the Christians in Revelations may have responded to the imperial cult in seven different ways based on the letters to the seven congregations. Some of these responses include nonviolent resistance, "compromise," an effort to reform the civil duties pertaining to imperial worship, rejecting the Roman system and its military, quitting or deceiving Roman society, or committing apostasy (Oropeza, 2012:182). Koester (2014:93-96), on the other hand, categorizes the issues of Revelation into three groups for example, "conflict with outsiders, assimilation and complacency." Revelation's imagery thus spoke to problems that were both "local and concrete," according to Koester (2014:93-96). These problems caused a crisis that were "internal" as well as "external" (De Silva, 1999:67-73; Koester, 2014:xiv: Oropeza, 2012:180). Revelation is, therefore, not only a text of "comfort" but also a text to "combat assimilation and apostasy" (Oropeza, 2012:181). John, therefore, modified dominant culture rhetoric to critique

society while advocating devotion to God and Jesus in order to convince his audience to persist and to challenge those who were docile and accommodating (Koester, 2014:xiv, 93-96).

1.4 Identification and Summary of Research Problem

The concept that femininity is intimately tied to reproduction is reinforced, as previously noted, by a heteronormative reading of certain biblical texts that pertain to procreation. Mate (2002:550)[9] demonstrates how the text of Revelation 12:1-6 is utilized to glorify motherhood, compounding the notion that women's bodies are merely a source of reproductive capital.

Although feminist biblical scholars have made significant contributions to the reading of Revelation, the focus seems to be more on who the woman represents (Collins, 1984, 1996; Fiorenza, 1985, 1991), rather than how she is represented (Garrett, 1992; Pippin, 1992, 1994). No previous study has investigated Revelation 12:1-6 utilizing SRI as an interpretive analytics.

Redding (2011:13) rightfully notes that Revelations' "apocalyptic imagery entreats multiple interpretations." Koester (2014:xiv), in a similar vein states that Revelation speaks to issues of a "multi-dimensional sense." Thus, as indicated by Robbins (1991:1), SRI as a "multi-dimensional approach to a text engages a multi-faceted dialogue with the text, and phenomena outside of the text which come within its influence."

The research questions that this thesis seeks to explore may be articulated as follows: 'How do feminist biblical scholars interpret Revelation 12:1-6? What would a feminist SRI of Revelation 12:1-6 produce? In which ways would a combination of feminist and SRI of the text offer possibilities for deconstructing conceptions of women's bodies as reproductive capital?'

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[9] Mate's study is based on empirical research done at two prominent Zimbabwean churches. She argues that these "organisations focus on domesticity as a way of setting born-again women apart from other women, as a sign of their modernity and faith." Moreover, she observed both "organisations liken infertility to the devil's work (based on Revelation 12:3-4)" (Mate, 2002:560).

1.4.1 Women's Bodies as Reproductive Capital

McCann et al. (2019:338) defines capitalism as follows: "Capitalism is an economic system in which the commerce, industry, and profits of society are centred on private ownership rather than state-owned industries, or the basis of profit-sharing by individuals employed in them." Drawing on the theory of Karl Marx (1848), Marxist feminism categorized capitalism alongside of patriarchy as the "dual systems that underpinned the oppression of women" (McCann et al., 2019:53). Moreover, socialist feminists are critical of the nuclear family model, stating that gender inequity may be connected to women's fragility during pregnancy and care for children (McCann et al., 2019:138-139). Thus, the notion of reproductive capital (Kartzow 2012, 2015, 2016; Mate, 2002; Oduyoye, 1999), as used in this thesis, refers to a system of oppression that renders Christian women inferior based on their reproductive dis/ability, relegating them to the realm of domesticity as a sign of their modernity and faith.

Among the issues feminist theorists are concerned with is the commercialization of women and the sexual objectification of their bodies in capitalistic society. For example, Luce Irigaray (1985:31) in *This Sex Which Is Not One* best states the commodification of women in capitalist societies, in the following statement:

> for the woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men, in other words, a commodity…Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procures. The contemporary manner of commodification is only a continuation of the treatment of women in primitive capitalism. The commodification of women is a natural outcome of women's subordination.

In a similar vein, feminist theorist, Naomi Wolf (1990:270) in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, theorizes about the commodification of women's bodies and argues that "bodies are being used to sell almost anything, and the use and portrayal of bodies in this sense is often gendered." She advocates the following response: "we must now ask the question about our place in our bodies that women a generation ago asked about their place in society" (Wolf, 1990:270).

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Other examples of common sexual objectification are pornography; prostitution, sexual harassment, and the representation of women in mass media and art are all examples of common sexual objectification. Rachel Calogero (2012:574) defines sexual objectification as the "fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and/or sexual functions, essentially stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body." Objectification theory attempts to explain why there is such a strong and pervasive tendency to equate women with their bodies, and why this can have such negative consequences for their body image and beyond (Calogero, 2012:574).

The story in Revelation 12:1-6 appears to commodify and objectify the woman character's reproductive capacity in the same manner that women's bodies are exploited for profit and treated like objects in modern society. Although John depicts the most essential symbols in Revelation in feminine form, his references to women are clearly "objectifying, condescending, and pejorative," says Chung (2007:112). Aside from that, his writing accurately depicts the patriarchal society of the early Christian era, in which males strove to "govern" women's sexuality through reductionist and dualistic gender classification (Chung, 2007:112).

Generally known as the most sacred part of women's bodies, the womb is the organ responsible for the reproduction and continuation of the human species. According to Jeremy Punt (2019:126), "the womb was guaranteed to be part of the biblical reference system of people, also deciding [women's] roles, well-being, and future in a context where fertility was highly valued." Furthermore, the "range of womb connotations" suggests that for the ancients, the "reproductive body" was an integral connection between "human life and the divine," as well as between the present and the future, in both religious-apocalyptic and imperial discourse (Punt 2019:127).[10] Punt (2019:129) points out that, despite the priority placed on the reproductive organ, in the hierarchical androcentric setting of the first century CE, not all wombs were treated equally. Furthermore, for the ancients, motherhood was more than just a highly regarded state of being (Punt, 2019:132).

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[10] For a brief and contextual map of uterine discourse and its function in the Pauline letters, see: Punt, J. (2019). 'Pauline uterine discourse in context.' In *Reconceiving Reproductive Health: Theological and Christian Ethical Reflections (Reformed Theology in Africa Series Volume 1).* Kotzé, M., Marais, N., Müller van Velden, N. (Eds.). pp. 125–143. Cape Town: AOSIS.

In a recent study, Corinne Low (2014, 2017); *Pricing the Biological Clock:[11]Reproductive Capital on the US Marriage Market* and *A "Reproductive Capital" Model of Marriage Market Matching,* utilize the concept of "fecundity[12]" and "fertility[13]" as "reproductive capital." Low (2017:1) demonstrates the value of fertility in "marriage market outcomes." In addition, as the labour market appreciates the "human capital"[14] of women, fertility has an importance on the wedding market: "men partially marry for children, and marriages appear to boost women's economic conditions" (Low, 2017:1).

Locating reproductive capital in the woman's reproductive capacity, Low (2014:2) states the following:

> Women's ability to conceive children falls off rapidly around age 40. This decline in fecundity has rarely been treated as an economic factor, despite large potential implications for women's welfare. If marriages are formed partly to have children, and marriages tend to improve the economic circumstances of women, then a woman is economically worse off after age-induced infertility than before. If she is unmarried, her value as a partner has diminished and thus her marital prospects are worse; if she is married, her outside option has decreased. Thus, fecundity can be thought of as a depreciating economic asset, which I call "reproductive capital.

Low's study (2014, 2017) demonstrated that even in contemporary society, women's value still resides in their reproductive capacity. Thus, fertility equals reproductive capital. As stated by Punt (2019:125), "fertility was a highly prized attribute" even in primitive societies." In her paper, Low (2014:53), "treats women's decisions as a trade-off between two assets: human capital, which grows based on investment, and reproductive capital, which depreciates with time."

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[11] In other words, estimating the value of a woman based on her reproductive capital.

[12]Encyclopedia.com defines these two concepts in the following way, "Literally, "fecundity" means the ability to produce live offspring, and "fertility" means the actual production of live offspring. So, fecundity refers to the potential production, and fertility to actual production, of live offspring." Interestingly, the French meanings of the two similar-sounding words are reversed: fécondité means "fertility," and fertilité means "fecundity." https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/fecundity-and-fertility

[13] Low's second paper (2017) seems to be a revised version of the first paper authored in 2014. She substitutes "fecundity" with "fertility" as reproductive capital.

[14] Human capital is a loose term that refers to knowledge, experience, and skills of an employee. Low speaks of income as human capital (2017: 13).

Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (2012), *Navigating the Womb: Surrogacy, Slavery, Fertility – and Biblical Discourses,* also equates a woman's reproductive capital with ability to procreate. Studying ancient texts dealing with slavery and motherhood, Kartzow (2012:45) notes how a slave girl's "fertile body is seen as capital." Based on the abovementioned, one can conclude that 'reproductive capital' relates to fertility (Kartzow, 2012; Louw, 2014' 2017). However, the use of the concept in the following sentence "Sarah owned her slave's reproductive capital" (Kartzow, 2012:39, 46); gives the impression that the concept is used to refer to the slaves' offspring – which is a result of fertility. The term reproductive capital is used in this thesis to refer to a woman's reproductive power over which she has complete autonomy and agency. It is not employed as an oppressive system that degrades Christian women based on their reproductive dis/ability, relegating them to the realm of domesticity as a symbol of their modernity and faith (Kartzow 2012, 2015, 2016; Mate, 2002; Oduyoye, 1999).

Barbara Omolade (1993), African American slave woman, in the following quote, best conceptualises the woman's body as reproductive capital as a means of oppression:

> [H]er head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labour where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family as domestic servants whether she was technically enslaved or legally free. Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment— capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market (Omolade quoted in Bordo, 1993:22).

1.5 Research Design and Methodology

This thesis is based on a textual analysis of Revelation 12:1-6, which I approach with a "heightened" hermeneutic of suspicion (Fiorenza, 1985; Hutaff, 1994; Pippin, 1994; King, 2000; Davies, 2003). In my attempt at deconstructing the text, I engage a feminist SRI reading of the text in conjunction with feminist literary criticism. SRI as espoused by Vernon K Robbins is a "multi-dimensional approach to texts guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic" (Robbins,

1999:1). Robbins (1999:1) maintains that his approach is an "interpretive analytic,"[15] which engages a multi-faceted dialogue with the text, and phenomena outside of the text which come within its influence. The tool comprises five major textures, namely inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (Robbins, 1996:3). Robbins also observed five kinds of sociorhetorical modes of discourse within early Christianity, which are "wisdom, apocalyptic, miracle, suffering-death-resurrection, and pre-creation discourse" (Robbins, 1999:11).

SRI as interpretive analytic has not only been utilized for the interpretation of biblical texts, but has also been used to analyse apocalyptic discourse in Surahs 2, 10, and 18 of the Quran, explains Robbins (1999: 12). In her article, *Visual Exegesis: Interpreting Text in Dialogue with its Visual Context*, Rosemary Canavan (2015) engages SRI in conjunction with social identity theory to provide a "visual exegesis." The dialogical nature of SRI is evident in the most recent publication edited by Robbins & Jeal (2020), *Welcoming the Nations: International Sociorhetorical Explorations.* The publication traces the "development and emergence" of SRI globally. In his essay, *Intersectional Texture: Reconsidering Gender Critical Frameworks and Sociorhetorical Interpretation,* South African scholar, Johnathan Jodamus who engaged SRI in both his Master's thesis (2005)[16] and Ph.D. dissertation (2015),[17] recommends "intersectional texture as an addition to sociorhetorical interpretation" (Robbins & Jeal, 2020:5). In support of his proposal, Jodamus (2020:91) argues that intersectional texture, as an additional texture would broaden the scope of "contexts" into the "interpretive environment" which would allow the "text to speak more vibrantly to context and for the context to more richly inform our understanding of the text."

Keeping these newer insights and SRI developments in mind in my analysis of Revelation 12:1-6 I will first look at the characters and the implied narrative of the text (chapter four). I will then turn to an exploration of the rhetorical structure of the text, but in order to achieve this goal, I will first

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[15] Robbins (2009:18) provides the following explanation for his use of the term "interpretive analytic" rather than "method" when referring to SRI: "The philosophy of a method is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is 'in something itself.' In contrast, the philosophy of an interpretive analytic is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is exhibited in the way it relates to all other things. This is the difference between a philosophy of essence or substance and a philosophy of relations."

[16] See: Jodamus, J. (2005). "A Socio-rhetorical Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:8–15." MSocSci Thesis. University of Cape Town: South Africa.

[17] See: Jodamus, J. (2015). "An Investigation into the Construction(s) and Representation(s) of Masculinity(ies) and Femininity(ies) in 1 Corinthians." PhD Diss. University of Cape Town: South Africa.

need to look at the type of discourse contained in the text and the rhetorical genre with its main features. Once I have done this, I will be able to construct a rhetorical overview of the structure of the text. I will proceed to investigate the social and cultural background that John presupposes (chapter five) as well as the normative social and cultural arrangement that he urges his readers to accept. This is exhibited in John's use of specific social and cultural topics as a rhetorical device to influence the perception of his audience. The last two chapters of this thesis (chapter six and seven) form the main argument on which this thesis is based. An important shift occurs when the divine is brought into the narrative through sacred textual analysis. Sacred texture (chapter six) sheds light on the nature and self-revelation of God in Revelation 12:1-6. God redraws boundary lines and overturns binary frameworks that exclude women and children from certain social and religious practices, as seen in this chapter. Finally, I explore how John utilizes pictorial narration (chapter seven) to conjure up images in the minds of his readers/listeners in order to draw a specific conclusion. Through the rhetography of wisdom, prophetic and apocalyptic discourse, God is seen as assuming the role of a mother; which is in sharp disagreement with how God's ways have been enacted by his/her people on the earth; and dramatically reconfigures all time and space.

1.6 Chapter Outline

The thesis comprises eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two of this thesis is a brief survey of feminist biblical scholarship on Revelation 12:1-6. In it, I reflect on the work of feminist scholars such as Adela Yarbro Collins, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Tina Pippin, and Susan Garrett, amongst others. I understand that these scholars are predominantly Western white women; however, they are the leading feminist figures in the interpretation of Revelation and are cited in most literature on Revelation. Their vigorous engagement with the text is testament to the fact that Revelation is difficult to interpret due to its apocalyptic nature.

The third chapter is concerned with the theoretical framework and methodology of this study. I read the text through the lens of feminist literary criticism, utilizing Vernon K. Robbin's SRI as an interpretive analytic. Feminist literary criticism applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read. Moreover, it is concerned with the representation of women in literature, both explicitly and implicitly because "texts affect lived lives," as argued by Plain &

Sellers (2007:15). For this reason, feminist literary criticism seeks to expose the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces and undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, 2006:83). A key question posed in this thesis is whether Revelation 12:1-6 is harmful to women, or whether the text can be utilized in the quest for social transformation. Another question raised by this research will be whether the text promotes hetero-patriarchy at the expense of women's dignity. These and many more questions could be asked when approaching a complex narrative such as Revelation 12:1-6 and will be dealt with in the investigation that follows. The apocalyptic aspect of the discourse and its widespread use of symbols and imagery further intensify a text like Revelation's interpretative possibilities. Thus, limiting Revelation to one interpretation downplays its intrinsic multi-layered polyvalence because its apocalyptic imagery entreats multiple interpretations (Redding, 2011:13). For a multi-faceted text such as Revelation 12:1-6, SRI's multi-dimensional approach to texts which is guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic, will be useful to glean the most out of the apocalyptic narrative.

In chapter four, I apply the features of Inner Texture analysis to Revelation 12:1-6. The inner texture looks at the various ways a text employs language to communicate. In other words, it allows the interpreter to stay within the boundaries of the text under consideration and examines what the language of the text is doing. Analysis on this level requires the interpreter to look at, hear the words themselves, and interpret how the text uses these words. Inner texture comprises six sub-textures, namely, repetitive texture, progressive texture, narrational, open-middle-closing texture, argumentative texture, and sensory-aesthetic texture (Robbins, 1996b:7).

The fifth chapter is an analysis of the social and cultural texture of the text. Social and cultural texture raises questions about the responses to the world, social and cultural systems, and institutions as well as on the cultural alliances and conflicts that the text calls to the fore. Analysis of social and cultural texture takes interpreters into sociological and cultural theory, which includes the analysis of the location of language and the social and cultural world that language evokes (Robbins, 1996b:71). Some important questions to be pondered in this chapter will be, is the text calling for a reformation of people, or social structures? Does it seek to disrupt or reconstruct the social order, and does it persuade its readers-both ancient and contemporary-to completely withdraw and construct their own social environment?

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Chapter six analyses the sacred texture of Revelation 12:1-6. Sacred texture allows the interpreter to look for the Divine in a text. Moreover, it concerns the experience of special forces, whether good or evil; experience of divine control; guidance in social or personal history; or experience of human behaviour that is shaped by encounters with the sacred. Sacred texture exists in a text which somehow addresses the relation of humans to the divine, and also subsists in communication about gods, holy persons, spirit beings, divine history, human redemptions, human commitment, religious community, and ethics (Robbins, 1996b:120).

In chapter seven, the features of rhetographical analysis are applied to Revelation 12:1-6. According to Robbins (2005:825), rhetography is a textual feature that encourages its audience to mentally "create a graphic picture," thereby inviting the recipient to infer a specific conclusion. This enables for the reconfiguration of multiple types of earlier and current discourse, as early Christians pioneered (Robbins, 2005:825). Furthermore, in the context of human action in which we position "body" in the world; early Christian discourse ubiquitously placed "world" in the body (Robbins, 2005: 825).

Finally, the conclusion (chapter eight) summarizes the findings of doing a Feminist SRI of Revelation 12:1-6 and relates it to gender discussions around conceptions of women's bodies as reproductive capital.

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Chapter Two

A Survey of Feminist Biblical Scholarship on Revelation 12:1-6

Revelation 12:1-6

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1. And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule[a] all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days (English Standard Version)

2.1 Introduction: For Better or Worse

Over the centuries, the Bible has had a significant impact on societal perceptions of women. These beliefs, when derived from a heteronormative reading of scripture, give men a distinct advantage over women in society. Feminist biblical critics unanimously agree that the Bible, along with a number of other factors, has resulted in patriarchal power and influence in society (Davies, 2003:10). Thus, it would be wrong to ignore or diminish the role that the Bible has played in influencing people's thoughts and expectations and promoting sexist attitudes and systems (Davies, 2003:10).

When it comes to the establishment of Western culture, the Bible has played a significant role. As Sawyer (1996:41) points out, Christianity has had the most significant impact on women's life throughout the history of Western civilization, particularly in the areas of religion, socialization, politics, and culture. Furthermore, Christianity' understanding of the nature and role of men and

women has been the single most influential factor in the development of gender roles and behavior in Western society and its territories (Sawyer, 1996:41).

Likewise, Loughlin (2012), in his chapter on 'The Body' in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture,* supports this view and asserts that interpretation and appropriation of the biblical message have largely attributed to the way women are viewed, and the particular roles ascribed to them (Loughlin, 2012:381). He illustrates how "the primary emphasis of the Bible is seemingly on women's subordinate status" (Loughlin, 2012:381). For example, the opening chapters of the book of Genesis; where the woman is created to serve as man's helper (Genesis 2:20-24), to the pronouncements of Paul concerning the submission of wives to their husbands, and the silencing of women in communal worship (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; Colossians 3:18) are some of biblical texts that endorses women's subjugation (Loughlin, 2012:381).

Gender inequality and power imbalances, which were prevalent in the patriarchal society of the Bible, are also reflected in wealthier women obtaining certain religious and social privileges. Women's religious identities within Judaism, were defined by participation in family rituals and activities that formed a Jewish household, which imprinted their own "Jewish identities" in their children from an early age (Sawyer, 1996:36). This attitude toward women persisted into the Hellenistic period, which was primarily patriarchal in character (Sawyer, 1996:38-40). Davies, (2003:1) in support of this view argues that biblical traditions represent a mainly androcentric worldview that places women on the periphery of society and assigns them a subservient role in the religious and social life of the nation of Israel. Women were not only barred from participating in various rituals in Judaism, but they were also separated from the men who observed them and the priests who conducted them (Sawyer, 1996:4). Women were also prohibited from participating in public activities and were given little influence over religious matters, among other things (Sawyer, 1996:76). Wealthy Jewish women, on the other hand, may have been spared from these restrictions because they performed important roles in particular synagogues and in the community (Sawyer, 1996:81). These disparities are all characteristic of patriarchal ideology.

Heteronormative readings of scripture, particularly those pertaining to procreation, continue to rewrite Christian women's bodies. For example, as pointed out by Sawyer (1996), the Bible was and continues to be influential in shaping Western civilization, but it also plays a role in instilling certain norms in the flesh, particularly when read and interpreted through the perspective of

heteronormativity. Loughlin (2012:381) likewise posits that the Bible's "meanings and possibilities" are etched on human flesh. According to Loughlin (2012:381), it is during the process of interpretation and appropriation of the text that believers are both "bound and set free" by the Holy Scriptures. Furthermore, our understanding of the texts through which we are written is influenced by the way we perceive ourselves (Loughlin, 2012:381).

Fiorenza (1988)[18], in a similar vein as Loughlin (2012) asserts that the biblical text has the potential to serve the purpose of its interpreter, whether good or bad. It is important therefore, as suggested by Fiorenza (1988:15) that biblical interpreters need an "ethics of accountability." An ethics of accountability will ensure that biblical scholars are responsible not only for interpreting biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to "evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values" (Fiorenza, 1988:15). Levine (2010:2), likewise points out how Revelation has been, and can be, read either as an inspiring and liberating book, or as "marginalizing and oppressive" literature. Thus, biblical interpretation is a complex process that requires responsibility and accountability on the part of its interpreters.

Davies (2003), in his book *The Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* refers to the complexity of biblical interpretation which feminist biblical critics are faced with, as a "dilemma" (Davies, 2003:10). Due to the patriarchal nature of the biblical text,[19] some feminist scholars have preferred to condemn biblical instruction entirely, finding it "irredeemably patriarchal and inherently hostile to women" (Davies, 2003:10). On the other hand, other feminist biblical scholars tend to see the biblical text as an obstacle that needs to be met, since they agree that interpretation of women's biblical position can have far-reaching consequences for women's rights, obligations and position in society at large (Davies, 2003:10).

Letty Russell (1985) as cited by Davies (2003:10) describes the "dilemma" of feminist biblical scholars as such: "[a]re they [feminists] to be faithful to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures, or are they [feminists] to be faithful to their own integrity as whole human beings?" The questions posed by feminist biblical critics are therefore very simple: "how should

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[18] See: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. 1988. "The ethics of biblical interpretation: Decentring biblical scholarship." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107, 1, Pp. 3–17

[19] Davies (2003: 1) argues that the "biblical traditions reflect a predominantly androcentric world-view which relegates women to the margins and assigns to them a subordinate role in the religious and social life of Israel." see: pp. 1-13.

women in religious societies respond to a text that has served as an authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy? How should they respond to its largely negative appraisal of women, and its oppressive patriarchal emphasis?" (Davies, 2003:10).

How ought feminist biblical scholars to react to this dilemma? According to Osiek (1997:956), in the face of this predicament, feminist biblical critics have reacted to the dilemma in a variety of ways, developing several different strategies to deal with the patriarchal bias of the biblical text. The *reformist branch[20]* of romantic feminism sought to recover neglected traditions, and so doing, retrieve forgotten perspectives in the biblical tradition, arguing that the Bible is not as oppressively patriarchal, as is commonly assumed (Osiek, 1997:958). On the other hand, the more *radical branch* of romantic feminism, in their approach, have opted to reject biblical traditions in their entirety, arguing that they are so immersed in a patriarchal culture that no parts of it are worth redeeming (Osiek, 1997:958). Between these two extremes, a variety of other approaches has been adopted, and each in its own way have contributed some valuable insights to understanding the biblical text (Osiek, 1997:958-960).

Davies (2003:1) thus suggests that readers must be prepared to confront and challenge the "values and assumptions" ingrained in the text. Moreover, readers should not allow themselves to be soothed into a condition of unquestioning acceptance but that they must "don the mantle of the 'dissenting reader' and apply a hermeneutic of suspicion" to its content (Davies, 2003:1).

2.1.1 Hermeneutic of Suspicion

A hermeneutics of suspicion is the precursor for feminist critical engagement of biblical texts. A hermeneutics of suspicion, according to Fiorenza (1985:60), examines androcentric texts as "ideological articulations of men" asserting, and preserving, patriarchal institutions. Hutaff (1994:25) strongly advises that any argument that a person, organization, or theological position represents or is driven by or is in possession of "the spirit," should be questioned by a hermeneutic of suspicion. Her assertion is supported by the premise that authority claims based on

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[20]   Italics; my emphasis.

"transcendent realities" are difficult to verify or validate (Hutaff, 1994:25). Likewise, for King (2000:9) a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is a "casting of doubt" on earlier preconceptions regarding the position and status of women within religious traditions. During this stage of the process, King (2000:9) claims, oppressive texts are demythologized, exclusive male representation for the spiritual is disclosed, dualisms of body and spirit are denied, and hierarchical understandings of authority are destabilized. In accordance with King's assertion, Schaab (2001:358) argues that after revealing the inadequacy of the "biblical and theological tradition" the analysis needs to shift below the surface level of the text in order to "retriev[e] of women's perspectives found between the lines, in the silences, and from alternate sources." The task of feminist theology in the movement to "(re)construction," is, therefore, to restructure key religious symbols, particularly those that are problematic from the Christian feminist perspective[21] (Schaab, 2001:358). Christian feminism is, in the opinion of Russell (1974:19), "feminist because the women involved are actively engaged in advocating the equality and partnership of women and men in the church and society." This chapter will briefly describe feminist theology as an approach to biblical interpretation. It will then discuss feminist interpretations of Revelations 12:1-6 in a concise manner.

2.2 Feminist Theology[22]

Feminist theology is a branch of liberation theology and is positioned within the critical paradigm. According to Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smith (2004:19), research using critical theory seeks to "foster critical knowledge and break down the institutional structures and arrangements that perpetuate oppressive ideologies, and the social disparities which these social structures and ideologies create, sustain, and perpetuate." In addition, critical theory examines the process of acquiring, sustaining, and circulating established relationships of power (Henning et. al, 2004:19).

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[21] The terms "feminist theology" and "feminine theology" should not be confused, according to Russell (1974: 19), since femininity refers to a traditionally determined collection of roles and personal characteristics that elaborate the biological capacity of women to bear children. In addition, feminist theology seeks to be "human," not only "feminine," and is concerned with the issues of individuals in "relation to others" (Russell, 1974: 19).

[22] According to Loades (1990: 2) "not every feminist is female by sex and not every female theologian is a feminist theologian." See, Loades, A. (1990). *Feminist Theology: A Reader*. Great Britain. Biddles.

Within the critical paradigm, thus, "knowledge is constructed in the act of critique in a dialectical process of deconstructing and reconstructing the world" (Henning et. al, 2004: 23).

According to Fiorenza (1993:x), critical hermeneutics problematizes the process of canonization and recognizes that "canonical authority has been founded in and through the silencing and exclusion of writings by women and other oppressed persons."

Schaab (2001:357), points out how feminist methodologies draw on the vast resources of traditional theological methods, and how these interpretive methodologies provides the basic elements of "critique, retrieval, and (re)construction." These components, Schaab (2001:357) argues, aids in the analysis of "hereditary inequality" through the "deconstruction of texts and frameworks," the quest for alternate information and the forgotten history of women, and the possibility of new definitions in connection with women's lives.

As Letty Russell (1974:19) reminds us, the task of feminists is to "advocate changes that will establish political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." Moreover, feminism is a "prophetic movement," maintains Russell (1985:55) that "proclaims judgment on the patriarchy of contemporary culture and calls for repentance and reform." In a similar vein, commenting on Cady Stanton's (1895) assertion that "all reforms are interdependent" Fiorenza (1993:4) concludes that one must also attempt to transform "biblical religion" whilst seeking to change the "law, education, and other cultural institutions." According to Russell (1974:19), Christian feminists focus on how religion can become more "complete" when all people are encouraged to contribute from their own perspective to the meaning of faith. Furthermore, "feminist theology[23] strives to be human and not just feminine" and is "concerned with the problems of persons in relation to others" (Russell, 1974:19). This view of Russell, although dated, reflects a responsible and accountable approach to biblical interpretation and appropriation.

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[23] Russell defines feminist theology as "liberation theology because it is concerned with the liberation of all people to become full participants in human history" (Russell, 1974: 20). "Feminist theology is written out of an experience of oppression in society" (Russell 1974: 21).

2.2.1 Types of Feminist Theology

According to Fiorenza (1993:4), "biblical normativity and revelatory authority" have been employed both for and against the religious liberation of women and "nonpersons." Ann Clifford (2001:30) likewise notes how the Bible has oftentimes been used to support the "subjugation of women and other societal evils," interpreting relevant texts as proof that God sanctioned these practices. It is, therefore, the task of feminist theology, as mentioned above, to prophetically call to judgement modern culture's patriarchy and demand repentance and transformation (Russell, 1985:55). Below are the different types of feminist theology that Clifford (2001:32-33) points out:

Revolutionary Feminist Theology:[24] Radical feminists promote "women-centred culture," Christianity is incurably patriarchal, if not "anti-woman"; subscribes to Goddess worship who is revered as "an appropriate symbol for the creative power of women" (Clifford, 2001:32-33).

Reformist Christian Feminist Theology: Committed to the Christian faith, acknowledges the "inerrancy of the Bible," opposed to gender bias, believes that the problems of women can be solved through – for example – better translations (Clifford, 2001:32-33).

Reconstructionist Feminist Theology: Also committed to Christianity; however, they pursue a "liberating theological core" for women within the Christian tradition while also envisioning a "deeper transformation"—a real reconstruction—not only of their church institutions but also of civil society (Clifford, 2001:33).

Russell (1985:12) argues that the Bible needs liberation from "privatized and spiritualized interpretations that avoid God's concern for justice, human wholeness, and ecological responsibility; it needs liberation from abstract, doctrinal interpretations that remove the biblical narrative from its concrete social and political context in order to change it into timeless truth."

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[24] Italics; my own emphasis.

2.2.2 Feminist Theology and Revelation

The issue for feminist theology is to critically evaluate not just the patriarchal roots of the biblical text, but also their own ideological orientation when they interpret the text. For example, Chung (2007:18) in her article, *Feminist Interpretations of Apocalyptic Symbols in Revelation*, notes that contemporary feminist theologians' most contentious interpretations question both the obviously sexist language of Revelation and their own feminist theological perspective. She goes on to say that feminist theologians contend that, when reading the book of Revelation from the perspective of a reader-response hermeneutical method, it includes patriarchal/androcentric symbols and agenda that must be discovered and changed before delivering meaningful interpretations (Chung, 2007:18). Her study demonstrates that feminists have challenged the historic readings of Revelation by claiming and/or revealing that not only has this book been interpreted by the "churchmen who had a misogynist agenda, but also that the book itself embodies an undeniably patriarchal force" (Chung, 2007: 108).

The portrayal of women in Revelation exemplifies the book's unmistakable patriarchal influence. The first portrait in Revelation is that of a woman, namely, Jezebel (Revelation 2). According to Selvidge (1992:163), Jezebel's name alone "conjures up loathsome feelings about an ancient Jezebel who challenged the forces of Yahweh and ultimately paid the price with her life in the Old Testament narrative of 1Kings 16:21". Chapter 14 (4, 8) involves prescriptions against sexual relations with women. John then sees a vision of 144,000.00 males, clothed in white robes who "did not defile themselves with women for they kept themselves pure" (Revelation 14:4). Four verses later, he depicts "Babylon the Great" as a woman who "made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries" (Revelation 14:8). Furthermore, in chapter 17 the "great city" (Revelation 17:18) is equated to a great prostitute who, like a queen, sits on many waters. Selvidge (1992:164) points out how John "viciously describes her activities that warrant punishment and painfully details her death by rape, fire, and cannibalism" (Revelation 17:6). John identifies Babylon the Great as a widow, a queen (Revelation 18:7), a prostitute (Revelation 18:3, an unclean/menstruous woman (Revelation 18:24), murderer (Revelation 18:24) and demon-possessed (Revelation 18:3). He depicts her as someone who is vile, and whose corruptions will

be burned (Revelation 18:8). He also claims that she is responsible for all those who have been slain or consumed on earth, as pointed out by Selvidge, (1992:165).

Amidst the unpleasant images and symbolism involving women, Revelation 12 begins with an apparently positive depiction of a magnificently clothed woman decorated with the cosmic triad. She is clothed with the sun; she wears a crown of twelve stars and stands on the moon (v. 1). Despite the fact that she is pregnant and due to give birth soon, she is depicted in the frontlines of what looks to be a violent conflict (vv. 2-4). The author mentions the sex of the child twice in one verse (v. 5). This reflects the misogynism of John's society (Garrett, 1992; Pippin, 1994). Women's representations in John's Revelation are openly sexist, and feminist scholars are unanimous in their belief that they must not be disregarded, regardless of their philosophical positions (Chung, 2007: 105).

The vision takes place in the heavenly realm while the mother is still pregnant with her baby; but, as soon as she gives birth, her boy is immediately transferred to a higher dimension; the divine throne (vv. 1, 5). The mother, on the other hand, is now seen fleeing for her life in the desert, as the dragon pursues her and wage war on her progeny (v. 6). This spirit-body duality is a patriarchal construct that legitimizes women's exclusion, marginalization, and subjection (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994; King, 2000; etc.)

While the son has the privilege of sharing space with the divine, the mother is sequestered for 1260 days while God cares for her (v. 6). This drastic shift in scenery and turn of events prompts the question, "Was her worth only in her womb?" Was she just useful because of the function of her body? Was her body just suitable for reproductive purposes? At surface level, John's rhetoric appears to be unconventional and unpalatable to certain readers. The following is a brief survey of feminist biblical interpretation on Revelation 12:1-6, whose active engagement with the text demonstrates how difficult it is to interpret Revelation due to its apocalyptic nature.

2.3 Feminist Interpretations[25] of Revelation 12:1-6

2.3.1 Adela Yarbro-Collins[26]

Collins reads Revelation both for "women and history, with a focus on the social and literary context of the text," according to Pippin (1994:112). *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (1984) therefore focuses more on reconstructing the historical context in which the text originated. Collins (1984:12, 141) deals extensively with issues of authorship, dating, social context, etc., and advocates the view that the "crisis" that John is addressing is "perceived" and that his work has a "cathartic" effect on his reader/hearers. She argues that John's purpose for writing the apocalypse was to:

> Overcome the unbearable tension perceived by the author between what was and what ought to have been. His purpose was to create that tension for readers unaware of it, to heighten if for those who felt it already, and to overcome it in an act of literary imagination (Collins: 1984:141).

She states that Revelation is based on "a repeated pattern which moves from visions of persecution/threat to those of salvation/victory." (Collins, 1976:xv). Interpretation based on a "literal millenarian eschatology" rendered the book of Revelation "offensive to those of a more liberal theological outlook," and as a result, the book remains a "sealed book for many readers" (Collins, 1976:1). Moreover, she claims that as much as the Old Testament and Jewish religion is important for understanding the historical background of Revelation, interpreters need to also take into account the "mythic, astrological and religious-philosophical traditions" of the Graeco-Roman religion, since the Revelation of John is a book that is a "very carefully planned work" (Collins, 1976:1). The "ancient myths of combat" cannot be ignored when trying to make sense of the "major images and narrative patterns" of the book of Revelation; "these myths involve a struggle between two divine beings for universal kingship [where] one combatant is often a monster

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[25] Regardless of their philosophical positioning, it is widely agreed upon amongst feminist scholars that the explicitly sexist representations of women in John's Revelation cannot be ignored (Chung, 2007: 105).

[26] Adela Yarbro-Collins, professor of NT at the University of Notre Dame, has made several significant contributions to the study of the Apocalypse of John.

representing the forces of chaos," such as is evident in Revelation 12 (Collins, 1976:12). Thus, Collins' interpretation of Revelation 12 is positioned in the tradition of the combat myth (Collins, 1976: 2). Moreover, she asserts that Revelation's "imagery did not simply fall out of the sky" and that John, therefore, did not write down "mechanically what he heard and saw" (Collins, 1976:57). As a result, it is clear that the socio-cultural, theological, and political circumstances of John's period influenced his worldview and the way in which he articulated the visions he received.

The nature of the Revelation 12 narrative is, according to Collins (1976:58), "international" since John consciously incorporated and fused "traditional elements from a variety of cultures." In other words, Revelation would appeal to a universal audience. Collins (1976:58, 60) assigns "power" in the narrative to the "dragon" since the male child of the woman, whom she refers to as the "champion," is not in a position yet to take that power away from him. After comparing the narrative to ancient traditional combat myths, she concluded that it is evident that the role of the Revelation 12 woman (who is also the "Queen of Heaven") is "depicted as the mother of a heroic figure under attack by a dragon because of the threat posed by the child" (Collins, 1976:65; 71-76). Collins (1976:67) states the following:

> The similarities between the two narratives are too great to be accidental. They indicate dependence. Since the Leto myth is the older of the two, we must conclude that Revelation 12, at least in part, is an adaptation of the myth of the birth of Apollo.[27]

2.3.2 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

In her book *Revelation: Justice and Judgemen*t, Fiorenza (1985) suggests that interpretations of Revelation that do not "either proclaim the apocalyptic promise of justice and salvation to the poor and oppressed or challenge the complacency and security of the well-to-do" are a misuse of the apocalypse. According to Fiorenza (1985:4), Revelation is a continuation of Jewish apocalypticism and should be understood in the context of "Jewish theology as exodus and liberation from slavery

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[27] Collins argues that Revelation 12 in its entirety is not a unified composition. She argues that Revelation 12 consists of two parts of which a "Christian redactor combined and adapted for his own purposes' ': See Collins, A. (1976). *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation.* Chapter 3.

rather than redemption of individual souls." As noted above, Collins (1976), whose study includes Greek mythology, likewise argues that John's Revelation may have been a "continuity of apocalypticism" not only of the Jewish tradition, but also of the religions of the broader first-century Graeco-Roman world. The woman in Revelation 12 can thus be regarded as a symbol for all those who are oppressed and disadvantaged by the patriarchal system, as well as a sign for all women everywhere. Hence, the narrative serves as both a revelation of God's justice in God's realm and a condemnation of oppressive systems that domesticate women and award them value only for the function of their wombs.

According to Fiorenza (1985:4), John "insists that the 'Lord' of the world is not the emperor but Jesus Christ who has created an alternative reign and community to that of the Roman Empire." Thus, if John's Revelation perpetuates notions of women's bodies as reproductive capital and disregards the full humanity of women based on socially constructed gender roles, then I would concur with Pippin's (1994:123) view that the Revelation of John is "decolonizing literature that turns around [and] recolonizes."

Fiorenza (1985:4, 6) interprets John's visions of a different empire and world as a way to "empower" Christians and a call to resist the Roman Empire's oppressive power. Since Revelation is also prophetic, his "alternative empire and world" as Fiorenza (1985) rightly argues, can be appropriated anew for all who are oppressed and relegated to the margins of society. Furthermore, the apocalypse of John is a reasonable response to its socio-political "rhetorical situation," and it can function similarly in subsequent generations (Fiorenza, 1985: 6).

2.3.3 Susan Garrett

Susan Garrett's (1992) approach to Revelation also falls in the spectrum of a feminist/liberationist tradition. In her chapter on 'Revelation' in *The Women's Bible,* she argues that John's purpose in Revelation was to synthesize the past persecution under Emperor Nero and his vision of the imminent end of the world (Garret, 1992:378). In accordance with Collins (1984), Garrett (1992:379) holds the view that John's symbolism blended "images from the Hebrew Scriptures together with images from ancient myths about the births of certain gods and divine combat with

monsters of chaos." John, therefore, makes use of vulgar, sexist language as a sense of urgency in order to "inspire a renewed devotion to God and repentance amidst prevailing temptations of defiance, apathy, apostasy, idolatry, and moral depravity because he believed that God's impending judgment was at hand" (Garret, 1992:378-382). Garret (1992:382) suggests that the radicality of John's apocalyptic message calls for a thorough critique from a feminist perspective. To derive the central meaning from Revelation, she maintains that the cultural sources found in John's metaphorical words must first be identified, and the androcentric connotations of them eliminated (Garret, 1992:382). She further explains that John's use of sexual words like "adultery" and "fornication" pertaining to women refers to idolatry (Garett, 1992:378). Nevertheless, her concern is that John's use of feminine imagery hardly allows for imagining a "full spectrum of authentic womanhood" (Garret, 1992:377). Moreover, that John's language remains "disturbing and dangerous" (Garett, 1992:382).

According to Garrett (1992:379-382), the Revelation 12 woman, who is clothed with "celestial garb" is classified by John as "wholly good" because her "sexuality is effectively controlled." Moreover, she describes John's feminine imagery as harmful because it reinforces an attitude in which women are not "allowed to control their own bodies and destinies" and in which "violence against women is – at least in some cases – condoned" (Garrett, 1992:382). While Revelation conveys a "radical message for desperate times," Garrett (1992:382) argues that this radical message necessitates "radical critique." She encourages modern readers to "boldly decry" those facets of Revelation that "celebrate bloody retribution rather than mercy and justice," and that jeopardize women's full humanity (Garrett, 1992:382).

2.3.4 Tina Pippin

Pippin (1992:16) expresses her desire to join Revelation as a "participatory reader," rather than from a historical-critical position. According to Pippin (1992:16), the central mode or reader response in the text is "cathartic." Whereas Collins (1984:12) views the crisis that John is addressing as a "perceived crisis," Pippin (1992:20) reads the crisis as both a "real crisis in the real world and its solution in the fictive world." Furthermore, Pippin (1992:20) asserts that "pure literature does not exist; all literature is political."

An example of the cathartic effect of Revelation, in a gloomy political landscape, is well expressed by Alan Boesak (1984) in his book *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective.* According to Boesak (1984:19), the book was written during the most "turbulent" years in apartheid, South Africa. Boesak explains, "[a]fter I started writing, the first state of emergency was declared. As *Comfort and Protest* are finally born, this page [the preface] is written during yet another state of emergency" (Boesak, 1984:14). The apocalypse of John provided Boesak (1984:15, 17) with both "comfort and protest"; finding it strange that some might think that the apocalyptic literature is nothing more than "comfort through escapism." Boesak (1984:19, 26) holds the position that apocalyptic literature is "underground protest literature" and that John did not "preach a disembodied gospel, but rather, felt the demands of this gospel in his own body, placing his own body, his own life, at risk for its sake." In solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized, Boesak (1984:25), who "reads and understands history from the underside," argues that it does not matter under which emperor early Christians suffer; "it is the fact that the weak and the destitute remained oppressed which provides the framework for understanding and interpreting history." Thus, in Boesak's view, a "contemporary-historical understanding" of Revelation would yield a satisfactory interpretation because the text as prophecy meant, "it will be fulfilled at different times and in different ways in the history of the world" (Boesak, 1984:28-29). Reading Revelation, therefore, with a view from "below" the text is a powerful expression of protest against the "injustice, oppression, and persecution of God's people" by Rome, the "tyrant/dragon" of John's context (Boesak, 1984:18, 30). The same tyrant/dragon manifests differently for women, in the form of patriarchy, who in the words of Boesak (1984:18) sees itself as a "god in the place of God, and he expects from his subjects the honour and submission of a God."

Pippin (1994:10) therefore, addresses this particular kind of oppression and refers to women's struggles as the "apocalypse of women." The following comment made by Pippin illustrates her view of women's apocalypse:

> By the apocalypse of women, I mean the misogyny and disenfranchisement that are at the roots of gender relations, accompanied by (hetero) sexism and racism, along with violence, poverty, disempowerment, and fear. This apocalypse of women is the destruction of women as women, through rape or pornography

or stereotyping or any part of the mind-body dichotomy (Pippin, 1994:110).

Thus, Revelation, since it is a depiction of John's socio-historical situation as Fiorenza (1985) maintains, also explains in graphic details and derogatory feminine symbols, the "apocalypse of women," as pointed out by Pippin (1994). As a result, she recommends that women approach Revelation with a "heightened hermeneutic of suspicion" (Pippin, 1994:110). Furthermore, in Revelation, the development of gendered archetypes and the exploitation of women's bodies "reveals a deep misogyny" (Pippin, 1994:110). She asserts that the causes and consequences of women's hatred have remained consistent throughout history (Pippin, 1994:116).

The Revelation 12 woman, according to Pippin (1994:116), is a "made up and made passive" character manipulated by "patriarchal politics." Not only is the Revelation 12 woman "moulded to fit the male fantasies of the ideal woman," but she is also described by Pippin (1994:119) as the only one who is safe amongst all images of women in Revelation, albeit exiled, lonely, and "her child taken from her." "Revelation is not a safe space for women," laments Pippin (1994:117).

2.4 Revelation 12:1-6: Identity

The woman of Revelation 12:1-6 is identified in many ways (Collins 1984, 1993; Fiorenza 1991; Pippin 1992, 1994; Sumney 2001).[28] She is depicted in an exalted fashion and might represent a goddess, possibly the Mother-goddess worshipped in Ephesus, the Syrian goddess 'Atargatis', or the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis (Collins, 1993:21).[29] The sun-clothed woman as a vision of a

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[28] The traditional Catholic understanding of the woman clothed with the sun, according to Collins (1993:20), is that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus, since the child she brings forth is the Messiah. However, most Protestant exegetes, as well as a growing number of Catholic exegetes, have ruled out that interpretation (Collins, 1993: 20). She may represent Israel, Jerusalem, or God's people, according to some interpretations, as pointed out by
 Collins (1993:20) note that such personifications are popular in Israel's prophetic traditions (1993:20).

[29] Interpreters relating Revelation 12 to Graeco-Roman sources often refer to the woman as the Queen of Heaven, who is surrounded by celestial symbols in the manner of a goddess, according to Koester (2014:528). Artemis and her Roman equivalent Diana were also portrayed with the moon and stars beside them or on the ornaments; they wear, according to Koester (2014:528). A moon goddess with stars encircling her head may be depicted (Koester, 2014:528).

"high goddess with astral attributes" is most common to those approaching the text from a history-of-religions perspective, notes (Collins, 1993:20).

In accordance with Collins (1993), Garret too is interpreting the woman's identity as one who represents the people of Israel, from whom both the Messiah and the Church is born, and whose character is influenced by the myths of Egyptian and Greek goddesses (Garrett, 1998:471). Fiorenza (1991:81) interprets the woman's identity as a representation of "messianic community" who were the marginalized people at the time of Revelation. Furthermore, according to Garrett (1998:471) John's rhetorical approach in depicting the woman and her association with Egyptian and Greek gods may have been to portray the marginalized early Christian church in the "highest possible manner." As pointed out by Sumney (2001:103), John may have utilized these myths in a way to reject the Roman emperor's imperial claim to legitimacy and power. Koester (2014:529), on the other hand, contends that although the image of the woman has similarities to Graeco-Roman deities and Jewish traditions, they do not fully correspond to either one.

Pippin's analysis is underlined by a central question: "Apart from whom the woman represents how she is being represented?" The woman is identified by her "reproductive event" twice, thus reaffirming her sexual identity, notes Pippin (1992:75). Both Collins (1993) and Fiorenza (1991) engage the text on the level of "reconstruction rather than deconstruction" (Pippin, 1994: 116). I concur with Pippin (1994:116) that although such a reading of the text is important, even before translation "the original representation of women in Revelation needs to be examined." The abuse of women's bodies in Revelation reveals deep misogyny, and although contemporary misogyny is more technologically advanced, "the roots and results of women-hatred are the same," maintains Pippin (1994:116).

Fiorenza (1991:14) advises interpreters of Revelation that an emphasis on the texts' "misogynistic language" involves the risk of magnifying the text's androcentric ideas such that it merely confirms misogynism as its primary meaning. She further recommends that to reclaim the text for a women it is important to understand language as dynamic and dependent on social context (Fiorenza, 1991:14). In this way, Revelation must be understood in the "conventional" language of its time in which whoring and fornication were common metaphors for idolatry, and Israel and Jerusalem were frequently depicted in bridal and maternal imagery (Fiorenza, 1991:14). The text can also be reconstructed from a wider feminist viewpoint in which a broad spectrum of socio-political

problems such as classism, racism, misogyny, and colonialism intersect (Fiorenza, 1991:14). The Book of Revelation as suggested by Fiorenza (1991:138) can be profoundly liberating; even today, for many people as it can stimulate resistance and harbour utopian expectations that "cry out for justice" in similar rhetorical circumstances. Although Fiorenza's concerns are legit, it does not take into account a multi-dimensional approach such as SRI where a text is analysed from a multi focal perspective.

2.5 Sexualized Violence in Revelation 12:1-6: "Abusive Gendering"

Pippin (1994:110) favours the later dating and claims that Revelation is a description of the end-of-first-century C.E. political, religious, and gender crisis, as evidenced by the archetypes of women in the text. As mentioned earlier, she encourages women readers to bring to the text a "heightened hermeneutic of suspicion" (Pippin, 1994:110). In his article, *'The Violence of Nonviolence in the Revelation of John'*, De Villiers (2015:197), regards John's imagery as "abusive gendering." De Villiers (2015:197) hold the position that "people who do gender, engage in ongoing interactional processes in which they invoke, construct, and enact polarized images of the two genders." He explained that while certain types of gendering can have no negative effects and do not use polarized images, others are harmful to women and, on a deeper level, leave dominant male roles and patriarchal hegemony unaffected (De Villiers, 2015:197). Moreover, he points out that gendering reveals the hegemony of dominant males who see women through the lens of their maleness and determine what roles they can play in social structures (De Villiers, 2015:198). Using the gender of those who have been marginalized in society to demean an opponent is dictatorship (De Villiers, 2015:198). He asserts that an increasing number of John's readers "experience his gendering as a discriminatory sub-discourse in his text that undermines or even invalidates its controversial discourse of justice" (De Villiers, 2015:197).

Defending the sexualized violence of Revelation by reconstructing the socio-historical situation of John, Marshall (2010:23) points out that the community to which Revelation was addressed, was a community "dominated" and "exploited" under Roman colonization. He further explains that in a colonial setting, the role of women as a topic of argumentation is one of the ways that can illuminate the insider violence of the apocalypse of John (Marshall, 2010:23). "Sexualized

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violence against women" is, therefore, one of John's main ways of portraying God's judgment, explains Marshall (2010:23).

Pippin (1992, 1994), in accordance with the views of De Villiers (2015), focuses on the sexism in Revelation, and holds the view that the text reveals more than an external form of inequality. She asserts that what is portrayed is an inequality that existed in the early Christian community, a reflection of the marginalization of women (Pippin, 1992:55). Concerning Revelation 12:1-6 she interprets the woman as "nameless and her fate undetermined" (Pippin, 1992:74), but she is also "speechless except for her cries of pain in childbirth" (Pippin, 1992:75). Pippin (1994:113) sees in Revelation the marginalization of women's bodies (The Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride), or their violent destruction (Jezebel and the Whore) and argues, "what is considered unclean and dangerous by the male hierarchy has to be placed outside the camp."

Collins (1993:33) regards the feminine symbols of Revelation 12 as "limited and limiting" for women, as she explains that the mother, prostitute, and bride, which are the main symbols of Revelation, are relationship words with the male in the middle. Moreover, not only is the normative individual, who also happens to be the hero, male, women are defined in terms of their sexual and reproductive roles (Collins, 1993:33). Despite the fact that the Mother of Revelation 12:1-6 is depicted as "good," she lacks agency, relying on the male high God for protection, nourishment, and salvation (Collins, 1993:33).

Pippin (1994:119) maintains, therefore, that women in Revelation are "victims of war and victims of patriarchy," which deems Revelation an unsafe space for women. She laments that Revelation is not liberating women, as the text contains only negative and male-dominated images of women (Pippin, 1994:119) Moreover, the text is so misogynistic that its blatant voice continues to shock her (Pippin, 1994:119). She concurs with Collins (1984) that due to the evils of Roman imperial policy, the violent destruction of Rome is cathartic (Pippin, 1994:119). Nevertheless, Pippin (1994:119) states: "when I looked into the face of Rome, I saw a woman."

2.6 Revelation 12 as "Combat-Creation Myth"

Collins (1976:58) refers to chapter 12 as a "fusion of diverse traditions" with the author attempting to be "international by incorporating and fusing traditional elements from a variety of cultures." The plot of Revelation 12 involves an attack of a monster on a pregnant woman, intending to destroy her and especially her unborn child. Since the child is the one who will rule the nations, the implication is that the dragon wishes to prevent the child's kingship in order to rule himself (Collins, 1993:21). For Collins (1993:21) the Revelation 12 plot resembles the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris.[30]

She illustrates how these myths share a basic pattern of combat that was widespread in the Ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world (Collins, 1993:23). Usually, the myths describe a battle for universal kingship between two divine beings and their allies, with the antagonist often being depicted as a monster, a dragon, as demonstrated by Collins (1993:22). Moreover, in the regions where these myths were created, replicated, and modified, this dispute may "reflect cultural and political changes and struggles" (Collins, 1993:22). These myths also represent the fundamental contradictions in human lives and nature. "Chaos, sterility, and death" are frequently identified with the beast, while "order, fertility, and life" are associated with his adversary (Collins, 1993:22). Thus, their conflict is portrayed as a "cosmic battle" whose result in society and fertility in nature will constitute, or eradicate order (Collins, 1993:22). The conflict in Revelation 12 between the two divine beings may reflect the cultural and political changes and struggles of John's context, as well as the fundamental contradictions in human lives and nature of the community of faith, which Revelation is addressing.

Redding demonstrates in his analysis of Revelation 12:1-6 that:

> The author of Revelation utilized mythical connotations to construct eschatological apocalyptic mythology that orients Revelation's original audience and allows the author to expand on mythic undertones to lay the foundation for his metaphoric ultimate battle

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[30] "Set kills his brother Osiris in a struggle for kingship. Isis, who is their sister and Osiris' wife, revives Osiris, who becomes king of the underworld. She conceives a child by the resuscitated Osiris- Horus, who when he is grown, kills Set and becomes king" (Colins, 1993:21).

and final creation. Revelation 12 is, we shall see, a hybrid combat-creation myth with the purpose of both summarizing Revelation and foreshadowing its conclusion (Redding, 2011:1)

John's description of the woman and her clothing associates her with goddess imagery, which he may have done to portray Israel in the highest possible manner (Garrett, 1998:471). Thus, according to Redding (2011:11), the narrative opens with "order and disorder as opposing forces, a central theme in mythological and biblical creation imagery". The woman is birthing an "unnamed child with an ambiguous messianic identity that is both a threat to the dragon and a symbol for new creation amidst Revelation's chaotic backdrop" (Redding, 2011:11). Revelation 12:5 indicates that this child is not simply a plot device inserted to advance the story; instead, he will undo the chaos brought about by the dragon, and other evils outlined in Revelation (Redding 2011:11). Moreover, Rev. 12:6 reveals God's overt role in this new 'creation' narrative, argues Redding (2011:12). Thus, God does not obliterate the dragon, but rather takes an active part in the struggle against chaos (Redding, 2011:12).

2.7 Nonviolent Resistance in Revelation 12:1-6

According to De Villiers (2015:189), John's Revelation is often regarded as a "non-violent text,"[31] because of its stand against the violent behaviour and actions of its opponents. De Villiers (2015:189) points out how this understanding of Christian scriptures and Revelation has been re-examined in recent studies, with the attention to their "overt and covert forms of violence." Moreover, De Villiers (2015:193-194) considers the language and imagery of Revelation as "dangerous" and "harsh." Although Revelation encourages readers to be non-violent witnesses, it does so in a harsh manner and with a claim of authority (De Villiers, 2015:194-196). He criticizes the language of Revelation, claiming that it draws listeners into a realm of "bitter and agonistic" hatred toward others, labelling people as good or bad, with potentially dangerous results (De Villiers, 2015:194-196). He further comments that such language is unlikely to keep a reader

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[31] According to De Villiers (2015:189), "Accepting suffering rather than inflicting it is a general picture of Early Christianity as a peace movement."

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from being involved, and states his concern that a reader might easily be persuaded to share the book's hatred for Satan and his adherents, or, even worse, to see those who are different as the enemy who needs to be killed (De Villiers, 2015:194-196). The following statement explains De Villiers' view of John's apocalyptic language:

> It is a language that breeds exclusivity that turns opponents into enemies with whom one cannot negotiate or dialogue - which is one reason why religion can become dangerous and violent. It has become an established insight that language as a social construct does not merely reflect, but also reinforces and even creates thought, consciousness, and reality. Language itself can also, in a subtle, often unrecognized manner, violate the dignity and humanity of people, as is particularly clear when one studies Revelation's seemingly innocent depiction of women in terms of gender stereotypes (De Villiers, 2015:194-196).

According to De Villiers (2015:199), John's protest against abusive political authority is expressed through language that represents and reifies harsh realities in culture, which he otherwise fiercely condemns.

The Revelation 12 woman's passivity or inaction in the face of immediate danger is often interpreted as non-violent resistance. Collins (1977:255), in her article *'The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John,'* outlines the two basic models for resistance developed in the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, namely: violent revolution and passive resistance. She distinguishes between two types of passive resistance, which is the "pure type, and the not purely passive type." In the pure type, the elect plays a "passive role both in the present and in the expected violent resolution of the conflict" (Collins, 1977:255). Whereas in the first type, the elect "wait in hope of sharing in the blessings which will follow the victory" in the second type, the death of the martyrs "play a role in bringing about the turning point, the eschatological battle" (Collins, 1977:256). They, therefore, contribute to the outcome in the form of a martyr's death, which is part of the eschatological process (Collins, 1977:256). Moreover, John's Revelation advocates for this type of passive resistance (Collins, 1977:256). She contends that John drew on the holy war ideology to "depict the religio-political conflict" in which his community was involved, and to encourage nonviolent resistance, thus awakening trust in the power of heaven to protect and rescue (Collins, 1977:246)

According to Oropeza (2012:177), John uses "otherworldly" notions and imagery to influence the group's thoughts and conduct in favourable ways to enable them to comprehend their temporal predicament in light of the heavenly realm and so inspire the members to suffer trials related to their condition. In accordance with the views of Collins (1984) and Pippins (1992), Oropeza (2012:117) too argues that John's images of a cosmic battle and victory may have helped the church to "deal with aggressive feelings in a non-violent way." The message of Revelation encouraged Christians to peacefully resist the imperial cult and avoid "assimilation with the Roman system that would compel them to adopt its socio-economic values" (Oropeza, 2012:181). The dominant view amongst scholars commentating on the Revelation 12:1-6 narrative holds the view that John is propagating a non-violent approach. Although the imagery he employs may be harsh, sexist, and induce fear at times, it is nonetheless used to awaken a deep faith and trust in God.

2.8 Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is evident that Revelation provokes a powerful and intense response from its readers because of its graphic symbolism and imagery. As demonstrated in this chapter, the Revelation of John is a complicated, multifaceted text, and the process of deciphering its symbols involves so many dimensions that no one theoretical framework can adequately describe it. An extensive number of attempts have been made to reconstruct the socio-political context of the Revelation 12:1-6 narrative in order to determine whom the "woman clothed with the sun" symbolizes. The maternal dimension of Revelation 12:1-6 is not given much emphasis, and the passage appears to reinforce hetero-patriarchy at the expense of women's dignity. The dominating ideology of the book establishes binary oppositions such as male and female, good and evil, honour and shame, and so on, and on the surface level, it supports gender hierarchy and male privilege. Despite the fact that each of the scholars listed in this chapter makes a substantial contribution to the understanding of Revelation 12:1-6, their interpretations are constrained by their various methodological perspectives. As previously mentioned, the book of Revelation is known for its capacity to open the door to a myriad of interpretive possibilities, particularly given the fact that it was authored in a patriarchal society. Moreover, because texts introduce individuals to a "rich

world," thus only a "highly programmatic," complexly varied and adaptive approach will engage and depict that world in a meaningful way (Robbins, 1994:2).

Returning to the question that was posed earlier: What would a feminist SRI of Rev. 12:1-6 produce? What possibilities might emerge from a combination of feminist and sociorhetorical readings of the text in terms of transforming traditional ideas of women's bodies as reproductive capital? In the following chapter, I will provide a brief discussion of feminist literary criticism as a theoretical framework and SRI as an interpretive analytic that will be used to analyse Revelation 12:1-6.

Chapter Three

Theory and Method: Through the Looking Glass

"People experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their own bodies, which they pick up from their culture and apply to their own." Margaret Atwood, author of Bodily Harm (1981) quoted in Grubstein de Cykman (2015).

3.1 Introduction

Throughout the centuries, women have experienced themselves through their bodies, as pointed out by the abovementioned quote, both positively and negatively. Feminist literary criticism, for this reason, seeks to expose "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women," asserts Tyson (2006:83). Thus, feminist literary criticism is concerned with the portrayal of women in literature, both explicitly and implicitly.

A myriad of cultural and societal standards are inscribed on the bodies of women because of heteronormative interpretations of biblical texts, as previously mentioned. Feminist literary critics are unanimous in their belief that texts have the potential to influence how women perceive themselves. According to Plain & Sellers (2007:2), women have undergone numerous "reconfigurations" over the centuries, and with every "re-inscription comes the need to read." Because women may be "defamed and defended" within the rhetorical space, Plain & Sellers (2007:2) suggest that here is where the most persuasive alternatives for women's future imagination can be located. They point out that, despite the fact that women had very limited chance to compose texts, they yet felt the effect of those texts since "texts affect lived lives" (Plain & Sellers, 2007:15). This chapter provides a brief overview of feminist literary criticism as a theoretical framework, with an emphasis on gender and motherhood studies. Additionally, I offer an overview of SRI as a research analytic.

3.2 Three Waves of Feminism

Feminism is an important social movement that began in the late nineteenth century and has had a long and lasting influence on the lives of women globally. The three waves of feminism have influenced feminist critique in a variety of ways. First wave feminism emphasized the importance of "gender inequality" as a primary concern (Tyson, 2006:107). The "suffrage movement" was at the forefront of this wave's concern (Robertson, 2019:1). The Second Wave Feminism evolved between the early 1960's and the late 1970's. According to Tyson (2006:106), feminist activities in the United States during World War II were cantered on the need for more egalitarian working conditions. Whereas the first wave of feminism was concerned with gender inequality, the second wave was concerned with legal and cultural disparities, adds Roberston (2019:1). The third wave of feminism is viewed as both a "continuation of and a response" to the second wave's perceived failings (New World Encyclopaedia, 2017). Plain (2007:6) asserts that while women's historical engagement with texts and textuality precedes second-wave feminism, feminist literary critique originated during this period.

3.3 Women's Body: Culture's Building Site

Ursula King writes the foreword in a book edited by Sylvia Marcos titled *Gender/Bodies/Religions: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIth Congress for the History of Religions* (2000). The "body and its lived experiences," according to King (2000:9), are "formed by inner and outer forces that inscribe into the body a specific identity and religio-cultural standards of bodily discipline, actions, fitness, and beauty." As she points out, there is no such thing as a blank slate; bodies are "cultural construction sites" that are valued both positively and negatively by society (King, 2000:9). These cultural inscriptions on the body, she continues, have an impact on how we "communicate with our bodies, project body expectations, and undergo body transformations" (King, 2009:9). She establishes a link between women's reproductive power and the celestial generation of all creation, concluding that "femininity has a greater value in relating body/earth/cosmos, expressed symbolically and ritually through the celebration of the 'Great Mother' – particularly in ancient, primitive, and tribal religions" (King, 2009:9). King (2009) is

echoing what biblical scholars (women and men alike) are conceptualizing regarding the influence of the Bible on the perceptions of women in society.

3.4 Writing Women's Bodies

McCann et al. (2019:184) explores the writings of late-twentieth-century French feminists and illustrate how these theorists accepted and embraced post structuralism as a strategy of opposing conventional knowledge and power assumptions. In their work, they emphasized the necessity of women "experience[ing] their bodies" and expressing this manner of loving their bodies via writing, thus, encouraging women to "intervene and rewrite the rules of writing, linguistics, and knowledge-making" (McCann et al., 2019:185). Furthermore, cultural conceptions of women were called into question, as was women's status in a patriarchal society (McCann et al., 2019:187). According to Plain & Seller (2007:270-272), the work of these theorists, among others, was met with criticism. Wallace (2009:23) articulates it with even more force when he notes that their work was in fact met with much resistance and not merely criticism.

As discussed previously, literature has the capacity to affect how women view and experience themselves. Through reading and proper education, women are encouraged to fight confining and demeaning societal preconceptions and to re-inscribe, albeit on their own bodies, their own narratives. A brief discussion of sex and gender follows, including whether it is biologically determined or socially constructed, and how these disputes affect society's view of gender distinctions.

3.5 Biological Determinism[32] vs Social Constructionism

As stated by Wallace (2009:64), biological determinists hold the belief that "differences in women's and men's attributes, behaviour, social experiences, and economic status are based on

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[32] For a more detailed discussion on biological determinism, see Wallace (2009), *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Literary Theory.*

biological differences," regardless of whether these differences are the result of evolution or God's creation. Feminism, therefore, distinguishes between the word sex, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word gender, which refers to our cultural programming as boy or girl (Tyson, 2006:86). In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, as Tyson (2006:86) points out, these "gender categories are constructed by society," which is why this view of gender is an example of what has come to be called social constructionism.

3.6 Women's Bodies in Feminist Discourse

American feminist scholar Susan Bordo (1993), in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* sharply critiques the representation of the body by Western philosophy and theology and how these representations are preserved and perpetuated in popular culture and mainstream media. Bordo (1993:5) questions the dualist assumption that equates "action with the mind and passivity with the body," which is deeply ingrained in Western cultural traditions. The duality of "active spirit/passive body" is one of the most historically significant gendered dichotomies that inform Western belief systems of gender (Bordo, 1993:11). Bordo (1993:5) argues that the genderedness of this notion of duality has been applied to the body resulting in "men being equated with the spirit/mind's activeness and women with the body's passiveness." Bordo (1993:5) further claims that the implication of such a view of the body for women is that "if the woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death." As illustrated by Bordo (1993:15) these deeply engraved cultural inscriptions on women's bodies are exhibited through eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Bordo (1993:41) asserts that to "deconstruct dualism in culture, a complete transformation of the social structures and institutions that support and maintain exclusion and marginalization centred on dualistic conceptions of reality are needed."

In her book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) also addresses the issue of gender. Grosz (1994:9) argues that Descartes's, "binary division of body and mind, nature and culture, divine and earthy, and women and men determine the masculine as

a divine, productive power identified with the mind, and the feminine as a reproductive but unproductive earthy passive potential identified with the body." This dualism, according to Grosz (1994:7), has left behind a legacy in which "consciousness is positioned outside of the world, outside of its body, outside of nature," and "removed" from direct interaction with other minds and a "sociocultural community." She reasons that if "subjectivity is no longer conceived in binarized or dualist terms," it will allow alternative ways to understand and explore "corporeality, sexuality and the difference between the sexes" (Grosz, 1994: vii). Moreover, as Grosz (1994:vii) asserts, "[b]odies have all the explanatory power of minds." Therefore, Grosz (1994) supports the idea of the "lived body, a body in a situation," as articulated by Grubstein de Cykman (2015:58).

Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1999)*, describes "performativity" in terms of sex, gender, and desire in her theory of "performativity." For feminist theorists (Grubstein de Cykman, 2015, Plain & Seller, 2007, etc.), Butler is a key figure in post-structuralist gender studies whose work has reverberated through the critical spectrum. According to Butler (1999:xxviii), gender categories that promote "gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" should be "troubled" because power appears to work within the binary frame of thinking about gender. Performativity, according to McCann et al. (2019:340), is defined as how people "perform masculinity or femininity." McCann et al. (2019:340) go on to say that gender performativity underpins how people "feel, look, or act," in other words, the concept of performativity defines what masculinity or femininity means to them and how others perceive them, implying that gender is not inherently "fixed or stable."

Pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, and the representation of women in mass media and art are all examples of common sexual objectification. According to Calogero (2012:574), "to objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties." Calogero (2012:574) defines sexual objectification as the "fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and/or sexual functions, essentially stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body." According to Calogero (2012:574), objectification theory seeks to understand the pervasive and extreme inclinations to compare women's bodies; as well as why this has such negative consequences for women's appearance and beyond. One of the common forms of sexual objectification, as listed by Calogero (2021:574) is "gazing."

Calogero (2012:574) refers to Martha Nussbaum's "seven qualities that represent common attitudes and treatment toward objects and things that when applied to a person constitutes objectification[33]." Calogero (2012:575), identifies seven characteristics of sexual objectification, namely:

"*Instrumentality*:[34] Treatment of another as a tool for one's own purposes; *Denial of autonomy*: Treatment of another as lacking self-determination; *Inertness*: Treatment of another as lacking agency and activity; *Fungibility*: Treatment of other as interchangeable with others; *Violability*: Treatment of another as permissible to break/break into; *Ownership*: Treatment of another as something that is owned; *Denial of subjectivity*: Treatment of another as something whose feelings and experience do not need to be considered[35]."

While many of these characteristics are present in the Revelation 12:1-6 narrative, for example, John's representation of the woman's reproductive body seems to be for his purpose because she is only important for her reproductive capacity (instrumentality). Moreover, the woman is represented as one who lacks agency or activity (inertness); the future success of the community of faith is dependent on the woman's reproductive capital. When contemplating sexual/self-objectification of women's bodies, Revelation 12:1-6 could be a useful text; therefore, it could be a topic for future research.

3.7 Deconstruction[36]

Deconstruction, as noted above, is a term frequently utilized by feminists who are theorizing the issue of sex and gender. McCann et al., (2019:184) defines deconstruction as a "philosophical tool used by poststructuralists to argue against the notions of binary opposition." Structuralists used the concept of binary opposition, "identifying opposites such as rational/emotional and male/female

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[33] This is worth mentioning here because at surface level, most of these attributes apply to John's treatment of the woman's character in Revelation 12:1-6.

[34] Italics, my own emphasis.

[35] See: Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). Objectification. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, 249–291.

[36] Deconstruction is a concept credited to French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s that became a major influence on literary studies in the late 1970s (Tyson, 2006:249).

in texts," notes McCann et al., (2019:184). As defined by Wallace (2009:182) deconstruction is "an analysis showing that a particular metaphysical system relies not on the presence of an absolute essence centring the system (such as "God"), but on the linguistic opposition, the difference between the presumed essence and its antitheses ("evil," "mortals," and so on)."

Tyson (2006:249) refers to Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction in which he argues that "language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them." Tyson (2006:249) further explains that deconstruction can help one see how deeply held beliefs influence experiences and is "built into" language.

Man Made Language, by Australian feminist scholar Dale Spender (1980), is a seminal text in the feminist study of language. According to Spender (1980:x), "men controlled the language, and it worked in their favour." Furthermore, language has a dual function in that it aids in the development of our world while also possessing the ability to "constrain" it (Spender, 1980:3). As a result, language has the potential to entrench "patriarchy" and to reinforce "male supremacy" (McCann et al., 2019:192). Spender (1980:5) makes the following statement, suggesting that feminist scholars ought to interrogate the language and seek to "modify" it since language is a "human product":

> Instead of acquiescing we will have to invest the language with our own authentic meanings, and repudiate many of those which are currently accepted as accurate: we will have to insist on our own forms of language use, on listening to others and on being heard, on 'taking a turn' rather than 'taking the floor' and doing it without use of imposition, control, or devaluation of 'others' (Spender, 1980:5).

Based on the views of Spender (1980), as briefly discussed above, it is evident that John's society was constructed with a prejudice that favours males; this bias may be seen in John's misogynistic vocabulary. Thus, according to Smith (2014:2), who reads the book of Revelation from the lived experiences of an African American womanist scholar, the "female literary character[s]" of the text warrants "some form of imaginative readerly engagement." As Chris Weeder (2007:89) correctly points out, the "radical otherness" can only be accessed through deconstructing the language that is utilized in our "constructions of the other." As a result, deconstruction can be used

to uncover how a piece of literature indirectly reinforces the "patriarchal ideology" it criticizes, argues Tyson (2006:94). Nonetheless, some feminists are suspicious about deconstruction's value for feminism (Wallace, 2009:183).[37]

3.8 Binary Oppositions[38]

As noted above, the notion of binary opposition is most notably used by structuralists to identify opposites or dualities such as male/female, active/passive, mind/body, subject/object, rational/irrational, presence/absence, and self/other. Mary Klages (2012:10)[39] posits that the basic structure of Western theory and culture is binary oppositions[40] – the idea that "one thing is what it is because it is not its opposite." Thus, the foundation of Derrida's deconstruction, as cited by Klages (2012:10), is to explore the inconsistencies in binary opposition. Tyson (2006:265) points out that by discovering the binary opposition(s) and structuring the key theme(s) of the text, we can discover the overt ideological project of the text.

3.9 The Male Gaze

McCann et al. (2019:339) describe the male gaze as the manner in which the visual arts depict women as "passive objects to be viewed by men." However, according to Tamber-Rosenau (2017:56), despite being common among visual theorists, this term is not confined to the cinema. Visual theorists use the male gaze, according to Wallace (2009:76), to examine the "construction of the female body as an object of the male gaze."

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[37] For a discussion on feminist critiques of deconstruction, see Wallace (2009: 183), *The Encyclopaedia of Feminist Literary Theory*.

[38] "Binary" means "two"; a binary opposition is any pair of opposites. We learn concrete opposites early in childhood: black/white, up/ down, right/left, on/off, yes/no. This idea that the world is structured in terms of opposites then becomes the base on which we build more sophisticated concepts, as we come to think about good/evil, right/ wrong, male/female, and so on. The binary opposition becomes the basic "unit" of our thought, both as individuals and as a culture (Klages, 2012:9).

[39] See: Klages, M. (2012). *Key Terms in Literary Theory.* Continuum. London & New York.

[40] Alternatively, false oppositions as Tyson (2006:94) refers to it.

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Laura Mulvey (1975), as cited by Tamber-Rosenau (2017:56) was the first to use the term 'male gaze' in her essay on psychoanalysis and cinema arguing that a "(male) audience member sees the female characters both through his own gaze and through the gaze of the male protagonist with whom he identifies."

The male gaze can also be seen at work in biblical texts, and most notably in Revelation 12:1-6. Tamber-Rosenau (2017:57), examines the Bible's depictions of the woman's body, claiming that it is impossible to avoid the inference that the Bible was composed "by men for men." Tyson (2006:102) points out how patriarchal power is visible in the male gaze; stating that "the man looks; the woman is looked at. In addition, the one who looks is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one looked at—the woman—is merely an object to be seen" (Tyson, 2006:102).

3.10 Motherhood Studies

Motherhood studies, a term coined by Andrea O'Reilly, *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood (2010),* [41] is a field of study that acknowledges motherhood as a "legitimate and distinctive discipline, one grounded in the theoretical tradition of maternal theory" (O' Reilly, 2010:vii). Adrienne Rich (1976) as cited by O' Reilly (2010:vii-viii) in her book O*f Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,* differentiated between two motherhood concepts, "one superimposed on the other: every woman's possible relationship with her reproductive powers and with children, and the institution that seeks to ensure that this potential and all women remain under male control." According to O' Reilly (2010:vii-viii), Rich's work created a "consciousness" of the disparity between women's experiences as mothers and society's expectations and demands.

Motherhood studies expands on the idea of motherhood as an institution and an experience; as O' Reilly (2010:viii) points out. She defines "motherhood" as the "patriarchal institution of motherhood," whereas "mothering" refers to the "experiences of mothering experienced by

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[41]See O' Reilly (2010), *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood,* for information on the central terms, concepts, topics, issues, themes, debates, theories, and texts of this new discipline of motherhood studies as well as to examine the topic of motherhood in various contexts such as history and geography and by academic discipline.

women as they try to resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its hierarchical ideology" O' Reilly (2010:viii). In her explanation of the term "empowered mothering," O' Reilly makes the following statement: "Empowered mothering may refer to any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women" (O' Reilly, 2010:viii).

According to O'Reilly (2010:viii), motherhood studies may be divided into four interconnected categories of inquiry namely, "motherhood as an institution, motherhood as experience, motherhood as identity or subjectivity, mothering as an agency." Moreover, O' Reilly (2010:viii) further explains:

> While scholars concerned with the 'ideology or institution' analyse patriarchal motherhood policies, rules, ideologies, and images, researchers interested in experience explore the work women do as mothers. The third type, identity or subjectivity, looks at the impact that being a mother has on the sense of self of a woman; in particular, how the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering respectively, shape her sense of self."

3.10.1 Motherhood as Experience and Institution

Adrienne Rich (1976:13), as mentioned above, distinguishes between two means of motherhood, "experience and institution." According to Rich (1976:13), motherhood as an experience refers to a woman's "potential relationship" with her reproductive powers and children, while motherhood as an institution "aims to ensure that that potential – and all women – remain under male control." In a similar vein, Ichou (2006:102) argues that the institutionalization of motherhood is the manner in which women are subjugated. This patriarchal institution of motherhood, according to Rich (1976:13) not only "alienates" women from their bodies but also "incarcerates [them] in them."

The enthusiasm for motherhood that Rich (1976:13) displays is evident in her description of how, while "woman as mother" may provide women with agency in some cultures or clans, motherhood as an institution has "ghettoized and diminished [women's] capacity for most of history." Furthermore, "[women's] potential has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood" under

patriarchy, argues Rich (1976:13). She further claims that men fear women's reproductive capacity (Rich, 1976:13). Consequently, patriarchy emphasizes "selflessness rather than self-realization" and "maternal instinct rather than intelligence" as a result of this fear (Rich, 1976:102).

Ichou (2006)[42] studied the subjective experiences of four young South African single mothers to see to what extent the institutionalization of motherhood is a reality in their lives. Ichou (2006:108) asserts that women should be able to take charge of their "childbearing" and "child capacity" without being limited by the institution of motherhood. "International and national conventions for women's rights have a [relatively] partial impact on the lives [of] the research participants," as demonstrated by the study undertaken by Ichou (2006:108). Overall, young moms studying and living at university question the standards imposed on mothers by the institution of motherhood only to a "limited level" (Ichou, 2006:108).

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, literature has the power to influence how women see and experience themselves. Thus, through deconstruction as a mode of reading, one can see how deeply held beliefs, which have the potential to influence experiences, are built into language. According to motherhood studies, the patriarchally induced institution of motherhood limits women's capacity, not only "alienating" women from their bodies but also "incarcerating" them in them, as Rich (1976:13) points out. Following this brief discussion on motherhood is a powerful example of how religious rhetoric was utilized in early Christianity to perpetuate the notion of women's bodies as merely reproductive capital.

3.10.2 The Martyrdom of Domnina[43] and Christian Motherhood

In a recent study, 'A Mother's Martyrdom: Elite Christian Motherhood and the *Martyrdom of Domnina*, Brooke Nelson (2016) demonstrates how early Christian concepts of mothering and motherhood for upper-class women, were constructed using "rhetorical examples" (Nelson, 2016:11). "Religious rhetoric," argues Nelson (2016:12), was one of the means utilized to "shape

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[42] See Claire Ichou. (2006). "Sex Roles and Stereotyping: Experiences of Motherhood in South Africa." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 69. pp. 101–109. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/4066819. Accessed 27 Oct. 2020.

[43] The Martyrdom of Domnina is the tale of an elite Roman matrona (Nelson, 2016:12)

and reshape gender values in early Christianity." The "rhetorical force" of such narratives, for example, the *Martyrdom of Domnina*, not only provided a rubric for Christian motherhood, it also "formed and formalized" notions about motherhood in early Christianity (Nelson, 2016:26). [44] Nelson (2006:12) points out how the "ideal Christian *matrona* (matron) is crafted through the martyrs' tale by referencing and reframing the core virtues, visible traits, and acknowledged roles of the Roman *matron.*"[45] In the *Martyrdom of Domnina*, maternal sacrifice is reframed so that everything the Christian mother does, from experiencing labour pains to breastfeeding her children, is seen as an act of faith (Nelson, 2016:14). [46] Nelson points out how the early Church Father and Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (347-407), sermonized the tale of Domnina and utilized it to "pattern feminine behaviour and encourage maternity" (Nelson, 2016:14). Moreover, Christian mothers were encouraged to live up to the ideals of the narrative and, in so doing, they "will reap the heavenly rewards reserved for martyrs" (Nelson, 2016:17). "Childbearing rhetoric and labour images" as metaphors were employed to point to Christian motherhood as the "broader sacrifice and selfless service expected of the best Christian women," according to Nelson (2016:19). As part of this process toward the construction of a distinctively "Christian *matrona,* and a distinctively Christian notion of piety" Nelson (2016:21) detects two major shifts in the rhetorical meaning of elite maternity. Labour pains were reinterpreted to symbolize "selfless dedication to Christianity" and the womb represented "the means by which a *matrona* physically earned her high social status toward a Christian understanding that women must overcome the physical markers of maternity in order to reach an even higher state" (Nelson, 2016:21).

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[44] "The most extensive treatment of this particular martyr story comes from a fourth-century sermon by John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople and an early Church father famous for his ascetic lifestyle. The fact that the *Martyrdom of Domnina* was a major part of early Christian devotion is also supported by sermons given by other religious leaders, like Eusebius of Emesa, to commemorate the actions of the upper-class mother and her daughters" (Nelson, 2016:12-13).

[45] "Analysing how motherhood was constructed in imperial Christianity helps all scholars of religion and gender understand some of the historical origins of Christian ideas of mothers, motherhood, and mothering" (Nelson, 2016:12). .

[46] This kind of religious rhetoric is still utilized to perpetuate the notion that procreation is God's plan for women. See for example: Mate, R. (2002). 'Wombs as God's Labouratories: Pentecostal Discourses of Femininity in Zimbabwe'. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 72(4). Pp.549-568.

3.10.3 Motherhood as "Working for God"

Some churches' contemporary religious discourse mirrors the preceding example of how early Christian religious rhetoric was utilized to define and redefine gender values. In 2002, Mate studied discourses of femininity in two prominent Zimbabwean churches. She observed how motherhood was viewed as "important work for God, an altar of sacrifice" (Mate, 2002:550). Mate (2002:549) argues that "such organizations teach women domesticity and romanticize female subordination as glorifying God." Furthermore, Mate (2002:549) claims that such religious rhetoric concerning motherhood undermines "individualism by exalting motherhood, wifehood, and domesticity as service to God [thus] repackaging patriarchy as Christian faith." In these churches, women are taught that their bodies (wombs) are offered on this altar for God's work (Mate, 2002:552). Pregnancy, therefore, "elevates women as co-workers with God in the production of humanity" (Mate, 2002:550). Based on Revelation 12: 3-4, fertility is seen as God's plan for women, and infertility is the devil's work (Mate 2002:550). Mate (2002:563) calls this kind of religious discourse "Christianized patriarchy" and argues that it makes "patriarchal control look attractive, and legitimate, and gives it new impetus." "Born-again discourses of motherhood," according to Mate (2002:560), are not about changing women's social roles, but rather depict motherhood as a part of faith and, therefore, obligatory for Christians. She points out that such discourse implies that abortion is not a choice and that no pregnancy is unwelcome (Mate, 2002:560). She also notes how pregnancy is viewed as a unique gift: one cannot prepare for it or choose which babies to keep or abort, and therefore discourses about choice and the need for women to have autonomy over their bodies are nullified and made sinful (Mate, 2002:560). This kind of discourse has severe implications for the overall well-being of women, as Mate (2002:560) comments: "When women do not have biological children, they feel less feminine and whole."

3.10.4 Childlessness: "Oh, it is such a shame!"

> *"Many are the traumas in the quest for a child of one's own."*
> *(Oduyoye, 1993:112)*

Mate (2002) does not mention the experiences of women who are unable to conceive children, in her paper. The quote above is from Oduyoye (1999), African feminist scholar who succinctly expresses her experience of childlessness in a West African culture based on the assumption that procreation equals fruitfulness. In the "eyes" of the world, her childlessness (as a married woman) is a "shameful and pitiable void" (Oduyoye, 1999:115). She argues that procreation is not the only way of "bringing forth life" and that the Christian church has often "made the suffering of childlessness more painful" (Oduyoye, 1999:115, 119). Her trauma is summarized in the following statement: "For me, then, childlessness in the West African space has been a challenge – to my womanhood, my humanity, and my faith" (Oduyoye, 1999:119). According to Oduyoye (1999:106), mothering entails more than having a "biological progeny." Mothering, according to Oduyoye (1999:111), is more than only procreation. She believes that it is a shared responsibility, and that men and women should engage in the "reproduction of the human race" (Oduyoye, 1999:111). Furthermore, the "diversity of God's gifts" should be recognized, as should the different ways of "bringing forth life" (Oduyoye, 1999:119).

As previously stated, patriarchal biblical tradition frequently referred to women simply as "wife" or "mother," with her primary value derived from her ability to reproduce (ideally male) offspring. This thesis argues that a feminist SRI of Revelation 12:1-6 allows for alternative readings that go beyond narrow views of women's bodies as just reproductive capital. In the following section of this chapter, I provide a brief overview of SRI as an interpretive analytics before applying the features of SRI to the text under consideration.

3.11 Sociorhetorical Interpretation: "Multiple Ways of Looking at Text"

Vernon K. Robbins[47] (1996a; 1996b; 2007) developed sociorhetorical interpretation (SRI) which is an "interpretative analytic"[48] that can be used to read multi-textured texts. According to Robbins (1996b:1), this mode of analysis integrates people's use of language with their ways of life in the

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[47] Vernon K. Robbins is a retired Research Professor of New Testament and Comparative Sacred Texts in the Humanities, located in the Department and Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

[48] Robbins argues in two pioneering books, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* (1996a) and *Exploring the Textures of Texts* (1996b) that SRI is an interpretive analytics rather than a method.

world. Importantly, as Oropeza (2016:3) points out, SRI is an "interdisciplinary approach" that emphasizes "values, convictions, and beliefs in both the texts we read and the world we live in." In addition, According to Oropeza (2016:3), texts are more than just texts; they are "performance[s] of languages in specific historical and cultural contexts." This form of interaction with a text's language is already the beginning of deconstruction, allowing the interpreter to identify the deeply held assumptions that may or may not be perpetuating patriarchal ideologies. With this in view, it is significant to mention that SRI is not a "competitive method," but rather an "interactive" approach, as Robbins (1996b:2) explains, since it allows for tapping into and incorporating insights received from various competing methodologies.

According to Robbins (1999:4), the metaphor of a "text as a tapestry rather than a site of windows and mirrors" motivates SRI. SRI began to concentrate not only on various textures of a text but also on "multiple discourses" that interlink with one another within those textures, explain Robbins (1999:4). Moreover, within a text, the "interweaving of multiple textures and discourses" provides an atmosphere in which "signification, meanings, and meaning effects "engage in ways that no single approach can show (Robbins, 1999:2). Texts brings a "rich world" into people's life, argues Robbins (1994:2), and, therefore, only a "highly programmatic, complexly variegated, and adaptable" approach would engage and illustrate that world.

Moreover, SRI helps the interpreter to "move interactively" into the context of the people who wrote the texts and into our own world by paying close attention to the text itself (Robbins (1996:1). "No interpreter will ever use all of the resources of SRI in any one interpretation," according to Robbins (1996:2); however, the goal is to "[create] an environment for interpretation that provides interpreters with a basic, overall view of life as we know it and language as we use it." The tool consists of five major textures that would enable an interpreter to "bring multiple textures of the text in view" namely, inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (Robbins, 1996:3).

According to David Gowler[49] (1994:1), Robbins' method of developing SRI is reflective of a collaborative and "dialogical" approach. In his recent work, Robert H. von Thaden Jr (2015:108) refers to SRI as an analytic space within which he can:

> (1) make space for specialization that allows for close nuanced readings, (2) allow these readings to be put into a meaningful conversation with colleagues in other areas of religious studies and the academy at large, and (3) take seriously the cultural hermeneutical space of the human beings who produced and who continue to make meaning of the texts.

3.12 A Feminist Evaluation of SRI and Vernon K. Robbins

Feminist scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1996)[50] critiques interpretive strategies that are based on rhetoric "as mere words." Fiorenza (2005:13) argues for "an ethics of inquiry" that would challenge interpretive methodologies, which relegate rhetoric, to empty conversations, and "the dustbins of history." She explains that by the rhetoric of inquiry she means, "a second-order reflection in the positivist practices, unacknowledged theoretical frameworks and socio-political interests of scholarship that undergird its self-understanding as value-detached, objectivist science" (Fiorenza, 1996:31). Fiorenza (2005:11) questions those who are only engaged in "textual rhetorical criticism" and re-affirms the need for biblical scholars to participate in "interdisciplinary rhetoric of inquiry." She maintains that rhetoric as a field of study is designed to bring text, society, religion, and politics together, and to examine ways in which knowledge is constructed, individuals and groups wield power, and biblical discourses generate values and visions (Fiorenza, 2005:14).

Fiorenza's (1996:29) criticism of those who advocate rhetoric in biblical interpretation as being "stuck in a rhetorical half-turn" is based (among others) on two main arguments. She contends that interpreters - including proponents of SRI - "remain in the captivity of empiricist-positivist science." Fiorenza (1996:33) regards Robbins' interpretive strategy (SRI) as "scientific," and

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[49] David Gowler is a colleague of Robbins. He is Associate Professor and Pierce Professor of Religion at Emory University and Associate Editor of the Emory Studies in Early Christianity.

[50] See Schüssler Fiorenza (1996), *Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn: Turn: Feminist and Rhetorical Biblical Criticism*

criticizes it for treating ideological criticism as one method among others, rather than understanding it as a dimension of all interpretive methods and strategies. Consequently, she calls for a rhetoric of inquiry in rhetoric as the subject of research, and she argues that a critical assessment of the ethics and ethos of the discipline is appropriate (Fiorenza, 2005:14).

In his response[51] to Fiorenza's accusation, Robbins (2002b:48-52) refers to the fact that SRI functions beyond the limits of "empiricist-positive science," and he rejects the fact that SRI separates ideology as an optional addition. In his article: *The Challenges and Opportunities of a sociorhetorical Commentary,* H.J. Combrink (2002:114) notes that Robbins has been calling for "transcultural rhetorical criticism that addresses ethnocentrism as a major topic." Combrink (2002:114) states that our conclusions are often situated "ethnocentrically, and that transcultural rhetorical criticism requires traveling across boundaries."

Robbins (1996a:24-27; 1996b:1-6, 95; 2002b:48) points out his understanding that "ideological analysis is a strategy that facilitates a process wherein the interpreter sees both him/herself as a reader and author, as well as the writer and reader of the text." Whilst ideology is a specific texture within SRI, ideological texture is also interwoven with inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and sacred texture. Furthermore, Robbins (1996b:1) explains that while SRI invites detailed attention to the text, it also moves interactively into the world of the people who have composed the text, and into the world of the present day. Robbins (2002b:49) states and maintains, therefore, that his position is not "scientific but rather interactionist." Regarding this debate, Jodamus (2020:90) observes that issues of gender and race are essentially missing, and hence unproblematized, because "conferences on rhetoric in South Africa were almost exclusively attended and organized by white male South African biblical scholars." Alternatively, Jodamus (2020:89-100) suggests adding "intersectional texture" as an addition to SRI.

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[51] See Robbins (2002) The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation: Reconfiguring Rhetorical Political Analysis, in Porter and Olbricht (eds), *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible: Essays from 1998 Florence Conference*, 48-60. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

3.13 Rhetorolects[52]

Christians in the first century CE developed argumentation based on larger social experiences, according to Robbins (2007:3). Hence, Robbins (1996c:355) coins the term "rhetorolect" to define early Christian discourse's "dialectical" nature. Robbins (1996c:356) explains that each piece of early Christian writing has a unique "rhetorolect configuration." Early Christian speech arose because of these rhetorolects' interaction, regardless of their distinctions (Robbins, 1996c:356) Thus, Robbins (2009:1) argues that this discourse is twofold namely; based on early Christian communication, Greek speakers in the Mediterranean world could understand them and their speech was incredibly unusual to the point that a dialect was uncommon.

Throughout the early Christian debate, the idea of "multiplicity" deepened Robbins' interest in how shifts in speech allow for interaction between "speeches and discursive cultures," resulting in a variety of literary cultures (Robbins, 1996c:355). Six traditional modes of discourse (rhetorolects), according to Robbins (2007:6), contributed dynamically to the imagination of early Christian speaking and writing. Furthermore, as Robbins (2002a:28) points out, early Christians integrated Mediterranean wisdom, miracle, prophetic, priestly, apocalyptic, and pre-creation discourse into the fabric of three essential literary forms: biographical history, epistle, and apocalypse during a highly imaginative process of rhetorical innovation during the first century.

Robbins (1996c:353) describes a rhetorolect as a form of language plurality or expression that can be characterized by a specific arrangement of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentation. Robbins (2007:13-14) further explains that a rhetorolect is a "network of significations and meanings associated by social-cultural-ideological places and spaces familiar to people in a certain geographical area." According to Robbins (1996c:353), each rhetorolect has made a significant contribution to the new culture of speech that emerged in the first century, illustrating distinguishing Christian argumentation based on unique social, cultural, and ideological topics. By

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[52] Every early Christian writing has a rhetorolect configuration, which is slightly different from any other piece of writing, note Robbins (1996c:356). As these rhetorolects, regardless of difference, engaged with each other, a rhetorical environment was created which is called early Christian discourse (Robbins, 1996c: 356).

exploring how texts exhibit topics to evoke specific social, cultural, and religious *topoi*[53], it is possible to identify the rhetography and rhetology central to a particular rhetorolect, argues Robbins (1996c:353). Rhetorolects (wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly) are identified based on topoi which are exhibited through pictorial narration, (rhetography) or/and enthymematic-syllogistic elabouration (rhetology).

3.13.1 Wisdom rhetorolect

This discourse, according to Robbins (1996c:357), assumes that Jesus is a conduit for God's wisdom to people. Having a triple focus, wisdom discourse exhibits:

(i) The relation of the created world to God.

(ii) The relation of humans to God; and

(iii) The relation of humans to one another because of the relation of God to the created world and to humans (Robbins 2007:33; Combrink 2002:112). According to Robbins (2007:33), wisdom rhetorolect is most prominent in households, where "God's wisdom is transmitted to children" and where the "blending of God's heaven and earth" takes place. Furthermore, God's heaven and earth merge with "people's bodies," allowing these bodies to "go forth" (Robbins, 2007:33). Moreover, as per Robbins (2007:31, 33), God acts as "Father and Mother" of all created things in wisdom rhetorolect; concepts that are usually associated to the head of a household who provides nurture, food, and wisdom to "children who are to become productive of 'good,' as God produced a good creation." Wisdom discourse excels at "inductive-deductive reasoning," providing "generalized principles" based on one or more specific cases, according to Robbins (2007:33); yet, it can supply any number of "specific examples or analogies" based on one or more generalized principles. The

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[53] Topoi is the plural for topos. SRI's dictionary of sociorhetorical terms defines a topos as a "location of thought (topic) associated with implicit or explicit image-picture schemas and implicit or explicit argumentative frames of thought, action, emotion, and belief"

major forms of argument in wisdom discourse are thesis[54], rationale[55], contrary[56], opposite[57], analogy[58], example[59], and authoritative judgment.

3.13.2 Prophetic rhetorolect

Early Christian prophetic discourse, according to Robbins (2007:6), evokes the context of God's kingdom on earth, with the geographical borders of God's kingdom extending beyond the land of Israel to other regions. As a result, early Christian prophetic discourse reinterprets God's land promise as an inheritance promise, explains Robbins (2007:6). According to Combrink (2002:112), prophetic discourse is undergirded by the assumption that God has designated certain people to be "especially responsible for righteousness in the world"; if they fulfil that duty, they will be especially blessed; however, if they do not accomplish that responsibility, they will suffer "negative consequences" (Robbins (2007:7).

The divisions in prophetic discourse are a combination of good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, and that of ailments and distress versus healing and restoration, notes Robbins (1996c:360). It presumes that people on earth can change the systems of behaviour by confronting it, attacking it, and enacting different behaviour that offers God's blessing to people (Robbins, 1996c:360). Thus, this discourse attacks individual behaviours and ideologies; the speaker is aligned with God, as opposed to those who pretend to understand God but do not truly understand

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[54] The SRI dictionary defines thesis as a "general or specific assertion put forward as a proposition for consideration. A thesis regularly invites elabouration or objection. If a thesis is attributed to a specific person, it is chreia. If it is not attributed to a specific person, it often has the form of a proverb or a maxim.

[55] A rationale is an "argumentative device that supports the thesis (chreia or theme) by giving the reason that the thesis is to be believed. It also functions as the minor premise (or case) in a syllogistic argument. Rationales often begin with "for" or "because."

[56] Contrary "presents an alternative to a thesis for the purpose of confirming or clarifying it. The alternative represents a choice that is not satisfactory in the context of the thesis but is not a direct contradiction (contrary) of the thesis.

[57] An opposite "presents the contradiction of a thesis. Thus, both the thesis and its opposite cannot be true. An opposite contrast with a contrary, which is an alternative that can be true at the same time but is not satisfactory in the same context.

[58] Analogies "embellishes the argument, helping to persuade the audience of its truth.

[59] An example is a "typical, singular instance of the main point that embellishes the argument through illustration and clarification. For SRI glossary see http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/t_z_defns.cfm)

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God's will and ways, explains Robbins (1996c:360). Moreover, prophetic rhetorolect assumes that Jesus' Messianism is a distinct alternative to other types of Judaism, and actions should be modified in light of new insights regarding how and under what conditions God provides eternal benefits to individuals on earth (Robbins, 1996c:360).

3.13.3 Miracle rhetorolect

The main topics of Miracle Rhetorolect are "human illness and personal crises," notes Combrink (2002: 112). "Fear" and "cowardice" are also prevalent topics in this discourse and "belief" is perceived to be an appropriate reaction, explains Robbins (1996c:358). Furthermore, miracle discourse believes that God responds to humans in times of peril or disease, and that Jesus is the conduit through which these benefits are supplied, according to Robbins (1996c:358). Integral to miracle rhetorolect is the reasoning that all things are possible with God (Robbins, 1996c:358; Combrink, 2002:112). As a result, "belief" is a prevalent topic in miracle discourse, resulting in a set of criteria that individuals must follow in order to get particular benefits in times of crisis, special need, or affliction, explains Robbins (1996c:358).

3.13.4 Apocalyptic rhetorolect

The focus of early Christian apocalyptic rhetorolect, according to Robbins (2007:362), is on "God's transformation" of special people, of the world, and even of time itself. This suggests that God's activities of transformation are not limited to the abilities or efforts of humans to transform themselves through repentance and obedience, notes Robbins (2007:362). Moreover, Combrink (2002:112) argues that the "special power" of apocalyptic rhetorolect is inherent in its "reconfiguration of all time (past, present and future) and all space (cosmic, earthly, and in personal bodies) in terms of holy and profane, or good and evil." As stated by Robbins (2007:364), apocalyptic discourse allows for the "creation of new storylines that presented the actions of personified agents of God's holiness and power who played a role in the past, present, and future to create well-being for believers." Furthermore, early Christian apocalyptic rhetorolect focused on the "eye" therefore emphasizing, "seeing" beyond the physical realm into the heavenly

mysteries (Robbins, 2007:364). Whereas wisdom rhetorolect focuses on what is apparent to the eye in the world of earthly life, apocalyptic rhetorolect claim that one must obtain vision into the heavens in order to comprehend God's essence, according to Robbins (2007: 64). In Robbins', own words: "Only by seeing what is happening in the heavens can one see the ways in which God is transforming the world and its people at present and will more dramatically transform the world and its people in future" (Robbins, 2007:364). Moreover, apocalyptic rhetorolect argues that only "perfect holiness and righteousness" can bring an individual into the presence of God, who removes all evil and gathers all holiness in God's presence, according to Robbins (2007:8)

3.13.5 Priestly rhetorolect

Blending God's world with God's temple, according Robbins (2007:34) is the "socially experienced" basis for priestly rhetorolect. In other words, this is a reciprocal space of exchange between God and humans (Robbins, 2007:34). Moreover, in light of priestly rhetorolect, human "bodies" may be viewed as "temples of the Lord," argues Robbins (2003:40). Thus, the presumption of priestly rhetorolect is that ritual activity serves God in such a way that "divine returns" are activated for humans on earth (2007:9).

Early Christian priestly rhetorolect, as Robbins (2007:10) points out, includes "thanksgiving, praise, prayer, and blessing" in ways that are frequently viewed as sacrificial in purpose and practice. As per Robbins (2007:34), priestly rhetorolect is most notable in New Testament discourse that presents "forgiveness of sins," since the priest's position is that of a mediator between humans and God, who is the source of the temple sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice, therefore, results in believers' sacred "bodily transformation," notes Robbins (2007:34).

3.13.6 Pre-creation rhetorolect

Unlike apocalyptic rhetorolect, which suggests that God would intervene decisively to eradicate evil in the universe and maintain the righteous, pre-creation rhetorolect, according to Combrink (2002:112), focuses primarily on what "God is doing through Christ. Not only is the emphasis of

pre-creation rhetorolect on the relationship of Christ to God prior to the creation of the world; the nature of this discourse is to heighten the Christological reasoning in the other discourses and is also related to wisdom, prophetic, and miracle discourse," according to Combrink (2002:112). Robbins explains that the socially experienced basis for precreation rhetorolect is a blending of God's created world with the household of an emperor since the emperor's household "reigns over an empire" (2007:33). Robbins (2007:33) further expounds how in Christian discourse, the "precreation household is characterized by a utopian, intimate relation understood as 'love' (agape) between emperor Father and his only Son." Every rhetorolect's unique social, cultural, and religious settings are depicted through pictorial narration (rhetography) and reasoning (rhetology).

3.14 Rhetography and Rhetology

According to Robbins (2008:5), early Christians reshaped various types of previous and existing discourse by combining pictorial narration (rhetography) with an argumentative claim (rhetology), resulting in unique "social, cultural, ideological, and religious" modes of thinking and belief in the Mediterranean world .[60] Robbins (20078:1-3) explains how the three primary settings of classical rhetoric, judicial rhetoric (picturing a law court), deliberative rhetoric (picturing a parliamentary assembly), and epideictic rhetoric (picturing a civil ceremony), form the foundation for picturing the main rhetorical situations in people's lives based on the city-state understood as a city. Furthermore, according to Robbins (2008:2-3), this is not the primary foundation for the conventional circumstances that underpin New Testament rhetoric. He argues that the New Testament does not assume that these traditional social systems benefit Christian belief and practice because they "created problems, suffering, conflicts, persecution, imprisonment, and even death for early Christians" (Robbins, 2008:3). As a result, Christians needed to build counter-institutional picturing and argumentation (Robbins, 2008:3).[61] This counter-argument occurred in the backdrop of Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric, which expanded the conceptual location of social geography beyond the three main categories, explains Robbins (2008:16).

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[60] See Robbins (2008): Rheotography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text

[61] See Robbins (2007).*The Invention of Christian Discourse. Volume 1: Wisdom, Prophetic, and Apocalyptic*. Blandford Forum, UK: DEO Press.

3.15 Conclusion

As previously stated, feminist literary criticism seeks to reveal the ways in which literature (and other kinds of cultural production) reinforces women's subjugation. The core concern in this thesis is whether Revelation 12:1-6 is harmful to women (as was pointed out by feminist scholars in the previous chapter) or whether the book may be exploited in the struggle for women's liberation. Revelation 12:1-6, as mentioned in chapter 2, is a difficult narrative to interpret because of its apocalyptic nature. As a result, confining Revelation to a single interpretation minimizes its inherent multi-layered polyvalence, as its apocalyptic imagery begs for multiple interpretations (Redding, 2011:13). Thus, to get the most out of the narrative, SRI's multi-dimensional approach to texts, guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic, will be useful (Robbins, 1991:1). Revelation 12:1-6, as seen in this chapter, is still interpreted and understood in a way that justifies women's subordination and maintains patriarchal control over women's reproductive power. I have also briefly included as an example the devastating implications such a reading of texts pertaining to procreation has had on African feminist scholar Oduyoye (1999). This chapter provided a brief overview of feminist literary criticism as a theoretical framework, focusing on gender and motherhood studies. I also gave a brief overview of SRI as a research analytic. In the following chapters, I will apply inner texture, social and cultural texture, sacred texture, and rhetography to Revelation 12:1-6, looking at the text from various points of view.

Chapter Four

The Inner Texture of Revelation 12:1-6: Is the Text Propagating Hetero-Patriarchal Ideology at Women's Expense?

4.1 Introduction

With a focus on the communication and language features of a text, inner textual analysis allows an interpreter to look at the "linguistic patterns" within a text and the "structural elements" of a text (Gowler, 2010:195; Robbins, 1996b:7). Inner texture refers to the basic manner in which the text attempts to "persuade" the reader, and the way in which the text's language "evokes feelings, emotions, or senses in different parts of the body," as defined in the Dictionary of Sociorhetorical Terms.[62] Thus, the inner texture of written texts is most evident in "verbal texture," which is the "texture of the language itself" (Robbins, 1996b:7). As Robbins (1996b:38) further explains, this mode of analysis occurs on two levels; firstly, the "internal texture of the unit of the text itself," and secondly, "the presence of the actual text in the entire written document in which it is created." Furthermore, the interpreter must "look at" and "hear" the words themselves, as well as how the text uses them, according to Robbins (1996b:7).

Whereas Fiorenza (1986:130), regards the language of Revelation as "emotional," Koester (2014:93-96) believes that John "cleverly employs the language of the dominant culture to criticize society while urging obedience to God and Jesus." In line with this view, De Silva (1999:72) positions John's language in "counter cultural perspective." Garrett (1992: 382) describes John's language as "disturbing and dangerous." Smith (2014:2, 3), on the other hand, describes her work as "scholarship," even though it is deeply saturated with "emotion," claiming that she invests John's language with her own authentic meaning by "highlighting" the woman Babylon's "beautiful complexity." It is evident; therefore, that Revelation has the ability to elicit a wide range of emotions in its readership. The focus of SRI's inner textual analysis, according to Robbins (1996b:7), is on a text's "communication." Thus, an interpreter who engages in this level of analysis will focus on the text's language characteristics (Robbins, 1996b:7).

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[62] See http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/i_defns.cfm#inner

A central concern of this chapter is identifying some of the ways in which Revelation 12:1-6 uses language to communicate with its audience. SRI, in contrast to "literary or rhetorical" interpretation, which focuses solely on the diverse components of a text, integrates both "literary and rhetorical" strategies (Robbins, 1996b:3). Bloomquist (1997:202) endorses this view by stating that inner texture is related to "rhetorical-literary characteristics within the text" that are aimed at persuasive aspects of the discourse. Bloomquist (1997:202) further explains that inner textural analysis introduces the interpreter to an initial view of the text's argument by referring to features like the repetition of specific terms or phrases, development of beginning and ending, alternation of speech and narrative, various ways in which words constitute a claim, and the text's particular "feeling" or aesthetics.

Thus, before analysing meaning, inner textual analysis concentrates on words as "communication devices,"as noted by Robbins (1996a:7). Moreover, as mentioned above, the interpreter can just look at and listen to how the text uses words, such as how often the same word is used, how nearly the same thing is said in different ways, how new terms are grouped with simple assumptions (Robbins, 1996a:7). Inner textual interpretation, thus, seeks to establish an "intimate knowledge" of the words, motifs of phrases, voices (present and absent), structures, instruments, and modes in the text that serve as the backdrop for meaning and consequences of meaning that an interpreter explores with other readings of the text (Robbins 1996a:7). Robbins (1996a:7) has identified six aspects of inner texture, namely, repetitive texture, progressive texture, narrational texture, open-middle-closing texture, argumentative texture, and sensory-aesthetic texture. The features of inner textual analysis will be applied to the text of Revelation 12:1-6 in this chapter.

4.2 Repetitive Texture and Pattern

When words or phrases appear several times in a text, as well as several instances of various forms of "grammatical, verbal syntactic, or topical phenomena," as Robbins (1996a:8) puts it, "repetitive texture and pattern" emerges . An interpreter should "highlight the text's repetitive words, topics, characters, or phrases," thereby demonstrating patterns of "repetition" and presenting an early insight into the discourse's broader rhetorical patterns, suggests Robbins (1996a:8). While repetitive textural analysis does not reveal "inner meanings in the sequences," Robbins (1996b:8)

points out that repetitive data clusters focus on providing a first glance into the overall picture of the rhetoric as well as a brief description of the language system, encouraging the reader to delve deeper into the text. The repetitive texture of Revelation 12:1-6 is summarized in the table below.

12 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule[a] all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.	And–11times his (male terms) – five times Great – twice Sign – twice Appeared – twice Crown – twice Stars - twice Heaven – thrice Woman – thrice Her – four times

Table 1: Repetitive Texture and Pattern

De Silva (1999:73) defines John's language in Revelation as "highly repetitive" which is clearly notable in the Revelation 12: 1-6 narrative. In repeating what he saw as "a sign in heaven," (vv. 1, 3), John underscores the otherworldly nature of his visions and invites his readers imaginatively into that world with him. John also emphasizes his function as a receiver of knowledge from an

"extrasensory, invisible source" by repeatedly evoking the sense of seeing as a way of pulling his audience into the "visionary experience" itself (De Silva, 199:84).

This is a typical feature of apocalyptic rhetorolect, which focuses on the "eye and allows readers/hearers to see beyond the earthly realm into mysteries of the heavens," explains Robbins (2007:364). According to De Silva (1999:67), the apocalyptic genre, which is a particularly useful medium for "deconstructing and reconstructing views of reality," permits God, Jesus, and other spirit entities to emerge as the text's actual authors, while John is only the "vehicle for this revelation." Thus, this particular repetition's rhetorical force not only invites John's audience to see what he sees, but also serves as a springboard for his counter-cultural propaganda.

Gendering of characters, and therefore gender stereotyping, is most notable in the narrative, for example, the word "woman" is used three times (vv. 1, 4, 6). The words "her" and "she," referring to the woman, appear nine times in the text, at times twice in the same sentence (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6,). The gender of the woman's opponent is described in male terms (Vv. 3, 4), the woman's child is male (v. 5), and God is described in male terms as well (v. 5). The patriarchal dominance that underpins the narrative is replicated in the all-male gaze that surrounds the woman (Tamber-Rosenau, 2017; Tyson, 2006; Wallace, 2009).

Nortjé-Meyer (2011:2) asserts that most ideologies of oppression work in the same way, in that they "create two different categories or binaries, and then assign certain traits to one group over and against the other." As a result, this ideology assigns a higher value to members of one party while deeming everyone else to have inferior characteristics (Nortjé-Meyer, 2011:2). For this reason Butler (1999:xxviii) suggests that gender categories that promote "gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" should be "troubled" because power appears to work within the binary frame of thinking about gender. Although feminist scholars vary over whom the Revelation 12 woman represents, they concur on the text's sexist and androcentric language (Collins 1984, 1996; Fiorenza, 1985, 1991; Garret, 1992; Levine, 2010, Pippin, 1992, 1994 etc.). Thus, it is apparent that John's text is a compelling gender studies topic that produces a great deal of feminist discussion and debate. Heteronormative interpretations of Revelation 12:1-6, on the other hand, have the ability to perpetuate patriarchy and promote male domination. Thus, deconstruction should be utilized to uncover how the text indirectly reinforces the patriarchal ideology it criticizes (Tyson, 2006:94).

Elements of the universe such as the "sun," "moon," "stars," "sky," and "earth" are frequently mentioned in vv. 1 and 4. As pointed out by Combrinck (2002:112), the special power of apocalyptic rhetorolect lies in its "reconfiguration of all time (past, present, and future) and all space (cosmic, earthly, and in personal bodies) in terms of holy and profane, or good and evil." As argued by Robbins (2007:364), apocalyptic discourse allows for the "creation of new story-lines that presented the actions of personified agents of God's holiness and power who played a role in the past, present, and future to create well-being for believers." As previously stated, the sexist and androcentric language of Revelation 12:1-6 cannot be ignored. However, if the apocalyptic genre allows for the construction of new story lines, then a multi-dimensional approach to texts, such as SRI, would allow the interpreter to advance beyond a single method's limiting view.

In verses 1 and 4, the characters' social status is highlighted, as crown and head (s) are mentioned twice. For the community to which John is writing, the emphasis on status is crucial and "cathartic" (Collins, 1984:12, 141; Pippins, 1992:16). Garrett (1998:471) assert that John's rhetorical approach in depicting the woman and her associations with Egyptian and Greek gods may have been to portray the marginalized early Christian church in the "highest possible manner." The image of the dragon, on the other hand, can be interpreted as being symbolic of an "oppressor nation," as can also be seen in other Jewish writings" (Fiorenza, 1991:81). The "messianic community" to whom Revelation was addressed was disenfranchised and marginalized (Fiorenza, 1991:81). For that reason, John may employ the image of the crown to communicate directly to the imagination of the readers/hearers, informing them that they are of tremendous worth and significance in comparison to their current circumstances. So in Revelation 12:1-6, John's apocalyptic vision positions his audience on an equal footing with the oppressive cult.

Garrett (1992:379-382), interprets the Revelation 12 woman as one who is clothed with "celestial garb." The woman's adornment and classification as "wholly good" by John is due to her "effectively controlled" sexuality (Garrett, 1992:379-382). John's depiction of women remains detrimental because it reveals a deep sexism in his thinking; fosters an attitude in which women are not "allowed to control their own bodies and destinies," and promotes tolerance towards gender-based violence (Garrett, 1992:392; Pippin, 1992:110).

Pippin's analysis is underscored by a central question: "Apart from whom the woman represents how she is being represented?" The woman is identified by her "reproductive event" twice, thus

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reaffirming her sexual identity (Pippin, 1992:75). This begs the question that I asked previously: "Was her worth *only* in her womb?"

4.3 Progressive Texture and Pattern

Whereas repetitive texture focuses on how many times a particular word or phrase appears in a text, progressive texture is displayed when a (progressive) series of words can be discerned through a unit, notes Robbins (1996b:9). Moreover, progressive texture is evident when particular words alternate with one another in the text or "shape a series of steps," Robbins, 1996b:10). Progression comes from repetition, and repetition is one type of "advancement" since moving from the first to the second occurrence of a word means a forward step or progression in the discourse (Robbins, 1996b:10). Robbins also demonstrates how emphasizing repetitive production increases the study's complexity by first referring to observations of "progressive texture throughout the work"; second, displaying phenomena that act as "stepping stones" into other textual phenomena; and third, displaying a "sequence of sub-units" in the entire document (Robbins, 1996b:10). Thus, Robbins (1996b:10) suggests that interpreters should "build a progressive diagram" on some recurring items in the text.

Introducing both main characters, the author progresses from "[a] great sign appeared in heaven" (v. 1) to "[t]hen another sign appeared in heaven" (v. 3). Although the second sign is positioned in the same space as the first one, the latter symbol is given a lower value. By introducing the second sign, John omits the adjective "great" as used in verse 1 when introducing the pregnant woman. Thus, he may have conveyed to his audience the insignificance and powerlessness of their adversary, as reflected in the domain of his vision. This may be for example, as argued by Pippin (1992:20); John's audience faced a "real crisis in the real world and its solution in the fictive world." Alternately, it may have aided the early church in its efforts to deal with hostile emotions in a peaceful manner (Oropeza, 2012:117). Despite the fact that the woman is embellished with heavenly adornment, the question remains: was the woman's magnificence and value entirely based on the utility of her reproductive power?

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While no speech is attributed to the woman, attention to her bodily/emotional vulnerability is emphasized through progression, namely: "she was pregnant" to "and cried out in pain" to "she was about to give birth" (v. 2). In verse 5, "she gave birth." The vulnerability of the woman in the delivery scene is described graphically. According to Nelson (2016:19), Christian motherhood was portrayed in early Christianity as the "broader sacrifice and selfless service expected of the best Christian women." To maintain these conceptions of motherhood, childbearing language and labour imagery as metaphors were used (Nelson, 2016:19). Thus, emphasizing the woman's vulnerability during labour could have been John's way of depicting the woman's "selfless service" to Christianity, encouraging his audience to do the same in their own social, political, and religious contexts (Nelson, 2016:21). This is an example of patriarchal conceptions of motherhood that feminist critics calls into question (Oduyoye, 1999; Rich 1976, O' Reilly, 2010). Nevertheless, it is too early in the investigation to speculate about the significance of John's use of reproductive rhetoric and labour imagery in the narrative of Revelation 12:1-6.

The child progresses from only a "child" (v. 4) to "son" (v. 5) to "male" (v. 5). The author also progressively moves from the woman's body "her feet" (v. 1), "her head" (v. 1), to her reproductive capital "her child" (v. 4), to her spirituality "her…God" (v. 6). The safety of the woman and her unborn child seems to be in jeopardy because the dragon stands "in front of the woman" who is in labour, so that it may "devour her child the moment he was born" (v. 4). However, as the story progresses, the woman gives birth and both her and her son are taken care of by the divine (v. 5, 6). Whereas the importance of the woman is emphasized through repetition, John gradually shifts the attention of the audience from the woman to her son through progression. At face value, it seems that John's progressive language in Revelation 12:1-6 promotes gender hierarchy and male privilege, mirroring John's cultural worldview that is deeply entrenched in patriarchy. For this reason some feminist theologians warns that Revelation is not a safe space for women (Garrett, 1992; Pippin, 1994).

Such a view of Revelation 12:1-6, is not held by Collins (1977:256) who argues that the text promotes passive resistance. However, commenting on the language of Revelation, De Villiers (2015:194-196) points out that although Revelation encourages readers to be nonviolent witnesses, it does so in a harsh manner and with a claim of authority.

4.4 Narrational Texture and Pattern

While the above mentioned features of inner textural analysis sheds light on the use of words, narrational texture appears in "speech—sometimes associated with a particular character—from which the words spoken in texts are derived," explains Robbins (1996b:15). According to Robbins (1996b:15), the narrator may simply begin and continue with "narration"—the narrator may introduce people (characters) who act (the narrator explain their actions), the "narrator may introduce people who talk (they are themselves narrators or speaking actors)," or they may introduce "printed texts" that speak (such as the Old Testament scripture). The narrative structure, as explained by Robbins (1996b:15), typically follows a pattern that pushes the discourse forward programmatically. Moreover, narrative patterns emerge when the narration "alternates between each other and the attributed voice," as well as when a certain form of speech appears frequently, states Robbins (1996b:15).

A narrative commentary on Revelation approaches the book as an organic whole, a unit with a beginning, middle, and end, entering John's world to "see what he sees and hear what he hears," argues Resseguie (2009:11). Moreover, according to Resseguie (2009:12), John's "bizarre characters" are not thin disguises for historical personages of the first century. In fact, they are "characters in their own right with archetypal characteristics which reveal the nature of good and evil in our world" (Resseguie, 2009:12).

Revelation 12:1-6 is also described in terms of a "cosmic war between good and evil" (Collins, 1976, 1993; Koester, 2014; Redding, 2011). The narrative depicts the pregnant woman as the protagonist, whereas the ferocious dragon is presented as the antagonist. For Koester (2014:525) the plot is thwarted when the newly born child is "caught up to God and to his throne," (v. 5), whereas the mother flees "into the wilderness" (v. 6). He regards John as both a "participant in and an observer of the story" (Koester, 2014:115). Moreover, John's perspective extends far beyond that of his readers and engages those readers who want to see what he sees, (Koester, 2014:115)

The textual unit consists of narrative discourse with no reported or attributed speech. While the characters are not in conversation with each other, their actions as narrated by John powerfully depict the social, political, and religious situation that John's readership was experiencing at the

time (Fiorenza, 1985:6). As mentioned earlier, scholars unanimously agree that John's revelation addresses a particular crisis, whether "real" or "perceived" (Collins, 1984:12, Pippins, 1992:20).

The narrative structure consists of four scenes namely: scene one (v. 1, 2), scene two (v. 3, 4), scene three (v. 5), scene four (v. 6). The woman is introduced as a "great sign" (v. 1), but the dragon is just "another sign" (v. 3). The woman is "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head" (v. 1). This picture reminds one of the creation in Genesis 1. The story reaches a climax in verse 5, where the woman gives birth to her baby and the child is snatched away to God which Koester (2014:525) interprets as the point where the plot changes.

The nature of the Revelation 12 narrative, according to Collins (1976:58), is "international" since John consciously incorporated and fused "traditional elements from a variety of cultures." In other words, Revelation would appeal to a universal audience. Collins (1976:58) assigns "power" in the narrative to the "dragon" since the male child of the woman, whom Collins (1976:60) refers to as the "champion," is not in a position yet to take that power away from him. After comparing the narrative to ancient traditional combat myths, she concluded that it is evident that the role of the Revelation 12 woman (who is also the "Queen of Heaven") is "depicted as the mother of a heroic figure under attack by a dragon because of the threat posed by the child"

Concerning Revelation 12:1-6 Pippin, (1992:74)interprets the woman as "nameless and her fate undetermined" but she is also "speechless except for her cries of pain in childbirth" (Pippin, 1992:75). The plot of Revelation 12 involves an attack of a monster on a pregnant woman, intending to destroy her and especially her unborn child. Since the child is the one who will rule the nations, the implication is that the dragon wishes to prevent the child's kingship in order to rule himself (Collins, 1993:21). For Collins (1993:21) the Revelation 12 plot resembles the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris . Moreover, in the regions where these myths were created, replicated, and modified, this dispute may "reflect cultural and political changes and struggles" (Collins, 1993:22). These myths also represent the fundamental contradictions in human lives and nature. "Chaos, sterility, and death" are frequently identified with the beast, while "order, fertility, and life" are associated with his adversary (Collins, 1993:22). Thus, according to Redding (2011:11), the narrative opens with "order and disorder as opposing forces, a central theme in mythological and biblical creation imagery."

It is precisely this image of the woman's passivity and lack of agency that feminist scholars question. Due to "patriarchal politics" the character of the Revelation 12 woman is manipulated, laments Pippin (1994:116). Bordo (1993:11) challenges the notion that women are assigned to the "passive body" dimension while men are designated to the "active spirit" dimension. This dichotomy is evident in the text's language, where the woman passively resists the ferocious dragon in the face of imminent danger, only to have her new-born son snatched from her arms and taken to God's throne to be recruited for military training (v.5). These deeply underlying cultural beliefs about women's bodies have detrimental consequences for women (Bordo, 1993:15).

4.5 Sensory-Aesthetic Texture and Pattern

Robbins (1996b:30) argues that identification of writing styles (epistle, historiography, etc.) and form(s) of a specific text (proverb, parable, hymn, etc.) may provide specific insight into the sensory-aesthetic texture. This is because, as Robbins (1996b:30) explains, a text's sensory-aesthetic texture is primarily determined by the variety of senses it evokes or embodies (thought, feeling, sight, sound, touch, smell), as well as the manner in which it evokes or embodies them (reason, intuition, imagination, humour, and so on).

Malina (1993:74) coined the term "three-zone model" to describe how humans are "endowed" with a "heart for thinking, along with eyes that fill the heart with data; a mouth for speaking, along with ears that collect the speech of others; and hands and feet for acting." Furthermore, as pointed out by Malina (1993:74) human beings are made up of "three zones" of interacting with people and objects in their environment that are mutually interpenetrating yet distinct, namely: "the zone of emotion fused thought, the zone of self-expressive communication, and the zone of purposeful action."[63] Robbins (1996b:30) indicates that in some cases, the discourse (in parables, historiographies, and so on) can be so rich and vibrant that it evokes images as complete and dramatic as film, while in others, the discourse may function with images that evoke feelings of bleak, harsh reality or abstract logic.

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[63] See also Robbins (2003:7).

Robbins (2003:7) points out that the text displays a sensory-aesthetic texture and pattern by identifying and grouping every element of a text that corresponds to a part of the body—"ears, eyes, hands, feet, stomach," etc. Robbins explains that this aids in the documenting of acts or feelings related to body parts, such as seeing, hearing, and experiencing, touching, walking, and so on (Robbins, 2003:7). Moreover, the emphasis on the body and bodily enactment necessitates interpretive techniques driven by a "taxonomy of body zones,"[64]argues Robbins (2007:7).

According to Robbins (2003:7), Malina's three-body zones describe the three fundamental types of interaction in Mediterranean culture's thought world, where interaction between individuals is symbolically depicted using components of the human being as metaphors. Each of these zones has corresponding body parts that are said to carry out these modes of interaction metaphorically, according to Robbins (2003:7). Furthermore, this particular texture can draw attention to aspects of the discourse's repetitive, progressive, narrative, or argumentative texture that offers it a distinct tone and colour, demonstrating the integrative nature of inner textual analysis (Robbins, 2003:7).

Revelation 12:1-6 arouses the senses of seeing (vv. 1, 3) and hearing (v. 2) as a means of "reaffirming John's role as a transmitter of information from an extrasensory, invisible source and as a means of inviting the hearer into the visionary experience itself" (De Silva, 1999:84-85). The narrative begins with the woman's body adorned with the cosmic trio. Emphasis is placed on the reproductive capacity of the woman in the context of an all-male gaze. Although her body is fully covered, "clothed with the sun" (v. 1), it seems that her private parts are fully exposed to the male gaze, "she was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth" (v. 2). According to Calogero (2021:574), one of the common forms of sexual objectification is "gazing." As previously mentioned, Calogero (2012:574) defines sexual objectification as the "fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and/or sexual functions, essentially stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body." The woman, who is portrayed as a docile, non-violent persona, had to suffer the male gaze while being pursued by a ruthless opponent intent on destroying her reproductive capital. The male gaze, as

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[64] See Dictionary of sociorhetorical terms,
http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/p_q_defns.cfm#purposeful

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defined by McCann et al. (2019:339), is the way in which the visual arts portray women as "passive objects to be viewed by men."

Aside from the detailed depiction of her birthing pains, the author assigns the woman a passive role, which is frequently perceived as non-violent retaliation. Collins (1977: 256) holds this position, claiming that John's Revelation encourages passive resistance. However, reading Revelation 12 through the lens of feminist literary criticism, on the other hand, necessitates a deconstruction of this dichotomy. As argued by Grosz (1994:2), these diametrically opposed characteristics of "body and mind, nature and culture, divine and earthy, and women and men determine the masculine as a divine, productive power identified with the mind, and the feminine as a reproductive but unproductive earthy passive potential identified with the body." Bordo (1993:5) argues that such a viewpoint is detrimental to women. This is why, according to Pippin (1994:116), the woman in Revelation 12 is a "made up and made passive" character exploited by "patriarchal politics." The new-born son, on the other hand, is given a more aggressive description, as he will rule with an "iron sceptre" (v. 5).

The woman does not speak, and she does not utilize her mouth to communicate until she cries out in pain due to labour (Pippin, 1992:75). Although no speech is attributed to the woman, emotion-fused thought (the zone where action and speech are interpreted in one's mind and heart), is exhibited in v. 2 where John articulates the woman's expression of her labour pains. The antagonist is introduced as a mythical creature "a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems" (v. 3). The body of the dragon is presented as a destructive force; "his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth" (v. 4a). The zone of emotion-fused thought is displayed through the dragon's insatiable desire to destroy the baby of the protagonist and in the graphic description of the woman's vulnerability during labour (vv. 2-4).

4.6 Conclusion

Although Revelation 12:1-6 seems to be a positive representation of a woman, amidst the negative and derogatory imagery in prior and subsequent chapters, an inner textual analysis of the narrative

shows that the text seems to promote hetero-patriarchal ideology at the expense of women's dignity. As noted previously, in a hetero-patriarchal society all men have power over all women, whether they choose to exercise that power or not (Nortjé Meyer, 2011:2). The narrative plot of the text revolves mainly around the male protagonist. Consequently, the woman occupies centre stage while pregnant and as soon as she gives birth to a son, she is relegated back to the margins, whereas the new-born son is snatched to the "throne of God." The repetitive and progressive texture of the text shows that the author privileges males over females and that the text exhibits the dominant patriarchal ideology of John's context. Revelation 12:1-6 presents the woman's body as the site on which political power is exerted and abuse is perpetrated, according to inner textual analysis. At this level of analysis, the woman's worth appears to be determined by her ability to reproduce, preferably male offspring. No speech is attributed to her apart from her expressing her labour pains through crying. John's focus is, therefore, not so much on the woman's lived experience, but on her reproductive event; hence emphasizing her vulnerability. At this point, I concur with Pippin (1992) and Garret (1992) that Revelation may not be a safe space for women, and it is of no value to indulge in its discourse. The following chapter will focus on the text's social and cultural texture, and will thus invite the reader on a time travel excursion to investigate John's world. In accordance with Fiorenza's (1991:14) advice to interpreters of Revelation, an emphasis on the texts' "misogynistic language" involves the risk of magnifying the text's androcentric ideas such that it merely confirms misogynism as its primary meaning.

Chapter Five

The Social and Cultural Texture of Revelation 12:1-6: Entrenched in Binarism

"The words we use to say and speak do in fact embody meaning,
but the meaning does not come from the words. Meaning inevitably
derives from the general social system of the speakers of a
language" (Malina, 1993:1-2).

5.1 Introduction

The abovementioned quote is by cultural anthropologist Bruce J. Malina (1993) from his book, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology.* It is worth noting since the previous chapter concentrated exclusively on the words employed in the text to interact with its readership, whereas the current chapter will concentrate on how Revelation 12:1-6 and the social system within which the text emerged, are interrelated. Malina (1993:1) likens those who approach the New Testament text to "foreigners" who are eavesdropping on a group of first-century Greek-speaking people. He asserts that people's words and their intentions are frequently at odds (Malina, 1993:1). As a result, Malina (1993:1) recommends that interpreters first examine the cultural environment in which these categories arose in order to have a better understanding of the "concepts of antiquity." An emphasis on this can be found in the social and cultural texture of SRI.

Bloomquist (1997:202) concurs with the interconnectedness of a text with its social and cultural context and asserts that "texts, authors, hearers, and readers" are all intertwined. As explained by Robbins (1996b:71), this mode of analysis takes interpreters into "sociological and cultural theory." This entails looking at the language's "location" as well as the "social and cultural worlds" that it invokes or produces (Robbins, 1996b:71).

Robbins (1996b:71) also points out that a text's social and cultural texture is revealed in "specific social topics" that convey tools for reforming individuals or social systems, disrupting and reconstructing social order, withdrawing from modern society, constructing one's own social

environment, or coping with the environment by shifting one's own perspective on it. Moreover, as explained by Robbins (1996b:71) "common social and cultural topics" set the stage for "specific social topics" that show how people present their ideas, justifications, and claim to themselves and others. In addition, these types of topics provide a wide range of viewpoints that will help interpreters to gain insight on "trade and benefit systems," explains Robbins (1996b:71). Social and cultural texture is also exhibited in what Robbins (1996b:71) refers to as "final cultural categories." This feature of social and cultural texture specifies the inclinations in the discourse of a text among topics, such as "what constitutes being lawful, expedient, sacred, valiant," etc. (Robbins 1996b:71). The characteristics of social and cultural texture are applied to Revelation 12: 1-6 in this chapter. This analysis looks into the social and cultural background that John assumes, as well as the normative social and cultural arrangement that he encourages his readers to accept.

5.2 Specific Social Topics

As Robbins (1996b:72), shows, "unique religious" approaches to the world can be found in languages that address "specific social topics." Religious texts, he believes, have a unique connection with the world because of their relevance and concern (Robbins, 1996b:72). Robbins adopts Brian Wilson's typology of sects, which consists of seven kinds of religious responses to the world, namely, "conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, gnostic-manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist, and utopian" (Robbins, 1996b:72). According to Robbins (1996b:72), the application of Wilson's taxonomy to the New Testament literature discloses the kinds of "cultures" that early Christianity cultivated and preserved in the first-century Mediterranean world.

5.2.1 Conversionist Response

The notion that the "world is corrupt because people are corrupt" characterizes a conversionist response, according to Robbins (1996b:72).The concept that "if people can be changed, the world can be changed," as defined by Robbins (1996b:72), is at the core of this type of response. As a

result, salvation is only conceivable through a dramatic and "supernaturally wrought transformation of the self," not through "objective agencies" (Robbins, 1996b:72). Moreover, "the world itself will not change" but the presence of a new subjective perspective on it will be "salvation" in and of itself, comments Robbins (1996b:72).

The discourse of Revelation 12:1-6 contains elements of a conversionist response to the corrupt world of the implied readers of John's text. As pointed out by some scholars, the crisis John's audience was facing was both internal and external (de Silva, 1999:67-73; Koester, 2014:xiv: Oropeza, 2012:180). Other scholars hold the view that the crisis was either real or perceived (Collins 1984; Pippin, 1994). Regardless, the work addresses a crisis, and John is seeking to help his audience in responding to the crisis through a new subjective perception of their environment. Thus, John is advocating for a transformation of the early Christian community of faith, which is addressed in the text. To illustrate this, the narrative plot shifts dramatically when the woman and her child, whose lives are in danger, are both saved by being withdrawn from the situation (v. 5, 6). They are both withdrawn from the corrupt world of the Roman Imperial power that the dragon symbolizes (Boesak, 1984; Fiorenza, 1986; Pippin, 1994, etc.). The transformation that John is fostering through a conversionist response has the potential to of spreading throughout society since the woman represents the "messianic community" (Fiorenza, 1991:81) or the people of Israel (Garrett, 1998: 471) who embodies an "international" mandate (Collins, 1976:58). When the time is right, the child whom the woman gave birth to will "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (v. 5). In his endeavour to persuade his audience of a specific point of view, John's depiction of the mother and the kid maintains male privilege and patriarchy's control over the reproductive processes of women.

5.2.2 Revolutionist Response

Whereas the previous response is concerned with changing people, this response to the world, as explained by Robbins (1996b:72) beliefs that "only the destruction of the world" – the natural world, but also, more precisely, the social order – can save people. Moreover, since humans lack the power to destroy or re-create the world, supernatural forces must perform the destruction, according to Robbins (1996b:72).

The implied readers of Revelation was a community controlled and exploited by the Roman colonization (Fiorenza, 1991:81; Garrett, 1998:471; Loader, 2007:175, Marshall, 2010:23, etc.). Thus, Revelation 12:1-6 illustrates God's judgment of the oppressive social order of the Roman Empire. As "combat-creation myth," special forces (depicted as Greek and Egyptian mythological characters) are utilized to "reflect cultural and political changes and struggles" (Collins, 1993:22; Redding, 2011:1). This combat is exhibited in the struggle between the woman and the dragon (v. 1, 4). Thus, the combat in Revelation 12:1-6 between the two divine beings reflects the cultural and political changes and struggles of John's context, as well as the fundamental contradictions in human lives and nature of the community of faith, which Revelation is addressing (Collins, 1993:22).

5.2.3 Introvertionist Response

According to this response, the world is "irredeemably evil" and the only way to find salvation is to "withdraw" as completely as possible from it, notes Robbins (1996b:73). As Robbins (1996b:73) further points out, the self may be purified by renouncing and leaving the world. As explained by Robbins (1996b:73), this kind of response may be carried out by an individual, but because of a "social movement's response," it contributes to the formation of a separate group preoccupied with its own holiness and means of isolation from the rest of society.

It is possible that John's disparaging image of women was an attempt to persuade his audience to remove themselves from the "symbols of dominance" of the Imperial Cult (Fiorenza, 1986: 134). John thus utilizes symbols as it may have been difficult to convey his topics in human language (Botha, Engelbrecht & De Villiers, 2004:910). In so doing, John is attempting to persuade his audience that the only way for them to be saved is through "renouncing and leaving the world" (Robbins, 1996b:73), even if it meant putting their "lives on the line" (Fiorenza, 1986: 134)

5.2.4 Gnostic-Manipulationist response

From the perspective of a Gnostic-manipulationist, only a "transformed set of relationships – a transformed method of coping with evil" – is sought by a gnostic-manipulationist response, notes Robbins (1996b:73). Furthermore, the gnostic-manipulationist insists that salvation is achievable in the world, and that evil can be defeated through providing people with the right tools through education and the development of their "problem-solving skills," describes Robbins (1996b:73).

A gnostic-manipulationist response is exhibited in Revelation 12:1-6 where the child is snatched up to God's throne (v. 6) where he will be trained for military recruitment. Revelation 12:5 indicates that this child is not simply a plot device inserted to advance the story; instead, he will undo the chaos brought about by the dragon, and other evils outlined in Revelation (Redding 2011:11). Moreover, Revelation 12:1-6 reveals God's overt role in this new 'creation' narrative, argues Redding (2011:12). Thus, God does not obliterate the dragon, but rather takes an active part in the struggle against chaos (Redding, 2011:12). The child, after receiving proper education will return and "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (v. 5).

5.2.5 Thaumaturgical response

While a gnostic-manipulationist view focuses on transforming relationships through education, thaumaturgical response focuses on the individual's need for "special dispensations" to alleviate current and unique ills, according to Robbins (1996b:73). The request for supernatural assistance is "personal and local," and it is carried out in a magical manner, says Robbins (1996b: 73). As described by Robbins (1996b:73) this type of response to the world beliefs that although salvation is instant, it is limited to the specific case and those like it (Robbins, 1996b:73). Examples of salvation includes "healing, grief relief, loss, restoration, reassurance, foresight and disaster prevention, and the promise of everlasting (or at least continuing) life after death are all examples of salvation" (Robbins, 1996b:73).

Collins (1976) argues that Revelation 12 in its entirety is not a unified composition and that Revelation 12 consists of two parts of which a "Christian redactor combined and adapted for his

own purposes." Thus, the second part of Revelation (12:7-17) exhibits features of a thaumaturgical response.[65]

5.2.6 Reformist response

"The world is corrupt," according to a reformist response, because its "social systems are corrupt" (Robbins, 1996b:73). Salvation is possible; if the structures can be altered, argues Robbins (1996b:73). Evil can be dealt with if supernatural insight is gained into how social organization can be changed, as described by Robbins (1996b:73). This kind of change requires people whose hearts and minds are vulnerable to "supernatural influence," (Robbins, 1996b:73).

One of the ways in which John's audience may have responded to the Roman Imperial system was by changing the existing social order (Oropeza, 2012:182). As apocalypse, people's perceptions and reactions to their surroundings are influenced by John's message (Koester) (2014:107). As stated by Collins (1998:8), a common conceptual structure of the world shared by all apocalypses is that the world is mysterious and that meaningful revelations are sent from the unseen realm above via angelic mediators. Likewise, Koester (2014:105) argues that apocalypses reflect a divine or ethereal dimension that exists beyond what can be seen but impacts life in this world. The events in Revelation 12:1-6 take place in the supernatural realm, where John receives divine revelation on how to reform the corrupt social systems of his society.

5.2.7 Utopian response

Whereas a reformist response is focused on amending social structures, a utopian response attempts to reconstruct the entire social order according to "divinely given principles" insisting on "complete replacement of the present social organization," notes Robbins (1996b:74). A utopian response, therefore, aims to create a "new social organization" that will eradicate evil according to Robbins (1996b:74). Unlike the revolutionist response, the utopian response insists, "people themselves remake the world and not a divine power which destroys this present world and re-

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[65] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to expand on the above-mentioned pericope.

creates another" (Robbins, 1996b:74). As a result, the utopian response is more "active and constructive" than an introversionist response' withdrawal from the world (Robbins, 1996b:74).

Some scholars believe that John's imagery is more subversive since it use literary conventions to foment opposition to Roman imperialism (Oropeza, 2012, 182; Koester, 2014: 65). According to Botha, De Villiers & Englebrecht (2004: 9) symbols are open-ended and ambiguous, and they frequently "invite the reader to participate creatively in the process of discovering meaning." John therefore urged his audience to be actively involved in reconstructing their world in order to achieve salvation (Robbins, 1996b:74; Oropeza, 2012:181; Redding, 2011:11). Thus, as noted by Fiorenza (1986:130) "[t]he strength of Revelation's persuasion for action, lies not in its theological reasoning or historical argument, but the evocative power of its symbols and its hortatory, imaginative, emotional language and dramatic movement." The Book of Revelation as suggested by Fiorenza (1991:138) can be profoundly liberating; even today, for many people as it can stimulate resistance and harbour utopian expectations that "cry out for justice" in similar rhetorical circumstances.

As per the preceding discussion, the discourse of Revelation 12:1-6 is profoundly ingrained in the patriarchal culture of the first-century Greaco-Roman milieu. While John is trying to influence the minds of his readers to respond to their immediate crisis in a particular way, the representation of his characters has the potential to justify a different crisis namely, the subjugation of women and children. No wonder the text elicits ambivalent responses from its readers (Koester, 2014:64). The following discussion focuses on the context of John's audience and the common social and cultural topics that was prevalent at the time.

5.3 Common Social and Cultural Topics

While the category of specific social topics in social and cultural texture depicts various ways in which "people in a text" react to the world, the category of common social and cultural topics depicts the "context in which people live in the world" (Robbins, 1996b:71). As a result, the general environment for particular social issues is provided by common social and cultural topics (Robbins, 1996b:71). The "social and cultural values, patterns, or codes" that are prevalent in a

given culture encompasses this sub-texture, explains Robbins (1996b:71). Moreover, as pointed out by Robbins (1996b:71), "everyone living in an area knows common social and cultural topics either consciously or instinctively." In sociorhetorical interpretation, the common social and cultural topics are: "honour-shame, dyadic personality, dyadic and legal contracts and agreements, challenge-response (riposte), agriculturally based economic exchange systems, peasants, labourers, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs, limited goods, and purity codes" (Robbins, 1996b:71).

5.3.1 Honour, Guilt, and Rights Cultures

Honour is defined by Robbins (1996b:76) as a "person's rightful place in society, one's social standing," which is "marked off by boundaries of power, sexual status, and social ladder position." Furthermore, honour is both a "claim to worth" and a "social acknowledgement of worth," asserts Robbins (1996b:76). There are two forms of honour: "ascribed," which comes to an individual passively by birth, family relationships, or endowment by powerful people; and "acquired," which is earned through deliberately seeking and gaining honour at the expense of one's peers in a "social contest of challenge and response," notes Robbins (1996b:76). Thus, as asserted by Malina (1993:xiii), these values are "essential" to "Mediterranean culture in antiquity and the present."

Binary oppositions seem to be the foundation of John's social and cultural context. For example, in addition to the two types of honour, Robbins (1996b:76) emphasizes the gendered nature of honour, claiming that it has both a "male" and "female" component. The male aspect is referred to as "honour," while the female aspect is referred to as "shame" (Robbins, 1996b: 76). Bruce Malina (1993) asserts the following:

> People get shamed (not have shame) when they aspire to a certain status, and this status is denied them by public opinion. At the point where a person realizes he is being denied the status, he is or gets shamed, he is humiliated, and stripped of honour for aspiring to honour not socially his. Honour assessments thus move from the inside (a person's claim) to the outside (public validation). Shame assessments move from the outside (public denial) to the inside (a person's recognition of the denial). To be shamed or get shamed, thus is to be thwarted or obstructed in one's personal claim to worth or status, along with one's recognition of the loss of status involved in this rejection (Malina, 1993:52).

Feminist literary critics who are positioned in a postructuralist framework, contests the notion of binarism, using deconstruction as a key reading tool (McCann et. al., 2019:184). However, New Testament scholar Osiek (2008:323) asserts that honour and shame, in the New Testament context, should not be treated as absolute "opposites," instead, they are "co-ordinates that function within a complex matrix of other societal factors." Thus, in alignment with the abovementioned assertion by Malina (1993), Osiek (2008:323) maintains that these two concepts should not be regarded as working in "isolation," but rather in "correlation with several other factors - primarily kinship, social hierarchy, economic control, and social networking."

Honour and shame in Revelation 12:1-6 are reflected in all the explicit characters. The mother is acquiring honour because of how she deals with the challenge at hand (v. 6). The son, on the other hand, is ascribed honour because of the purpose of his birth (v. 5). When the dragon's claim to honour is denied, he is shamed (vv. 3-5).[66] According to Pilch and Malina (1993:96) "being shamed involves a loss of repute and worth in the eyes of others, especially of one's peers. It results from a public exposure of a man's weakness or cowardice or pretension or foolishness."

5.3.2 Dyadic and Individualist Personality

The first-century Mediterranean world was based on a strong "group orientation," instead of "individualism," argues Malina (1993:67). Furthermore, as pointed out by Malina (1993:67), "persons always considered themselves in terms of the group(s) in which they experienced themselves as inextricably embedded." Therefore, the "dyadic" individual is a "group-embedded and "group-oriented" individual (some call such a person "collectively-oriented")," asserts Malina (1993:67). Thus, a dyadic personality or a group-embedded personality actually "needs another to know who he or she really is;" understanding that his/her identity is based on people's opinions about him/her (Malina, 1993:67). In agreement with Malina's view, Robbins (1996b:77) defines a dyadic personality thus, "a dyadic personality is characteristic of individuals who perceive themselves and form their self-image in terms of what others perceive and feedback to them."

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[66] Chapter 6 and 7 expands more on this idea.

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According to Robbins (1996b:77-78), a first-century individual will view himself/herself as a distinguishing whole in relation to other distinguishing wholes' in a given social and natural context. In other words, each individual in a "sequence of embedding" is perceived as being embedded in another (Robbins, 1996b:77-78).

Revelation 12:1-6 features the woman as a dyadic personality. As mentioned above, the mother acquired honour as a result of how she handled the existing crisis (v. 6). Not only did she obtain honour, she received divine approval when the deity prepared a place for her and provided her with nourishment (v. 6). Fiorenza (1985:4) understands Revelation to be a continuation of Jewish apocalypticism that should be understood in the context of "Jewish theology as exodus and liberation from slavery rather than redemption of individual souls." In light of this, the woman in Revelation 12:1-6 as a symbol of the "messianic community" (Fiorenza, 1991:81) holds a distinct social position on behalf of the larger community. Thus, John may have used this narrative to appeal to his intended audience's "self-perception" and "self-image" (Robbins, 1996b:78).

5.3.3 Dyadic and Legal Contracts and Agreements

Robbins (1996b:79) defines a dyadic agreement as an informally binding contract between two contractants rather than a group. It is founded on the informal concept of "reciprocity," which was the most significant mode of social interaction in the first century's limited-goods world, explains Robbins (1996b:79). Moreover, "contracts of this type may bind people of the same rank (colleague contracts) or people of different statuses (patron-client contracts)," according to Robbins (1996b:79). The dyadic contract cuts through the culture's structured contracts, acting as a "glue" that keeps things together for long or short periods of time and allowing for the "social interdependence" that is required for life (Robbins, 1996b:79).

The woman and the deity is exhibited in the text as having a dyadic agreement, initiated by the means of a "positive challenge" (Robbins, 1996b:79). Her reproductive capital (v. 5), for protection, provision and lodging (v. 6).[67] As Robbins (1996b:79) points out, this type of agreement signals the "start of an ongoing reciprocal relationship." Also prompted by a positive

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[67] This idea will be elaborated on in chapter 7.

challenge is the patron-client agreement between God and the woman. Thus, one of the things that patrons in the first-century Mediterranean world may demand from clients is "lodging" (Osiek, 2005:359). This type of agreement is evident in verse 6: "and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days."

5.3.4 Challenge-Response (Riposte)

This type of response refers to a constant "tug of war, a game of push and shove" where the winner receives "honour" and the loser, "shame," argues Malina (1993:34). Malina (1993:34) equates the challenge-response as a form of social communication, since "any social interaction is a form of communication in which messages are transferred from a source to a receiver." Moreover, "the channels are always public, and the publicity of the message guarantees that the receiving individual will react in some way since even his non-action is publicly interpreted as a response" (Malina, 1993:34). It is carried out by "social peers or equals," according to Robbins (1996b:80), and consists of several steps: "the initial challenge, the perception of the challenge, and the reaction to the message" (Malina, 1993:34-35; Robbins, 1996b:80).

Power over the woman and her reproductive capital is depicted in the image of the dragon, who is a representation of the oppressive Roman system, which is deeply embedded, in a patriarchal culture (Exum, 1993:10; Fiorenza, 1993:5; Osiek, 1997:958). Despite the fact that she is in a lot of pain from labour and is portrayed as vulnerable, the dragon is ferociously attempting to forcibly remove her progeny. Since the child is the one who will rule the nations, the implication is that the dragon wishes to prevent the child's kingship in order to rule himself (Collins, 1993:21). This pattern of combat was common in the Ancient Near East, according to Collins (1993:23). According to Redding (2011:11), Revelation 12:5 indicates that this child is not simply a plot device inserted to advance the story; instead, he will undo the chaos brought about by the dragon, and other evils outlined in Revelation.

5.3.5 Limited, Insufficient, and Overabundant Goods

According to Malina (1993:94), the "vast majority" of people in the first-century world were subject to the demands and prohibitions of "power-holders" outside their social sphere. Furthermore, they were marked by an unquestioning "acceptance of dominance by some supreme and remote power," with "little control" over the circumstances that governed their lives (Malina, 1993:94). According to Robbins (1996b:84), the concept of a limited good stems from the peasant class's view that all things in the world are in "fixed quantities and in short supply." Robbins (1996b:84) points out that any gain or loss of a limited good occurred at the cost or advantage of another, fostering "mistrust and conflict" in peasant communities. As a result, this gradually gave way to "wantlessness," which Robbins defines as a lack of desire for ever-increasing quantities of products (Robbins, 1996b:84).

Malina (1993:95) regards limited goods as an act of depriving or denying something that belongs to another, "whether they know it or not." Consequently, any substantial change is viewed as a challenge to all individuals and families within the society, whether it be "village or city quarter" because it is often unclear who is losing, explains Malina (1993:95). He adds that "honourable people know how to use their colleagues," as well as a variety of influential and socially superior human and non-human persons, to solve life's problems in order to preserve this essential self-image (Malina, 1993:112). This implied the need for "patron knowledge" a sort of popular political science (Malina, 1993:112). Furthermore, the human patron-client system had a "nonhuman system" in the entities who ruled over human life, resulting in a celestial patron-client system that included humans as well, as stated by Malina (1993:112). Honourable people, therefore, often knew how to exploit the available nonhuman influential persons to assist them in solving life's problems, which meant a need for knowledge of celestial patrons, a kind of common and personalistic natural science, as well as knowledge of God, explains Malina (1993:113).

Unlike the view that the Revelation 12 woman, according to Pippin (1994:116), is a "made up and made passive" character manipulated by "patriarchal politics," the woman, while at face value is represented as weak, vulnerable, voiceless, etc. seems to be an honourable person[68] with great

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[68] See: Malina (1993: 112-113).

influence who is in control of her own body and who exercises her agency[69]. The patron-client system, as exhibited by the narrative, goes beyond only human life and includes the non-human world. The woman's speechless negotiation with the divine is a testament to her remarkable knowledge of both the patron-client system as well as the celestial patron system, as explained by both Malina (1993) and Robbins (1996b). Unlike, in the case of the dragon, who is overtly aggressive and antagonizing, there appears no such coercion used to force the woman to give up her reproductive capital, in exchange for the safety and security of her community.[70] As noted earlier, Boesak (1987) refers to apocalyptic literature as "underground protest literature;" it is, therefore, a possibility that the text is implicitly protesting patriarchal notions of motherhood[71] or as Rich (1985) conceptualizes it, "motherhood as institution."

5.3.6 Purity Codes

Purity laws were a major concern in the Second Temple Israelite period, argues (Malina, 1993:149). Malina has the following to comment regarding purity rules:

> The common perception is that observance of purity rules brings prosperity both to the society and to the individuals in that society, while infringement brings danger. The purity rules of the society were intended to foster prosperity by maintaining fitting, harmonious relationships. Thus perfection— the wholeness marked off by purity rules—characterizes God, the people in general, and the individual. This perfection gets spelled out in replicating patterns (Malina, 1993:158-159).

For Robbins (1996b:85) purity refers to the overall "cultural map of social time and space," as well as the "spatial structures and boundaries that distinguish the inside from the outside." The "unclean or impure" does not belong here; it belongs somewhere else because it disrupts the framework of the generally accepted "social diagram" by crossing boundaries, explains Robbins (1996b:85).

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[69]The chapter dealing with Rhetography expounds more on this view.

[70] Revelation 12:7-17 describes the "heavenly war" that surrounds the woman and her offspring, as well as how angelic assistance is offered to ensure their safety.

[71] I explore this possibility in the analysis section of chapter 7.

Moreover, certain people's preference for the "holy, honourable," and so on denotes a "specific social and cultural position" for them (Robbins 1996b:3).

Pippin (1994:113) sees in Revelation the marginalization of women's bodies (The Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride), or their violent destruction (Jezebel and the Whore) and argues, "what is considered unclean and dangerous by the male hierarchy has to be placed outside the camp." Furthermore, as Malina (1993:158-158) points out, the common agreement about John's social system was that adhering to purity norms brought prosperity while disobeying them brought danger. Revelation 12:1-6 challenges the binary social norms that categorize people as pure or impure.[72]

It is apparent that the social and cultural issues of John's era are founded on and entrenched in binarism. Revelation 12:1-6 thus instructs its audience to choose an either-or stance. In actuality, the prevailing Greaco-Roman society placed John's audience in a position of shame. However, as the story progresses, John presents his audience in a position of honour that is divinely sanctioned. This dichotomous worldview is evident in contemporary interpretations of Revelations 12:1-6, as demonstrated by Mate's (2002) study. The fertile wombs of women are regarded as "God's laboratories," thus placing the woman in an honourable position (Mate, 2002:550). Women who are unable to reproduce biological progeny is encouraged to be delivered from the "devil's work" (Mate, 2002:550). Likewise, Oduyoye (1999) recounts her traumatic experience while trying to conceive in her marriage. As a result, it is clear that this form of rhetoric has serious consequences for women's health and well-being. It encourages women's subjugation and convinces them that domestication is a form of devotion to God. The final section of this chapter examines the cultural location of Revelation 12:1-6.

5.4 Final Cultural Categories

Final cultural categories are those topics that most clearly describe a person's "cultural location" (Robbins 1996b:86; Bloomquist 1999:187). The way people present to themselves and

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[72] In chapter 7, this idea is further explored.

others—their "proposals, reasons, and arguments"—is referred to as cultural location (Robbins 1996b:86; Bloomquist 1999:187).

Robbins (1996b) proposes five final topics of cultural rhetoric:

1. *Dominant culture rhetoric* - A form of "imperial rhetoric" that spreads through space and time, according to Robbins (1996b:86). This form of rhetoric introduces a "system of attitudes, values, dispositions, and norms" that the speaker assumes are accepted by social institutions with the authority to enforce their agendas on people across a large geographic area, explains Robbins (1996b:86).

2. (ii) *Subculture rhetoric* – Rhetoric that is similar to dominant culture rhetoric but is used by subgroups that appear to be better at enacting it than dominant culture participants (Robbins, 1996b:86).

3. *Counterculture rhetoric* – is rhetoric that offers an alternative to the existing rhetorics (Robbins, 1996b:86).

4. *Contraculture* – rhetoric that combats existing rhetorics, but with no clear replacement in mind (Robbins, 1996b:86).

5. *Liminal culture rhetoric* – is rhetoric typical of transitional periods in individual or corporate lives (Robbins 1996b: 88; Bloomquist 1999:187).

An interpreter's investigation of the language's social and cultural position, as well as the type of social and cultural atmosphere that the language evokes or creates, is prompted by the text's social and cultural textual analysis, according to Robbins (1996b:3). The text's ability to promote social change, withdrawal, or resistance, as well as invoke cultural expectations of superiority, subordination, distinction, or exclusion, is examined in this mode of study, asserts Robbins (1996b:3).

In Revelation 12:1-6 the dragon functions in a dominant cultural mode whereas the woman and her new-born son is positioned in a countercultural mode. The dragon's cultural identity is situated in Greaco-Roman culture and represents the oppressive Roman Empire (De Villiers, 2015:189, Oropeza, 2012:81). The woman and the child, on the other hand, is a representation of Jewish culture (Fiorenza, 1991:81), infused with "diverse traditions" (Collins, 1976:58). Regarding John's

language, dominant culture rhetoric is reconfigured to critique society while advocating devotion to God and Jesus in order to convince his audience to persist and to challenge those who were docile and accommodating (Koester, 2014:xiv, 93-96). De Silva (1999:72), on the other hand, positions John's language in a "counter cultural perspective." De Villiers (2015:199) sharply criticizes John's use of dominant cultural language, arguing that John's protest against abusive political authority is communicated through language that symbolizes and reinforces harsh realities in culture, which he otherwise fiercely rejects. Furthermore, language can "violate" people's "dignity and humanity" in nuanced, often unnoticed ways, as evidenced by Revelation's seemingly benign description of women in terms of "gender stereotypes" (De Villiers, 2015:194-196). Language, according to Spender (1980:3), has a dual function in that it both supports in the development of our world and has the power to "constrain" it. Thus, according to Smith (2014:2), the text warrants "some form of imaginative readerly engagement." As a result, Revelation 12:1-6 can be regarded as either empowering and liberating or disenfranchised literature, depending on whether it is positioned in a dominant or countercultural rhetorical position (Levine, 2010:2).

5.5 Conclusion

The social and cultural texture of Revelation 12:1-6 presents the world within which the early Christian community emerged as corrupt and evil; a world without regard for the vulnerable and one that privileges men over women, a world entrenched in dichotomy. On a textual level, the woman's presence in the text seems to be solely for the sake of procreation, which is a depiction of the oppressive system of primitive capitalism. The woman's body, therefore, becomes the terrain on which the battle for liberation is fought. It is evident that John's rhetoric is deeply rooted in the valued beliefs, economy, political systems, ethos, and worldview of his time. As a result, the woman character is portrayed as the embodiment of first-century Graeco-Roman cultural assumptions. In his call for transformation, John objectifies the her reproductive capacity, thus stripping her of her unique personality and subjectivity. John's character is equated with her body, and her sexuality is subjected to male dominance. Her actions are manipulated to fit the androcentric worldview of the author, and she is portrayed as powerfully adorned, yet powerless in the face of immediate threat. She is depicted as a dyadic personality who acquires honour on

behalf of the community. This level of analysis, much like inner textual analysis, shows that Revelation 12:1-6 is patriarchal and inherently hostile towards women. However, an alternative way of looking at the narrative may yield the exact opposite results. Reading the text from the "bottom-up," as suggested by Boesak (1987), suggests that the woman may not have been as passive and unproductive as her character is depicted. She may have implicitly, since apocalyptic literature is "underground protest literature" (Boesak, 1987), protested the system that confines women to the domestic space. Furthermore, the apocalypse of John is a reasonable response to its socio-political "rhetorical situation," and it can function similarly in subsequent generations (Fiorenza, 1985:6). As the analysis unfolds, one may have a clearer picture of an alternative way to read and interpret Revelation 12:1-6.

Chapter Six

The Sacred Texture of Revelation 12:1-6: A Prophetic Act of Divine Protest

6.1 Introduction

The focus of the previous chapter was to investigate the variety of social groupings and locales in the discourse, as well as how these orientations and locations interact with one another (Jonker & Lawrie, 2005:60). When the divine, brought onto the scene via sacred textual analysis, the focus shifts. This level of analysis puts emphasis on the text's relationship between humans and the divine (Gowler, 2010:195; Robbins, 1996b:120-131). Moreover, it concerns the experience of "special forces, whether good or evil; experience of divine control; guidance in social or personal history; or experience of human behaviour" that is shaped by encounters with the sacred (Robbins, 1996b:4, 120). Furthermore, Robbins (1996b:4, 120) suggests that the following religious criteria can help an interpreter's exploration for sacred aspects of a text: "gods, holy persons, spirit beings, divine history, human redemptions, human commitment, religious community, and ethics." According to Gowler (2010:195) sacred texture is a "subset of ideological texture." Moreover, sacred texture is inextricably linked with the other four textures (Robbins, 2016: 317). In this chapter, the features of sacred textual analysis will be applied to Revelation 12:1-6.

6.2 Deity

According to Robbins (1996b:120), God (or a divine being) may appear either plainly or exist in the background of a text. This is "the realm of theology par excellence," according to Robbins (1996b:120), because it is here that one can see the "nature of God and God's action and revelation." As an additional point of interest, the text may make a direct allusion to God, or it may portray God "speaking or behaving" in the same way as the other characters (Robbins, 1996b:120). As a result, establishing God's "essence" as expressed in the text is an important step in interpreting and comprehending sacred texture, according to Robbins (1996b:120).

God does not appear as a primary character in Revelation 12:1-6, but rather as an active participant in the background. For example, the narrator does not mention God until the infant is born and "snatched to God's throne" (v. 5). Additionally, God's hospitality is emphasized in the roles of host and nurturer (v. 5, 6). According to Exum (1993:9), women are frequently depicted as secondary characters in biblical texts. Furthermore, traditionally, males have been in control of symbol systems, with women being "marginalized and excluded" from these symbolic constructs (Exum, 1993:10). Thus, in patriarchal cultures, women's respect and dignity is mainly determined by their ability to reproduce (Exum, 1993:121). As a result, it is clear that the ideals of honour and shame, which were fundamental in the first-century Greaco-Roman civilization, legitimize such misogynistic sentiments toward women. In the narrative of Revelation 12:1-6, these cultural value systems from John's milieu are incorporated into the symbolic production of the story. Reading Revelation 12:1-6 via the lens of heteronormativity, for example, would result in these attitudes and assumptions being inscribed on Christian women's bodies as normative and divinely sanctioned.

This viewpoint is consistent with feminist scholars' criticism of the representation of the woman in Revelation 12:1-6. (Pippin, 1992, 1994; Garrett, 1992). Pippin (1992:75) describes the woman in Revelation 12:1-6 as "nameless" and "speechless" except for the cries of agony she is experiencing during childbirth. Furthermore, despite the fact that she is depicted as "good," the mother of Revelation 12:1-6 lacks "agency," and she is entirely dependent on the male high God for protection, sustenance, and redemption (Collins, 1993:33).

Although I concur with the above-mentioned perspectives on the representation of the woman, this level of analysis unpacks the essence and revelation of God's character in the story. As the analysis progresses, it becomes clear that the ideals and assumptions inherent in God's nature are diametrically opposed to those of John's culture. In Revelation 12:1-6, God shows favour to the unclean mother (who had just given birth), and the uncircumcised infant, who may have been considered shamed and unclean until they adhered to ceremonial cleaning. Whereas the prophet John adopts an "uncompromising theological" position against imperial religion and Rome's "dehumanizing" powers (Fiorenza, 1986:139), God, too, opposes oppressive institutions that discriminate against women and children.

6.3 Holy Person

The text's holy persons are those that have a special relationship to God or spiritual forces, as well as a "status that associates them with holy things or holy ways," argues Robbins (1996b:21). Furthermore, their interactions establish an "environment" in which subtle comparisons can be created between "genuinely sincere religious thinking and behaviour and inferior beliefs and practices" maintain Robbins (1996b:121).

John portrays himself as a holy man whose particular relationship to God is a direct result of his selection for divine revelation (1:1). The story, on the other hand, portrays both the woman and the new-born infant as holy individuals whom God intervenes to save in their hour of need (vv. 5, 6). Contrary to Old Testament laws and beliefs, both these characters are associated with holy things (v. 5), and holy ways (v. 6). The woman had just given birth to a son, and according to the purification laws as stipulated in Leviticus 12, the woman is "ceremonially unclean" and has to wait until her days of purification were over before she could touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary. Afterward, she must present a "burnt offering and sin offering" to the priest so that he can make "atonement" for her, only then is she declared ceremonially clean from her blood flow (Lev. 12:6). An essential part of religious practice for the nation of Israel was circumcision, which was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:11-12; 21:4). It was customary that sons be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). Therefore, in both these cases, the woman was 'unclean' and the child 'uncircumcised' and did not qualify for the status as holy persons. God, on the other hand, is depicted in Revelation 12:1-6 as protesting against Leviticus 12's priestly restrictions and administering justice to those who are considered outcasts. As pointed out by Malina (1993:158-158), the general consensus about John's social system was that following purity norms brought "prosperity while breaking them brought danger." However, the boundary lines are redrawn by divine hand, and the binary structures overturned so that the 'unclean' and the 'uncircumcised', representing the marginalized and oppressed, are welcomed into a space that they were previously not entitled to occupy. It is evident that the Bible reflects a hegemonic worldview. This sub-texture of sacred textual analysis reveals that the woman was instrumental in God's plan to reform the oppressive social structures that undermines the dignity of women and children.

6.4 Spirit Being

Unlike holy persons who are fully human, "spirit beings are special divine or evil beings that have the nature of a spirit rather than a fully human being," as pointed out by Robbins (1996b:123). According to Robbins (1996b:123), the fight between "good and evil spiritual forces" produces the "environment" in which sacred texture emerges. Furthermore, Robbins notes that the outcome of this conflict offers even more light on the text's consideration of the link of human life to the divine (Robbins, 1996:123).

In Revelation 12:1-6 reference is made to a spirit beings, both good and bad. The dragon (v. 2) is also referred to in Revelation 20:2 as the "ancient serpent," the "devil'" and "Satan." While John may be using this character to address the "oppressor nation" of his context (Fiorenza, 1991:81), references to the ancient serpent and Satan suggest an evil spirit that exists beyond Roman rule.

According to Oropeza (2012:180) the conflict John's readership faced was both "external and internal…different and overlapping problems including assimilation, apathy, social, economic and religious clashes." Thus, the Revelation of John may have urged those who were content with the current order to resist the behaviours he saw as incompatible with the Christian community, while also providing comfort to those who were experiencing social conflict (Koester, 2014:64). Collins (1977:246) argues that John drew on the holy war ideology to "depict the religio-political conflict" in which his community was involved, and to encourage nonviolent resistance, thus awakening trust in the power of heaven to protect and rescue. This conflict is depicted in Revelation 12:1-6 as a "cosmic battle" whose outcome in society and fertility in nature will either establish or destroy order (Collins, 1993:22). She argues that John's work may have had a "cathartic" effect on his audience (Collins, 1985:141). Moreover, Oropeza (2012:117) agrees that John's depictions of a cosmic battle and victory may have aided the church in dealing with "aggressive feelings in a nonviolent way." A sacred textual analysis elevates interpreters above the historical context of John's audience. It stresses ethereal action that has immediate implications in the corporeal world. Yes, the dragon may represent the prevailing Roman system; nonetheless, the text is still read and understood in contexts other than John's. Revelation 12:1-6 is still considered to justify women's

subordination and to limit their agency over their reproductive powers.[73] Thus, reading the text through the lens of God's divine essence, the characters may be interpreted anew to address issues of gender discrimination and violence against women and children.

6.5 Divine History

Several "texts," according to Robbins (1996b:123), assume that supernatural forces "direct historical processes and events" toward specific results. Robbins (1996:123) points out that "in the New Testament, this is the realm of eschatology (history moves towards the time of "last things"), apocalyptic (revelations from heaven, making the end time known before it occurs), or salvation history (God's plans for humanity works itself out through a process that moves slowly towards God's goals)."

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, sacred texture is inextricably linked with the other four textures (Robbins, 2016:317). Intertexture, in my opinion, would shed better light on this sub-texture. Intertexture provides an interpreter with the opportunity to enter the "interactive world of a text" (Robbins, 1996:40). The interactive world of a text includes the way in which the language of a text interacts with phenomena outside of the text thus resulting in a text with a "rich configuration of texts, cultures, and social and historical phenomena" (Robbins, 1996: 40).

6.6 Human Redemption

Human salvation is a gift provided to humans from the divine realm because of certain "activities, rituals, or practices," asserts Robbins, (1996b:125). As a result of events that occur or may happen if people do them, heavenly powers can "change human lives" and move them to a higher plane of "existence," according to Robbins (1996b:125). This advantage, he explains, may be the "transformation of humans' mortal nature into an immortal nature," or the elimination of

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[73] See: Mate (2002).

"defilement or remorse," allowing an individual to be free of harmful and destructive forces or practices (Robbins, 1996b:125).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, an ongoing reciprocal relationship was started between God and the woman via a dyadic agreement (Robbins, 1996b:79). God, who is depicted as the client provides lodging for the woman who is the patron (v. 6). Amongst the benefits that patrons could receive from clients are "loyalty, public support, economic assistance if needed and possible, votes, and most important, public praise and presence, especially at significant times for the political advancement of the patron" (Osiek, 2005:349). These benefits are not only for the individual but could also benefit "groups of social inferiors" (Osiek, 2005:349). Thus, through this depiction, John may have urged those comfortable with the current order, to resist the behaviours he considered incompatible with the Christian community while also providing solace to those readers who were facing social conflict (Koester, 2014:64).

When God personally cleanses the mother's impurities, the narrative redraws the boundary lines of the fundamental values of honour and shame, and the son's uncircumcision does not preclude him from the benefits of covenant and community. The essence of God is revealed through the preservation of the woman's honour and prevention of shame in a society where "purity has to do with the making and maintenance of boundaries" (Pilch & Malina, 1993:163). Fiorenza (1991:81), views the woman of Revelation 12:1-6 as reflecting the "messianic community," who were the outcasts at the time of Revelation. Through this narrative, God is demonstrating to the oppressed and marginalised, or those deemed outcasts, how they ought to "perceive themselves and form their self-image in terms of what [God] perceives and feedback to them" (Robbins, 1996b:77). I therefore concur with Koester (2014:109), "Revelation's oracular elements have the divine speaker talking directly to the readers."

6.7 Human Commitment

According to Robbins, human commitment refers to the "other side of what God and holy persons do for humans" (Robbins, 1996b:126). These are the "devoted supporters and adherents of those who play an important role in disclosing God's ways to humans (Robbins, 1996b:126). The

problem, therefore, as Robbins (1996b:126) points out, is the "response of humans at the level of their practices."

The first-century Jesus movement was one of many diverse groups within Judaism in the Graeco-Roman world. Fiorenza (1994:105) regards the Jesus movement as a "renewal movement within Judaism." This new movement fostered a view that was more "egalitarian" (Fiorenza, 1994:140). She also points out that via the practice of egalitarian discipleship, Jesus challenged and rejected the existing patriarchal attitude (Fiorenza, 1994:140). Although the women around Jesus experienced "new inclusion," this was not intended to be a "long-term solution to centuries of patriarchy and exclusion, but rather an interim arrangement to reflect the universalism of God's imminent action" (Sawyer, 1996:95).Thus, due to the major influence of Greek philosophy, Christology evolved along "dualistic lines" (Isherwood & Stuart, 1996:16). I thus concur with Fiorenza (1991:138) that Revelation 12:1-6 can be deeply empowering and liberating; even today, it can inspire resistance and utopian aspirations in people who "cry out for justice" in related rhetorical situations

6.8 Religious Community

As much as human commitment is important, so also is the individual's participation with "other people in activities that nurture and fulfil a commitment to divine ways," notes Robbins (1996b:128). This, according to Robbins (1996b:128), is what can be referred to as the "church" today, a "community [that] includes commitments to God, to people inside the community, and people outside the community."

The dragon's attempts to "devour" (v. 2) the woman's child and to destroy her (v. 13) has not succeeded, and verse 17 records that the dragon was so enraged that he "went off to make war against the rest of [the woman's] offspring." The offspring of the woman represents the religious community. Her dyadic personality is demonstrated in her commitment to God, and people both inside and outside the community (Malina, 1993; Robbins, 1996b). She is committed to God because she remains loyal even amid persecution, and advocates nonviolent resistance (Collins,

1977:255-256). She is committed to the people inside the religious community by giving her son up for adoption so that he can be trained since he will "rule with an iron sceptre" (v. 5).

Scholars agree that John's portrayal of women, including the Revelation 12 woman, reflects the marginalizaion, exploitation and misogynism of the community to whom the Revelation was addressed (Fiorenza, 1991:81; Marshall, 2010:23; Pippin, 1994:110). Thus, the message of Revelation 12:1-6 is an encouraging and hopeful message that presents the early Christian church in its best possible light, even though it was ostracized by society. Boesak (1984:25), who "reads and understands history from the underside," argues that it does not matter under which emperor early Christians suffer; "it is the fact that the weak and the destitute remained oppressed which provides the framework for understanding and interpreting history." Revelation 12: 1-6 is, therefore, a powerful expression of protest against the "injustice, oppression, and persecution of God's people" (Boesak, 1984:18, 30), not only by Rome as Boesak suggests, but also by the evils of patriarchy. God's essence and actions in Revelation 12:1-6 presents the community of God with a renewed challenge to enact God's righteousness, peace and justice, both inside and outside of the community.

6.9 Ethics

Ethics involves the duty of humans to think and behave in unique ways in both ordinary and exceptional circumstances, writes Robbins (1996b:129). Thus, it includes "special ways of thinking and acting" that are inspired by a dedication and commitment to God (Robbins, 1996b:129).

Through the patron-client relationship with the divine, the woman secures she divine protection, salvation, and nurturing (v. 6), (Osiek, 2005; Robbins, 1996b). As Robbins (1996b:79) points out, this type of agreement signals the "start of an ongoing reciprocal relationship." This image thus communicates to the religious community that godly benefits can only be obtained from God, through a life that is committed to God's ways. The narrative serves as a reminder of the "egalitarian" view that was cultivated in the Jesus movement and calls its adherents to persevere and continue fostering an "egalitarian discipleship" (Fiorenza, 1994:40). Matthew 5-7 contains

teachings that Jesus taught his disciples during his ministry years. Jesus encourages his followers to reflect not only on their actions but more importantly, on their character. For example, regarding murder, he teaches that it is not limited only to the action, but anyone "who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:22). An 'ethic of being' according to Jesus, is therefore as important as an 'ethic of doing'. According to Fiorenza (1994:121), Jesus' kingdom vision is a "praxis of inclusive wholeness" in which no one is excluded; everyone is invited, women and men, prostitutes and Pharisees alike. This is what the vision of Revelation 12:1-6 captures: everyone is welcome in God's dominion, including the exiled, the unclean, the uncircumcised, the disadvantaged, the outcasts, and so on. In fact, it is precisely this type of character, inspired by a dedication to God, that the earthly occupants of the kingdom should strive to nurture and portray.

6.10 Conclusion

The sacred texture of Rev. 12:1-6 mostly emerges through implicit aspects of the text. God does not appear in the text in a direct position, but as demonstrated above, the deity is directly involved in the salvation and nurturing of people who trust in divine providence. The conflict between good and evil spiritual forces in the narrative shows that good always triumphs over evil.[74] Furthermore, human redemption is attainable and available to humanity; but, individuals must play a role in this process by adhering to God's ways, which leads to salvation. The text calls for individuals to commit to working with others, both within and outside the religious community, to promote and implement a dedication to divine ways. It is not only important for humans to be dedicated to God for the purpose of heavenly rewards, but a commitment to God should also stimulate ethical reflection on one's own behaviour and activities. Whereas inner texture and social and cultural texture illuminated the patriarchal nature of the text, an important shift occurs in the narrative plot when a sacred textual analysis is applied to the text. The woman's body becomes the vehicle through which the deity challenges notions of female's bodies as merely reproductive capital. Moreover, cultural assumptions about honour and shame, purity and pollution, etc. are opposed

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[74] This is covered in Chapter 2's "combat-creation" myth section.

and challenged when the divine is sought in the text through sacred textual analysis. When the deity adopts the role of mother and nurturer, notions of motherhood as an institution,[75] as well as its hierarchical ideology, are questioned. The text demonstrates empowered mothering, which is defined as any "practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and [reform] various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women."[76]

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[75] See: Rich (1976:13)

[76] See: O'Reilly (2010: viii)

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Chapter Seven

The Rhetography of Revelation 12:1-6: Redrawing the Boundary Lines

7.1 Introduction

According to Robbins (2007:1), a search for the word "rhetography" yielded no results – except for himself and his "Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity" colleague's use of it. Rhetography is the means by which a speaker or writer conveys a "context of meaning" to the listener or reader (Robbins, 2009:1). He further explains that the speaker or author "conjures mental images" in the listener or reader's mind by "phrases or signs that evoke familiar contexts" that provides meaning (Robbins, 2009:1).

Rhetography is made up of the words, "rhetoric" and "graphic," and is based on the ancient Mediterranean idea of *ekphrasis*, or "vivid language that enlivens the imagination," explains Canavan (2015:149). Moreover, as pointed out by Canavan (2015:149), the word *ekphrasis* denotes a "descriptive language," putting what is depicted explicitly before the "sight." In addition, Robbins (2006:178) asserts that rhetography also refers to a "social, cultural, or ideological place of thought" that is "connected to multiple networks of meaning" and from which *topoi* can be portrayed. He argues that rhetorolects are often embedded in "rhetography (pictorial narrative) in early Christian forms of discourse, which has descriptive or explanatory rationales" (Robbins, 2006:178). He further explains that texts often provide statements followed by verbal images that serve as arguments or rationales (Robbins, 2006:178). These "argumentative rationales" are referred to as "rhetology," (Robbins, 2006:178).

According to Robbins (2007:3), SRI demonstrated the importance of rhetography in rhetorical research through an extended study of classical rhetoric; making the following statement:

> A doorway into rhetography of texts begins to open when one focuses on the speakers, who evoke ethos, and the audiences, who respond with pathos, in classical rhetoric. In the context of composing or analysing a speech (logos), a speaker/writer or interpreter is asked to envision attributes of the speakers and characteristics of the audiences where the speech occurs. This

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"envisioning" introduces dynamics of rhetography into classical rhetoric" (Robbins, 2007:3).

Robbins points out that classical rhetoricians have represented three distinct types of speakers and audiences: "prosecutors and defenders in the form of judges and juries, politicians in the form of a political assembly, and a civil orator in the context of a funeral or other public ceremony" (Robbins 2007:3). This chapter will apply the features of rhetography to the Revelation 12:1-6 narrative, demonstrating how John utilizes pictorial narration to conjure up images in the minds of his readers/listeners in order to draw a specific conclusion.

7.2 Topoi: Showing Familiar Trends in Discourse

A *topos* (singular for *topoi*) is described by Robbins (1996c:356) as a position of thinking that evokes the "social, cultural, ideological, or theological" use of a group of "meaning networks." Moreover, Robbins (1996c:356) elucidates that *topoi* is derived from many "conceptual sites with a wealth of information available for recombination and serves as a repository of trends and relationships within the habits of thought, value hierarchies, knowledge forms, and cultural convention of the host society." Furthermore, according to Robbins (2007:93-94), a *topos* works convincingly in "descriptive discourse (rhetography) and explanatory discourse (rhetology)" based on recognizable "patterns." In short, *topos* can be described as a framework of thought based on "cultural, social, ideological, and theological" premises (Robbins 2007:95).

Topoi develops in two ways, according to Robbins (2007:70): rhetology and rhetography. Moreover, whereas these two types of argumentation display *topoi*, rhetorolects, as a "mode of early Christian discourse," are articulated using *topoi* (Robbins, 2007:70). The creation of a *topos* makes way for more *topoi*, which helps to "recontextualize and reconfigure the world through the blending method," asserts Robbins (2007:95).

7.3 Blending: "Creating New Ways of Seeing"

"Conceptual integration theory" also known as "blending theory" is an aspect of the "cognitive science of religion which is concerned with the empirical investigation of the human mind" (Von Thaden, 2011:1). According to Von Thaden (2011:2), insights of blended theory fits naturally with SRI.

According to Robbins (2007:25), blending, in early Christian discourse, refers to both the blending processes within each rhetorolect and the processes by which the rhetorolects blend and compete. Rhetorolects "engaged dynamically (via their rhetography or rhetology)," and each one contributed to a new "culture of discourse" that arose during the first century in their own unique way (Robbins, 2007:134). Furthermore, applying "conceptual blending theory and critical spatial theory to sociorhetorical research" aids an interpreter in "constructing a spatial topology in early Christian rhetorolects and comprehending the rhetorical power of spatial blending in those rhetorolects" (Robbins 2007:134). According to Robbins (2007:134), the dynamic blending process resulted in an ever-increasing mixture of "cognitions, reasonings, picturing, and argumentation." Moreover, first-century Christians "established a discourse framework" that enabled them to address issues and topics relating to "individual human bodies, families, communities, synagogues, towns, temples, kingdoms, empires, the developed world, and God's uncreated domain" (Robbins, 2007:137).

Robbins (2005:82) makes the point that early Christian discourse, rather than putting "body" in the world, places "world" in the body. According to Von Thaden (2011:5), "the experiences of the body is a cultural experience" since human bodies are located in specific cultures. King (2000:9) likewise asserts that "no 'body' is a blank slate;" bodies are "cultural construction sites" that are valued both positively and negatively. King (2000:9) further explains that these cultural inscriptions on the body have an effect on how we "communicate with our bodies, project body expectations, and undergo body transformations."

Early Christian discourse blended six different types of "Christian body" together through the medium of the six different rhetorolects (Robbins, 2005:825). Each rhetorolect has its own way of integrating "locations" in the world with the human body, explains Robbins (2005:826). Moreover, it also blends the human body with "locations" around the world (Robbins,

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2005:826). The human body's reciprocal activity with "locations" provides a "complex structure of Christian discourse that simultaneously reconfigures images of the human body and images of world locations," argues Robbins (2005:826).

7.4 Conceptual Blending and *Topoi* in Revelation 12: 1-6

Analysis of the "wisdom," "apocalyptic," and "prophetic "discourse (Robbins, 1996c), makes it apparent that these three discourses which are foundational to Christianity, are present in Revelation 12:1-6. The author uses words in the rhetography of wisdom rhetorolect, which invokes an image of the household in the reader's mind. The picture includes "parents teaching their children practical knowledge and using teachers to direct them into forms of adult knowledge" (Robbins, 2008:24).

7.4.1 The Rhetography of Wisdom Rhetorolect

According to Robbins (2002:31), the "primary rule underlying wisdom discourse is that God is Father and Mother of all created things." Topics of wisdom rhetorolect include "parent/child, patron/client, host/guest, friendship, limited goods, honour/shame, and life/death" (Robbins, 2002:31). As discussed in chapter 5, God and the woman entered into a patron/client agreement based on a positive challenge. As client, God honours this agreement by providing lodging for the woman, as was a common gesture by the client in the first-century Mediterranean world (Osiek, 2005:359). Moreover, the patron-client system, as exhibited in the narrative, goes beyond only human life and includes the non-human world. This "nonhuman system" resulted in a "celestial patron-client system" that included humans as well, explains Malina (1993:112). Thus, honourable people would know how to access and exploit the available nonhuman influential persons to assist them in solving life's problems, which meant a need for knowledge of celestial patrons, a kind of common and personalistic natural science, as well as knowledge of God, explains Malina (1993:113). Thus the woman's patronage in Revelation 12:1-6 demonstrates her intimate knowledge of the patron/client system both in her own cultural context as well as the nonhuman

aspect of the patron/client system. She therefore exercises agency even though no speech is attributed to her.

In Revelation 12: 1-6 God acts as both Father and Mother (v. 5). Unlike the popular culture of the time, where women were only allowed to exercise their influence in the private sphere, which was the home, John reconfigures the home setting and shifts the roles ascribed to the woman's body regarding child rearing, to that of the Father (v. 5). Wisdom discourse's main goal is to encourage "good" and discourage "bad" (Dictionary of SRI terms).[77] This was often achieved in the New Testament through Jesus' use of sayings. For example, Matthew 5-7 contains teachings that Jesus taught his disciples during his ministry years. He encouraged his followers to reflect not only on their actions but also more importantly, on their character. Regarding murder, he taught that it is not limited only to the action, but anyone "who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:22). Jesus was therefore God's transmitter of wisdom while he was on earth (Robbins, 1996c:357).

In Revelation 12:1-6, Jesus is not explicitly on the scene transmitting wisdom as in the Gospels. However, God, who functions as "Father and Mother of all things made" (Robbins, 2002:31), demonstrates divine wisdom by extending mercy to an 'unclean' woman and an 'uncircumcised' child (v. 5, 6). Purity, in the first-century Greaco-Roman world, as Pilch and Malina (1993:163) points out, was a "means value" because it allowed the core values of honour and shame to be realized. Thus, transgressing boundaries, that excluded certain individuals from religious privileges, was an act of divine protest.

Revelation asserts the authority of Jesus Christ, who sent an angel to John to "reveal the things which must soon come to pass" (Rev. 1:1). At the end of the book, the same words are attributed to Jesus, who confirms John's introductory statement namely: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches" (Revelation 21:16a). As mentioned previously, Jesus' leadership reflected an "egalitarian ethos" which unfortunately was short lived (Fiorenza, 1996:140; Sawyer, 1995:96). Thus, due to patriarchal philosophical influence Christology developed along "dualistic lines" (Isherhood & Steward, 1996:16). As stated by Frymer-Kensky:

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[77] See: http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/t_z_defns.cfm#wisrhet

> Western civilization has looked upon gender as an absolute distinction between men and women. The Greek philosophical systems viewed the male-female polarity as the major axis of their thinking. Man embodied all those characteristics that the Greeks considered the highest achievements of their civilization, and woman, by contrast, had all the characteristics that the Greeks denigrated and discarded. The contest between men and women and, in particular, the replacement of women's modality by the superior male culture is the theme of many Greek myths (Frymer-Kensky, 2006:185).

Whereas a historical-critical analysis of Revelation 12:1-6 interprets the dragon (v. 3) as the corrupt world of Roman Imperial power (Boesak, 1984; Fiorenza, 1986; Pippin, 1994, etc.), the text designates him as the "ancient serpent," the "devil'" and "Satan." (Rev. 20:2). According to Boesak (1984:18) the dragon sees itself as a "god in the place of God, and he expects from his subjects the honour and submission of a God." Osiek (2005:360) likewise asserts that the Roman world "loved honor, prestige, status symbols and signs of precedence." According to the text's description of the dragon (Rev. 20:2), I maintain that the dragon's influence extends beyond the Roman Empire, and his actions in the text reflect the patriarchal system's core.

Thus it is apparent that the text is not only addressing socio-political issues of John's immediate context, but also religious disparities that is deeply engrained in early Christian church life. The text not only speaks to issues of early Christianity but questions contemporary misogynist interpretations of scriptures pertaining to procreation that relegates women to the realm of domesticity and only values them for the utility of their wombs. For Pippin (1994:110), John's "female archetypes" and the exploitation of women's bodies, including the Revelation 12:1-6 woman, "reveals a deep misogyny" (Pippin, 1994:110). Revelation 12: 1-6 is, therefore, a powerful expression of protest against the "injustice, oppression, and persecution of God's people" (Boesak, 1984:18, 30), not only by Rome as Boesak suggests, but also by the evils of patriarchy.

The rhetography of wisdom rhetorolect brings Jesus back to the centre as the transmitter of God's wisdom to people. John, therefore, modified dominant culture rhetoric to critique society while advocating devotion to God and Jesus in order to convince his audience to persist and to challenge those who were docile and accommodating (Koester, 2014:xiv, 93-96). Moreover, John "insists

that the 'Lord' of the world is not the emperor but Jesus Christ who has created an alternative reign and community to that of the Roman Empire" (Fiorenza, 1985:4).

The text depicts the divine in an act of protest, challenging patriarchal gendered roles inscribed on women's bodies, problematizing corrupt social structures, and proposing a new Christian ethos based on the kingdom of God. Thus, God as deity, illustrates the kind of attitude God's people should embody on earth.

7.4.2 The Rhetograpgy of Prophetic Rhetorolect

Early Christian prophetic literature, according to Robbins (2008:23), depicts a kingdom in which God calls, authorizes, advises, and commands prophets to challenge the leaders and citizens of the kingdom in order to enact the ideals of justice and righteousness of God in the region. Prophetic discourse focuses on specific people or groups which God has chosen to lead in the production of justice within the world, explains Robbins (2002:44). Thus, God plays an "important role in recruiting individuals and groups for specific roles and blessings" (Robbins, 2002:44). It clearly illustrated in the narrative that God's choice of individuals for enacting justice and righteousness on earth is not influenced by others' views or limited by cultural inscriptions inscribed on human bodies.

The above-mentioned rhetorolect exemplifies the idea of God's kingdom as an inclusive kingdom. In a similar vein, prophetic rhetorolect emphasizes an egalitarian viewpoint. According to Robbins (2007:6), prophetic rhetorolect evokes the context of God's kingdom on earth, with God's kingdom's geographical borders extending beyond Israel's borders to other regions, thus reinterpreting God's land promise as an inheritance promise. In accordance with this view, Collins (1976:58) argues that the nature of the Revelation 12 narrative is "international" since John consciously incorporated and fused "traditional elements from a variety of cultures." In other words, Revelation 12:1-6 has the potential to address circumstances that extends beyond the limits of Roman control.

Prophetic discourse necessitates a supernatural "transformation" of the self on the part individuals because "the world itself will not change" but the presence of a new subjective perspective on it

will be "salvation" in and of itself (Robbins, 1996b:72, 1996c:360). Furthermore, corrupt social systems can be changed and evil can be dealt with if supernatural insight into how to change them is gained (Robbins, 1996b:73). This type of change, on the other hand, necessitates people whose hearts and minds are susceptible to "supernatural influence" (Robbins, 1996b:73). According to Oropeza, (2012:182), one way John's audience may have reacted to the Roman Imperial system was by altering the existing social order. Thus as prophet, John provides his audience with an "alternative empire and world" that can be appropriated anew for all who are oppressed and relegated to the margins of society (Fiorenza, 1985:n.d).

Whereas John designates himself and his mandate as prophetic, the rhetography of prophetic discourse features both God and the woman in a prophetic capacity. The divine speaker speaks directly to the readers in the prophetic elements of Revelation (Koester, 2014:109). Not only does the divine speaker speak directly but demonstrates how kingdom subjects ought to fulfil their responsibility of righteousness in the world. If they fulfil their duty, they will be especially blessed; however, if they do not accomplish that responsibility, they will suffer "negative consequences" (Robbins, 2007:7). As prophet, God judges the oppressive social order of the Roman Empire in general (Marshall, 2010:23), but the evils of patriarchy in particular. Special forces are utilized to "reflect cultural and political changes and struggles" (Collins, 1993:22; Redding, 2011:1). Moreover, God further demonstrates the necessity of withdrawing from the "irredeemably evil" world by removing mother and child (vv. 5, 6; Robbins, 1996b:73). Through this act, God calls individuals to be purified by renouncing and leaving the world; thus forming a separate group preoccupied with its own holiness and means of isolation from the rest of society (Robbins, 1996b:73).

The narrative depicts God's active position in that God does not annihilate the dragon, but rather participating actively in the war against chaos (Redding, 2011:12). Letty Russell (1985:55) in a similar vein argues that feminism is a "prophetic movement," "proclaims judgment on the patriarchy of contemporary culture and calls for repentance and reform." God as prophet, stand in solidary with those who are marginalized and oppressed, not only under Roman rule, but who suffers at the hands of patriarchy.

The woman as prophet is selected by God to be an active agent in God's reform in the world. She represent the "messianic community" (Fiorenza, 1991:81) but also the broader community as her

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prophetic mandate is "international" (Collins, 1976:58). Hence the struggle between the two "divine beings for universal kingship" (Collins, 1976:12). The woman is sent forth with a body re-inscribed by divine hand. In Exodus 24:12, the patriarch Moses is commanded to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Decalogue inscribed on tablets of stone. Through the prophet Jeremiah (31:33) God makes the following promise: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." In Revelation 12:1-6, this process of re-inscription is revealed through John to his audience. As stated by Collins (1998:8), a common conceptual structure of the world shared by all apocalypses is that the world is mysterious and that meaningful revelations are sent from the unseen realm above via angelic mediators. Likewise, Koester (2014:105) argues that apocalypses reflect a divine or ethereal dimension that exists beyond what can be seen but impacts life in this world.

The rhetography of prophetic rhetorolect demonstrates how God-self transcends oppressive boundaries and redraws the boundary lines to include those that are labelled outcasts. God's actions evoke the image of a prophet who is strongly opposed to how God's ways have been carried out by God s people on earth (Robbins, 1996c:360),

7.4.3 The Rhetograpgy of Apocalyptic Rhetorolect

Robbins (2002:54) explains that through the rhetography of apocalyptic rhetorolect, the author will "use terms that conjure up in the reader's mind an image of an emperor ruling over an empire through an imperial court, and through this image, the author evokes judicial reasoning as God acts against evil in judgment." Apocalyptic discourse possesses a "special power," notes Robbins (2002:54). This power lies in its "reconfiguration of all time (past, present, and future) and all space (cosmic, earthly, and of personal bodies) in terms of holy and profane, good and evil" (Combrink, 2002:112). In the words of Robbins (2002:54):

> The specificity and concreteness of apocalyptic discourse lies in revelation to specific people, display of very detailed descriptions of beings (God, beasts, evil personages, good personages), display of places (bountiful gardens, beautiful cities, places of punishment, places of worship, altars, temples, walls), and display of procedures (programmatic destruction of portions of the earth, specific

procedures of torture, specific processes of journey of the righteous soul into heaven and then into the paradise of jubilation, specific processes of journeys through the heavens and throughout the cosmos).

The narrative expression of God in Rev. 12:1-6 denotes an evocation of all of God's actions. Apocalyptic discourse, according to Robbins (2007:364), allows for the "creation of new storylines" aimed at the believers' well-being. In light of this view, both Collins (1976) and Redding (2011) interpret Revelation 12:1-6 as "combat-creation" myth. Redding (2011:11) argues that the narrative opens with "order and disorder as opposing forces, a central theme in mythological and biblical creation imagery." Moreover, the child who is "unnamed with an ambiguous messianic identity," symbolizes a new creation amidst Revelation's tumultuous background (Redding, 2011:11). Furthermore, Rev. 12:1-6 discloses God's explicit engagement in this "new creation" narrative (Redding, 2011:12).

Although tacitly, the woman's character is shown to be more active. According to Exum (1993:9, 96), women are generally minor characters in men's stories in the Bible and are merely fragments of their spouses' and sons' broader and more complete narrative. Pippin (1994:116) expresses similar feelings about the Revelation 12 woman, claiming that she is a "made up and made passive" character exploited by "patriarchal politics." However, according to King (2009:9), the women's reproductive power is connected to the "celestial generation of all creation." In a similar vein, Oduyoye (1999:119) argues that the many ways of "bringing forth life" should be "celebrated." According to Punt (2019:127), the "range of womb connotations" suggests that for the ancients, the "reproductive body" was an integral connection between "human life and the divine," as well as between the present and the future, in both religious-apocalyptic and imperial discourse. Regarding women's agency in biblical times, Frymer-Kensy states the following:

> Women in the Bible pursue their goals as actively as men. They have certain techniques and strategies at their disposal; they can use their access to food to set the mood and so influence people; they can use their powers of persuasion through reason, rhetoric and persistence (nagging); and they can trick and deceive when they cannot persuade. None of this is different from the strategies that men outside the power structure could be expected to use. They are all methods of indirect power, used by people who cannot take direct action: women, and subordinate men (Frymer-Kensy, 2006:187).

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Thus in accordance with Fiorenza (1991:14), I concur that emphasizing the text's "misogynistic language" risks exaggerating the texts androcentric concepts to the point where it only affirms misogynism as its fundamental meaning.

Early Christian apocalyptic rhetorolect, according to Robbins (2007:364), focused on the "eye," emphasizing, "seeing" beyond the physical realm into the heavenly mysteries (Robbins, 2007:364). Thus, in order to know God's essence, one must have insight into the heavens (Robbins, 2007: 64). Robbins makes the following statement:

> Only by seeing what is happening in the heavens can one see the ways in which God is transforming the world and its people at present and will more dramatically transform the world and its people in future (Robbins, 2007:364).

The Revelation 12:1-6 woman is clearly subjected to a male-dominated gaze. Tyson (2006:102) emphasizes patriarchal authority in the male gaze, arguing that "the man looks; the woman is looked at." Furthermore, the one who looks is in power, as he has the power to name things, explain the world, and therefore rule the world. The one being observed, is only an "object to be seen." In this sense, apocalyptic rhetorolect asks the readers of Revelation to gaze, but to look beyond the physical realm in order to see God's essential nature.

The scene where the child is "snatched to God's throne" (v. 5) and the mother is fleeing into the "wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God" (v. 6) depicts the reversal of socially constructed parenting roles. Social and cultural texture of Revelation 12:1-6 demonstrates that the world within which the early Christian community emerged was corrupt and evil; a world without regard for the vulnerable and one that privileges men over women, a world entrenched in dichotomy. Likewise, Exum (1993:112) asserts that women needs children to give them "status," in a patriarchal society. The implications of a narrative strategy such as Revelation 12:16 is that it "reinforces the patriarchal ideal of the self-sacrificing mother" (Exum, 1993:140). In early Christianity, according to Nelson (2016:11, 21) notions of motherhood for upper-class women were constructed using "rhetorical examples" in which labour pains were reinterpreted to symbolize "selfless dedication to Christianity." This same narrative (Revelation 12:1-6) is used in

some contemporary churches to inscribe women's bodies claiming that fertility is seen as God's plan for women, and infertility is the devil's work (Mate 2002:550). According to Mate (2002:550) this kind of religious rhetoric makes women feel "less feminine and whole" when they do not have biological children.

The concept of inclusivity, which is emphasized in wisdom and prophetic rhetorolect, is also visible in apocalyptic rhetorolect. An apocalyptic view of Revelation 12:1-6 depicts God as one who is in solidarity with the marginalized in their quest for "humanization, for justice, for community" (Oduyoye, 1999:106). Sadly, as pointed out by Oduyoye (1999:118) "church joins culture to uphold" notions of motherhood as institution, thus during her ordeal the church had "no affirming words" for her. In her own words: "God knows the priests are taught by African culture and by biblical narratives to confirm only the dreams of a child that is yet to be born" (Oduyoye, 1999:119). Under patriarchy, "female potential" has been practically butchered on the "site of motherhood," according to Rich (1976:13). Moreover, the patriarchal institution of motherhood, not only "alienates" women from their bodies but also "incarcerates [them] in them" (Rich, 1976:13).

Thus, in Revelation 12:1-6, the "language of the dominant culture [is used] to criticize society while urging obedience to God and Jesus" (Koester, 2014:93-96). Mothering, as illustrated in the text, from an eschatological perspective, requires more than producing "biological progeny" (Oduyoye, 1999:106). It is a shared responsibility that recognizes the "diversity of God's gifts" and celebrates the various ways of "bringing forth life" (Oduyoye, 1999:119).

7.5 Conclusion

The narrative function of Revelation 12:1-6 is to provide hope and new historical and prophetic meaning. Like the rest of Revelation, this narrative is indeed open to many interpretive possibilities. At surface level, this text may seem to perpetuate stereotypes concerning women's roles, however, a multi-dimensional reading brings to the fore God's concern for justice and human wholeness that goes beyond the immediate crisis John and the Christian community were experiencing at the time.

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Grammatically, God is introduced in masculine terms (v. 5); however, God assumes the role of mother and child-rearer. The divine also takes on the role of host and prepares a place for the woman. In so doing, the notion of motherhood as an institution and women's bodies as merely reproductive capital, are challenged, corrupt social structures are problematized, and the deity proposes a new Christian ethos based on kingdom values and principles. This kind of wisdom that functions in a liberating and transformative way is what is expected of those claiming to be participants of the Christian community of faith.

The prophetic rhetorolect implicit in Revelation 12:1-6 demonstrates that it is God who summons, approves, advises, and orders prophets to question the kingdom's leaders and citizens. The narrative further demonstrates that God's selection of individuals far exceeds heteronormativity and cultural norms. The divinity also assumes the role of a prophet; challenging the ways in which God's ways have been enacted by God's people on earth. By redrawing the boundary lines to include the "other," an exiled man, a ceremonially unclean woman (v. 5), and an uncircumcised child (v. 5), God demonstrates solidarity with those who are marginalized and treated unjustly and holding space for those who are disadvantaged and excluded by the hierarchical dualist structures of patriarchal society.

The rhetography of apocalyptic rhetorolect allows the interpreter to gaze, beyond the material into the ethereal world until the essence of God is depicted. The scene where the child is "snatched to God's throne" (v. 5) and the mother is fleeing into the "wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God" (v. 6) depicts the reversal of socially constructed parenting roles. An apocalyptic view of Revelation 12:1-6 depicts God as one who is in solidarity with the marginalized in their quest for "humanization, for justice, for community" (Oduyoye, 1999:106). Mothering, thus, is a shared responsibility that recognizes the "diversity of God's gifts" and celebrates the various ways of "bringing forth life" (Oduyoye, 1999:119).

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to do a feminist SRI of Revelation 12:1-6 by utilizing the hermeneutical key of "body" as the main thinking technology. As stated in the introduction, the experience of women is crucial to the formation of theology.[78] Furthermore, the body provides a new paradigm, a new insight, which challenges the traditional word.[79] The aim of this thesis was to investigate how a feminist and SRI interpretation of Revelation 12:1-6 can offer opportunities for challenging hegemonic conceptions of women's bodies as only valuable for reproductive capital.

In this thesis, I show how the apocalyptic nature of the discourse, as well as its copious use of symbolism and imagery, complicates the interpretive possibilities of a text like Revelation 12:1-6. Not only is Revelation a difficult text to comprehend, but its dualistic and patriarchal portrayal of women also inspires fervent feminist engagement. Attempts to reconstruct the historical situation to identify whom the Revelation 12:1-6 woman represents is widespread. Despite the fact that the woman is introduced positively, the narrative appears to support hetero-patriarchal ideology at the sacrifice of the woman's dignity. The woman occupies centre stage while pregnant, but as soon as she gives birth to a son, she is relegated back to the margins, whereas the new-born son is snatched to the "throne of God" (vv. 5, 6). This portrayal of the Revelation 12 woman was not new to John's audience since it was customary practice in patriarchal biblical tradition to refer to women simply as "wife" or "mother" — her primary value being in her ability to reproduce (ideally male) children. Christian women and their bodily *hexis* are, therefore, inscribed by patriarchal culture through heteronormative readings of biblical texts such as Revelation 12:1-6.

Revelation 12:1-6, like the patriarchal biblical tradition, privileges men over women, at face value. It is evident from John's phallogocentric portrayal of the woman clothed with the sun, that the culture of John's time is deeply inscribed on the woman's symbolic body. Her body becomes the terrain on which the cosmic battle between good and evil is fought.[80] This struggle symbolized the

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[78] See: Isherwood & Stuart (1998:10).
[79] Ibid
[80] See: Collins (1977), Redding (2011).

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socio-political turmoil that John and the Christian community were experiencing at the time. Although some scholars argue that the text is creating a crisis, it nonetheless addresses a crisis. The woman's character in John's narrative, although being magnificently clothed with the cosmic trio, is regarded as helpless and lacks agency due to the cultural preconceptions engraved on her body. Moreover, at surface level, she seems to submit her sexuality and reproductive capital to male authority. If biblical discourse, therefore, has such an immense impact on how women's roles are constructed then responsible biblical scholarship, that takes into account the lived experiences of women, should address issues of heteronormativity and deconstruct hetero-patriarchal inscriptions, thus liberating the women's bodies from its patriarchal confines. This study has shown how Revelations imagery is complex and offers "multiple interpretations" (Redding, 2011:13). As a result, SRI, as a "multi-dimensional approach to a text," participates in a "multi-faceted" interaction with the text, as well as phenomena outside of the text that come under its impact (Robbins, 1991:1).

Whereas inner texture emphasizes the hetero-patriarchal ideology of Revelation 12:1-6 and social and cultural texture demonstrates how the value system of John's world are constructed on and entrenched in binarism, an important shift occurs in the narrative plot when a sacred textual analysis is applied to the text. The woman's body becomes the vehicle through which the deity challenges notions of women's bodies as merely reproductive capital. Moreover, cultural assumptions about honour and shame, purity and pollution, etc., are explicitly challenged when the divine is in the text through sacred textual analysis. As a dyadic personality, the woman's actions in the narrative show commitment to God and to people, both inside and outside, the community. Unlike the notion that the woman was "made up and made passive,"[81] which I do not contest as an inner textual analyses demonstrated that the text is deeply sexist, the woman was in fact actively involved in a reciprocal agreement with God to challenge patriarchal conceptions as women's bodies being merely reproductive capital.

Through a rhetographic analysis, I demonstrated that this familiar text could be seen in a new way. The patriarchal cultural inscriptions of the first century Graeco-Roman world on the women's bodies are opposed and challenged and an eschatological salvation is re-inscribed in its place. The woman is sent back to the public space, with a flawed body, bleeding after childbirth (v. 5), full of

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[81] See: Pippin (1994:116)

righteousness and justice that the community of faith ought to embody. A new creation narrative is written on the flesh of the woman in which the boundaries are redrawn, and those who were deemed "others" are now included in the community of faith.[82] Thus, to echo the words of Combrink (2002:112) the transformative power of Revelation 12:1-6 lies in its "reconfiguration of all time (past, present, and future) and all space (cosmic, earthly, and of personal bodies)" in terms of holy and profane, good and evil.

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[82] Apocalyptic discourse allows for the "creation of new storylines" aimed at the believers' well-being (Robbins, 2007:364).

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