

RE-PRESENTING BIBLICAL WOMEN: FICTION AS FEMINIST CRITICISM

RE-PRESENTING BIBLICAL WOMEN: FICTIONAL RE-VISION AS
FEMINIST CRITICISM

By

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Abstract

Using Anita Diamant's The Red Tent, India Edghill's Queenmaker Margaret George's Mary, Called Magdalene, whose texts recreate/re-envision the lives of Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene respectively, this project focuses on fictional portraits of biblical women who are either silent or whose histories are relayed, possibly inaccurately, in the original biblical accounts. The development of this popular subgenre of historical fiction can be viewed as part of the tradition of feminist biblical scholarship, which focuses on the examination of biblical women and their experiences and identities, the omission of women as narrators in the Bible canon, and the subsequent position of women in the church and in other social structures.

My research indicates that there exist two opposing bodies of feminist biblical critics: on one side there are the 'rejectionist' feminists who argue that the Bible is the handbook of patriarchy and that, consequently, its theological traditions must be rejected by women. On the other side there are the 'reinterpretationist' feminists who refuse to give up on the authoritarian and liberating power of the Scriptures and insist that, through reinterpretation, women can be empowered by the Bible. Throughout my consideration of fictional re-imaginings of Bible women's histories, including the ways in which these novels re-present female knowledge and power, I consistently address the need for a negotiation between the rejectionist and reinterpretationist paradigms that resolves their individual inherent inadequacies. My project asserts that rewriting biblical histories using the genre of the novel enables theorists to transcend the boundaries and limitations imposed on the discipline by the contrasting theoretical paradigms and create a third, hybridized approach to critiquing the Bible from a feminist perspective that both rejects and reinterprets biblical narratives.

My project focuses on the theoretical function of revisionary novels in feminist biblical scholarship, although it invites a further consideration of the valuable stake that these novels might claim in the wider arena of theological discourse.

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Introduction

The beginning is not the beginning. Inside the oldest stories are older stories not destroyed but hidden. Swallowed. Mouth songs. Wafers of parchment, layer underneath layer. Nobody knows how many. The texts remain traces, leakages, lacunae, curious figures of speech, jagged interruptions. ~ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Entering the Tents*

When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?”¹ he had no idea that his question would be at the heart of feminist scholarship and biblical interpretation more than two millennia later. Feminist theologians in particular grapple with the idea of truth in their consideration of male-authored, male-narrated, and male-centred biblical narratives. Since the ‘truth’ that is narrated in the Bible seems to exclude female experiences and histories, these feminists suggest that multiple ‘truths’ co-exist in the Scriptures; while male histories exist visibly on the surface of the text, female histories are the sub-layers, histories that are ‘not destroyed but hidden,’ as contemporary American feminist Alicia Suskin Ostriker describes them in the epigraph (547).² Like all historians, the men who penned the Bible determined what should be remembered and what should be sent into “the oblivion of the forgotten” (Joyce par. 3). Unfortunately, given the Bible’s overwhelming emphasis on male histories, the experiences that ‘hit the cutting room floor’ appear to be predominantly female-centred. Feminists are continually searching, examining, reinterpreting, and ‘turning and turning’ (Ostriker, *Nakedness*, preface xiii) the top layer of the Bible to resurface and revalue those hidden stories of

¹ John 18:38; unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural citations in this publication are from the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1984). After consulting other English-language versions of the Bible, I determined that, for the sake of readability, *The New World Translation* most successfully translates the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts into modern speech.

² Whether the Bible was inspired by God or constructed by men is not a debate I am willing to address. I am looking at the Bible purely as a literary text that has been used as a cornerstone of Jewish and Christian religions for centuries.

women's lives, which, when revealed, establish women's importance within biblical history and empower those who seek within it validation and recognition of female experiences.

According to feminist scholars, there is an intrinsic link between the Bible's treatment of women and their experiences and the social positioning of contemporary women. "Until the early nineteenth century," relates feminist biblical critic Barbara Brown Zikmund, "there was no conscious awareness that women's experience, *as women's experience*, was relevant to intellectual work. It was a man's world" (21; original italics).³ The source of this 'unconsciousness' and the historical subordination of women, as articulated by women's rights activists since the early 1800s, was grounded explicitly in biblical scriptures, since its compilation, it appears, gave special authority to male experiences while denouncing those of the female. Feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that feminist contentions with the Bible and patriarchal religions stem from the fact that "classical theology, including its foundational tradition in [S]cripture ... [is] shaped by male experience rather than female experience" (113). Ruether continues to define female experience(s) not merely in terms of biological difference, but rather as those "experiences created by the social and cultural *appropriation* of biological differences in a male dominated society" (113; italics added). She explains that in a patriarchal hierarchy, women's experiences of themselves are

³ Silvia Schroer's essay, "'We Will Know Each Other by Our Fruits': Feminist Exegesis and the Hermeneutics of Liberation" suggests that one of the key problems with feminist hermeneutics is its tendency toward making hegemonic claims. I see Zikmund's reference to "women's experience" as encompassing all women in patriarchal societies who experience, to varying degrees, subordinate social positioning relative to men. I pick up this idea in my conclusion of Chapter One during my discussion about essentializing the female experience; see pp. 47-48.

“filtered and biased by male dominance and by their own marginalization and inferiorization” (113). According to Ruether then, while female experiences are diverse, women in patriarchal societies share to varying degrees the same experience of marginalization insofar as their biological differences from men are used to justify their social subordination. Gradually, beginning in the nineteenth century, “women came to believe that their experience was too limited and undervalued” (Zikmund 22) and consequently, they began to rally for change “in the legal system, in politics, in fashion, in social expectations, and even in the church” (Zikmund 22). By the 1830s, many women in America began articulating a need for different understandings of biblical scripture since the impetus for their subordination, they argued, had been legitimized throughout history by the Bible – the quintessential authoritarian text, which Ostriker calls, “the founding text of western patriarchy” (qtd. in Blair 7). This group of early feminists included Sarah Grimke, a women’s rights author who charged that “the masculine bias of... biblical interpretation [is] part of a deliberate plot against women” and who subsequently called for a “new feminist scholarship” in 1937 (qtd. in Zikmund 23). Thus began the history of a body of critical work that is now recognized as feminist biblical scholarship, the focus of which surrounds the examination of biblical women and their experiences and identities, the omission of women as narrators in the Bible canon, and the subsequent position of women in the church and other social structures.

I will examine how Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent, India Edghill’s Queenmaker, and Margaret George’s Mary, Called Magdalene, three examples of the flourishing

subgenre of fictional portraits of biblical women⁴ that explore, recreate, and re-envision the lives of Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene respectively, challenge the authority and gendered constraints of biblical narrative. These novels have arisen as a result of first, feminist readings of the Bible that have noticed that women's voices and their narrated historical testaments are omitted from both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and second, the twentieth-century anxiety that important testaments, including ones written by women, have been intentionally excluded from the Bible canon. This anxiety stems partly from the 1945 excavation of the Nag Hammadi Library, a selection of religious texts buried in a large stone jar in the desert outside the modern Egyptian city bearing the same name as the library. These so-called apocryphal, Gnostic texts include the Gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the Pistis Sophia (George 627). Although their divergences from the four standard New Testament gospels prompt some scholars to doubt their historical accuracy, their recovery has led theologians to question the politics surrounding which accounts were included in and excluded from the Bible, and perhaps why. Contemporary bestseller, The Da Vinci Code, theorizes these issues by challenging the authority of the Bible and its historical accuracy. A bestselling novel cannot replace or destabilize decades of theological research and criticism, and I am not suggesting that

⁴ There are numerous novels written by both men and women that engage in this type of fictional revisionary work and produce the same effects on feminist biblical scholarship that my project asserts, particularly in the second and third chapters. While each of these texts is worthy of consideration, the task would be too ambitious for this project. I have chosen to consider *The Red Tent*, *Queenmaker*, and *Mary, Called Magdalene* both out of personal interest and because of the different ways in which each text represents female knowledge and power (see Chapter Two). For further examples of fictional rewritings of biblical women's lives, consider the following texts: Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther* (Penguin, 2005); Marek Halter's Canaan trilogy, *Sarah* (Crown, 2004), *Zipporah, Wife of Moses* (Three Rivers, 2006), and *Lilah: a Novel* (Crown, 2006); Francine Rivers' *Unveiled* (Tyndale House, 2000); Orson Scott Card's *Rebekah: Women of Genesis* (Forge Books, 2002); and Mary Rourke's *Two Women of Galilee* (Mira, 2006).

Brown's novel is an authority in the field. His novel is, however, a well-known example of a fictional text that engages in biblical criticism and questions, as do the revisionary novels at the forefront of my examination, whether and why the Bible has omitted particular narratives. Mingling fiction with historical research, Dan Brown's conspiracy-theory questions the divine origin of the Bible and asserts that "the Bible did not fall magically from the clouds ... [M]an created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and ... [it] has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions" (231).⁵ As the Nag Hammadi Library as well as the recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1950s suggest, the Bible as we know it contains only a selection of historical records. Brown's novel claims that those books that are included in the New Testament, for example, were actually chosen by the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine who, in a successful effort to fuse sun-worshipping paganism with Christianity and unify the Roman empire with "the new Vatican power base" (233), established Christ's divinity. To support Christ's divinity rather than his mortality, Brown writes, "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike The modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda" (234). Alongside this modification, those scriptures that were included signalled a shift from a relatively gender-neutral Christ-based organization to a male-exclusive-hierarchical model that closely mirrors the subordinate positioning of women in the Old Testament

⁵ Compare with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's undermining of the Bible's divine origins in her introduction to *The Woman's Bible*: "I do not believe that any man ever saw or talked to God, I do not believe that God inspired the Mosaic code, or told the historians what they say he did about women, for all the religions on the face of the earth degrade her" (12).

and solidifies it by excluding women from narrative, both as subjects and authors. Diamant, Edghill, and George also grapple with this important issue of inclusivity and exclusivity of narrative; they re-envision the lives of women in the Bible who are either completely silent or whose histories are relayed, possibly inaccurately, in the written accounts of the original male authors. Their fictional re-imaginings of the biblical narratives retell the historical accounts from the perspectives of their female protagonists and depict the untold stories of female experiences – including marital dynamics, motherhood, childbearing and childbirth, infertility, power and politics within patriarchal societies, women's knowledge and unique female relationships – which lay hidden between the Bible's wholly gendered lines.

Questions about historical truths, silenced voices, and hidden stories are at the centre of feminist considerations of the Bible. My research has led me to define two opposing bodies of feminist criticism: on the one hand there are the 'rejectionist' feminists who view the Bible and its histories as nothing more than the embodiment of patriarchal hierarchy and the handbook of racial, gender, and religious discrimination and subordination. These feminists argue that the "whole Bible is infused with patriarchy" (Sakenfeld 61) and therefore its theological/ecclesiastical traditions must be rejected by women. On the other hand the 'reinterpretationist' feminists refuse to give up on the authoritarian, "liberating power of the Scriptures" (Zikmund 28) and focus not on a complete rejection of the text, but rather on a new interpretation of Scripture, a feminist reading of biblical accounts, to locate examples of women's agency, power, and autonomy. Rather than maintaining the either/or approach, rewriting biblical histories in

novel form bridges the gap between the two dichotomous bodies of scholarship by proposing a synthesis of both theoretical paradigms. The development of this popular subgenre of historical fiction can be viewed as part of the tradition of feminist biblical scholarship that reinterprets the identities of biblical women, along with their experiences, to figure women as a locus of power and importance; however, in that they create entirely new experiences for their protagonists, invent for them unique personalities, and fabricate biographical details to de-fragment their lives, the novels also reject the Bible's historic accuracy and authority. The novels engage in what Adrienne Rich calls "re-vision," which is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18) far greater than do feminist reinterpretations. They not only read the text through a feminist lens and imbue its scriptures with a feminist perspective, but also they boldly recreate and replace, using artistic imagination, the missing pieces of the old, male text to piece together the fragmented lives of our foremothers and to make their lives meaningful to contemporary women.

The act of re-membering the past, or piecing together shards of memory to compile a more complete version of women's fragmented histories faces critical scepticism. Marcel Proust asserts, "It is impossible to recover our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect" (34). Proust suggests that while fiction writers try to reshape traditional forms of history, their fictional rewritings inadequately explain the past. I agree that it is impossible to

fictionalize history and pass it off as fact; however, none of the writers at the forefront of my project tries to either encapsulate the past by writing in the style of the time, or pass their works off as historically accurate. Instead, each writer attempts to imaginatively “restore to the present memory those important pieces of the past which, rather than being stored in the public and generic repository of history, have been dissolved into the oblivion of time” (Joyce par. 5). As I discuss in chapters One and Three, they corroborate David Samuels’ notation regarding the “elevation of stories, historical and personal, over the often-grim elucidation of facts” in professional historical narration (36). They incite us to wonder whether the impact of each of these women voicing her story could have reverberated through generations to the present. Indeed, how valuable would the Gospel of Mary been to a young Christian girl looking for a role model in the canon that she has been taught is the Word of God yet to which she has a difficult time relating since its androcentricism excludes her from any real point of identification? Importantly, these novels transcend the limitation of recorded “male” history, and ask, what is the rest of the story? Refusing to accept the Bible’s recorded history with its primary focus on male experiences and its gaping holes where female stories should be, these fictional revisions of biblical narratives strive toward wholeness and reparation by lending an imagined voice to their female characters. Imagination in historical reparation is useful to the feminist agenda. In fact, Rich encourages artistic invention in feminist revision:

For a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive ... Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for

the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. (23)

These revisionist novels approach the Bible from the perspective that “day might be night” and propose that there may be ‘alternative,’ unrecorded versions of history, which have the power to ‘transform’ female experiences, that can only be unearthed by the imagination. According to Rich, the ghostlike appearance of women in certain biblical narratives and complete disappearance from others has facilitated woman’s spiritual re-emergence in modern and contemporary fictional prose and verse as women writers try to reconcile the Bible’s gender-biased narrative. Resurrecting these historical women and telling “the rest” of their stories are vital to an understanding of women’s present identity; by pointing out the consequences of muting women’s histories we come to understand our present relationship to patriarchy and the ways it shapes and filters our self-perceptions. Rich explains,

This drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see – and therefore live – afresh. (18)

Revisioning the past is necessary in order for feminists to articulate a vision for the present and by extension, the future. Challenging the ways in which women are portrayed in the Bible can, in particular, empower religious women to not only re-evaluate their relationship to biblical narratives and God, but also their current and future positions in the church and society. Although the Catholic Church is making slow progress toward its tolerance of religious diversity and sexual orientation, its views of women, especially

those that involve women assuming “male” leadership positions in the Church, remain archaic. Conventional attitudes toward Christian and Jewish women expressed by various religious tenets are still being transmitted as part of their heritage and many women respond unquestioningly to these views as if they were given truths. These same gender-biased attitudes exist in non-theological social structures. In her article, “The Will to Choose or to Reject,” feminist scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out that “not only in the last century but also today, the political Right laces its attacks against the feminist struggle for women’s rights and freedoms in the political, economic, reproductive, intellectual, and religious spheres with biblical quotations and appeals to scriptural authority” (129). For a recent example of the Bible’s instrumental role in shaping contemporary society and politics, one need only listen to the mandates pertaining to women’s reproductive rights and non-heteronormative sexual orientations spoken by American President George W. Bush who couches his political agenda in fundamentalist Christian doctrine and has made the Republican Party an extension of the religious right.⁶ Professor Henry Giroux writes, “Democratic politics and secular humanism are being replaced by a “Rapture” politics in which certainty, moralism, and absolutism ... wage an unrelenting war against gay rights and women’s reproductive rights ... on religious grounds” (309). Bush’s political agenda leaves no room for diversity in public spheres, seeks to strip women of their reproductive rights, including the right to abortion and accessing contraceptives, and denounces feminists as women

⁶ For more information on the Bush administration’s alliance with the Christian right and how joining right-wing religion with conservative political ideology threatens democracy, see Esther Kaplan, *With God on their Side: How Christian Fundamentalists Trampled Science, Policy, and Democracy in George W. Bush’s White House* (The New Press, 2004).

who, in the words of evangelist Pat Robertson, “leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (qtd. in Giroux 310).

Examining the ways in which women have been systematically devalued by the Bible and revaluing their lives through fiction enables contemporary feminist theologians to safely critique and reject patriarchy’s treatment of women and those scriptures that support this oppressive social structure without completely rejecting those parts of the Bible that are valuable. In this way, women who retain a sense of religiosity can view the Bible and women’s positions within ecclesiastical history “afresh.”

In Chapter One, I will discuss in depth the two opposing bodies of feminist biblical scholarship and explore the function, benefits, and pitfalls of each. I will then discuss how the revisionary novels at the forefront of my thesis speak to the existing bodies of scholarship and demonstrate in detail the ways in which these novels are a synthesis of the two theoretical paradigms, as indicated in my cursory explanation above. Chapter One also considers how each of these novels reframes events, as laid out in the biblical accounts, with respect to the actions of the prominent male characters and the experiences and identity constructions of the female protagonists. The renegotiation of the Greek Scriptures’ Mary Magdalene in George’s novel, for example, depicts Mary not as a debauched whore, but rather as a disciple of Christ, a visionary endowed with prophetic power, a prominent leader in his ministry, and importantly, a woman experiencing identifiable human feelings, including self-doubt, sorrow, and loss. Similarly, Edghill’s text reinvents Michal, King David’s queen, not as a woman tossed hither and thither between two patriarchs against her will, but as a woman who asserts her

power and political agenda and creates her own happiness despite her seemingly weak status. This chapter contemplates such questions as: How are the women marginalized in the original biblical accounts? How are the female protagonists reinvented in these novels? What has been adopted from the historical accounts, what have the authors changed about them, and to what end?

In Chapter Two, I explore how these three revisionary novels handle issues relating to male and female knowledge and power and examine the different ways that knowledge and power are appropriated by the female characters. I frame my discussion of female knowledge and power using the ‘repressive hypothesis’ as it is generally employed by Michel Foucault, who maintains in his theory of agency and subjectivity “that the traditional dualistic understanding of power ... the polarisation of the ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed” is inadequate in critiquing gender relations (Bailey 110). Whereas feminist rejectionist critics argue that the Bible devalues women’s knowledge and insists on female physical, spiritual, and psychological weakness and inferiority, these revisionary novels push women’s knowledge to the forefront of their texts and assert, despite women’s narrative voicelessness, their historical potential for power. Through the various ways in which they reinterpret and create examples of biblical women’s knowledge and power, the novels demonstrate how women whom rejectionist critics label ‘the suppressed and powerless structure’ are actually able to work alongside the oppressive and dominant male structure rather than beneath it.

In Chapter Three, I address the ways in which the novel genre functions as a new kind of feminist biblical scholarship that mediates the opposing boundaries of rejectionist

and reinterpreter criticism. This emerging body of biblical historical fiction demonstrates that the way to break through the barriers imposed by these constraints is not through the standard genres of scholarship, which possess their own limitations and boundaries, but rather through the creation of an intermediate mode of criticism that can only be possible through the fictive space of the novel. While addressing the notion of gendered authorship and the absence of women's narratives in the Bible, I engage the critical work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his discourse on the novel as an anti-authoritarian, adaptive genre that distinguishes itself by its incorporation of *heteroglossia*, or various voices, into its discourse (Booker 110). The novel, the mutable literary form that allows more than one voice to speak, is the genre that is best equipped to respond to the so-called male, authoritarian narration of the Bible, which is criticized by feminist biblical scholars. Furthermore, Bakhtin's assertion that "our speech, that is, all our utterances [including narrative], is filled with others' words ... which we assimilate, rework, and reaccentuate" (Booker 112,113), supports my theory that the rewriting of biblical histories necessitates a partial, rather than a complete, acceptance or rejection of Scripture.

Throughout my consideration of fictional reconfigurations of Bible histories, the novel as a viable and even superlative genre for engaging in feminist biblical criticism, and the ways in which these novels deal with concepts of gendered knowledge and power, what surfaces consistently is the need for a negotiation between the two polarized bodies of feminist criticism. My call for a synthesis of the rejectionist and reinterpreter paradigms that resolves their individual inherent inadequacies and limitations is answered by the fictional narratives of biblical histories.

– Chapter One –

Re-membering the Past and Bridging the Gap in Feminist Biblical Scholarship:
Rejectionists, Reinterpretations, and Revisionist Fiction

The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven ... The Bible is a product of *man*,
my dear. Not of God. ~ *The Da Vinci Code*

We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have
ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.
~Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*

While women have always orally passed on culture through storytelling, “history has by and large been written by elite men as their own story and in their own interests” (Fiorenza, *But She Said* 80). The Bible, an anthology of ancient historical records written by men, about men and male experiences, supports Fiorenza’s claim that historical writing traditionally excludes women from both dominant narrative and authorship. Feminist scholars strive for gender equality in biblical representation by reinterpreting the Scriptures “to reappropriate the past of women who have participated as historical agents in social, cultural, and religious transformation” (Fiorenza, *But She Said* 80) but who are given, at best, cursory mention in the Bible. Yet despite their best efforts, what still remains are the empty spaces where female stories and experiences should be documented. In her article, “Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials,” scholar Katharine Doob Sakenfeld concludes that “unless feminists find some understanding of how women’s rejected history and untold stor[ies] can be regarded as authoritative ... no feminist use of biblical material is ... immune to the risk of finding the Bible hurtful, unhelpful, not revealing of God, and not worth the effort to come to grips with it” (64). The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene are contemporary novels that

weave biblical narrative, historical research, and fiction to re-create the life stories of Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene respectively. They question the prevailing accounts of the past and both reinterpret its records and construct entirely new female-centered narratives to subsidize the ones 'produced by men.' The novels address the absence of female voices in the Bible and its unequal treatment of women's experiences and histories compared to its treatment of men's, and they articulate the value in re-visioning the past and re-membering women's fragmented narratives. Diamant, Edghill, and George opt out of the traditional form of historical narration with its linear, sequential lists of events and facts (consider the long list of 'who begot whom' that appears at the beginning of a number of Bible books), in favour of imaginative fiction to recuperate those aspects of history that have been neglected by this approach.

Within the framework of feminist considerations of the Bible, my research indicates that there exist two predominant and opposing bodies of biblical scholarship: the rejectionist and the reinterpretationist theories. Rejectionist critics view the Bible and its narratives as nothing more than the embodiment of patriarchal hierarchy⁷ and the handbook of racial, gender, and religious discrimination and subordination. Taking into consideration the general themes of biblical scripture that support the text's focus on male power and Divine favour, female subordination and inequality, and obtrusive

⁷ I would like to clarify the way in which I use the word "patriarchy," since I do not intend to speak in terms of simplified binary opposites of male oppressors and female oppressed, or, as Fiorenza states, "all men over and against all women" (*Will* 127). Borrowing Fiorenza's use of the term, my reference to "patriarchy" throughout this text refers to "a social, economic, and political system of graded subjugations and oppressions" that specifies women's oppression "in terms of the class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom they 'belong' ... In a patriarchal society or religion, all women are bound into a system of male privilege and domination" (127), but within that system, there are varying levels of oppression based on those other factors listed above; to varying degrees "we all live in a society and culture that denies us our independence and self-determination" (127).

statements about female weakness, impurity, and defilement, rejectionists view the Bible simply as the written justification for male domination. Feminist scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes that in a spiritual quest for “self-affirmation, survival, power, and self-determination,” feminist consciousness must radically throw into question “all traditional religious names, texts, rituals laws, and interpretive metaphors” (*Will* 126) because they do not support “the idea of woman’s equality with man in all natural rights and opportunities” (Underwood 191). Regarding the Bible’s role in constructing and supporting gender hierarchy, Elizabeth Cady Stanton notes in her text, The Woman’s Bible (1895) that “when, in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer [and] when they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer” (8). If patriarchal societies use the Bible to justify the subordination of women (and other socially marginalized groups), then by rejecting Bible doctrine and any literal interpretations or ecclesiastical appropriations of biblical narrative, feminists can, as Stanton suggests, “change the indictment served on [women] in Paradise” (qtd. in Schweizer 15), which is supported throughout the rest of the canon. The Book of Genesis suggests that woman is naturally man’s inferior and that, hence, her position should be one of subordination, and “that she should have no will of her own, except as it [is] in accord with that of her father, husband, or master” (Underwood 190). Time and again the Bible refers to women as property possessed by men rather than as autonomous persons (Stanton 79). Sarah Underwood describes the Bible as “a collection of books which teaches, as from God, that man was made first for the glory of God, and

woman for man simply; that woman was first to sin, and therefore should be in submission to man; that motherhood implies moral impurity and requires a sin offering (twice as much in the case of a female as a male child)” (191), and that these ideas, believed to be true and inspired by God, have continued to keep women in a degraded position by those whom the Bible delegates as their superiors. In the Hebrew Scriptures, those women who could have political roles – as priestesses for example – were “restricted from significant participation in any public social and political service” (Sheres 7); relative to males, the written testament indicates that priestesses held no political power and that they could be punished for challenging their male counterparts. For example, the priestess Miriam⁸ is stricken with leprosy when she questions Moses’ unilateral authority, the Israelites’ favouritism, and the lack of recognition and reverence that she receives, compared to Moses.⁹ Miriam plays an inferior role to Moses in the Exodus story, and this unequal positioning underscores the pattern of female subservience, even for those who are allotted a modicum of power, that runs throughout biblical narrative. Using the Moses/Exodus story to illustrate the Bible’s andocentric agenda, Stanton notes, “In all the directions given Moses, for the regulation of the social and civil life of the children of Israel, and in the commandments of Mount Sinai, it is rarely that females are mentioned. The regulations are chiefly for males, the offerings are

⁸ See Micah 6:4: “For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt... and I proceeded to send before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”

⁹ See Numbers 12:1,2,9,10: “Now Miriam and Aaron began to speak against Moses ... And they kept saying: “Is it just by Moses alone that Jehovah has spoken? Is it not by us also that he has spoken?” And Jehovah’s anger got to be hot against them, and he went his way. And the cloud turned away from over the tent, and, look! Miriam was struck with leprosy as white as snow.” Note, too, that while both Miriam and Aaron question the Israelites’ favouring of Moses and their lack of recognition, it is Miriam alone whom God strikes with leprosy and, although God heeds Moses’ request to heal her, she is forced into humiliating quarantine outside the camp for seven days (Numbers 12:13-15).

male, [and] the transgressions referred to are male” (80). This is only one of countless examples where women are excluded from dominant narratives and from sharing equally with men in religious instruction and blessing. Furthermore, Stanton asserts that the “real source of [women’s] multiplied disabilities” (79) stems from the disproportionate distribution of sexual rights and the unequal moral guidelines described for each gender, which are intrinsically linked to the notion that women were created after men, to please men.¹⁰ While they do not seek to disrupt the historical value that the Bible offers as a testament to the cultural and political context within which its narratives are written, rejectionist feminists disregard the Bible’s theological/ecclesiastical traditions and view it, general speaking, as the tool with which dominant, white males validate their socio-political position.

Rather than rejecting the Bible completely, Jewish and Christian feminist reinterpretationists retain a belief in the authority of the Bible and maintain that its divinely inspired words have liberating effects for those who are in the greatest need for God’s mercy and help: the dominated and the oppressed. In her article, “Liberating the Word,” Letty M. Russell suggests that the Bible can be a validating text for all faithful

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 22:13-21: “In case a man takes a wife and actually has relations with her and has come to hate her, and he has charged her with notorious deeds and brought forth a bad name upon her and has said, ‘This is the woman I have taken, and I proceeded to go near her, and I did not find evidence of virginity in her’; the father of the girl and her mother must also take and bring forth the evidence of the girl’s virginity to the older men of the city at the gate of it ... If, though, this thing has proved to be the truth, evidence of virginity was not found in the girl, they must also bring the girl out to the entrance of her father’s house, and the men of her city must pelt her with stones, and she must die, because she has committed a disgraceful folly in Israel by committing prostitution [read also adultery or premarital sex] in the house of her father.” The Law states that if the parents can prove their daughter’s virginity, her husband owes her father a hundred silver shekels, but he owes his wife nothing for causing her shame. There is no mention of male virginity under the Law, nor are men stoned for engaging in premarital sex. Furthermore, women are permitted only one husband while polygamy and possessing multiple concubines is acceptable for men.

'believers,' but that in order for its words to adequately empower women they first need to be extricated from existing "sexist interpretations which continue to dominate our thoughts and actions" (11). For Fiorenza, the problem that the Bible poses for women is the ways in which masculine interpretations of its narratives have been used to halt the emancipation of women and other marginalized groups. She argues that "feminist biblical interpretation must ... challenge the scriptural authority of patriarchal texts and explore how the Bible is used as a weapon against women in our struggles for liberation" (*Will* 129) and whether it can "become a resource in ... [the feminist] struggle" (*Will* 129).¹¹ Describing the ways in which feminists engage in the process of reinterpreting well-known scriptures and use the Bible to locate themselves within the Judeo-Christian community, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld writes,

A number of studies of Genesis [chapters] 2-3 have suggested fresh interpretations that are not so negative toward women. The creation of woman at the end of chapter 2 may in fact mean that she is equal to the man;¹² in the encounter with the serpent, the woman and the man should

¹¹ Aemilia Lanyer's seventeenth-century text, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is an early example of a reinterpretation of Scriptural narrative that seeks to redeem women from their social subordination by renegotiating the 'indictment served' upon Eve in Eden and offering a new way of viewing and respecting the place of women in religion and in society. In *Salve Deus*, Lanyer mixes Scriptural narrative, theological allegory and meditation to produce a Bible-based narrative within which she craftily advocates the innocence and virtues of Eve's sex. She manipulates the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion and seamlessly inserts "Eve's Apology" into the narrative to lead her readers to view women in an innovative way. While this insertion can be interpreted as a digression from the gospel, it can also be viewed as a re-reading of the Scripture and a re-interpretation of religious doctrine, which she uses to challenge the social restrictions on women and to eradicate centuries of accusations against their sex.

¹² I would suggest that a feminist reinterpretation of Genesis that supports male and female equality is illustrated more convincingly in what is known as 'the first creation story.' In chapter one, God says, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let *them* have in subjection the fish of the sea and the flying creatures of the heavens and the domestic animals and all the earth and every moving animal that is moving upon the earth.' And God proceeded to create the man in his image, in God's image he created him; *male and female he created them*" (26-28; italics added). In this passage, the narrator conflates singular and plural pronouns "him" and "them"; however, what is clear is that God created both "male and female" and immediately commissioned them to procreate *on the sixth day*. The creation story that happens on the seventh day in Genesis chapter 2, when man is created first, and woman second is interpreted by feminist theologians as entirely separate from the creation that occurs on day six.

be viewed as “mutually responsible,” united in disobedience. In a similar vein, New Testament specialists point out that Paul’s instruction for women to keep silent (1 Cor. 14) is advice peculiar to a disruptive situation in the church at Corinth ... Complimentary to such reinterpretation of negatively viewed passages is a new emphasis on those texts which seem to speak positively of women. Galatians 3:28 is surely the parade example: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” ... Feminists have also turned to the many stories of Jesus’ relationship to women as recorded in the Gospels and to the scattered indications of women in leadership roles that are treated with approval in Scripture ... Jesus’ attitude toward women (speaking with them, taking them seriously) is regarded as exceptional and even revolutionary for his time – an attitude which then informs a critique of patriarchy both in the early church and today. (57, 58)

Although feminist theology is a relatively new body of criticism, Harold Schweizer suggests that “biblical revisionism is as old as Genesis” (15). Contemporary reinterpretations engage in what originated as the ancient rabbinic act of midrash, which is “the creative interpretation of the Torah invented by the Sages¹³ and carried on in various forms into the present day. [It] comes from the same root as these words – darosh darash [‘he shall surely seek’]” (Hammer xi), or reading details into, or out of, a biblical text. Reinterpretationist feminists, as Sakenfeld demonstrates, read details into the Bible where there are no details recorded, in an effort to draw out “voices in the text that once were silenced” (Hammer xii) and give biblical women “the honour that is due them as prophets, rulers, and teachers” (Hammer xv). According to Jewish feminist theologian Jill Hammer, midrash is an act of study, of prayer, and of repairing the world. She explains,

It is an act of study because it begins with textual exegesis, with finding a point of text on which to hang a new idea. Midrash returns repeatedly to the text, examining and exploring it, and it returns to the mind and heart of

¹³ Jewish sages are considered wise teachers who draw on ancient wisdom and reread, retranslate, and renew ancient scriptures with new meanings.

the midrash maker to absorb what it finds there ... This loop is what makes Torah study and midrash so engrossing. Midrash ... is a way of offering back to the Torah the fruits of our encounter with it¹⁴ ... [It] is an act of repairing the world, because it seeks to uncover the voices that the text does not hold and forces us to listen to what these voices say. (xv)

Repeatedly returning to the text, approaching it from a different angle, “telling the story a different way” (Hammer xi), engaging in a dialogic relationship with its stories – both the revealed and the unrevealed – allows reinterpretationists to engage in the act of recovery so that through reinterpretation, “ancient tales yield new meanings to new generations” (*Nakedness*, preface xiii). By engaging in midrash and remolding the Scriptures regularly, feminist reinterpretationists ensure that the Bible is kept alive and that it continues to remain current and relevant to each new generation of women.

While fundamentalist groups insist that it is sacrilegious to change or add to Scripture, the Bible, according to Ostriker, invites change and reinterpretation. She explains that the Bible's textuality makes it capable of subverting its violently masculine intentions and engendering revision:

It is essential for the feminist critic to remember that Scripture has at no single moment in its history been a unified, monolithic text; [it] has always been [a] radically layered, plurally authored, multiply motivated composite, full of fascinating mysteries, gaps, and inconsistencies, a garden of delight ... a kind of paradise of polysemy. (*Revision* 62)

¹⁴ Compare with Gerald L. Brun's notion that where there is biblical reinterpretation, there exists a dialogue between the reader and the text: “For what is at issue with respect to the Scriptures is not what lies behind the text in the form of an original meaning but what lies in front of it where the interpreter stands. The Bible always addresses itself to the time of interpretation; one cannot understand it except by appropriating it anew If the text does not apply to us it is an empty text Midrashic understanding is reflexive and reciprocal: we take the text in relation to ourselves, understanding ourselves in its light, even as our situation throws *its* light upon the text, allowing it to disclose itself differently, perhaps in unheard-of ways” (Bruns 627, 628, 633; original italics).

The multiple layering of meaning to which Ostriker refers indicates that the Bible, like any other literary work, invites diverse readings and that the lasting influence of the Bible can be attributed to its self-revising language. This phenomenon of a self-revising language, or language that invites multiple interpretations that exist simultaneously without cancelling each other out can be explained by one of H.D.'s most-quoted passages from her revisionary epic poem *Trilogy*, which contends that words are “anagrams, cryptograms,/ little boxes, conditioned/ to hatch butterflies” (53). H.D. suggests that language contains many meanings and that words have the potential to initiate new “chains of meaning” (Graham 162) depending on how the reader reads the text and applies the text to him- or herself. That she describes words as “little boxes” that are “conditioned/to hatch butterflies” indicates that words simultaneously reveal and conceal meaning; the potentiality of a word is more important than what the word reveals at first glance and, therefore, invites multiple interpretations. Reinterpretationists translate this knowledge about the capacity of language to their consideration of the Bible and argue that the Bible is in a state of interpretive flux rather than fixity (Ostriker, *Revision* 62); “revelation is not something that occurs once for all and is now over and done with” (Bruns 633), but rather new meanings can and must continue to ‘hatch.’ Ostriker uses the complexity and plurality of the Bible’s language to support her claim that due to its linguistic “mysteries, gaps, and inconsistencies,” the Bible is “intrinsically no more absolute in its authority than other writing” (*Revision* 61). She argues that the Bible, “is an endlessly complex, provocative, layered contradictory set of documents, as befits its composition over a period of millennia” (*Nakedness*, preface xii). She invites readers to

reject a linear, literal reading of the Scriptures and reconsider claims that reinterpretation of biblical narrative weakens biblical authority. If anything, a monolithic, androcentric reading of the text “limits the inexhaustible meanings of Scripture, thwart[s] the Bible’s pluralistic textuality [and] level[s] its radical layering” (Schweizer 19), whereas feminist theologians’ reinterpretations, argues Ostriker, enlarge the Bible canon.

In theological discourse, to approach the Bible from a feminist viewpoint, then, requires either rejecting the text completely, or reinterpreting Scripture to reposition subordinated women within the text and subvert patriarchal doctrine. Yet, there are problems with this type of either/or approach to feminist biblical scholarship. By completely rejecting the Bible, these feminists are negating the social power that the Bible maintains and the integral role that it plays in the maintenance of historical identity and religious experience (Fiorenza, *Will* 126). In her introduction to The Woman’s Bible, Stanton notes that some scholars objected to her reinterpretation of the Scriptures, calling it a “useless expenditure of force over a book that has lost its hold on the human mind” (11). In response to their denial of the Bible’s power, Stanton argues, “So long as tens of thousands of Bibles are printed every year,¹⁵ and circulated over the whole habitable globe, and the masses in all English-speaking nations revere it as the word of God, it is vain to belittle its influence. The sentimental feelings we all have for those things we were educated to believe sacred, do not readily yield to pure reason” (11). The Bible’s

¹⁵ The Bible remains the most widely distributed book in the world. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament “have been translated more times and into more languages — more than 2,100 languages in all — than any other book. It is said that more than five billion copies of the Bible have been sold since 1815, making it the best-selling book of all-time” (“Bible” par. 3).

relevance does not end with its sales figures; Stanton notes that the Bible should be recognized for its moral and literary values. She writes,

There are some general principles in the holy books of all religions that teach love, charity, liberty, justice and equality for all the human family, there are many grand and beautiful passages, the golden rule has been echoed and re-echoed around the world. (12)

While Stanton wrote her introduction more than a century ago, the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are still the foundation for Jewish and Christian religious sects that view the text's original manuscripts, whether wholly (Christian) or partially (Jewish), as the inspired Word of God and share a belief in its authority and contemporary relevance. Some scholars have taken to heart the words of French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex that Christian ideology has contributed to the oppression of women and have abandoned it as "a source of authority, direction, and comfort" (Thurston 1). Yet they appear to forget that, as Fiorenza points out, biblical reinterpretation "has also provided authorization for women who rejected slavery, colonial exploitation, anti-Semitism, and misogynism as unbiblical and against God's will. It has inspired countless women to speak out against injustice, exploitation, and stereotyping and energized them to struggle against poverty, unfreedom, and denigration" (*Will* 129). In addition, those who reject the Bible completely disregard those few historic examples of women who act freely and independently or who, often times in the face of animosity and opposition, assert themselves and attain honour and recognition for their determination. They also discard the fact that although female disciples disappeared quite early in the life of the church, the majority of New Testament books indicate that women held apostolic positions in Christ's ministry and performed leadership tasks in the First Century

mainstream church;¹⁶ they “headed churches in their homes ... prophesied, taught theology, and administered the Lord’s Supper as deacons and leaders” (Pareles 62).¹⁷ Thurston’s scholarly text, Women in the New Testament, examines the Pauline writings as the earliest witness about women in the early Christian church. For example, in Romans 16:1, Paul mentions “our sister,” named Phoebe, “who is a minister of the congregation that is in Cenchreae” and admonishes his brothers to “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the holy ones” and “assist her in any matter ... for she herself also proved to be a defender of many.” Many scholars and reinterpretationists believe the apostle Paul entrusted Phoebe with carrying his letter from her home church in Cenchreae to the Christians in Rome, and believed her to be “qualified to answer any questions the Roman Christians might have about the letter’s contents” (Pareles 63). According to feminist interpretations of her brief appearance in the book of Romans, Phoebe appears to be a well-educated and experienced theologian and “a woman who was self-secure, independent, strong, decisive, and determined” (Pareles 63). In his letter Paul also mentions Priscilla (“Prisca” in some scriptural references) and her husband Aquila, who

¹⁶ In Philippians 4:2, 3, two women are mentioned among men as Paul’s coworkers: “Euodia I exhort and Syntyche I exhort to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes ... keep assisting these women who have striven side by side with me in the good news ... whose names are in the book of life.”

¹⁷ In his lecture entitled, “Gnosticism, Women, and Leadership in the Early Church,” Dr. Anders Runesson discusses the ways in which the early church attempted to liberate women from patriarchal oppression and explains the cultural and religious contexts that drove the early Christian community to eventually compromise with the dominant society and relegate women to a position of inferiority. In an effort to gain Roman favour, Runesson explains, Christ-believing Jews began to separate themselves from non-Christ-believing Jews. In the latter books of the New Testament, such as 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, we see emerging a distinction between Jews and Christians and the development of Christian anti-Judaism, as well as a divergence from Jewish traditions, including the Christian adoption of Graeco-Roman anti-women organizational structures. For more information on the role of women in the early church, see Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible*, pp. 122-133.

both proved to be authoritative teachers¹⁸ and “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3). Reinterpretationists assert that Paul felt “great respect for Priscilla [because] he addressed her before her husband in his greeting” (Parales 68) and that the order of their names reveals that she took the lead in teaching. These examples suggest that some women maintained prominent leadership and teaching positions in the church and do not support rejectionist claims that the Bible excludes women from authoritative and public roles.

On the one hand, rejecting the Scriptures because they prove valueless to anyone with a feminist agenda leaves little room for recognizing those biblical women who are mentioned. Yet, on the other hand, reinterpreting Scripture to locate within the text women's individuality, independence, and power oversimplifies the complex social and political consequences resulting from their subservient roles in relation to the male figures, their fragmented stories, and their omission from representation in and narration of dominant biblical narratives. An attempt to construct in scholarly writing a more complete idea of the important positions and responsibilities these women held in the earliest Christian churches are based on a few fragmented records.¹⁹ Simply

¹⁸ See Acts 18:26: “And this man started to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him into their company and expounded the way of God more correctly to him.” See also I Corinthians 16:19.

¹⁹ There are few, fleeting references to these women in the canonical Scriptures, and the references that are included are “often obscured by our modern English translations” (Parales 62). In Romans 16:7, Paul mentions the apostle Junia, whose “brief moment in history provided another testimony to authoritative positions held by women in the early church” (Parales 65). She is the only female directly called an apostle in the New Testament. Paul writes, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” Her mention is brief but her prominent apostolic position is unmistakable – unless an undiscerning reader is presented with a modern translation of the scriptures, which turns Junia into a man named Junias. For more scholarly evidence backing Junia's female gender status, see Parales' text, *Hidden Voices: Biblical Women and Our Christian Heritage*, pages 65-67.

reinterpreting the Scriptures seems to diminish the fact that the Bible is laden with doctrine that advocates female subordination and the devaluation of the female experience throughout its historical accounts. Russell supports women's rights author Sarah Grimke's argument regarding the masculine bias of biblical interpretation (Zikmund 23), and points out that each book of the Bible has been authored by a male writer, including the books Ruth and Esther.²⁰ Brief accounts of faithful female servants of God exist in the Bible, however these stories are told from the perspective of male writers and narrators and their historical roles are typically tied to their relationships to men and valued "only if they are willing to assume the enabling roles of wife and/or mother" (Graetz, *S/He* 2). In her so-called feminist analysis of biblical mothers in the Hebrew Scriptures, Leila Leah Bronner explains that the barren Sarah plays a key role in fulfilling prophecy and is "joyful" when she gives what appears to be miraculous birth to Isaac. Bronner writes,

She recognizes that others in subsequent generations will share in her joy. She seems to intuit that her role as mother will be long remembered, and [will] contribute largely to the narrative heritage of her people. Although we are privy to very few insights regarding Sarah as a mother here we imagine her no longer hurt and forlorn at her long standing barrenness, but redeemed, relieved, grateful, and finally fulfilled. (6)

I would argue, however, that Bronner's interpretation fails to subvert the androcentricity of the original Scripture because she ignores Sarah's identity as a friend, a daughter, an individual, a woman, and entrenches her in the traditional roles of wife and mother. Her story retains its important and validity only insofar as she remains the vessel to carry her

²⁰ Ruth and Esther are the only two books in the Bible canon named after women. Ruth, the eighth book of the Hebrew Scriptures was completed in 1090 B.C.E. in Israel by Samuel, who also authored Judges and 1 Samuel. Esther, the 17th book of the Hebrew Scriptures was written by Mordecai in 475 B.C.E. (Watchtower 51, 91).

husband's heir. Bronner's interpretation of Sarah's so-called independence, assertiveness, and power does not account for the enormous gaps in her story and the fact that she is not valued in her own right. We are privy to very few insights regarding Sarah as a person, let alone as a mother. Regarding the Hebrew Scriptures inclusion of women, Stanton notes that "at every stage of his existence Moses was indebted to some woman for safety and success. Miriam, by her sagacity, saved his life. Pharaoh's daughter reared and educated him and made the way possible for the high offices he was called to fill;²¹ and Zipporah, his wife, a woman of strong character and decided opinions, often gave him good advice" (88). Yet, does the Bible legitimize and value the brief snippets of these women's histories in their own right, or are they included in the narratives because of the supportive roles they filled in the life of Moses? Paying particular attention to Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene, the three female characters at the centre of The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene respectively, the same observations could be made of their appearances in Scripture. From a literary viewpoint, the so-called violation of Dinah may be included in the Scriptures to explain the special position of the tribes of Simeon and Levi in later Israelite history or "the major rift between some Canaanite settlers and the Israelites on the latter's way to political entrenchment in Canaan" (Sheres 6). Michal's history is sparsely woven throughout David's narrative; she is both the woman who helps him escape death and the wife who despises him when he makes a spectacle of himself. Finally, would we know about Mary Magdalene if she had not been

²¹ See Acts 7:21, 22: "But when he was exposed, the daughter of Pharaoh picked him up and brought him up as her own son. Consequently Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. In fact, he was powerful in his words and deeds." The active word in this passage is "consequently" since it indicates that because of Pharaoh's daughter's instrumental action, Moses acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to adequately fulfill his role as Israel's leader.

healed by Jesus, become his follower and supporter, and been the one to whom he first appeared after his resurrection?

Given that there are legitimate reasons for feminists to either reinterpret the Scriptures or reject them completely, a number of which I have detailed above, there needs to be another alternative for Jews and Christians who find value for women in the Bible but who simultaneously condemn it for its androcentric narratives which render its female characters relatively voiceless. In her introduction to The Woman's Bible, Stanton suggests that because it remains spiritually and culturally valuable to many women, and because its treatment of women seems to improve in the New Testament, "the Bible cannot be accepted or rejected as a whole [because] its teachings are varied and its lessons differ widely from each other" (13). Rewriting biblical histories in novel form offers a solution to the exclusiveness and limitations of each theory. This body of works represents a third alternative to approaching the Bible from a feminist perspective that neither completely overthrows the Bible's legitimacy, nor simply reinterprets or rewords existing Scripture. Fictional rewritings of biblical histories synthesize the theoretical paradigms and demonstrate that the existing theories should not be mutually exclusive. Recreating or revising biblical histories from the perspective of a voice other than the original narrator's necessitates a *reinterpretation* of this written history that is based on a *refusal to accept* (or a rejection of) the inadequacies and deficiencies of the original recorded accounts. The result is a new type of hybridized feminist scholarship, communicated through the fictive space of the novel, that transcends the boundaries and limitations of either/or exclusion imposed by the contrasting bodies of criticism. Margaret

George, Anita Diamant, and India Edghill participate in the most radical feminist form of midrash that allows the interpreter to not simply reread and interpret Scriptures but to create entirely new stories in their effort to flesh out the gaps in biblical narratives.

Jewish feminist theologian Jill Hammer explains that feminist midrash is “based on a way of reading the Torah ... in which pure invention can be seamlessly grafted into existing text. These collections fill in the ‘white spaces’ in the text, creating both new stories and new laws ... [They] speculate about characters, events, and everything else that the text leaves to the imagination” (xii).²² Diamant, Edghill, and George engage in this radical feminist form of midrashism; their texts use the meagre glimmers of their characters’ recorded histories and add “dialogue and/or description to the original story” (Graetz 1) in an effort to recover the untold possibilities of these women’s lives. Jewish midrashist Naomi Graetz explains the type of work that feminist midrash should accomplish:

The new version should be more than a re-telling of the biblical tale. It should contribute new insights and/or perspectives to the original version. It may treat the tale from a new angle or draw a new or unusual conclusion from it. In short, its purpose is to make the biblical text relevant to us [women], so that it speaks to us in our idiom. (*S/He* 1)

In an inclusive, hybridized approach to reading the Bible through a feminist lens, The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene not only borrow directly from the Bible and reinterpret its scriptures, but also challenge the authority of the text and reject its unequal treatment of women’s stories by imaginatively creating a past in which

²² For more information of woman’s midrash, see Sharon Cohen, “Reclaiming the Hammer: Toward a Feminist Midrash” *Tikkun* 3.2 (1988): 55-57; 94, 95.

biblical women were active participants.²³ These novelists articulate feminist biblical criticism within their fictional revisions of the Bible in an effort to bring new perspectives to the old text and to afford their female characters an opportunity to tell their story as it *may* have happened. The novels provide a possible answer to historian Gerda Lerner's question, "What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?" (162). By extension, given their woman-centered reconstructive narratives in which the Bible's male characters take a backseat, "What would the past be like if man were regarded as woman's 'Other'" (Lerner xxxi).

The novels share some similar attributes: they each adopt biblical narrative, reinterpret it, reject it, and create something new. They focus on the subordinate and powerless position of women in the past and draw in aspects of history which have been hitherto denied, such as the emotional, the illogical, and the feelings behind the events rather than the events themselves. They provide details of private lives, which biblical accounts typically do not include even when they rely on first-hand accounts, and value those seemingly irrelevant details about history that rely more on the senses than on facts, including its feel, textures, tastes, and smells. Finally, the focus in these novels on the role of individual memory in historical recapitulation prompts Diamant and Edghill to use first-person narration, while George combines third-person narration, which does not deviate from relaying only Mary's perspective, with personal correspondence between her and her daughter, and a fictional first-person account of "The Testament of Mary of Magdala" (560-623). First-person narration enables the narrator to be in dialogue with its

²³ I will consider some of the key ways in which these three texts revalue female knowledge and power in the following chapter.

reader: “We are directly addressed, made intimate with the [characters’] struggles, invited to share her visions as she reopens the closed Book, reconceives a story we thought was finished” (Ostriker, *Revision* 72). Let us consult the biblical accounts upon which each novel is based, and consider the ways in which these revisionist authors ‘reopen the closed Book,’ engage in feminist midrash and bridge the distance between rejectionist and reinterpretationist theories by examining what they borrow from biblical narrative and what they substitute with their own narrative inventions.

Dinah is best remembered as one of the young Hebrew women in the Bible who was raped. Upon a close examination, her story, which consumes an entire chapter in the book of Genesis, is actually less her story than it is an account of fraternal revenge, deception, territorial claims, and male alliances:

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, used to go out to see the daughters of the land. And Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, a chieftain of the land, got to see her and then took her and lay down with her and violated her. And his soul began clinging to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he fell in love with the young woman and kept speaking persuasively to the young woman. Finally Shechem said to Hamor his father: “Get me this young lady as a wife.”

And Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter. And his sons happened to be with his herd in the field, and Jacob kept silent until they should come in. Later Hamor, Shechem’s father, went out to Jacob to speak with him. And the sons of Jacob came in from the field as soon as they heard of it; and the men became hurt in their feelings and they grew very angry, because he had committed a disgraceful folly against Israel in lying down with Jacob’s daughter, whereas nothing like that ought to be done.

And Hamor proceeded to speak with them, saying, “As for Shechem my son, his soul is attached to your daughter. Give her, please, to him as a wife, and form marriage alliances with us. Your daughters you are to give to us, and our daughters you are to take for yourselves. And with us you may dwell, and the land will become available for you. Dwell and carry on business in it and get settled in it.” Then Shechem said to her father and to her brothers: “Let me find favour in your eyes, and whatever you will say

to me I shall give it. Raise very high the marriage money and gift imposed upon me, and I stand willing to give according to what you may say to me; only give me the young woman as a wife.”

And Jacob's sons began to answer Shechem and Hamor his father with deceit and to speak so because he had defiled Dinah their sister. And they went on to say to them: “We cannot possibly do such a thing, to give our sister to a man who has a foreskin, because that is a reproach to us. Only on this condition can we give consent to you, that you become like us, by every male of yours getting circumcised. Then we shall certainly give our daughters to you, and your daughters we shall take for ourselves, and we shall certainly dwell with you and become one people. But if you do not listen to us to get circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go.”

And their words seemed good in the eyes of Hamor and in the eyes of Shechem, Hamor's son, and the young man did not delay to perform the condition, because he did find delight in Jacob's daughter and he was the most honourable of the whole house of his father.

So Hamor and Shechem his son went to the gate of their city and began to speak to the men of their city, saying, “These men are peace-loving toward us. Hence let them dwell in the land and carry on business in it, as the land is quite wide before them. Their daughters we can take as wives for ourselves and our own daughters we can give to them. Only on this condition will the men give us their consent to dwell with us so as to become one people, that every male of ours gets circumcised just the way they are circumcised. Then their possessions and their wealth and all their livestock, will they not be ours? Only let us give them our consent that they may dwell with us. Then all those going out by the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to Shechem his son, and all the males got circumcised, all those going out by the gate of his city.

However, it came about that on the third day, when they got to be aching, the two sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, proceeded to take each one his sword and to go unsuspectingly to the city and to kill every male. And Hamor and Shechem his son they killed with the edge of the sword. Then they took Dinah from Shechem's house and went on out. The other sons of Jacob attacked the fatally wounded men and went plundering the city, because they had defiled their sister. Their flocks and their herds and their asses and what was in the city and what was in the field they took. And all their means of maintenance and all their little children and their wives they carried off captive, so that they plundered all that was in the houses.

At this Jacob said to Simeon and to Levi: “You have brought ostracism upon me in making me a stench to the inhabitants of the land, with the Canaanites and the Perizzites; whereas I am few in number, and they will certainly gather together against me and assault me and I must be

annihilated, I and my house.” In turn they said: “Ought anyone treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Genesis 34)

The Red Tent rejects the idea that Dinah was raped; instead, it treats her relationship with Shalem²⁴ as a love story. On the one hand, the biblical rape narrative implies that Dinah's “going out” of the house of Jacob was an act of individuality and even self-discovery (Sheres 6), but that the price that she had to pay for “attempting to break away from tradition was a loss of voice” and sexual violation (Sheres 7). This narrative violates her a second time; Dinah's words and thoughts are not reported in the biblical story. On the other hand, The Red Tent's anti-rape narrative suggests that Dinah's role as a knowledgeable midwife leads her and her aunt Rachel to Shechem to deliver a baby. This knowledge and skill lead her to an active and independent love and a companionate relationship. In first- person narration, The Red Tent describes the encounter as bashful, disconcerting, and flirtatious. Dinah refers to Shalem as her “beloved” (185) and sexually fantasizes about him before she even learns his name (185, 186). While Dinah is a “ruined girl” (200) in the sense that she was not a virgin when Hamor and Jacob negotiate her bride-price, their sexual affair is consensual. While the book of Genesis denies that Dinah married and had children, The Red Tent insists that Dinah and Shalem were legitimately married (200) and that she bore a son named Re-mose.

Although Diamant's text rejects the biblical assertion that Dinah was raped by Shalem, it does accept the negotiation of male circumcision as her bride-price and the slaughter of every male in the city of Shechem three days later. In The Red Tent, the

²⁴ In *The Red Tent*, the Biblical “Shechem” refers to the city over which Hamor rules; the man with whom Dinah falls in love is named Shalem. I will use this spelling of his name when I refer to this character in Diamant's text.

reason for this vengeful and deceptive retaliation diverges from the biblical narrative. Whereas in the Bible Jacob's sons slaughter the men "because they had defiled their sister," Dinah explains that Levi was envious and contemptuous toward Hamor because "he had not been given the audience with the king that he considered his due" (192) and accused Hamor of "swindling the family" (192). Also, while Dinah notes that "marriages between their two houses were much to be desired" (192, 193), she also explains that Levi and Simeon protested her marriage to Shalem because they worried that "their own positions would be diminished by such an alliance. Jacob's house would be swallowed up in the dynasties of Shechem, and while Reuben might expect to become prince, they and their sons would remain shepherds, poor cousins, nobodies" (197). So, because of a wounded ego, selfishness, and economic, political, and territorial cupidity, Jacob's sons, under the guise of fraternal loyalty and familial honour (Graetz, *Garden* 27), orchestrate a mass slaughter that shatters Dinah's happiness. While the Bible explains that Jacob chastises his sons for bringing shame to his household, their defensive retort, "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?" (*New International Version*) not only trumps Jacob's contention but also denies Dinah any level of independence and choice in her marriage to Shalem. The relationship between Dinah and Shalem, beginning with their courtship and ending with her brothers hogtying her and carting her back to Jacob's tents, accounts for only one chapter in the novel. This chapter offers Dinah an opportunity to vocalize her thoughts and feelings about her love for Shalem and the hatred she felt toward her brothers not only for the circumcision bride-price, but for the slaughter of her beloved. In fact, given that the entire novel is told by Dinah using first-person narration,

the reader learns how and what Dinah thinks, believes, experiences, and feels from her childhood through to her old age. Beginning with Dinah's description of the lives and personalities of her four 'mothers' – Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah – the four wives of Jacob whose histories and memories are kept alive through Dinah, the novel functions as a retelling of the lives and experiences of five women and then divulges the mysteries of birthing and menses in the red tent. The novel rounds out our knowledge about the potential history of Dinah, including her experience as a daughter, wife, mother, friend, widow, and midwife and exonerates her from her historical position as a voiceless and passive rape victim.

Like that of Dinah, Michal's biblical history is fragmented, and while it explains that she falls in love with David, the narrative affords her no other independence and relegates her to a position of passivity as she is both given and taken by men. The following is the entire biblical history of Michal, wife of David, whom he purchased from her father, Saul, for a hundred Philistine foreskins:

And the sons of Saul came to be Jonathan and Ishvi and Malchishua, and, as for the names of his two daughters, the name of the one born first was Merab and the name of the younger one Michal.

Now Michal, Saul's daughter, was in love with David, and they went reporting it to Saul, and the matter was to his liking. So Saul said: "I shall give her to him that she may serve as a snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may come to be upon him." Accordingly Saul said to David: "By one of the two women you will form a marriage alliance with me today."

At that Saul said: "This is what you men will say to David, 'The king has delight not in marriage money, but in a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, to avenge himself on the enemies of the king.'" But as for Saul, he had schemed to have David fall by the hand of the Philistines. So his servants reported these words to David, and the matter was to David's liking, to form a marriage alliance with the king, and the days had not yet expired. So David rose and he and his men went and struck down among

the Philistines two hundred men, and David came bringing their foreskins and giving them in full number to the king, to form a marriage alliance with the king. In turn Saul gave him Michal his daughter as a wife. And Saul got to see and know that Jehovah was with David. As for Michal, Saul's daughter, she loved him.

Later Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch it and to have him put to death in the morning; but Michal his wife told David, saying: "If you are not letting your soul escape tonight, tomorrow you will be a man put to death." Immediately Michal had David descend through the window, that he might go and run away and escape. Then Michal took the teraphim image and placed it on the couch, and a net of goats' hair she put at the place of his head, after which she covered it with a garment. Saul now sent messengers to take David, but she said: "He is sick." So Saul sent messengers to see David, saying: "Bring him on his couch up to me to have him put to death." When the messengers came in, why, there was the teaphim image on the couch and a net of goats' hair at the place of his head. At this Saul said to Michal: "Why did you trick me like this, so that you sent my enemy away that he might escape?" In turn Michal said to Saul: "He himself said to me, 'Send me away! Why should I put you to death?'" (1 Sam. 14:49; 18:20, 21, 25-28; 19:11-17)

David remained on the run for quite some time, since Saul was determined to have him killed. Sending for Michal would have undoubtedly endangered his life, so they remained separated for what appears to be years. Meanwhile, "As for Saul, he had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Palti²⁵ the son of Laish, who was from Gallim" (1 Sam. 25:44). The war between David and Saul "came to be long drawn out" (2 Sam. 3:1); meanwhile, David began to build his army and conquer the Philistines, apparently with God's help (1 Sam. 23:1, 2). In a political movement involving territorial ownership, David made a covenant with Abner, chief of Saul's army, who switched camps when Saul's son Ishbosheth questioned his affair with one of Saul's concubines. Accepting Abner's offer to join David's army, David proposes the following condition:

²⁵ The Bible also refers to Palti as Paltiel; Edghill's text refers to him as "Phaltiel." My consideration of this character will largely be with reference to his treatment in Edghill's novel, so I will consistently refer to him as Phaltiel.

To [Abner] [David] said, “Good! I myself shall conclude a covenant with you. Only one thing there is that I am asking of you, saying, ‘You may not see my face except first you brought Michal, Saul’s daughter, when you come to see my face.’” Further, David sent messengers to Ishbosheth, Saul’s son, saying: “Do give over my wife Michal, whom I engaged to myself for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines.” So Ishbosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband kept walking with her, weeping as he walked after her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him: “Go, return!” At that he returned. (2 Sam. 3:13-16)

While the narrative introduces Michal as a woman who is in love with David, her feelings for him appear to change when he makes a spectacle of himself upon the Ark of the

Covenant’s relocation to Jerusalem:

And it occurred that when the ark of Jehovah came into the City of David, Michal, Saul’s daughter, herself looked down through the window and got to see King David leaping and dancing around before Jehovah; and she began to despise him in her heart. So they brought the ark of Jehovah in and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it; after which David offered up burnt sacrifices and communion sacrifices, he then blessed the people in the name of Jehovah of armies.

David now returned to bless his own household, and Michal, Saul’s daughter, came on out to meet David and then said: “How glorious the king of Israel made himself today when he uncovered himself today to the eyes of the slave girls of his servants, just as one of the empty-headed men uncovers himself outright!” At this David said to Michal: “It was before Jehovah, who chose me rather than your father and all his household to put me in command as leader over Jehovah’s people Israel, and I will celebrate before Jehovah. And I will make myself even more lightly esteemed than this, and I will become low in my eyes; and with the slave girls whom you mentioned, with them I am determined to glorify myself.” So, as regards Michal, Saul’s daughter, she came to have no child down to the day of her death. (2 Sam. 6:16-18, 20-23)

Queenmaker accepts all aspects of this recorded history, from the foreskin dowry to Michal’s infertility. However, in this text, like the fictional stories constructed around Dinah and Mary Magdalene, her reconstructed history begins with her childhood and describes her feelings toward her role as a daughter and a sister, along with her adult

experiences as a wife, a queen, and a lover, which gives readers multiple points of identification. In Queenmaker, readers follow Michal's life as it develops and witness her acquisition of wisdom and power, the details of which I provide in the following chapter. Along with her individual knowledge, Michal also discloses information about David's character that diverges from the standard account of God's "shining hero and ... golden king" (Edghill 344). She describes his pomposity and the ways in which his self-love renders him a fool and renders her a captive in his house. Given the ways in which her narrative disrupts the Bible's representation of David, Michal's description indicates that through the eyes of a woman, those men whom the Bible depicts as strong, powerful, and favoured are actually grossly flawed, selfish, and self-destructive. What the Bible says about David is, according to Michal, only the false surface of his identity; her narrative depicts the ugly truth about his treachery, murders, and deceit that lay hidden beneath that surface (234). Queenmaker also expands on Michal's marriage to Phalteil, and explains that while he was significantly older than she was, she loved and respected him and wanted to remain married to him. The Bible states that Phaltiel follows Michal when she is taken from his house by Abner, and that Michal appears to go willingly, as many readers might expect; after all, one of the only concrete facts we know about her is that she "loved David." Queenmaker suggests that Michal was taken against her will and that to keep her from escaping from Jerusalem and running back to Phaltiel, David sends men to kill him. The novel also describes Michal's feelings of abandonment by David, explains that her hatred did not originate when he danced naked in front of the Ark of the Covenant, and relates how she forges a friendship with Bathsheba partly to seek revenge

against David. One of the key differences between the Bible and Queenmaker is that Michal, although infertile in both narratives, assumes a motherly role for Bathsheba's biological son, Solomon. Finally, and most importantly to a consideration of Queenmaker as a feminist text, whereas Michal appears sporadically in the Bible's story of David, David's story in Edghill's text is woven through Michal's narrative. While he plays a significant role in her life and thus also in the novel, the novel reconfigures this biblical story with its female character at the centre of the plot, action, and narrative.

In the same ways that The Red Tent and Queenmaker revalue its female protagonists, and legitimize and valorize their lives apart from their relationships to their male counterparts, Margaret George's Mary, Called Magdalene rounds out the Bible's obscure details about this female figure. For all the later devotion to Mary and the legends woven around her, there are few references to her in the canonical Gospels. There are "Marys a-plenty" (H.D. 135) in the Bible, so where "Magdalene" does not follow her given name, it is unclear whether she is the Mary to whom the Scripture refers. The four canonical gospels specifically mention Mary Magdalene in connection with five events: Luke 8:1-3 reads,

Shortly afterwards [Jesus] went journeying from city to city and from village to village, preaching and declaring the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and certain women that had been cured of wicked spirits and sicknesses, Mary the so-called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out,²⁶ and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's man in charge, and Susanna and many other women, who were ministering to them from their belongings.

²⁶ See also Mark 16:9: "Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons."

From Luke's account, we learn both that Mary was delivered from seven demons by Jesus and that she, along with other women whom he cured, followed him and supported him materially in his ministry. Matthew 27:50-61 specifically names Mary Magdalene as one of the many women present at his crucifixion:

Again Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and yielded up [his] spirit. And look! The curtain of the sanctuary was rent in two, from top to bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rock-masses were split. And the memorial tombs were opened and many bodies of the holy ones that had fallen asleep were raised up, (and persons, coming out from among the memorial tombs after his being raised up, entered the holy city,) and they became visible to many people. But the army of officers and those with him watching over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things happening, grew very much afraid, saying, "Certainly this was God's Son."

Moreover, many women were there viewing from a distance, who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee to minister to him; among whom was Mary Magdalene, also Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Now as it was late in the afternoon, there came a rich man of Arimathea, named Joseph, who had also himself become a disciple of Jesus. This man went up to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded it to be given over. And Joseph took the body, wrapped it up in clean fine linen, and laid it in his new memorial tomb, which he had quarried in the rock-mass. And, after rolling a big stone to the door of the memorial tomb, he left. But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary continued there, sitting before the grave.²⁷

Matthew's account of the crucifixion indicates that Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," referring, possibly, to Jesus' mother, remained at his tomb; there is no indication in this or any of the other gospels that Jesus' male apostles or disciples tended to his grave. Each gospel does concur, however, that Mary Magdalene came early to his tomb on Easter morning to anoint his body and that she encountered the risen Christ. In the

²⁷ See Mark 15:40-41: "There were also women looking on [the crucifixion] from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem." See also John 19:25.

Gospel of John, she is named as the person to whom he first appears and commissions to go tell the others that he has risen:

On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the memorial tomb early, while there was still darkness, and she beheld the stone already taken away from the memorial tomb ... Mary, however, kept standing outside near the memorial tomb, weeping. Then, while she was weeping, she stooped forward to look into the memorial tomb and she viewed two angels in white sitting one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." After saying these things, she turned back and viewed Jesus standing, but she did not discern it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She, imagining it was the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him off, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" Upon turning around she said to him in Hebrew, "*Rabboni!*" (which means "Teacher!"). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to me. For I have not yet ascended to the Father; but be on your way to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene came and brought the news to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" and that he said these things to her. (20:1, 9-18; original italics and parentheses)²⁸

These five references indicate that Mary was a follower of Jesus, that he exorcised seven demons from her, that she materially supported Jesus and accompanied him on his ministry, that she was present at the crucifixion, was the first to see him after the resurrection and was the first to declare the good news to the disciples. After these few references, Mary disappears from the biblical narrative, and we hear no more of her. Christian commentators have connected her to Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha (John 11:1-35). She has also been identified with the prostitute of Luke 7:37-50, who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and had her sins forgiven by

²⁸ See Matthew 28:1-10, which indicates that both Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" who is presumably his mother, witness the resurrected Jesus and are both commissioned to report the news to the other disciples.

him.²⁹ While the Bible seems to conflate these “Marys,” it is doubtful that these other figures are in any way connected with Mary of Magdala. According to the online Catholic Encyclopedia, “New Advent,” the reformed prostitute who washes Jesus’ feet is actually Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, although Protestants resist this assertion (Pope par. 4). In a conversation with Margaret George following the afterward in Mary, Called Magdalene, George points out that Mary Magdalene’s association with prostitution “did not arise until the sixth century, and it was formally refuted by the Vatican in 1969” (7). George’s fictionalized account of the life and experiences of Mary Magdalene includes and expands upon the five instances in the Bible where Mary is mentioned by name. Like The Red Tent and Queenmaker, Mary, Called Magdalene also rounds out the biographical information about its protagonist that is missing from the Bible, the circumstances surrounding her possession, her wedding, marriage to Joel, and her role as a mother, and by doing so ascribes value to Mary’s life and experiences, pre-Jesus, as an ordinary person. In her novel, George provides a detailed description of Mary’s childhood and adolescence, including her relationship with her family, her strong-will, inquisitiveness (26), thirst for knowledge and an education, propensity at a young age to be a leader (30), and independent and free spirit that her father sees as “flaws” and fears will make it “harder to marry [her] off” (58). That she secretly learns how to read and write with her friend Keziah (49-50) supports not only her defiance and desire to transcend the barriers imposed on her gender by the Pharisees’ rigorous interpretation of the Law (81), but also the possibility that there actually exists a

²⁹ Compare with John 12:1-8. John’s gospel differs from that of Luke in that it does not depict Mary as a woman of ill-repute. See also Matthew 26:6-13.

first-hand testament of Christ's ministry written by Mary that should be included alongside the standard gospels.

Besides borrowing from the four gospel accounts, George's novel creates a new portrait of Mary that borrows partly from the Gospel of Mary in that it stresses the special relationship she had with Jesus, although eschewing popular contemporary claims that the two were married, and maintains that she is "a figure of enlightenment who possesses special spiritual knowledge and is honored by Jesus for it" (George, *Afterward* 627), and is endowed with a unique faith in him and his message. George includes an interlude with Jesus and his family in Mary's childhood to fill in the gaps surrounding their acquaintance with one another and to propose that, in the same way that Mary always felt 'called by God' (3, 4), she had been connected to Christ from an early age. Her faith in Jesus combined with her inner vision of being chosen by God leads Mary to leave her family to follow Jesus, after which we learn of the personal sacrifices, verbal denunciations, and ostracism she faces for her faith. Finally, George's novel does not evade the subject of Mary's leadership position both during and after Christ's ministry. George depicts her as the first woman called to join Christ and the third disciple after Andrew and Simon-Peter who is commissioned by Jesus to preach the good news about his message and, as I will explore in detail in the following chapter, perform miracles in his name.

Each of these three novels, which I have labelled feminist biblical revisionist texts accept, reject, and recreate stories about women whose narratives are missing from Biblical accounts. Their efforts strive to recuperate those lost events and experiences of

women that traditional history has discarded to the “oblivion of the unrecorded past” (Joyce par. 25). Feminist revisionist midrash does not dodge scepticism either from religious fundamentalists or feminists. Naomi Graetz explains, “It is possible to criticize feminist readers like myself whose contemporary ‘midrashic solutions’ run the risk of not being taken seriously, of being considered children’s stories rather than an authentic [or authoritative] genre” (*S/He* 2). Similarly, Gubkin argues that revising biblical narratives and representing women’s histories is not a satisfactory solution to the inherently unequal treatment of women in the Bible since their writings “belie the fact that it is the Torah given through Moses that is canonical [and therefore authoritative] today” (62). She calls the fictional reconstitution of biblical histories from the perspective of its female participants “a marginal activity that has no authority in the patriarchal community” (qtd. in Graetz, *S/He* 5). However, M. Nourbese Philip counter-argues that creative writing, whether in verse or prose, is a legitimate genre for affecting social critique and change. She writes, “We seldom think of the lyric voice as one of authority – poetry and authority seem strange bedfellows – but it is, with the weight of a tradition behind it, even in its sometimes critical stance against society or the state. The tradition and overwhelming image is of the great man who expresses, in the best possible way, the dreams and aspirations of his people” (121). Sheila Hassell Hughes likewise defends revisionist authors who use fiction to allow the historically silenced to speak. She argues,

If understood to be expressive of feminine subjectivity and/or representations of women’s historical realities, then novels, short stories, plays, and poems can ... offer theologians textual ‘evidence’ of that important but elusive category, ‘women’s experience.’ Further, insofar as feminists’ and womanists’ theological methods are creative and

constructive, literature also provides them with rhetorical models for the imaginative task. (1)

It is important to remember that in constructing their fictional revisions of biblical women's histories, Diamant, Edghill, and George do not pretend to present historical facts, nor do they claim that the Bible's writers 'have got it all wrong.' Instead, these authors engage in what Fiorenza calls a "critical emancipatory historiography that seeks to open up to historical memory what has been suppressed in traditional historiography in order to examine the exclusions and choices that constitute our historical knowledge" of the Bible (*But She Said* 81). Through the safe space of fiction, creative license permits them to critique the absence of female recognition and importance, voice, and authorship in the Bible and emphasize "equality of [gender] representation" (Hampson 133) in a text that is gender-biased. They "re-present," in the sense of presenting anew, the lives and experiences of Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene, and represent to their readers those possible alternative versions of historical events that are unrecorded but are no less relevant, especially to those women who view the Bible as authoritative.

Gubkin also contests revisionary fiction because, she asserts, the contemporary author who speaks in the voice of biblical women "places her own needs and concerns onto the biblical text without explicitly claiming them as her own" (Gubkin 61). For those who accept Ostriker's assertion that the Bible is no more authoritative than any other text (that is, that it was neither written nor inspired by God), then projecting their own needs onto the text is exactly what the original authors of the Bible do. If Diamant, Edghill, and George imbue their texts with their own political and theoretical agenda then they are only following in the footsteps of those whose works they find dissatisfying to

women readers. In the same way that feminists turn to twentieth-century utopian, dystopian, and apocalyptic literature by writers like Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing, for their “visions of alternative or future possibilities necessary to imagining and calling for change” (Hughes 3), Diamant, Edghill, and George use the fictive space of the novel for both its critical and visionary qualities to re-read the past and tell women’s untold stories. They look to the novel primarily as a vehicle to articulate their own experience and for imaginative visions of social transformation. They ask us to consider what impact revisioning the past can have on our vision of both the present and future. Through the novel, feminist authors can infuse their texts with ‘personal needs and concerns’ and criticism in a way that reinterpreterists of the Bible who articulate their findings in the form of scholarly writing cannot.

Gubkin is not the only sceptic of fictional revisionism; other critics suggest that these novels and their efforts to revalue female experiences risk essentializing the female. It is important to remember that the women’s voices presented in these novels do not represent all women’s voices, whether from the past or present. As I indicated in my introduction, feminists are becoming increasingly aware of the dangers of speaking about and defining “women” using universal terms since we do not experience life, function in society, or read texts as autonomous individuals in equal positions of access, influence, and power. Jana Sawicki urges feminists to be wary of the “constitution of theoretical unities such as ‘woman’s experience’... insofar as they inevitably suppress important differences” (349). The women represented in these novels do not share the same experiences; otherwise my consideration of all three texts would be redundant. Instead,

while there are parallels between how the authors structure their narratives and the ways that they reshape and recreate the narratives from a feminist perspective to compensate for the collective repression of female voices in the Bible, each novel re-presents and revalues female experiences, knowledge, and power in unique ways.

Bridging the distance between rejectionist and reinterpretationist feminist approaches to the Bible, Diamant, Edghill, and George redefine our notion of “historical truth” by appropriating Scripture, transforming it and adding to it to help make the Bible “ours by having it reflect women’s reality as well as men’s” (Graetz, *S/He* 4). By re-presenting women these novels encourage their readers to be open to the possibilities of alternative versions of history and solicit equal representation of women in contemporary religious structures so that both the Bible and religions founded upon it truly include women. They do not simply ‘add women’s voices and stir,’ as it were; instead, they demonstrate how the silencing of their female characters functions in the recorded Bible narratives, and how creating new stories in which the women rather than the men play the dominant role, can function as a kind of academic criticism.³⁰

³⁰ See Chapter 3 in its entirety.

– Chapter Two –

Re-presenting and Revaluing Female Knowledge and Power in
The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene

We must learn to see what we do not recognize – what is not reflective of the already known – and we must learn to resee our own work, and ourselves, in the light of that new vision. ~ Sheila Hassell Hughes, *Eye to Eye*

Now you come to me – women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in childbed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them. ~ *The Red Tent*

Each book of the Bible tells a man's story; its scriptures are brimming with narrated accounts of men's experiences, victories, failures, miracles, resurrections, folly, betrayal, wars, visions, and conversations with God. Its androcentric narratives make it a questionable source of support and validation for women given its disavowal of female experiences and gross ignorance about women's knowledge and power. It valorizes men and male experiences to the exclusion of women and while it is touted by Jewish and Christian leaders as the ultimate authority on religious matters, its thousands of scriptures in no way reflect female experiences positively, unless the women have assisted men, are virtuous virgins, or fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. Alicia Suskin Ostriker notes that there is so little reflection of 'woman' in the Scriptures to which women can relate that she calls the heroes of the stories those who are "not-me" (*Nakedness* 8). Regarding the lack of female representation and the silencing of women throughout the Bible, Ostriker provocatively asserts,

The biblical story of monotheism and covenant is, to use the language of politics, a cover-up ... when we lift the cover we find quite another story, an obsessively told and retold story of erased female power. Biblical

patriarchy, as I see it, figuratively encodes within its text the repeated acts of literal murder and oppression necessary for its triumph ... I would argue that the canonizing process throughout our history has rested, not accidentally but essentially, on the silencing of women. (*Revision* 30, 31)

Women's narratives are either silenced or fragmented, but recovering their histories is relevant to Judeo-Christian women today who require a knowledge of their past in order to affect social change. Anita Diamant, India Edghill, and Margaret George are authors who re-write the unwritten; they retell biblical narratives in the light of women's experiences and desires. They are feminist biblical scholars who challenge and reject the Bible's gendered narratives by engaging in revisionary work that also includes creating new narratives that redeem and empower their female characters. Each author not only incorporates biblical history, reinterprets events and retells them from the perspective of their female protagonists, but also creates entirely new narratives to push examples of female knowledge and power to the forefront of the story. As a result, their novels function as a synthesis between those feminists who reject the Bible's limited, male-centred narratives, and those who engage in feminist reinterpretation of Scriptures who are content to tell the story a different way, but who do not appear troubled by the absence of narratives that value women. Basing their narratives on anthropological data and research about Jewish culture, Diamant, Edghill, and George insist that Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene begin to be known and remembered individually for their strength, knowledge, agency, and power rather than for the subservient and relatively weak roles they play in biblical narrative.

Women's subservience and silence in relation to patriarchal male 'dominance' does not necessarily mean that biblical women are weak and powerless; instead, their

silence can be both empowering to them and beneficial to a feminist revision of biblical narrative. The Bible can both empower and disempower women depending on the power that one chooses to attribute to that which is not written. In her groundbreaking feminist text, The Nakedness of the Fathers, Ostriker notes that in their desire to remember forgotten presences, women must metaphorically “climb into” (7) the Bible’s texts, “invade the [male] sanctuary” (7), and recover women’s untold tales. She says that women can accomplish this task of reconstitution “from the very bricolage and linguistic gaps which allow forbidden entrances into the father’s [text]” (*Entering* 547). While criticizing the Bible’s ‘silencing’ of women, Ostriker argues that by virtue of its fragmented structure the Bible also permits ‘forbidden entrance.’ In other words, that which is unwritten and unsaid can be equally as important and accessible as that which is recorded because it prompts readers to question why these narratives have been discounted and to what end. In this sense, the silencing of biblical women offers an opportunity for female empowerment as it invites questions about why their experiences did not find their way into the canonical Bible. The ‘linguistic gaps’ also give revisionary authors the ability to reimagine and recreate biblical women’s experiences and convey biblical narrative from new, female-centred perspectives.

The ‘unwritten’ permits the construction of new, empowering narratives that value female experiences and allow them a fictional “voice”; by describing their experiences and identifying their possession of special knowledge, Diamant, Edghill, and George insist that we no longer view these women as powerless, weak, and subservient. Compared to men, biblical women do not have authority, “but they are not powerless”

(Exum 136). Since Michel Foucault's discussion of the "repressive hypothesis" in The History of Sexuality and power and knowledge in Discipline and Punish, feminist analyses of the gender hierarchy both in the Bible and in social structures renegotiate notions of binary opposites, traditionally defined in terms of centre and margin, powerful and weak, dominant and subordinate. Foucault challenges the easy recourse to consolidated dualisms by repudiating fixed and authentic centres of truth and suggesting that the so-called 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed' interact, transgress, and transform each other. Each has the potential to exercise power. He invites us to think differently about the nature of knowledge and power, and "questions in particular the ways in which feminists have thought about men having power *over* women" (Ramazanoğlu 4; italics added). He writes,

Power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure on them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them... [T]hese relations go right down into the depths of society.... [These relations] are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations. The overthrow of these 'micro-powers' does not, then, obey the law of all or nothing; it is not acquired once and for all by a new control of the apparatuses nor by a new functioning or a destruction of the institutions. (*Discipline* 26, 27)

Foucault conceptualizes dominance and subordination as "effects of power rather than as proceeding from a specific source of power" (Ramazanoğlu 5). By refusing to distinguish between men and women in terms of 'those who have power' and 'those who do not have

it,' Foucault upsets key assumptions in feminist thinking, namely that patriarchy has “subordinated, separated, and devalued everything female” (Ramazanoğlu 4) and rendered them powerless. Power is not something that is exercised on or over the subordinate structure. Instead, Foucault urges us to see the subordinate structure engaging with, resisting, pressuring, and transmitting power. He argues that power hierarchies can be inverted, even if temporarily, and that even when one group is in a subordinate position and are perceived to be ‘powerless,’ they are not actually without power.

In their re-presentation of women as knowledgeable, skilled, intelligent, hard-working, and powerful, Diamant, Edghill, and George support Foucault's assertion that power relations can be inverted or at least equalized where there is an exercising of knowledge. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault emphasizes that in political terms, knowledge and power are inseparable and that as long as one possesses knowledge, he or she is powerful. He explains that “power and knowledge directly imply one another [and] that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (*Discipline* 27). The problem with Foucault's theory appears at the point at which it intersects with those feminist conceptions of power that are grounded in women's accounts of their experiences. The question is not who has knowledge and, therefore, power, and who does not, because both men and women are knowledgeable; instead, the question posed by feminist biblical scholars concerns whose knowledge is most valued by the Scriptures. How can feminists negotiate Foucault's theory that power is constantly created and appropriated by both the knowledgeable dominators and the

dominated when women look to biblical women's histories to learn about their experiences but find only that men have excluded them from their narratives and, to recall Ostriker, "erased female power"? The powerlessness with which I see the Bible rendering women comes from its dis/mis/representation of their knowledge and experiences. I borrow my concept of power from the critical work of Carolyn Heilbrun who writes, "The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or woman. Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (qtd. in Rosenberg 235). In this sense, the Bible has 'erased female power' by not enabling women to participate in active discourse and, through its discounting of female experiences and representation in its narrative, has robbed biblical women of the right to have their story 'matter' to future generations. Ostriker's theory regarding the Bible's silent but powerful and accessible female subtext merges with that of Foucault who insists that silence is a way of speaking differently from the dominant regime, "in order to obtain different results" (*Repressive* 309). He explains,

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name; the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine ... how those who can and those who cannot speak ... are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized ... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (*Repressive* 309, 310)

While Ramazanoğlu argues that Foucault's theory comes from a male perspective (5)³¹ and perhaps is not as neutral as it appears, it stimulates feminist biblical scholars to probe the Bible, 'enter the forbidden tents' from different angles, reinterpret Scripture, and question how woman's historical silence has affected the social and religious trajectory of women in patriarchal societies. According to Foucault, silence in narrative encourages us to think critically about whose knowledge and discourse is valued in recorded history. Silence can speak when we note what is not said.³² It is this perspective of silence as audible and accessible that enables Diamant, Edghill, and George to create a space where female narrative overturns the dominant gender's "discourses of truth" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 93), and re-insinuate their protagonists' unique knowledge and experiences into contemporary discourse.

While Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene are silenced in the Bible in the sense that they could not tell their own stories or relay history in their own words, their silencing enables modern revisionary writers Diamant, Edghill, and George to give them voices and demonstrate that although their experiences were not recorded, they were in no way *literally* powerless. Diamant, Edghill, and George cannot actually give back power to the original biblical narratives, but they can seek to revalue the lost experiences

³¹ For more information about the relationship between Foucault and feminism, see the following chapters in *Up Against Foucault*, edited by Caroline Ramazanoğlu: Kate Soper, "Productive Contradictions" (29-50); Maureen McNeil, "Dancing with Foucault: Feminist and Power-Knowledge" (147-175); and Maureen Cain, "Foucault, Feminism and Feeling" (73-96). See also Jana Sawicki, "Foucault and Feminism: A Critical Reappraisal" in *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly. Each writer articulates in unique ways the benefits that Foucauldian theories bring to feminism, but iterate that any feminist appropriation of the "male stream" tradition must be critical.

³² See Thomas P. Kuffel's "St. Thomas' Method of Biblical Exegesis" in *Living Tradition*, which explains biblical exegesis, or the idea that Bible Scripture invites at least four levels of interpretation, and the notion that the value of metaphorical and allegorical interpretations, or that which is unwritten, supersedes literal interpretations.

of biblical women by reimagining their negotiations with power and re-presenting “the subjugated knowledges of women” (M. Cain 85). The authors situate their characters at the centre of discourse that is “essential to action,” as I note in the following chapter during my consideration of fiction’s function in affecting social change, and re-empower their characters by revealing how biblical events could have been seen through their eyes. Their fictional re-imaginings of women’s histories, and their portrayal of the possibilities that exist in the realm of the unwritten, support Foucault’s theory about the co-existence of multiple truths. He writes,

I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth ... we can demand of those who govern us a certain truth as to their ultimate aims, the general choice of their tactics, and a number of particular points in their programs: this is the *parrhesia* (free speech) of the governed, who can and must question those who govern them in the name of knowledge, the experience they have, of what those who govern do. (*Politics* 51)

Foucault’s notion of the co-existence of multiple truths supports the work of biblical reinterpretationists and revisionist authors who are suspicious of universalist history, especially in light of Foucault’s assertion that silence, or unrecorded history, is equally as powerful and relevant as that which is recorded by ‘those who govern.’ Diamant, Edghill and George reinterpret and reconstruct biblical narrative and urge us to see Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene as women whose re-envisioned experiences illustrate their individual possession of knowledge and skills either within the domestic/private or public sphere and enable us to view them as powerful rather than weak. Empowering Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene with authority and voices with which they retell their

stories, the authors demonstrate that these women are not as powerless as biblical narrative, through its silencing of their voices, would have us believe.

Feminist considerations of women's roles throughout history have tended to view the traditional "relegation" of women to the domestic sphere as a sign of their social and political powerlessness and inferiority to men who were empowered by their social and political roles in the public sphere. Feminists maintain that in order to be powerful, women need to transcend the barrier between the two spheres and, as men do, participate actively in the public sphere. The Red Tent, however, suggests that while there is definitely a distinction between male and female spheres (109) in Canaan, the private sphere, including the role of motherhood, is not disempowering to the women. Whereas the Bible's authors are concerned with male skills in warfare and politics, The Red Tent revalues the experiences, knowledge, and skills of Dinah and her "mothers"³³ within the domestic space. Dinah says that in history books, "No one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers" (2), but The Red Tent re-presents and celebrates her domestic skills. Whereas men find their fortunes outside the family tent (Sheres 16), Diamant depicts women exercising domestic power by virtue of their special knowledge and skilled labour within the family tent. Although the Bible treats daughters as less valuable than sons except in terms of their marketability to neighbouring nations and their ability to bear children, Dinah explains that "daughters eased their mother's burdens – helping with the spinning, the grinding of grain, and the

³³ Emphasizing not only the communal act of childrearing but most importantly the special favour Dinah receives from her biological mother and aunts as the only female child born to the house of Jacob, *The Red Tent* refers to Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah as Dinah's 'mothers.'

Mary a prostitute and a disgrace to her family, her mother tells her, “Unless you repent, and purify yourself, you are no longer my daughter” (333). Mary notes that “this circle of women, so tightly woven, so like a sisterhood, now seemed an evil net to entrap her and kill her” (334). Knowing that staying in Magdala and rejoining her family and her daughter means confessing to crimes and sins that she did not commit, Mary chooses to leave and follow Jesus. Before leaving, she tries to take Elisheba away from her sister-in-law, Dinah. George writes, “Elisheba held out her arms, tentatively. Mary reached out and tried to take her. For an instant she felt the warmth of her daughter, held her close ... [but] instantly a large group of men and women from the village ... surrounded her, [ordering,] ‘Drop her! Drop the child!’” (336). Mary’s role as a mother is not included in the Bible but it functions in George’s novel as a symbol for the larger sacrifice, the domestic sphere, to which Mary sporadically tries to return but, in choosing to participate in the public sphere, she can never reclaim. Mary interjects her account of preaching, teaching, and daily activities as part of Christ’s discipleship and apostle in the church of Ephesus, with her letters to her brother Silvanus and to her daughter, which demonstrates her constant desire to reconnect with her family and her domestic life although she knows that reconciliation with Elisheba is impossible. In her novel, George reveals not only that Mary was a chosen disciple of Christ, but also the possibility that her acceptance and fulfillment of this role in his ministry was likely at the expense of her domestic life.

From the onset of the novel, George depicts Mary as a woman who is less suited to a life of domesticity than one of social and political engagements. As a child and adolescent she is “thirsty” for knowledge (50) and secretly learns how to read. She

desires “more freedom, not less” and asserts that being married and running a household meant that, “in practical terms, she would be a slave” (60). The “flaws” (58) in her personality that her father insists make her that much harder to marry off, which include “a restless, questioning mind. A tendency toward disobedience. Interest in taboo subjects ... and a certain stubbornness” (58) are positive attributes for someone suited for leadership and responsibility as a preacher in Christ’s ministry. While she tries to fulfill her role as a wife and find purpose in her household responsibilities, Mary cannot find self-fulfillment in the domestic realm. Joel tells her to put her mind “to more important things” than worrying about whether dinner will be cold by the time he arrives home to eat it (101), but he does not give her any specific suggestions. When she expresses her desire to “study Torah,” he dismisses her because women are not allowed to study the Scriptures outside the home (101). In the domestic sphere, Mary does not find fulfillment outside of motherhood and cannot achieve her full potential. In Mary, Called Magdalene, Mary’s knowledge and her visionary capabilities, which she does not share with her family, are valued by Jesus and enable her to engage in meaningful work as a teacher, healer, helper, and leader in the public domain. In a letter to her brother, Silvanus, she describes the fulfillment she finds outside the domestic sphere: “There is so much to do now, so much more than I have ever been asked to do before. I am busy all the hours of the day, and fall down exhausted at night, but I sleep soundly knowing I have spent the day doing good and helping people” (280). Although she possesses the same domestic skills as Dinah and Michal, such as the ability to cook, run a household, and raise children, Mary, Called Magdalene explains how Mary’s knowledge of languages and the

Scriptures, her faith in Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God, and her visionary power facilitates her public teaching role in Christ's ministry. By revaluing Mary's teaching, preaching, and healing abilities and asserting that she held a prominent position in Jesus ministry and in his early church, George's novel consistently demonstrates that Mary did not simply minister *to* Jesus, as the Bible indicates, but that she was chosen as a minister *by* Jesus, possessing "equal authority" to his male apostles. By re-establishing the power she held in the public sphere, especially among Christ's apostles and in the early congregations, George encourages her readers to reconsider the Bible's relatively insignificant depiction of Mary as a voiceless follower.

In addition to the various ways in which they revalue women's knowledge and power within the domestic and public spheres, The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene empower their female protagonists by returning to them the voices of which the Bible divests them. As I indicated in Chapter One, Diamant's revision of the story of Dinah both reinterprets and rejects the account of her so-called rape in the book of Genesis. The novel retells the slaughter of the Hivite nation by her selfish and politically motivated brothers, under the guise of brotherly retribution, from Dinah's perspective. Importantly, though, it rejects the idea that Dinah was raped by Shalem, and thereby refutes the only significant record of Dinah in the Bible. The biblical narrative victimizes Dinah and functions as a moral lesson for women who are contemplating disobedience to 'the law of the father,' which demonstrates that leaving one's father's house and asserting any sort of independent action can lead to tragedy. It also justifies her brothers' scandalous deed and figures Dinah as important to the book of Genesis only

insofar as her “rape” affects familial alliances and political land claims. If Dinah had not actually been raped, would the narrator have been motivated to include her at all in the biblical record? Is she only an object to be used to make a point by not only the narrator of the story, but also by her brothers? Where is her opinion? If she was raped, where is her description of her pain?

Naomi Graetz points out that “none of the traditional midrashim takes into account what Dinah the daughter thinks about her plight” (*Garden* 38). Dinah’s silence is both intriguing and frustrating to feminists; difficulty determining ways to re-empower Dinah has caused most modern Jewish feminists to avoid the story completely (Graetz, *Garden* 38). Susan Niditch notes that Dinah’s role in the Bible story is paradoxical:

[She is] on the one hand, central to the action, the focus of [Shalem’s] desire, the object of negotiations between Jacob and Hamor, the reason for her brothers’ trickery, and the cause of tension between Jacob and his sons. On the other hand, she has no dialogue, no voice ... She seems to fade out after her brothers retrieve her. (qtd. in Bronner 64)

While we know that the consequences of Simeon and Levi’s violent and treacherous response to their sister’s rape are far-reaching,³⁴ Leila Leah Bronner asks, “What happens to Dinah?” (65). The Bible suggests that others make decisions about her and act on her behalf, but then she disappears from the narrative. If she actually was raped, should we not have some indication from her about how she felt being sent to live for days in the home of her rapist? Instead, the “psychological and emotional components wrapped up in the action are displaced” (Bronner 67) from her to her brothers. The Bible states that her

³⁴ See Genesis 49:5-7 where on his deathbed Jacob curses the violent acts of his two sons and divorces himself from them. Bronner recalls that Simeon “seems to be excluded from having specified tribal territories, and Levi is given the singular blessing of service in the temple” (65).

brothers were 'hurt' and angry, but it says nothing of Dinah's feelings. Dinah's voicelessness is illustrative of the Bible's trend to omit women's narratives and to structure events, even those involving women, around its male figures.

The Red Tent compensates for the overall failure of the biblical narrator to follow up on women's extraordinary narrative possibilities by relating, in Dinah's 'voice' such experiences as her childhood, her relationship with Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah whose experiences are also expounded in the novel, and her life as a Jewish daughter and sister in a patriarchal society. The novel diverges from the biblical narrative by enabling Dinah to transcend the permanent status of unwed, disobedient daughter and rape victim. It re-empowers Dinah by giving her a voice with which to articulate her life story; it creates the alternative possibility that she genuinely loves Shalem and marries him before he is slain, and describes the birth of her son and her role as a mother and a midwife. Diamant resolves the feminist tendency to avoid Dinah's story altogether by reinterpreting and creating anew the circumstances that make her story a loss to feminist biblical interpretation. Diamant's narrative differs from that of the Bible in that The Red Tent imagines what Dinah might have said if her words had been valued enough to transcribe. In the biblical account, Dinah's silence is a result of intentional omission rather than of her own choice. In The Red Tent, however, after Dinah's brothers slaughter her new husband, her in-laws, and their entire city, the horror of the scandalous treachery does not stop Dinah's tongue and she summons up the strength to compensate for the voicelessness that fetters her in the Bible. She denounces her father Jacob and curses his sons:

I should have been defeated by grief. I should have been exhausted past seeing. But hatred had stiffened my spine Fire shot from my eyes. I might have burned them all to cinder with a word, a breath, a glance. "Jacob," I cried with a voice of a wounded animal. "Jacob," I howled, summoning him by name as though I were the father and he the wayward child. Jacob emerged from his tent trembling ... I saw the guilt before he had time to deny it. "Jacob, your sons have done murder," I said, in a voice I did not recognize as my own. "You have lied and connived, and your sons have murdered righteous men, striking them down in weakness of your own invention."³⁵ You have despoiled bodies of the dead and plundered their burying places, so their shadows will haunt you forever. You and your sons have raised up a generation of widows and orphans who will never forgive you ... Jacob shall never know peace again... He will never again find rest, and his prayers will not find the favour of his father's god. Jacob knows my words are true. Look at me, for I wear the blood of the righteous men of Shechem. Their blood stains your hands and your head, and you will never be clean again. You are unclean and you are cursed," I said, spitting into the face of the man who had been my father. Then I turned my back upon him, and he was dead to me. I cursed them all. With the smell of my husband's blood still in my nostrils, I named them each and called forth the power of every god and goddess, every demon and every torment, to destroy and devour them "The sons of Jacob are vipers," I said to my cowering brothers. "They are putrid as the worms that feed on carrion. The sons of Jacob will each suffer in his turn, and turn the suffering upon their father." The silence was absolute and solid as a wall when I turned away from them. (206-207)

She does not wail or scream incoherently and tear at her clothes in grief, as the men around her would expect her to do. Rather, in a controlled, rational, and authoritative voice that causes Jacob to 'tremble,' Dinah generates "a voice so powerful as to translate outrage into vengeance" (Brown and Kushner 546), and curses, in the form of malediction, her father and his sons for their malicious crime. Kate E. Brown and Howard I. Kushner state that malediction is a "category of speech that makes an unusually powerful claim for the efficacy of utterance" (544). They explain that

³⁵ She is referring here to the physical pain the Hivites were in after being circumcised according to the bargain Jacob struck with Hamor and Shalem.

malediction is a “performative speech act ... that does not describe or report but *performs* an action ... Like all acts of performative speech, malediction ... insists on the mechanism of voice as an instrument of bodily agency: in malediction, to vocalize a desire is, theoretically, to ‘make it so’” (544, 545). Dinah does not merely convey the ways her brothers’ actions make her *feel*, nor does this passage simply provide narrative representation for the historically voiceless while rendering the patriarch and his sons, silent. Instead, by virtue of the fact that in malediction “the words themselves constitute the deed” (Brown and Kushner 543), Dinah’s eruptive voice is a powerful exercise of bodily agency in the presence of men. By virtue of the fact that she directs her malediction toward men, her curse transgresses social hierarchies and inverts the power dynamics both of father and child and of man and woman. The Red Tent empowers Dinah not only by re-presenting her life and revealing her domestic knowledge and skills, but also by enabling her to retell her story and giving her an authoritative voice with which to exercise agency and defy patriarchy.

Similarly, India Edghill’s Queenmaker gives Michal the narrative space within which to tell her story and compensates for the female voice that we unavailingly search for in the Bible, but also ensures that, by the end of the novel, her voice has the authority to fulfill her political agenda to make Solomon successor to David’s throne. Reading Michal’s story is frustrating because while the reader ‘hears’ Michal’s voice, King David refuses to listen to her and, in doing so, renders her politically powerless. She wants to return to Phaltiel; instead, David has him killed. She wants David to honour Bathsheba and prevent her from being stoned for adultery, and while she prevents the stoning, it is at

the expense of Bathsheba's husband's life. Although Michal has authority and power within the women's quarters of the palace, she is powerless to subvert patriarchal authority and free herself from his control. When Michal mourns the death of Phaltiel and accuses David of murder, David threatens to make her the "queen of silence" and lock her away "in the darkness known to soothe the mad" if she is not "docile and obedient" (149, 150). David's control both over Michal's physical body and perceptions about her mental condition is facilitated by his patriarchal power and the authority of his voice. At the beginning of Queenmaker, Michal introduces David, saying, "All the world knows David's story now – he always had a master's way with words, and always could tell a tale so that men repeated it to his credit" (11). At the end of the novel, however, the power dynamics are inverted and Michal's voice has authority over David's "frail . . . [and] weak" (362, 363) voice and body. On his deathbed, Michal lies to David and tells him that he swore, before Yahweh, that Solomon would be king. When David denies it, Michal takes advantage of the fact that David is physically powerless and replies, "That is what happened, David. It is what happened because I say it did, and because no one can deny it" (363). David responds, "I can. I am king! Tell such a tale, and I will rise from this bed to tell all the court that you are mad," (363), but when he tries to sit up, "his body was too weak to obey him" (363). Knowing that her voice has more authority than that of the dying king, Michal manipulates David and threatens to publicly call into question his mental state: "Go tell the court if it pleases you, O great king. And I will follow behind, shaking my head sadly and saying that King David is too old, too ill, to know what it is he says. That King David is mad" (364). When David tells her that no

one will believe her because she is “only a woman,” (364), Michal responds, saying, “I am Michal, the first lady of the palace ... So when I, Michal, the queen, say David the king is half-mad with age, men will believe me, David” (364). Although she is a woman, she is, as I noted earlier, the most powerful woman in the domestic sphere. By virtue of her position, Michal’s voice, at last, will be authoritative. Michal revels in the fact that David’s defeat by his own body gives her the opportunity to speak with authority and to be heard, not only by David, but by the rest of the men in the court, saying, “If I speak against you, [David,] this time it is *I* who will be believed When I go from your room with the king’s seal and the king’s blessing on Solomon, who will not believe whatever tale I choose to spin? Whatever tale *I* choose, David” (365; original italics). Throughout the novel, people unquestioningly accepted David’s version of the truth while Michal remains muted, veiled, and political powerless. In this inversion of authority both in speech and body, Michal gains “power over David” (365) and exercises agency, not through cursing as Dinah does, but through verbal and physical manipulation. She tells him, “The only thing I care for is that Solomon should be king. King now. King *because I say he shall be*” (367; italics added). Michal physically removes David’s ring from his feeble fingers and, at that, she secures the crown and the future for Solomon.

Queenmaker not only affords Michal the opportunity to fill in the Bible’s narrative gaps and speak about her life and relationship with David, but also it figures Michal as a woman who patiently acquires the knowledge and wisdom to usurp and free herself from patriarchal control, to speak authoritatively, and to wield political influence.

Mary, Called Magdalene not only gives Mary Magdalene a voice with which to articulate her life experiences, which are absent from the Bible, but the text also empowers her voice by giving her authority both as a teacher and public speaker and as a visionary. While the four canonical gospels name as Christ's apostles 12 men, George depicts Mary as an apostle who shares equally with her male colleagues in public preaching and teaching, and later becomes a leader in the congregation at Ephesus. She demonstrates her eagerness to participate actively in the public ministry and to teach people about the Kingdom of God when she and her preaching partner John arrive at the village of Korazin. Mary is the first of the two to speak about Christ's message, and she does so with strength of voice and conviction that surprises her (355). Without being ashamed or intimidated by the fact that openly witnessing in public constitutes a transgression against social norms for women, she preaches about the Kingdom of God so loudly that her voice was "ringing" (359). When the people in the village bombard Mary and John with questions about Jesus, Mary remembers that "answering questions was not what Jesus had ordered them to do. He had ordered them to act as he had, not to explain about him" (357). Recognizing that actions are a more persuasive testament to the authority of her message, she cries out, "Bring me a person who is imprisoned by sin and its suffering! God will cure such afflictions; through Jesus he indeed sets the prisoner free, as the scripture says. And he has given us his power, as his disciples" (357). Mary, who initially doubts her ability to be a disciple and to publicly preach the news about the Kingdom, commands a crippled woman, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand straight!" (357) and performs a miracle in public, in front of both men and women. Of

course the men in the crowd accuse her of being a witch and a harlot, but she loudly and boldly defends herself and proves her God-given power by exorcising Susanna of her demons, at which Susanna's husband replies, "Such a demonstration of God's power I have never seen" (360, 361). In the same way that Jesus corroborates his message by performing miracles, there is a link in the text between Mary's words and her deeds, between her preaching and her healing. In order for her words to have authority, she must substantiate them with actions. Mary's ability to both publicly preach and perform miracles endows her with an authority that is only shared by Jesus and his apostles. Her relationship to Jesus and her participation in his ministry as a preacher, teacher, and healer elevates her status to one of equality with men and supports the notion that she was a prominent leader and preacher in his ministry rather than an insignificant follower and financial supporter.

That George's narrator introduces the reader to a six-year-old Mary during one of her first visions signifies that her dreams will play a significant role in her life and will be a source of her authority and power. When she explains to her father that in her dream she was taken up to heaven and called by the angels to join them, her father chastises her and states that "all prophesy has ceased in our land... There has been no word uttered by a prophet since Malachi, and that was four hundred years ago. God does not speak to us that way any longer" (4, 5). Whereas her father denounces her vision and rejects the idea that God would speak to her, Jesus praises her for her prophetic power. When she has a vision of John the Baptist, she fears that her exorcised demons have returned because visions of any sort were a curse and a sign of either madness or possession; however,

Jesus smiles and says, “Your visions ... [are] part of you, not just the curse of the demons” (319). Indicating the power that visionaries and seers possess, he suggests that perhaps her visionary ability was that part of her which the demons wished to destroy or pervert, saying, “Demons do not attack people unless they perceive them as a threat” (320). Far from being a curse or a sign of madness, Jesus assures her that visions are a gift from God and that she should view them as a blessing, even though they reveal painful and disturbing images (383, 384). Although Mary begs God to “take these visions from me” (383) because she believes she cannot bear them, the fact that she has the gift of prophesy is an indication that God chose her to receive visions *because* of her strength.

Mary's visions lend credence to her words and give her voice an authority that is not shared by any of the other disciples. In fact, since Mary and Jesus share the same prophetic power and even the same visions, Mary is, more than any of the other disciples, Christ-like. When she doubts her ability to preach and participate actively in Jesus' ministry, saying, “I cannot – I do not know enough – I am a woman – I have nothing to give anyone” (350), Jesus reminds her to trust in her visionary abilities, stating, “God gave you the gift of spiritual visions. You are a prophet. Perhaps the only one in the group” (350). While Jesus proclaims equality among his disciples, by valuing Mary's prophetic gift and telling his apostles to “trust it” (320), he distinguishes her from the men as someone endowed with a unique power who fulfills a special role in his ministry. Jesus values Mary's revelations and trusts in their divinity so much so that he uses her visions to confirm his own. When Mary tells him that she has had a dream about the Temple in Jerusalem engulfed in flames (383), he responds, saying, “The Temple...?”

Then the knowledge I was granted is true” (399). Jesus and Mary are not the only visionaries in the novel: Jesus’ mother Mary receives visions from God telling her that her son is “not an ordinary child” (390), but she does not receive the visions about God’s plans for the future that Jesus and Mary share. God grants both Jesus and Mary Magdalene visions about the new Kingdom, the apocalypse (399), and the honour that Christ will receive in heaven after his resurrection (384). The fact that they share this ability and special knowledge signifies not only that Mary is chosen by God in the same way that Jesus is, but also that her visions are legitimate, authoritative, and divinely inspired. Her public preaching skills and her relationship with Jesus make her equal to her male colleagues, but her visions and private revelations, which she uses to strengthen the wavering disciples, perform miracles, and lead people to follow Christ, give her voice a unique superiority among the apostles.

The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene recreate and reinsert into biblical narrative female experiences that illustrate their heroines’ possession of unique knowledge and the ways in which this knowledge enables them to, in the words of Foucault, assert power in tension with and alongside dominant power systems and ideologies. Dinah and her mothers possess domestic power, while Michal exercises power first, in the domestic sphere, and then, through her appropriation of male knowledge in combination with female power, exerts political authority in the public sphere. Finally, Mary Magdalene’s participation in Christ’s ministry excludes her from maintaining domestic power, but enables her to function equally with men in the public sphere. The novels’ appropriation of Foucauldian theory enables them to both accept and

reject the Bible; they perceive its unwritten narratives and women's silences as voluminous and create entirely new narratives detailing examples of female knowledge and power that have not hitherto been relayed, not to dislodge the Bible's authority but to reclaim its liberating power for women. Each novel creatively demonstrates that although it is tempting to view biblical women as powerless and oppressed victims of patriarchy, especially since men have effectively removed their voices from its dominant narratives and have thereby relegated them to inferior positions, women have always been, whether covertly or overtly, gifted, knowledgeable, and powerful in unique ways.

– Chapter Three –

The Function of Fiction in Feminist Biblical Scholarship

Suppose we take seriously the rabbonic saying that “There is always another interpretation.” If this is the case, then my interpretation, yours, his, hers, must always be contingent, never final. There is not and cannot ever be a correct interpretation, there can only be another, and another, and another.

~ Interview with Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*

Accepted by religious fundamentalists as the handbook of moral guidance and social behaviour, as well as an accurate historical epic spanning God's creation of the world in the Book of Genesis to John's prophesy of Armageddon in the Book of Revelation, the Bible is believed to be God's communiqué to his faithful servants. It functions as a cornerstone of western religions and an invaluable tool for worshippers because it is believed to be the Word of God. They believe that by reading the written historical experiences contained within, and applying its myriad lessons to their own lives, they can come to know God's laws, be obedient to him, and gain access to heaven. For both those who accept and those who reject its perceived ecclesiastical value, the Bible is predominantly a book of male histories. It spans generations of male lineage, beginning with Adam and beginning again (post-Flood) with Noah. Each book of the Bible contains historical accounts, featuring at the forefront of its stories kings, male priests, prophets, and other so-called faithful men, through whose experiences, according to Judeo-Christian religions, readers can learn valuable lessons about what God expects from his worshippers. While male figures are at the forefront of each narrative, that is not to say that there are no women or no stories of faithful women documented in the Bible. The issue that feminists have with the text, however, is that most women are either

nameless or figured as secondary characters – supporting cast members if you will – to the male protagonists. Female figures are interspersed in the Scriptures, but their stories are fragmented. Especially disconcerting to feminist theorists, as noted in Chapter Two, is the fact that the text validates the existences of those women whom it actually mentions by name only in relation to their male counterparts.³⁶ Their experiences, stories, knowledge and skills are not recognized for their own merit.

The preceding chapters demonstrate how Anita Diamant's The Red Tent, India Edghill's Queenmaker, and Margaret George's Mary, Called Magdalene are feminist revisionist novels that adapt and rewrite biblical narratives in an effort to fill in those historical and biographical aspects of women's lives that the Bible has left blank. One of the critical functions of these texts, as I explored in the preceding chapter, is their revaluation of female knowledge, strength, and power without entirely compromising the historical integrity with which theologians accredit the Bible. The novels combine cultural history, Biblical narrative, and fiction to fill in the Bible's biographical gaps and explore the unrecorded stories of inspirational women from whom female Jews and Christians may possibly derive strength. Importantly, these novels synthesize rejectionist and reinterpretationist theories to create a hybridized body of feminist biblical scholarship that both rejects and reinterprets biblical narratives. Given that feminist biblical scholarship typically conveys its theories through scholarly writing and academic

³⁶ For example, the story of the Virgin Mary in the Gospel of Matthew begins when the angel Gabriel appears to her and foretells her miraculous impregnation by God's Holy Spirit. Her body is used as a vessel by God to bear, as the story relates, the saviour of mankind. Prior to her introduction to the reader as the chosen mother of Christ, there exists no recorded information about her life in the Bible. For more examples of women whose value is recognized in the Bible solely in relation to the male counterparts in the narrative, see Chapter One, pp. 27-29.

publications, by engaging Mikhail Bakhtin's critical work on the novel and pointing out the pitfalls of academic writing, I would like to consider the ways in which the genre of the novel satisfies the need for a platform from which women can tell and retell their stories. In addition to contesting women's historical silencing and filling the gendered gaps in biblical narratives, these revisionary novels identify the interrelationship of fiction and ideology and exemplify the novel's functionality as a viable medium for communicating feminist biblical theory.

Feminist and other intellectual thinkers have challenged the ability of academic writing to affect social change and have a wider impact on society. Academic feminists find themselves in a double-bind. For centuries, feminist theorists, whether theological or not, have used formal academic writing, or what Virginia Woolf calls "a man's sentence" (79) to communicate their theoretical platforms and challenge patriarchal biases. In fact, French feminist Julia Kristeva, in compliance with her argument against gender differentiation in language and writing, has been criticized "for conforming too closely to traditional patriarchal models of scholarship" in her own writing practice (Booker 94). When it comes to communicating feminist theory, whether theological or otherwise, to Kristeva, there is no other choice but to use 'a man's sentence'. In her article on feminist theology, Serene Jones notes that feminist biblical theorists draw heavily upon the ideological insights and writing structure of feminist theorists like Kristeva who "work in nontheological disciplines but who nonetheless struggle with questions concerning relations of power and the multiple axes of identity construction" (Jones 44), including race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnic orientation. Jones explains that "without [the]

guidance and critique [of nontheological feminists], feminist theology would have long ago become a theoretically static and archaic enterprise, lacking focus and a critical edge sharp enough to elicit even cries of heresy” (44). The problem with the genre of scholarly essay used by feminist theorists, which has also been adopted by feminist theologians, is that while they position their work vis-à-vis communities of women “who are struggling against the oppressive logic of phallogentrism” (Jones 45), their principal audience has been and continues to be, by virtue of their medium of communication, academic feminists. While the delivery of literary criticism, and for the purposes of my examination, feminist biblical scholarship, traditionally appears in scholarly journals or texts,³⁷ unwillingness to transcend the boundaries of this genre for the sake of reaching a wider readership can hinder the circulation of knowledge and weaken the cultural relevance of the theory. Maurice Berger explains, “Each critical discipline is governed by different histories, priorities, goals, audiences, and schedules – factors that can, in the end, effect [sic] the critic’s ability to lead, follow, evaluate, or even recognize cultural trends” (5), so that to write for the benefit of academic audiences occludes access to the general population of readers. Hindering the circulation of feminist ideas by using traditional scholarly mediums of discourse is especially dangerous to their agenda since their ideas are intended to affect more than half of the world’s population. While scholars

³⁷ In addition to the three fictional literary works upon which I have focused my project, the bibliography following this chapter clearly identifies scholarly journals, texts and anthologies as the primary genre for communicating feminist biblical ideology. Besides fictional rewritings of biblical histories and creative reinterpretations of biblical narratives, such as Alicia Suskin Ostriker’s poetry/prose/essay-styled text, *The Nakedness of the Fathers* and Fiorenza’s appropriation of Black women’s poetry to enrich her theological project, there is little significant biblical criticism that is not communicated using formal academic writing. For other examples of short, creative reinterpretive stories see Naomi Graetz, *S/He Created Them: Feminist Retellings of Biblical Stories*, Jill Hammer, *Sisters at Sinai*, and Miriam Therese Winter, *The Gospel According to Mary*.

continuously conceive of new ideas about varying topics, the structure they use to present their research is inflexible and predictable; convincing and logically presented, yet apathetic in tone. Criticism must be willing to evolve both in content and structure if it intends to maintain its social relevance. Insisting on the necessary mutability of both criticism's structure and content, American novelist Joyce Carol Oates writes, "Criticism is itself an art form, and like all art forms it must evolve or atrophy and die. There can be, despite the conservative battle cry of 'standards,' no criticism for all time, nor even for much time" (qtd. in Berger 3). Oates identifies the temporality not only of scholarly ideas and knowledge, but also of form, because while there is a call for 'standards' in the communication of information, critics must be willing to submit both content and form to change in order to appeal to diverse audiences. If feminist biblical criticism is meant to circulate new knowledge regarding, among others, women's roles in the church, female power and autonomy, and women's relationships with God and Christ, what relevance does this criticism bear in contemporary society if theorists are writing to be accessed only by one another?

That critics tend to engage in dialogue primarily with other scholars is a theory most notably supported by the type of elitist language they use in their published works. Whether theorists consciously *intend* to limit their readership to the educated 'few' is outweighed by the exclusive language with which they consciously choose to articulate their theses. According to William Cain,

theorists are too content to write for one another, dispute one another's positions, and provide occasions for further re-statements of familiar platforms and debates. They are not seeking a means to renovate and

reaffirm the discipline, but rather are speaking in a privileged discourse to other members of a highly visible coterie. (244)

The process of academic exchange between theorists complicates the relationship between audience and accessibility and calls into question the exclusivity and consequent function of scholarly writing. Academic writing's categorization as privileged discourse immediately signals the exclusivity of the language used and the inaccessibility that faces non-academics, or the "unprivileged." According to Berger, academic writing is "often directed at tiny, highly informed, and partisan audiences" (5), and by virtue of its own self-inflicted handicap, suffers denunciation. Analyzing the Bible from a feminist perspective, for example, has the potential to affect the way in which millions of Christians, Jews, and others view the Scriptures, and given the powerful influence that the Bible has over billions of people, this criticism is clearly meant to be socially relevant to a wider audience than academe. Regarding the style and structure of academic writing with reference to audience and accessibility, Berger writes,

The academization of criticism – the growing inclination of many critics over the past thirty years to base their arguments on abstruse theoretical models – has also contributed to the marginalization of serious criticism. It is not theory per se that is the problem; rather, it is the tendency of even the most experienced critics to slip into the jargon and mimic the style of the awkwardly written or translated treatises that influenced them. Critical writing – whether specialized or academic, online or in print – has all too often become bad writing. (8, 9)

Berger's notion of "bad writing" refers to that which is grammatically incoherent, convoluted and/or most importantly, incomprehensible. This is not to say that all conventional academic writing has become "bad writing," nor does it suggest that academic writing lacks value; indeed its theoretical content and formal structure has been

vital to the articulation and dissemination of centuries of social and literary criticism and provides building blocks upon which contemporary scholars foot their new ideas.

However, in terms of audience accessibility, both to the physical text and to the language used by its author, a barrier exists that can be remedied by a more user-friendly genre.

Berger clearly states that his issue is not with theory itself but rather that the models used by scholars to articulate their theories, according to his research, has led to the ‘marginalization of serious criticism,’ or information that has been ‘lost in translation.’³⁸

To be consistent with their principles, feminist biblical critics should attempt to reject the type of elitist discourse that affirms the “alienating obscurity of theory” (Berger 10), since its function is to subvert elitism and hierarchical structures that reward those who have been historically privileged. After all, what is the function of criticism if it cannot be read and responded to by a wide readership, especially when its ideas have the potential to destabilize traditional ideologies regarding gender and power hierarchies, renegotiate the place of women in religion, and question the blindness with which we accept dominant historical narratives? Feminist biblical revisionists Diamant, Edghill, and George choose to articulate their theoretical viewpoints through the fiction novel, a genre that uses inclusive and accessible language, which is flexible in structure, and permits, as my later consideration of Mikhail Bakhtin’s research demonstrates, the expression of multiple points of view.

³⁸ Many critical theorists reject coherence as a matter of principle. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha justifies using complex and elusive jargon to theorize the construction of identity and attack the notion of binary oppositions – traditionally defined in terms of centre and margin, civilized and savage, and so on – and suggests that cultures interact and transform each other in a much more complex manner than simple binary oppositions allow. See Maurice Berger’s assessment of Homi Bhabha’s ratification of elusive jargon in *The Crisis of Criticism*, pp. 9.

While few would say that they read academic texts for leisure the novel permits the writer to convey both theory and entertainment in the same work.³⁹ For example, The Red Tent landed on the New York Times Bestseller list, which signifies its overwhelming appeal to a broad audience despite its somewhat controversial handling of biblical narrative. By tightly weaving her criticism of recorded history with biblical narrative, and critiquing the omission and/or devaluation of women from both, Diamant uses the fictive space of the novel to theorize the Bible from a feminist perspective and circulate her thesis to an audience that reaches beyond academic feminists and theologians. Using novels, or what are known as “thesis novels,” to communicate literary and social criticism dissolves the boundaries between high and low culture and those that determine who has access to what kinds of information. In their thesis novels, Diamant, Edghill, and George are able to present theoretical points using “popular speech” (Bakhtin 23), rather than specialized jargon with which a reader must be familiarized before being able to access the text’s main ideas. These revisionist texts bridge fictional representations and social commentary, and in doing so they test the utility of imaginative representation in the communication of theoretical ideas.

Since Virginia Woolf’s envisioning of the development of a more distinctly feminine mode of writing “through the development of a ‘woman’s sentence’” (Booker 90), French and American feminists have been theorizing the possibility of developing

³⁹ In his famous dictum, with particular reference to poetry, since the novel in its contemporary form had not yet been developed, the ancient philosopher Horace (65-8 B.C.) declares that literature’s ultimate aim is “dulce et utile,” or to be sweet and useful. The best writings, he argues, “both teach and delight” (qtd. in Bressler 21). Horace argues that writers “must understand their audience: The learned reader may want to be instructed, whereas others may simply read to be amused” (qtd. in Bressler 21). The point is that literature, whether poetry or prose, has the potential to both entertain and instruct.

new feminine forms of expression. Hélène Cixous' notion of *l'écriture féminine*, or women's writing, insists that feminine language is related not to biological gender but to certain "antipatriarchal modes of thought" (Booker 91). She argues that women need to use a language and mode of writing that can carry out the boundary-blurring, patriarchy-destabilizing mandate of feminist scholarship; both content and form should support feminist discourse. Cixous is concerned with the ways that language and modes of expression can be a tool for the "revolutionary enactment of social change" (Booker 93). She optimistically proclaims the powerful political potential of feminist literature when she declares, "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments" (Cixous 258). Unlike Kristeva, who is skeptical of the notion of a separate woman's language and who therefore prefers to write within the existing, dominant system of discourse, Xavière Gauthier argues that men and women must write differently, but that for women's language and writing to enact any level of social change, it must "exceed and elude traditional male language" (Booker 90). She writes, "Women are, in fact, caught in a very real contradiction. Throughout the course of history, they have been mute...As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt" (162, 163). Biblical revisionist writers, however, demonstrate that the successful appropriation of traditional male discourse can effectively convey their theoretical agenda without subduing or alienating them. By virtue of the fact that the novel genre widens their readership,

redeploying a traditionally male mode of writing can be seen as actually advancing their ideas. Pointing toward the benefits of feminists' responding to literature by speaking the same literary language, or in other words, using fictional narratives to theorize literature, Catherine Pastore Blair writes,

As a language for literary theory and criticism, metaphor and narrative reach out, permeate boundaries, [and] find correspondences. Articulating theory in the language of literature, of dream, and of imagination, which may very well be the site of its creation, is a refusal to ape at objectivity and tidiness we don't possess, opting instead for accessibility and emotion. (12, 13)

Narrative, metaphor, and imagination can, according to Blair, do the same critical work as academic writing; in fact, she suggests that for feminist theorists, narrative appears the most fitting mode of theoretical discourse because it actually pushes the structural boundaries of genre while simultaneously exploring alternate historical and contemporary possibilities for women.

The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene present their biblical and social critiques using language that is not only accessible, but also emotionally powerful, and that is therefore meant to have an impact on readers who empathize with and relate to the female protagonists in each text. The novel genre allows for various levels of association: dialogue and connections exist between characters within the texts, and between the characters and the reader. These types of emotional connections and investments cannot be made in scholarly writing, first because there are only concepts, not characters, with which to identify, and second, because as a rule, scholarly writing rejects emotive language and advocates persuasion through the presentation of a logical, cohesive argument. Alternately, these feminist revisionist writers strive to write in a voice

endless task of looking after baby boys, who were forever peeing into the corners of the tents, no matter what you told them” (2, 3). The novel repeatedly describes women’s work within the family’s camp as skilled and unrelenting, and explains that since it requires effort and organization, women actually prefer when men are absent from the domestic sphere. The women do not trespass into the men’s public realm because they possess little knowledge of that realm; likewise, the novel explains that men have no knowledge about the order and functions of running a household and their presence within the women’s domain is intrusive. For example, when the men in Jacob’s household return home from the fields in preparation for the household’s departure from Laban’s camp, Dinah explains that the tents became filled “with the unaccustomed noise and tension of so many men in our midst” (100). The “relentless presence of her sons” becomes a “nuisance” (100) to Leah because the men know nothing about “the work of wool and bread and beer” (100). Dinah explains that the presence of men in the tents proved problematic because although women held the most knowledge and, subsequently, power in the private sphere, the women could not order the men to work, so preparations took longer than necessary. Dinah relates, “The tents were Leah’s domain, and although she was the one who knew what needed to be done, she would not give orders with her husband by her side. So she stood behind Jacob and softly asked, ‘Is my husband ready to dismantle the big loom and lay it into the cart?’ and he would direct his sons to do what was needed” (100). Preferring men to sleep or tend animals in the fields while they engage in their daily tasks, Leah and her sisters view the men’s infringement of the realm of domesticity as a hindrance to their preparations for

departure, which underscores the value of gendered realms to the women in Jacob's household.

In The Red Tent, Diamant repeatedly praises the unique knowledge of women within the private sphere and, in particular, within the red tent, where women's biological functions are demystified and celebrated. From the beginning of the novel, Diamant portrays women as naturopaths and healers, who use herbs to cure diseases, heal wounds (121), prevent pregnancy (64), ease childbirth (40, 70) and pregnancy symptoms (176), and lure bees to produce honey (48). They are hardworking and knowledgeable about babies, cooking, spinning, and weaving: "the camp was always well run, clean, provisioned, and busy. The spinning never ceased, the garden flourished, and the herbs were plentiful" (29), but that is only a glimpse of women's capabilities and knowledge to which men are not privy. Dinah's experiences with her mother, aunts and other women in the camp, and her coming-of-age primarily occur within "the ruddy shade of the red tent, the menstrual tent" (3), where women were relegated by men during menstruation and childbirth, two mysterious female biological functions that involve the spilling of blood, because they were considered by Law to be "unclean." Within this female sphere the older women pass on to Dinah, their only daughter, their memories, stories, and female knowledge – about birth, menstruation, midwifery, herbs – and make her "swear to remember" (2). It is within this space where Dinah learns the craft of obstetrics from Inna, the midwife (176, 177), and how to use the tools in a midwife's kit, including "the knife, the string, reeds for suction, amphorae of cumin, hyssop, and mint oil" (40). It is a rudimentary doctor's kit, but its tools, used properly by a knowledgeable woman, have

the ability to save lives. Knowledge about childbirth is unknown to men, but women share this life-giving knowledge with one another within the privacy and safety of this female space. From Inna and her aunt Rachel Dinah learns, in addition to bedside manner, “what to do when the baby presented itself feet first, and what to do when the baby came too fast and the mother’s flesh tore and festered. She learned how to keep a stillborn’s mother from giving up her spirit in despair. And how, when a mother died, to cut open the womb and save the child within” (47). In the tent women became a part of “the great mother mystery, which is bought with pain and repaid with an infant’s sparkling smile” (52). The mystery of motherhood, however, is not the only unique and empowering female experience about which men remained ignorant.

The men know nothing about women’s secret knowledge and dealings in the red tent, including their prayers to the ancient female deities of their foremothers or their “ceremonies and sacrifices” (174). Rachel states that men are “too stupid to suspect anything. I don’t think even the subtlest among them realizes what we know and do among ourselves” (64). Everything that happens and all things spoken of by women in the red tent are unknown to men not only because they are ‘too stupid’ but also because, by Law, men are forbidden from entering the red tent lest they become contaminated by women’s “uncleanness” during times of blood flow. Dinah’s retelling of her mother’s, aunts’ and her own experiences in the tent say nothing about uncleanness. Instead, the red tent is where women communally experience their menstrual cycles, tell stories, gossip about men, and give birth “on the bricks” (59), with their weight supported by other women. Within the red tent, women celebrate their biological differences from men,

including menstruation, which enables them to exercise godlike power as life-givers.

Men did not know that while daughters were valueless to them, women rejoiced in the tent at the birth of other life-givers – baby girls. Dinah describes the ways in which her mothers honoured her after she was born:

While Leah slept, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah took me out into the moonlight and put henna on my feet and hands, as though I were a bride. They spoke a hundred blessings around me, north, south, east, and west, to protect me against Lamashtu and the other baby-stealing demons. They gave me a thousand kisses ... After the birth of a boy, mothers rested from one moon to the next, but the birth of a birth-giver required a longer period of separation from the world of men. "The second month was such a delight," my mother told me. "My sisters treated us both like queens... We oiled your skin morning and night. We sang songs into your ears, but did not coo or babble. We spoke to you with all our words, as though you were a grown sister and not a baby girl." (68)

Their rejoicing at Dinah's birth mirrors the commemorating ritual she experiences during her first menstruation and transition from 'child' to 'woman' (170-175). Like its depiction of childbirth, the novel's portrayal of menstruation overturns the Bible's insistence that it is an impure or unclean thing that signifies women's inferiority (Exum 138) and weakness. The first menstruation is commemorated because it represents not only a girl's passage into womanhood, but that this passage fortifies her with a power that no man will ever exercise. While the red tent is where men think women go to wait out their unclean cycles in pain and suffering, women know it as the place where their knowledge and power is venerated. Leah explains to Dinah,

The great mother whom we call Innana gave a gift to woman that is not known among men, and this is the secret of blood. The flow at the dark of the moon, the healing blood of the moon's birth – to men, this is flux and distemper, bother and pain. They imagine we suffer and consider themselves lucky. We do not disabuse them. In the red tent, the truth is known. In the red tent, where days pass like a gentle stream, as the gift of

Innana courses through us, cleansing the body of last month's death, preparing the body to receive the new month's life, women give thanks – for repose and restoration, for the knowledge that life comes from between our legs, and that life costs blood I will make sure that you are welcomed into the woman's life with ceremony and tenderness. Fear not. (158, 159)

Whereas men, in their ignorance, know nothing about the life-giving and sustaining work, knowledge, expertise, strength, spirit, and passion that comprise woman, 'the truth' of these female attributes are celebrated as sacred, spiritual, and powerful in the red tent. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that since men have used their assessment of the female body and its biological functions to justify their subordination and 'othering' of women, this type of renegotiation of women's bodies away from a symbol of marginalization and inferiorization and toward a positive understanding of their bodily experiences and biological differences is empowering. She writes, "Insofar as ... [women] appropriate their own experiences, such as ... menstruation, as a positive and creative rhythm of ebb and flow, they must do so in contradiction to the male hermeneutic of their ... experience imposed on them by the dominant culture" (114). The Red Tent's female characters' appropriation of their uniquely female capabilities from this vantage point represents one way in which their knowledge and corporeal experiences empower them in a society where women are perceived as powerless.

Since it is where women go to experience those powerful female processes of menstruation and childbirth that originate in "the three-cornered [space] of woman's sex" (25), the red tent is a metaphoric vagina that belongs solely to women; it is a domestic and purely female space in which life is born and female knowledge and power is celebrated. Unlike the female body, which can be dominated by men through sex, the red

tent is the only female space that is impenetrable by men and the only place where women's power never has to yield to the presence of men. In fact, women's power supersedes the authority of men inside the red tent. When Laban's ransacking of Jacob's tents in search of his stolen teraphim, a collection of idols, proves unsuccessful, "there was nowhere left for him to search except the red tent" (117). Dinah explains, "It was unthinkable that a healthy man would walk of his own will inside [the tent]" (117), yet Laban opens the flap and walks in, glancing around the tent "nervously, not meeting any of the women's eyes" (117). Whereas Leah had to submit her domestic power and authority in the presence of her husband in the private sphere, Laban's penetration of the red tent actually inverts the patriarchal power hierarchy and renders Laban speechless and defeated. Dinah explains,

Rachel stood up from her place on the straw. She did not drop her eyes as she addressed her father. Indeed, she stared straight into his face, and without anger or fear or any apparent emotion she said, "I took them, Father. I have all of the teraphim ... I sit upon them. The teraphim of our family now bathe in my monthly blood, by which your household gods are polluted against redemption. You can have them if you wish ... I will dig them out and even wipe them off for you if you like, Father. But their magic has been turned against you." No one drew a breath as Rachel spoke. Laban's eyes widened and he began to tremble. He stared at his beautiful daughter, who seemed to glow in the rosy light that filtered through the tent ... Laban turned and shuffled out of our sight. (117, 118)

While Rachel and the rest of the women view their menstrual cycle as powerful, Rachel deploys the stigma of female uncleanness, created by male lawmakers, against Laban. While men view menstruation as a sign of weakness, sin, uncleanness, and inferiority, Rachel uses her menstrual blood to silence Laban and destabilize his authority in the presence of women. The novel's praise of women's knowledge and power within the

domestic sphere not only demonstrates that this power is significant but also suggests that, especially given the text's description of women's biological power and knowledge, it actually rivals the social and political power that their male counterparts have outside the household's camp. Diamant's detailed look into the craft of midwifery and depiction of the domestic skills and reproductive power of the female body through her recreation of Dinah's story indicate that although their knowledge and power are unrecorded and, hence, are devalued in the Bible, biblical women should, nevertheless, be remembered as exercising power and authority alongside that of men.

In the same way that The Red Tent fills in the Bible's gaps in Dinah's narrative and portrays her and her mothers as knowledgeable and powerful within the domestic sphere, Queenmaker rounds out the story of Michal, David's first wife, and describes how she translates her power in the domestic sphere into political power at the end of the novel. Although she is a princess, the Bible depicts Michal as a woman who "neither speaks nor initiates action, but rather is the object of the two men's political manoeuvring over the kingship" (Exum 44). In her analysis of the text, Cheryl Exum argues that Michal is "hemmed in" narratively:

The scenes where she is a subject are surrounded by scenes in which she is "acted upon", first by her father, then by her husband – just as she is hemmed in by the men's political machinations. Significantly, the scene in which Michal acts autonomously as "David's wife" is surrounded by accounts in which she is "acted upon" by her father Saul; and the scene in which she acts autonomously as "Saul's daughter" is framed by accounts where she is "acted upon" by her husband David. This narrative imprisonment underscores the impossibility of autonomy for Michal. (45)

Edghill's novel likewise depicts Michal as a strong-willed woman who, try as she might, cannot seem to act autonomously and exercise any authority in the public realm, even as

queen. She does, however, exercise knowledge and power within the domestic sphere, first within Phaltiel's house, and second in the women's quarters in David's palace. After her father, King Saul marries her off against her will to Phaltiel, a man twice her age, Michal dreams about David coming to rescue her (62); however, her dreams are squelched when she hears of David's marriage to Abigail (67). Fuelled by pride and pain, Michal resolves to be content with Phaltiel whom she begins to love for the way he cherishes her (71), encourages her to speak freely, and praises her "womanly wisdom" (73). She learns to live comfortably in Phaltiel's house where she realizes that being with him provides her a life of usefulness, contentment (72) love, and peace (75). As a child, Michal is a princess who has attendants waiting on her, but as Phaltiel's wife, she does not experience any royal privileges. Instead, she learns the value of working hard with her hands. Regarding her role in the domestic sphere, Michal explains, "the household was mine to order as I thought fit, and to do so gave me more pleasure than I had expected to find in such work" (73). Far from being restrictive and subordinating, her household responsibilities, which included raising Phaltiel's youngest son, Caleb, and assisting labouring women, give Michal a sense of purposefulness.

In lesser detail than The Red Tent conveys, Queenmaker describes the domestic sphere as women's sphere of influence and depicts the hierarchical structure that exists within this private space. As Phaltiel's wife, Michal has authority over the household, including other women in the house. She not only engages in manual tasks, such as cooking and sewing, but also assigns chores to other women and oversees their completion. Her domestic authority in Phaltiel's humble household translates over to

David's palace in Jerusalem. When Michal arrives in the women's quarters of the palace and finds the maids useless and disorderly, she demonstrates her ability to take charge of servants and uses her authority as David's queen to whip them into action:

The maids who surrounded me seemed to have no proper notions at all ... I counted to three, and breathed deep and slow, and then I flung back my veil and spoke sharp words. "See King David like this, with dust up to my eyes and my hair a nest for bees? Is that a fit way for him to welcome the daughter of Saul – or for her to greet the king of Judah?" They stood all round-eyed; I stamped my foot. "Fools, do you truly not know how to serve a woman weary with travel? I will see the king, but not until I have washed my body and oiled my hair and changed my linen. Now go and ready a bath, that I may prepare myself to receive King David." I clapped my hands hard and the silly girls scattered, noisy as partridges to do my bidding ... I did not think overmuch of the way David's wives kept his state. I did better for Phaltiel with less – and my handmaids did not gape and giggle at visitors. (94, 95)

In David's palace, Michal's work consists only of ordering handmaids, and she curses the idle life of a queen. Importantly, Queenmaker demonstrates that a top-ranking woman within the private sphere does not retain any of her power when she attempts to parlay her domestic power into public influence.

Assuming that the position as King David's queen would give Michal a certain level of power within his household, David repeatedly promises to elevate Michal's status during the years she spends in Jerusalem: "Whatever you wish, that you shall have – you are my first wife, and I will put aside all others if you ask it. Come, and I will set a crown upon your head and you will walk first among all the women of Israel and Judah" (97). Michal's power in David's household differs from that which she experiences in Phaltiel's house. Under Phaltiel's roof, Michal is responsible for maintaining order in the house and she is rewarded by Phaltiel with respect. Under David's roof, Michal has the

power to ask David for material possessions, and she ranks first among his wives, but in terms of receiving love and respect, David comes up short. Like The Red Tent, Queenmaker distinguishes between a woman's power in the domestic sphere and her powerlessness in the public sphere. Michal's power to ask David for "anything" and her authority over the wives in the women's quarters, she learns, does not translate into political power, even for a queen. Whereas the women in The Red Tent are empowered by their domestic knowledge and skills, for Michal, knowledge and power within the women's quarters of David's palace prove useless. David promises to give her any material object she desires, assuming that material objects, jewellery, and clothing are all that women want, but when it comes to fulfilling her desire to return to Phaltiel, he not only dismisses her, but has Phaltiel killed to silence her request and force her attention toward him (143-146). Although she is Queen and ranks highest in the domestic sphere, she is politically powerless: she is powerless to send a message to Phaltiel, to leave the palace, to prevent Phaltiel's murder, to convince the prophet Nathan of David's treachery, and, most importantly, to outwit David and subvert his authority over her. With each lie, treachery, villainy, and betrayal David commits, Michal reiterates her own ignorance about his capabilities, saying, "I thought I knew all of what David was, but I was wrong. I knew nothing, then" (113). Throughout Edghill's narrative, we witness Michal's worthy attempts to assert her will, gain independence from David, and subvert his authority, and repeatedly we witness him vanquishing her attempts by wielding his kingly power. Time and again Michal responds with, "I should have known" (140) and "I knew nothing ... I was still blind" (141). Queenmaker, however, is a novel about

Michal's increasing vision and her awakening to knowledge. Her handmaid Zhurleen points out that if she exercises 'women's power' she will get what she wants:

You have a woman's power, Michal. Only find what David wants of you, and give it to him – and it will be some easy thing, for men think women have nothing, and so they ask for little when they could have much. And when you know what the king desires from you, why, make it a gift to him, and give it graciously. Then he will spread the world before your feet for you to tread upon. (131, 132)

While Michal initially misinterprets Zhurleen's instructions, she eventually learns that in order to subvert David's power over her and exercise her will she must first comply with his authority. Zhurleen's definition of 'women's power' is cryptic, but throughout Queenmaker we learn that, in David's house, this power encompasses not physical force, which is "man's power" (131; 359), but patience (177; 276), wit (359), listening skills (245), manipulation (220; 362-367), the ability to stroke a man's ego (216), sacrifice (175), silence (245), obedience (161), and sexuality (152). When David threatens to lock her away and call her "mad" in response to her "weeping and wailing for [Phaltiel]" (149), Michal resolves to pretend to love him and go willingly to his bed. She explains, "I was not mad; my mind was clear as well-water ... I saw the path I might tread to safety, and to David's undoing" (151). While her initial plan to have David punished by the prophet Nathan for killing Phaltiel fails, her effort brings her closer to her acquisition and appropriation of 'male knowledge' and her ability to exercise 'women's power.' While ranking highest among the women in terms of domestic knowledge and power does not permit Michal to yield power in the public realm, Queenmaker depicts Michal's ability to transcend her gendered limitations and assert her will, not only over her husband, but also in choosing David's successor to the throne.

Michal initially asks God to grant her vengeance against David; however, it is not vengeance but the appropriation of male knowledge in combination with “women’s power” that eventually enables Michal to assert her political agenda. When her heart cries that she would never “learn David’s wisdom,” she writes, “There was another voice within me. A voice that whispered soft, like silk... *You must. Bow before him*, that soft voice told me. *Give him what he wants now, and wait. Someday*, it hissed. *Someday*” (175; original italics). Michal eventually begins to “think as David might” (218) and learns “how David moved his playing-pieces” (320), and by combining his logic and strategy she learns how to subvert his authority and to use his power against him. By exercising Zhurleen’s ‘womanly power’ and combining it with her newly acquired male knowledge, Michal eventually succeeds at wielding political power. She explains that “a man’s weapons are sword and spear; a woman’s her wits” (359) and she uses them to gain “what [she] once prayed for with every beat of [her] heart – [not] power over David” (365) but “freedom” from his control (366). Foucault describes power “not as a property, but as a strategy ...; [the dominating effects of which] are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings” (*Discipline* 26). Michal learns ‘the manoeuvres and tactics’ that are necessary to ensure that her political agenda, that is, the crowning of her pseudo-son Solomon, is carried out. She writes, “*Solomon is the future. Oh yes. Solomon. My son. The son Yahweh gave to me. To me, not to David*” (292; original italics). While 1 Kings, chapter 1 indicates that Bathsheba follows the prophet Nathan’s advice and petitions David for Solomon’s inheritance of the throne, Queenmaker explains that Solomon’s future was Michal’s

“care” and her “will” (291). She manipulates David using the skills that she painfully learned from him, participates in what the text describes as male forms of bargaining with Nathan to obtain his blessing for Solomon’s kingship, and secures the throne for the man to whom she is a second mother. At the end of the novel, Michal physically takes the kingship, symbolized by the King’s seal-ring, from the dying David and gives it to Solomon. Literally, Michal is a “Kingmaker,” a right only exercised by kings and prophets. Queenmaker demonstrates that although Michal appears to be politically powerless from within the domestic sphere, she learns men’s rules, including trickery and manipulation, and combines them with ‘women’s power’ in order to effect political change.

Whereas The Red Tent recognizes women’s knowledge and biological power within the domestic sphere, and Queenmaker demonstrates that women can affect political change by combining their knowledge with that of men while maintaining their place within the private sphere, Mary, Called Magdalene signifies a shift in women’s knowledge and power away from domesticity toward an actively public role alongside men. While Michal asserts power in both the private and public spheres without physically transcending the barrier between the two social realms, Mary must physically leave the private sphere behind in order to participate in the public sphere. At an early age, Mary feels like she is “being called or chosen by God” (199), but when her father dismisses her visions and snidely tells her, “God would not call you” (4, 5), Mary resolves to lead an ordinary and traditional life for a woman, which includes marriage, housekeeping, motherhood, and hosting religious celebrations at her home. She takes

pride in her role as Elisheba's mother because she views it as the only meaningful and "important thing" (101) available to women, but wifehood appear to run counter to her inherent independence, curiosity, and desire for something 'more'. She writes, "Suddenly it seemed that all this – the carefully laid table, the oil lamps freshly filled and burning, the sweet-scented rushes – was a waste of timeA lonely road that stretched on endlessly" (101, 102). When she becomes possessed by several demons, she leaves her home and family, and travels, accompanied by fishermen Simon and Andrew, to the desert to rid herself of her affliction. Near death and in search of John the Baptizer for help, she reunites with Simon and Andrew beside the Jordan River and meets Jesus, who successfully and permanently exorcises her demons. Jesus calls Mary to join him in his ministry; she is the first woman chosen, and the third disciple next to Simon and Andrew. Actively participating in Jesus' ministry fulfills her desire to engage in important work, but she doubts her ability to follow him because of her gender. In her consideration of women in contemporary society, Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that any hesitation to engage in activity outside the home is the consequence of self-doubt that has been indoctrinated into women's minds for millennia:

Women find their own viewpoints and judgements of events trivialized, and this trivialization is justified on the grounds that women are inherently stupid, uninformed, lacking in authority, and incapable of forming significant understandings. Thus they are alienated from their own minds, from being able to trust their own perceptions. These judgements upon the woman's body and mind are, in turn, used to justify women's exclusion from cultural opportunities and leadership. (114)

By virtue of her gender, Mary not only doubts her ability to follow Jesus and to respond when he asks her for her opinion about the Messiah (204), but also she stutters when he

invites her to speak openly about herself (201). Echoing her father's denunciation of her vision of being called by God and voicing the patriarchal perception of women at the time, Nathanael, a man whom Jesus calls to discipleship after Mary, objects to her position as a disciple, saying, "You can't join him anyway, you're a woman. You can't be a disciple. There is no such thing as a woman disciple ... And even if there were, you're married. You can't leave your family. Then you'd surely be stoned, as a prostitute. Jesus couldn't have meant it when he invited you" (213). This tension between Mary's domestic responsibilities as a wife and mother and her desire to follow Jesus leads her to oscillate between the public and private realms. While in the company of Jesus and the other male disciples, she states that she longs to return home, but when "her old life beckoned" (234) and she tries to leave Jesus the first time, she hesitates and says, "I cannot return just at this moment. I am not strong enough ... to leave [my family again] ... to help you in your mission" (233, 234). While she is homesick and longs to see her family, she foresees the complications she will face if, once she returns, she decides to leave her family and follow Jesus (243). She is tempted by her old life with her daughter and the rest of her family, where she fulfills her expected roles as wife and mother, but she senses that Jesus' invitation to be his disciple and participate in his public ministry fulfills her vision of being called by God. Mary, Called Magdalene demonstrates, however, that for women, maintaining both a domestic and public role simultaneously is not complicated, but impossible.

Mary's life in the public sphere along with Jesus and the rest of his disciples becomes not only her choice but also a consequence of her family's rejection of her for

her belief in the authenticity of Jesus' ministry and for associating with him and his other male disciples. While it is, as Nathanael iterates above, natural for men to be disciples and participate actively in the public realm, Mary's faith in Jesus and desire to follow him is, according to her husband and father, unnatural and a sign of possession and madness. Rather than thanking Jesus for healing Mary, her husband, Joel, believes that Jesus is "in league" with demons and has deceived his wife. When she tells Joel that she wants to "repay" Jesus and "help him as he's helped me" (257) by assisting him in his ministry, Joel verbally divorces her, saying, "I have no wife" (258). Joel abandons Mary at the moment that she is functioning again, but with new priorities, interests, and a new sense of confidence and purpose. Her father, Nathan, believing Mary has been bewitched by Jesus, begins to "tear at his robes in a ceremonial act of mourning" (257), crying,

Mary, my daughter ... alone with all those men for a month. Waiting on *this* man. She's shamed, and dishonoured, and we cannot take her back ... She must be dead to us ... She's dead to us! ... Shamed, shamed! To live with men in the desert is a disgrace, a sin! [Joel] you cannot take her back! (257, 258; original italics)

Nathan and Joel both divorce Mary and cast her out of the family, calling her a disgrace to the family and "a whore" (258), and strip her of her rights to her daughter, Elisheba. Mary says to Jesus, "I do not want this. I do not want to lose my daughter, or have my husband cast me aside" (260); yet, choosing to participate in the public realm, by following Jesus and supporting him in his ministry, means sacrificing her domestic life. When she returns to Magdala for the second time, her family and community treat her like an outcast. Her brother, Eli, calls her "a shame and a scandal" (328). Even the women in Mary's family denounce her. Believing the third-hand gossip that renders

that is, in Carol Christ's words, "passionate, personal, political and scholarly, and reflective" (qtd. in Blair 12), the combination of which can be achieved in the novel.

Maurice Berger explains that the strongest criticism is that which

is capable of engaging, guiding, directing, and influencing culture, even stimulating new forms of practice and expression ... The strongest criticism uses language and rhetoric not merely for descriptive or evaluative purposes but as means of inspiration, provocation, emotional connection, and experimentation. (11)

Diamant, Edghill, and George demonstrate that, in answer to Oates' call for evolution in critical theory, the novel is a 'new form of ... expression' that can be used to effectively express new theoretical platforms and debates, further the discipline, and influence culture without being too didactic in its delivery.

Bakhtin's analysis of the novel suggests that its value as a vehicle of developing theoretical discourse is inherent in the nature and structure of the genre. In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin argues that the novel is unique in nature because it "is the sole genre that continues to develop"; that is, as of yet, the "generic skeleton of the novel is still far from being hardened" and therefore "we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities" (3). Other genres are, according to Bakhtin, "fixed pre-existing forms into which one may then pour artistic experience" (3). Academic writing follows a rigid structural pattern: it begins with a formal introduction followed by a thesis statement, a definition of terms, an argument including necessary proof, and a conclusion. It varies in content yet the structure and tone remain fixed; expectations about form and delivery of scholarly texts and articles typically do not change either among or between disciplines. Unlike academic writing, the novel is not a "well-defined system of rigid generic factors"

(8) and, as a result, “experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable characteristic of the novel without adding a reservation, which immediately disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic” (8). Rather than functioning according to rigidly defined principles, the novel maintains a dynamic adaptive ability by continually challenging predefined notions of what it should be. It is therefore an inherently anti-authoritarian genre – “a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality” (*Dialogic* 39). Alicia Suskin Ostriker agrees with Bakhtin’s notion of the novel as the antiauthoritarian genre, and views it as the most effective mode for expressing feminist criticism since feminism continues to challenge ‘predefined notions’ of how women and gender relationships should be. She sees the creation of myths and cultural stories as “the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for ‘male’ and ‘female’ are stored” and argues that revisionist storytelling through the fictive space of the novel is the “‘major strategy’ whereby women writers ‘subvert and overcome’ the ‘oppressor’s language,’ which denies them access to authoritative expression” (qtd. in Blair 4). Demonstrating the necessity of the evolution of academic writing away from monotony and abstractness toward clarity and accessibility, Ostriker claims that “our critical discourse grows ever less capable of dealing with visionary artists as it grows ever more infatuated with pseudo-scientific postures and jargons” (qtd. in Blair 6). Consequently, her writing reflects her preference for the experiential and metaphoric over the abstract, and for revisionary mythmaking over the androcentric tradition (Blair 7), the possibilities for

which are endless in the novel. For Ostriker, fictional narrative articulated in the novel answers Oates' call for mutable and ever-evolving criticism so that the form or structure of the criticism reflects its dynamic content.⁴⁰ According to Bakhtin's research, the novel can become a space where theoretical dialogue is enacted precisely because, like literary criticism, which is ever-expanding and evolving, the novel is perpetually in the process of 'becoming.' By virtue of the fact that "the novel is the only developing genre," it therefore, according to Bakhtin, "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process" (*Dialogic* 7). The novel's fluidity, mutability, openness, inconclusiveness, and evolving structure facilitate contact with the "developing, incomplete, and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present" (*Dialogic* 17), which bears these same characteristics. By virtue of its analogous relationship to present reality, "with all its inconclusiveness, its indecision, its openness, [and] its potential" (*Dialogic* 18), novels play a significant role in "cultural critique and cultural formation and reformation" (Blair 12). They are especially useful to feminist writers whose research centres on revising, re-evaluating, and rethinking the present social positioning of women and reclaiming lost moments in women's histories. Whereas recorded history has, according to Ostriker, 'denied [women] access to authoritative expression,' women can find resolution and representation in contemporary fictional narratives. She argues that oppressed groups can find affirmation and life-giving sources in the novel because no other genre can accommodate social vision and revision as it can.

⁴⁰ The connection between form and content is borrowed loosely from Bakhtin's notion in "Discourse in the Novel" that "form and content in discourse are one" (*Dialogic* 259).

It provides room for alternative possibilities and hope for change because, as Bakhtin argues, it embodies change.

Women writers can use the novel not only to identify and unravel contemporary feminist issues – including women's alienation and subordination in society, politics, and religion – and effect change for the future, but also to re-think “the official story – the version that passes into history ... the one written by male writers” (Anderson, *Preface* vii), by making up new stories and engaging in their own truth-telling. For centuries, notes Lorna Sage, women writers have covertly and illegitimately been at “the sensitive core of ... fiction” (67), but that however successful or influential women writers may be, argues Nancy Miller, “literary history remains a male reserve, a history of writing by men” (qtd. in Anderson, *Preface* vii). The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene bridge the distance between recorded history and lost experience and, importantly, between the Bible's laconic introduction of Dinah, Michal and Mary Magdalene and their potentially rich and unrecorded experiences that amend and at times subvert Scripture. After their brief appearance in biblical narrative, their experiences and lives are closed off from readers. The ‘relevant’ part of their lives, their relationship to the key male figure of each narrative, is recorded, but their other valuable experiences, the ones they would have recorded if they had the ability and the confidence that their writings would have been preserved and valued, remain only in the realm of imagination. The narrative structure of the novel enables these revisionist biblical writers to make multiple contributions to feminist biblical theory. Most obviously, they reform biblical myths, account for the disappearance of women from the Bible and replace the masculine

hero-quest narrative with one that refocuses attention toward female knowledge and experiences. They bridge the distance between rejectionist and reinterpretationist theories by creating, out of existing biblical scripture, entirely new stories about their female protagonists, which ultimately serve to revalue female knowledge and invite their readers to think critically about what the absence of the female voice means for women in Judeo-Christian religions.

In addition to emphasizing that the unique knowledge and power maintained by Dinah and the women in her family within the domestic sphere signifies that despite their historical silencing these women were in no way historically powerless, The Red Tent critically analyzes memory and argues that the communication of history has been a gendered act. At the end of the novel, Dinah's brother Joseph explains that after she curses her father and brothers for their murderous deeds she was forgotten in the house of Jacob, which accounts for her disappearance from the Bible. Her story was not forgotten, however, among the women in the land. When she overhears her niece, Gera, retelling the story of Shechem's slaughter, unaware that Dinah is her aunt, Dinah asks,

“And what of the sister? ... The one who was loved by [Prince Shalem]?”
“That is a mystery,” said Gera. “I think she died of grief. Serah made up a song about her being gathered by the Queen of Heaven and turned into a falling star.”
“Is her name remembered?” I asked softly.
“Dinah,” she said. “I like the sound of it, don't you? Someday, if I am delivered of a daughter, I will call her Dinah.” (317)

For Dinah, being remembered is of utmost importance. She writes, “Gera had given me peace. The story of Dinah was too terrible to be forgotten” (317). Gera not only remembers Dinah's name but also plans to ensure that it is known and used by the next

generation. The fact that she plans to name her daughter “Dinah” demonstrates that preserving her memory can be achieved through the act of naming, a feminine form of remembering and embodying women’s history that triumphs even when the story is forgotten, through the act of not naming, by the male tradition of passing on history. Diamant asserts that the “truth” of Dinah’s relationship with Shalem, one that emphasizes their love, was remembered by women and kept alive (even if in a romanticized legend) as long as oral communication of history remained authoritative. Yet, by virtue of the fact that The Red Tent’s reconstruction of the story of Dinah differs from the official one written in the Bible, Diamant proposes that stories about women’s lives were lost when oral communication was replaced by men’s written accounts of history. Dinah introduces herself to her reader, saying, “We have been lost to each other for so long ... My memory is dust. This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing” (1). When ‘the word’, that is memories and histories passed from the keeping of women to that of men, Dinah explains that the chronicles of men became “well-known” (1) while the stories of women became whispered “secrets on pillows” (1). As long as men’s recorded histories are accepted unquestioningly by readers, women’s histories will continue to be silenced and rendered socially irrelevant. Diamant asserts then that though Dinah’s story may be “dead” to Jacob, to the author and narrator of the Book of Genesis, and consequently to generations of Bible readers, her story needs to be revalued and passed on through the contemporary reinterpretation and complete rewriting of the

biblical narrative to encourage readers to question the Bible's accuracy and gendered representation of women.

In addition to retelling the story of Michal from a perspective that challenges the Bible's version, Queenmaker likewise critiques from a feminist perspective the notion of truth and identifies the subjectivity of storytelling and recorded history. While The Red Tent openly states that women's histories were lost when men's versions became concretized in writing, Edghill's critique of narrative subjectivity is an undercurrent in the novel that emerges throughout Michal's narration. At the beginning of the novel, she writes, "I did not know then that words ... are more deadly than any spear" (22). While she refers to the ways in which David's "soft words" (22) would be used to keep her silent and obedient later in her life, her reflection can be applied also to the figurative 'murdering' of women's histories and voices that men's written words have perpetrated. Unlike The Red Tent, however, Queenmaker conspicuously advocates the essentiality of feminist revision and the retelling of history to destabilize that which has been passed down as 'truth' by arguing that like men, women can use words to shape reality. Michal explains that to the undiscerning listener or reader, "tale and truth sound the same" (65), which is what men have relied on in their selective compilation of history. Though history is a story of the past, it claims not to be fiction; however, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out that "'facts' are created by the narrative act of coding history and by the choice of narrative strategy ... In this view, the past is constituted as a domain of *representation*" rather than the truth about historical events (*But She Said* 81; italics added). Queenmaker supports Fiorenza's claim that we cannot merely take what history

says as absolute truth but must acknowledge its relativity and sift through its convolutions for traces of other unrecorded pasts and truths. At the end of the novel, Michal learns to use words to manipulate reality and shape truth (175) as David and other male voices of authority have done. She writes, “The future would be what I desired; I would shape it myself with words ... as David so often had” (361). Edghill not only criticizes the Bible for its incomplete and inaccurate account of Michal’s life but also advocates the feminist act of historical revision and the reshaping of reality and truth through words in order to trouble those ‘tales’ that have been accepted as ‘truth.’

Margaret George’s feminist criticism of the Bible takes two different shapes in Mary, Called Magdalene. George, like Diamant and Edghill, not only questions the relativity and subjectivity of recorded history (9) and engages in historical revision and narrative reconstruction in order to represent the apostolic life and preaching work of Mary Magdalene, but also criticises the gender bias of Scripture and religion by figuring Mary as an early feminist critic. George voices her criticism of the Bible’s unequal treatment of women through Mary and her struggle to come to terms with her visions and with her role in society and religion. Mary’s conviction that she has been called or chosen by God begins to wane when she considers the representation of women in the Scriptures and their relationship with God:

God has addressed Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Gideon, Solomon, Job, the prophets – but the only time he ever seemed to address a woman was to announce that she was to have a [male] baby! She was, suddenly, quite distressed, even as she struggled to refute that thought ... There must be a woman he spoke to, she thought. Some woman, somewhere, with a message that had nothing to do with childbearing. But she could not think of any. (61)

Given that Jesus represents change, which is signalled by the creation of a New Testament that is entirely Christ-centred, he preaches reformation in ideology and interpretation of the Scriptures. He tells Mary that her visions, none of which has anything to do with childbirth, are a “gift from God” (196), and trusts in the authenticity of her “revelations” (399) so much that, as I note in Chapter Two, he uses them to confirm his own visions. We can view visions in Mary, Called Magdalene as a female source of knowledge to the extent that we associate Jesus with femininity. The text seems to argue more convincingly, however, that divinely inspired visions are shared by those who are specifically chosen and blessed by God to receive special knowledge and to carry out His agenda. Given the revered positions that Jesus and his mother, Mary, have in Christianity, the novel's figuring of Mary Magdalene as a visionary alongside them exemplifies George's conviction that as a preacher, leader, and apostle, Mary deserves at least a comparable level of veneration.

Mary critiques not only God's refusal to speak to women and entrust them with knowledge and assignments beyond childbirth, but also questions the Scriptures' representation of women's experiences. When she agrees to marry Joel, Mary engages in a rudimentary form of feminist criticism when she recalls the scripture describing the act of marriage: ““Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife,’ scripture said. Again it only concerned the man and what he did, Mary thought. No mention of the woman he was clinging to, and what she felt” (71). Here, Mary identifies the barrier between women and Scripture and that its gendered language and male-centred narrative inhibits women from identifying with and finding comfort and

affirmation within its text. She reconciles this gulf between Scripture and women's stories by recording a testament of her life with Jesus to pass on to her daughter, Elisheba, not only to teach her about the Kingdom of God, but also to provide her with a female-centered narrative with which she can identify. "The Testament of Mary of Magdala, Called Magdalene," which George includes in segments at the end of the novel, begins as a letter to her daughter. It is both a personal story about her life as an apostle after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and, because she is a leader in the church at Ephesus by the time she writes it, an official document. It is a written record, conveying a female perspective, which Mary writes to insinuate female testaments into recorded history and challenge the traditional trajectory of remembering and passing on history. Her first-hand testament is meant to be as authoritative as those written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Margaret George's depiction of Mary differs significantly from the Mary Magdalene we read little about in the canonical gospels. She is not a repentant prostitute, nor does she simply provide financially for Jesus and his male apostles. She is a compelling and believable modern woman who engages in a critique of the Bible that is similar to the criticism of contemporary scholars. Unlike Dinah and Michal who can only engage in a criticism of memory, women's social positioning, and the notion of truth because they do not have an authoritative, written account of history to critique, Mary Magdalene has the benefit of temporal distance; she can critique the Torah because it is already formed by the time she is born. Identifying the lack of female-centered laws and experiences in the Scriptures to which she can relate Mary engages in the construction of

a new written history and records her experiences both to fit into the male tradition of history-making and to destabilize that tradition by including the female perspective.

Figuring Mary as an early feminist critic enables her story to be identifiable and relevant both to the society in which she lives and to contemporary readers of George's novel. Mary's desire to study the Torah and acquire a deeper knowledge of the Scriptures resembles the stunted desire of women in contemporary Judeo-Christian denominations to elevate their status in the Church. Mary disappointedly explains, "Girls could not attend the school [attached to her synagogue], since they could have no official place in religion. Her father had sternly repeated the rabbinical dictum, 'It would be better to see the Torah burnt than to hear its words upon the lips of women'" (8). Participation in Jesus' ministry affords Mary the opportunity to not only engage in conversations about Scripture, but also to publicly preach and teach the message about God's Kingdom and the apocalypse to both men and women. George's novel destabilizes traditional assertions that women should not hold authoritative positions in religion by affording Mary the same opportunity as the male apostles to talk about the Scriptures, publicly preach, perform miracles, and demonstrate that women are in no way inherently inferior to men. George validates Mary's critique of the Torah's exclusion of women by reminding readers of Jesus' rejection of gender inequality. She uses a direct quotation from the Bible to support her claims that women and men deserve equal opportunity and social and religious positioning, both in Mary's generation and in contemporary society (377; Gal. 3:28). Mary, Called Magdalene not only questions the authority and accuracy of recorded history and values the prominent position that Mary Magdalene held in Christ's

public ministry and early Church, but also critiques the Bible's unequal treatment of women and sanctions feminist criticism of the Bible by portraying Mary as a foremother of feminist biblical critics.

Through fiction, Diamant, Edghill, and George have found a way to contest and reconcile the silencing of these biblical women and disentangle masculine stories of “desire and power ... [from] the constitution of what we take as universal truth” (Anderson, *Preface* vii). These novels see through the male stories and weave through them alternative fictions to free their female characters from their old fixed identities (and the stories that contain them) so that we, as readers, can begin to imagine history differently. “Juxtaposing stories with other stories,” explains Linda Anderson, “or opening up the potentiality for multiple stories also frees the woman writer from the coercive fictions of her culture that pass as truth” (*Preface* vii). In their re-reading and re-visioning of biblical narrative, these novels combine recorded history with fiction to construct new stories containing new meanings in an effort to resurrect women's submerged past. Historians argue that “history cannot be given the status and authority of being objective or ‘real,’ determined by past events, standing outside or before its shaping into story. According to this radical critique historical narratives do not reveal meanings that are ... already ‘there’; rather they construct meaning just as fictional narratives do” (Anderson, *Re-Imagining* 131). History only exists as such when it is shaped into a story; it is within the space of storytelling where its meaning is constructed. Self-consciously fiction, these biblical revisionist novels are not concerned with relating unmediated or ostensibly “factual” accounts, only historical potentiality and possibility.

Through these novels the authors create an imaginative scene (the space of which is facilitated by the novel genre and cannot exist in academic writing) not so much to present facts as to help readers question the devaluation of the female experience in the Bible and open their minds to the possibility that recorded history is negotiable. Herein lies one of the key functions of fiction: While the authors are powerless to tear down this paradigm of oppression, voicelessness, and devaluation, they can reiterate that within this power-based hierarchy women have historically been held at a disadvantage. Their novels' function is to identify the lack of women's narrative representation in the Bible, to invite readers to question the accuracy of recorded history, and to open up the "generic boundary between history and fiction," construct new meanings, and release "woman into a life beyond her conventional confinement within the divisions and paradigms of patriarchal thinking" (Anderson, *Re-Imagining* 131).

The novel partially accommodates both Cixous' call for a feminine mode of discourse and Kristeva's claim that, since no such mode exists, women must work within the parameters of male discourse. The novel is also the most suitable choice for expressing not only feminist biblical theory in general, but specifically the hybridized theory, which combines rejectionist and reinterpretationist claims, that is at the centre of The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene. Bakhtin's discussion of the novel reveals how the incorporation of two seemingly contrary versions of Scriptural narrative and two opposing bodies of feminist biblical criticism can be possible only in novelistic form. In The Dialogic Imagination Bakhtin discusses his notion of the novelization of other genres; that is, that genres adapt particular features of the novel in

an effort to parody this ascending genre, and the novel, in turn, parodies other canonized genres. He suggests that in its ascension to a dominant status in contemporary literature, the novel has become infectious and possesses the power to not only influence other genres, but also to appropriate their various characteristics into its structure (*Dialogic* 7). The novel “sparks the renovation of all other genres [and] infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness” (*Dialogic* 7). Consequently, the novel genre is “critical” of other genres and “fated to revise the fundamental concepts” of these genres and their relationship to reality. It is “self-critical” too, since it resists structural closure and continues to be a “genre-in-the-making” (*Dialogic* 11). Bakhtin’s notion of novelization refers specifically to such genres as drama, epic poetry, and lyric poetry (*Dialogic* 5, 6) rather than scholarly writing; what we find working within the relationship between revisionist novels and scholarly essays is not so much the novelization of academic writing as it is the academization of the novel. These novels exist not only to tell an entertaining story but also to carry out a feminist criticism of the Bible that bridges the theoretical distance between rejectionist and reinterpretationist theories. They revise and add to existing Bible scripture, challenge the authority of the canon’s records and, more broadly, speak out against the devaluation and at times outright exclusion of women’s experiences from recorded history and the social consequences to women that arise thereof. They demonstrate, in accordance with Bakhtin’s theory on the function of fiction, that novels can effectively convey developing critical ideas and cause even the least academic reader to contemplate the purpose of the texts’ existences and their dominant messages.

Besides its limited linguistic accessibility, academic writing as the mode by which literary scholars convey their theories is also a monologic genre. While P.N. Medvedev/M.M. Bakhtin⁴¹ describes scholarly writing as on-going ideological dialogue between theorists (19, 20), each text, chapter, or journal article argues a thesis from the position of the writer whose project either entirely disproves or proves inadequate the theories of another. Although the author of theoretical articles is subjective in his or her choice of topic or argument, theoretical articles have stuck closely to traditional structure and rhetoric. With its emphasis on singularity in voice and perspective some academic writing can seem, at times, linear and preachy; this genre leaves little room for reader interpretation and imagination, the value of which to feminists is, as indicated earlier, limitless. The writing resembles a monologue, in which the reader, outside of his or her choice to read the material, acts as a passive recipient of the author's text. It is in this type of stringent, inflexible discourse that rejectionist and reinterpretationist biblical feminists assert their dichotomous theoretical platforms. The reader does not participate in constructing the critical concepts in the text, and besides choosing to either agree or disagree with the theorist's argument the reader is not responsible for discerning, through individual interpretation, the thesis of the research. Literature in general, and novels in particular, invite and depend upon reader interpretation; their social power depends upon

⁴¹ Michael Holquist notes in his introduction to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* that "there is a great controversy over the authorship of three books that have been ascribed to Bakhtin: *Freudianism* (1927) and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929; 2nd ed. 1930), both published under the name of V.N. Vološinov, and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), published under the name of P.N. Medvedev" (xxvi). In Wehrle's introduction to the English translation of *The Formal Method* (1978), he explains the authorial controversy in detail. Rather than chancing an inaccurate ascription, Wehrle chooses to use the names under which he first encountered the work; in this sense, "the slash separating the names on the title page of this translation may be taken as the conventional signifier/signified bar (Medvedev/Bakhtin)" (xi). Because the names on the title page of Wehrle's translated edition, the edition to which I refer, are written as such, my citation likewise reflects this authorial attribution.

the realizations and resolutions that readers make in the effort to interpret what they read. In his discourse on the novel, Bakhtin perceives it not as a monologic genre, but rather as one that distinguishes itself by the way it incorporates the various 'languages' or 'voices' of society into its own discourse: "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (*Dialogic* 262). Bakhtin asserts that the novel has the ability to grow and evolve not only because it resists entrenchment and fixidity as noted earlier, but also by means of its incorporation of 'heteroglossia' [*raznorečie*], which literally means "multiple languages" (Booker 479), and by the "differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions" (*Dialogic* 263). For Bakhtin, the interaction among the different attitudes and opinions of a society has a rich potential that finds its ultimate literary expression in the novel. He notes the variety of types of speech and discourses as those "fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel [because] each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of ... links and interrelationships" (263). Among four other attributes of novelistic composition Bakhtin lists "the stylistically individualized speech of characters" (*Dialogic* 262), the existence of which is not gender-biased. Whereas the Bible rarely quotes women directly, preferring to paraphrase wherever a woman acts or is permitted an opinion, the novel allows both its male and female characters to speak. Under these conditions, "the period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language" (*Dialogic* 12). While The Red Tent,

Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene are written by female authors and narrate biblical accounts from the perspective of their female figures, the dominant male figures in the biblical narratives retain their recorded status and accomplishments. While The Red Tent predominantly honours the traditions of ancient womanhood and celebrates the uniqueness of women's labour and skills, it also makes notable mention of men's work in the fields and retells the story of the months of labour that Jacob paid Laban as a bride-price for Rachel. In recreating the life of Dinah, Diamant necessarily also creates, to a lesser degree, stories about Jacob's sons, and attributes them characteristics and qualities that are not included in the Bible. Dinah's biblical story is heavily entrenched in male negotiations and actions, so Diamant borrows elements from the original narrative and incorporates Dinah's voice and actions to equalize the distribution of perspective and voice in her novel. Whereas The Red Tent critiques biblical history by engaging in a significant amount of fictional rewriting, Queenmaker offers a more explicit reaction to the biblical narrative. In Queenmaker, David is not stripped of his vanquishing of Goliath, his musical and lyrical talent, his military prowess, or his kingship. They are duly noted and esteemed by Michal. As the reader follows Michal's progression from childhood into adulthood, however, other events that the Bible mentions briefly are reinterpreted in depth through her mature eyes, such as the circumstances surrounding her residence in Jerusalem,⁴² her infertility,⁴³ and Solomon's appointment as king.⁴⁴ Mary,

⁴² According to the Bible, while David hides from Saul's army, Saul gives his daughter, Michal, to Paltiel, son of Laish. David asks for Michal after he is crowned in Judah following Saul's death. Paltiel follows her weeping but is powerless to prevent her from leaving him (2 Sam. 3:14-16). In Queenmaker, David essentially kidnaps Michal, ignores and dismisses her requests to be returned to Phaltiel, and has Phaltiel killed to ensure that David became "the lodestar of [her] existence" (Edghill 366).

Called Magdalene, to a greater degree than The Red Tent and Queenmaker, incorporates the male-centred narrative into its re-presentation of its female character. George's novel is not only a retelling of the life of Mary Magdalene, but also it is a retelling of the Jesus narrative, which centres on him and his ministry, from her perspective and experience. He remains the authority, and Mary acknowledges in her Testament that it is by virtue of his power that she is a "respectable woman" (574). While we have four Gospel accounts to which we can refer in the New Testament to learn about Jesus, they are written by men. Mary contributes a female voice to these already-existing multiple perspectives, which have sought to write her almost completely out of their accounts. She represents Jesus, his attributes, and his message in the same ways as do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but by reinstituting herself as a fellow apostle, teacher, and church leader, her chronology is slightly different and she relates private moments and conversations that she had with Jesus to which the other apostles would not be privy. While Mary, Called Magdalene focuses on Jesus and his ministry like the Gospels do, George does not insert Mary into any or all of the Gospel accounts. Rather, she extracts Jesus' narrative from the Gospels and inserts his narrative into Mary's life story to ensure that her testament is viewed as separate but authoritatively equal to the four Gospels. The male and female narrated stories, that is, those included in the Bible and those fictionally re-imagined by Diamant, Edghill, and George, engage in dialogue 'and throw light on each other.' While

⁴³ In 2 Samuel 6:14-23, Michal despises David because he dances partly unclothed before Jerusalem and God when the Ark of the Covenant is moved to Jerusalem. This contempt is linked in the narrative with Michal's inability to have children for the rest of her life. In *Queenmaker*, Michal is infertile but becomes, nevertheless, a mother to Bathsheba's son, Solomon (Edghill 369, 370).

⁴⁴ 1 Kings 1:11-13 relates that Bathsheba listens to Nathan's counsel and asks David to appoint her son Solomon as his successor to the throne; however, in *Queenmaker*, Solomon's future as king was the "care" and "will" of Michal who secures the throne for him (Edghill 291; 362-367).

critiquing the Bible's gender-bias, given its male-centred stories and omission of women's narratives, the novels' attempted equalization of recorded history does not necessitate silencing their male figures. By allowing them a voice, these texts demonstrate that both male and female experiences should be valued equally, and that when you put the two narratives together, they take on a different shape. In their novels, Diamant, Edghill, and George do not completely reject the original narratives, nor do they create completely new characters; instead, they incorporate both the original male narrative with the new female narrative and invite their readers to rethink the record that has been handed down. The novel, the mutable literary form that allows more than one voice to speak, is the genre that is best equipped to both compensate for the monologic structure of scholarly writing and respond to the so-called male, authoritarian narration of the Bible.

The novel not only allows multiple voices to speak, including male and female characters, the narrator, and the author, but it also provides the possibility to present multiple theories. Because the novel is the site of multiplicity and continuum and not dichotomy, it functions as the space where revisionist theorists can construct a third kind of feminist biblical criticism that mediates the boundaries of reinterpreterist and rejectionist feminists. In Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, Bakhtin asserts that "our speech, that is, all our utterances [including creative works], is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness [and] varying degrees of 'our-own-ness' ... These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (89). Words, ideas, and theories, if we recall

Medvedev/Bakhtin's critical work on academic writing, assimilate and rework that which precedes them. In their effort to restructure the Bible canon and re-envision biblical history, feminist writers and biblical scholars cannot simply add women into history, or expand

the boundaries of historical knowledge empirically without putting under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place. The story of wars, nations and dynasties, the tangible public events – so long assumed simply to be history – take on a different meaning, a different configuration when we begin to see through them – in both senses – to women's concealed existence in the private sphere. (Anderson, *Re-Imagining* 130)

In The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene, the emphasis is on the retelling of dominant biblical narrative through the eyes and voices of each biblical story's passive female figure. By providing a different version of these well-known stories and questioning the accuracy of male-recorded history, these authors create 'different meanings' for these dominant narratives and place at the centre of narrative interpretation the female rather than the male characters. In refusing to accept the voicelessness of women, they reassess the "other's words" and "assimilate" them in their storylines while achieving their goal of inserting female voices into the canon of biblical history. These novels cannot exist and function critically as they are meant to independent of the Bible. To reclaim the histories of biblical women and write into existence their unrecorded experiences necessitates both a partial reinterpretation of Scripture and a partial rejection of biblical narrative since in order to revalue and reinsert their stories into history, we must accept the source that introduces us, albeit briefly, to these women in the first place. Unlike academic writing, the novel, according to Bakhtin,

emphasizes plurality and is the space where multiple voices, points of view, and ideologies can co-exist, which makes it the most suitable genre to bridge the distance between rejectionist and reinterpretationist theory.

In an effort to revalue female knowledge and power, re-insinuate the female experience into biblical narrative, and critique the social, cultural, and historical positioning of women as a result of their narrative (mis)treatment in the Bible, The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called Magdalene assimilate biblical scripture and imaginative fiction to create a third type of feminist biblical scholarship, one that both necessarily accepts and rejects the dominant narrative. Diamant, Edghill, and George not only rejuvenate feminist theological criticism by insisting on a hybridized approach to biblical criticism, but they also renovate and restructure the delivery of feminist literary criticism by relying on narrative to carry out their theoretical goals. They harness, to the extent that it permits harnessing, the genre of the novel to articulate their feminist critiques of biblical history and lend a voice to those passive characters whose stories are dissected, divided, and for the most part discarded by the male writers of the Bible. The novel genre permits a revaluing of the female through the act of storytelling that, in all three examples, teeters on the brink of biography, which is impossible to attain through more discursive modes of writing. By virtue of its emphasis on multiplicity in structure and narrative, its incorporation of heteroglossia, its fluid and ever-evolving structure, and its analogous relationship to the present, the novel demonstrates the possibility that scholarly writing can take shape as literature so that literature is not only that which is critiqued, but also it becomes the space where criticism is articulated. Diamant, Edghill,

and George use the genre of the novel to critique recorded history, “speculate in what is unknown” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 32), and write into existence the untold, complex stories of relatively voiceless biblical women. This act of fictional revision or re-imagining history substantiates Linda Anderson’s conclusion that “what gets passed on, what becomes ‘known’ as history, is not all there is to know” (*Re-Imagining* 141), and that re-imagining history in an effort to remember the repressed and unrecorded past is an endless process.

Conclusion

Storytelling, whether orally communicated or written, is the way that history and cultural traditions are passed on from one generation to the next. Telling stories ensures that the past is always linked to both the present and future; we define ourselves, our relationship to others, and our society in relation to the past, which is “the combination of history – genealogies and events – and interpretations, legends and myths” (Bennett 57) that are passed on and remembered. History is partly concerned with recording events, and partly concerned with individual responses and interpretations of those events. Perhaps it is this understanding of the way in which we read the present and envision the future through our knowledge of history that prompts Adrienne Rich to assert that the act of re-vision, or looking back and examining history from a new perspective is, for women, “an act of survival” (18). Biblical language and imagery are still central in shaping contemporary consciousness; women’s positioning within patriarchal societies is the consequence of a trajectory of theological doctrines and assumptions about gender hierarchies that stem from biblical narratives. As Adrienne Rich explains, “until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (18). Similarly, Anne McGrew Bennett writes, “I feel in order to understand the present situation of women worldwide in church and society – women treated as inferior and subject to increasing violence – we need to recover women’s hidden histories and know the way that half of humankind has been treated for millennia and the rationale that is given” (67, 68). A consideration of feminist theory’s grievance with the Bible yields a wealth of support for the fact that the Scriptures have facilitated and blatantly proclaimed

the subordination of women and that 'assumptions' about gender inferiority can be found in this ancient text. Important, though, to a feminist analysis is the way in which the Bible has implicitly devalued female history and the lives and experiences of women by omitting them from narratives either as authors or as prominent characters. Those women whom the Bible mentions by name are either praised only for fulfilling their expected roles as wives and mothers or valued only for their peripheral relationship to the men who are at the centre of the action. If contemporary women look to the Bible for information about their identity, their history, or their roots, they will find fragmented stories at best.

I have considered the two opposing bodies of feminist biblical scholarship that attempt to resolve the inadequate representation of women in the Bible. The rejectionists claim that if the Bible's language excludes women from its dominant narratives and rejects the concept of gender equality and, ultimately, the feminist agenda, then women should, in turn, reject the Bible. Reinterpretationists insist that there is liberating value for women in the Bible if they look deep enough, reread its stories and sift through the multitudinous details about men, war, and conflict to locate examples of female action, agency, and power, and infuse the Scriptures with gender-neutral language. In Chapter One I considered the ways in which these approaches are limited and flawed. On the one hand, rejectionists discount the social power that the Bible wields and the relevance it retains for those Jewish and Christian feminists for whom it functions as a cornerstone of their faith. On the other hand, reinterpretationists do not account for the fact that women's histories are either excluded or fragmented, and that they are portrayed as never

having made any important contributions to society aside from giving birth to ‘important’ men.

Answering the call for a third, alternative form of criticism that neither wholly rejects the Bible nor simply reinterprets it, contemporary feminist fiction writers both reinterpret and reject Scripture in an effort to create role models for the next generation of women and to fictionally present “the truth[s] of women ... along with the truths of men” (Ostriker, *Revision* 31). Recalling the ideas raised by both Ostriker and H.D. that words have the potential to both conceal and reveal meaning and carry within them multiple meanings, the impetus for engaging in feminist revision is the idea that “the vast realm of interpretation is already hidden in the Torah, and it is up to us to find it” (Hammer xii). That which is not said, then, is as important as that which is said – it just needs to be recovered and re-membered. Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent, India Edghill’s Queenmaker, and Margaret George’s Mary, Called Magdalene are part of a subgenre of midrashic feminist revisionist fiction that challenges the authority and constraints of the Bible by taking, leaving and adding to its narratives without completely rejecting its legitimacy. By engaging in revisionary work that combines biblical history and fictional storytelling, these authors assert the importance of women’s unrecorded stories. Uncovering and reconstructing these missing stories can both honour women of the past and empower women of the present. Additionally, I examined the specific ways in which these three revisionary novels accept and reject biblical women’s histories and add new information to expand the potential of their female protagonists’ lives. Chapter Two examined the various ways that The Red Tent, Queenmaker, and Mary, Called

Magdalene provide examples of female knowledge and power within both the domestic and public spheres in order to re-present female experiences and balance their contributions to society with those of men. In this chapter I also discussed that these novels aim to resolve the voicelessness that the Bible imposes on Dinah, Michal, and Mary Magdalene not only by affording them the opportunity to retell biblical narratives but also by infusing their voices with authority. By revisioning women's histories and articulating these visions creatively, these authors remember and revalue the potential lives and experiences of women who are unequally represented compared to men in the Bible.

This type of biblical revision incorporates fiction into a biblical history that has attempted to be accurate and objective, but has obviously fallen short of this goal given its disproportionate emphasis on male experiences. As I pointed out in Chapter Three, the fictive space of the novel broadens the range of potential resources for feminist theological reflection and enables feminist scholars to expand the context of history to include more than dates and genealogies. Diamant, Edghill, and George count as relevant those elements of the past, such as individual emotions, opinions, and sensory responses that do not typically appear in historical documents and that have been omitted by male authors of the Bible. Feminist theologian Carol Christ supports fictional representations of biblical narratives because, she says, it is more likely to be 'articulated in women's own language' and measured and documented according to the values that they uphold, rather than "forced into the structures of male theology" (qtd. in Hughes 3). In addition to providing a vehicle to convey new ideas about the past, the novel, with all its structural

possibilities as noted by Mikhail Bakhtin, facilitates the articulation of feminist biblical theory and provides, in a way that scholarly writing cannot, the platform upon which to articulate a new, hybrid feminist theory. Throughout my consideration of these three fictional re-imaginings of Bible histories, the ways in which these novels negotiate concepts of gendered knowledge and power, and the novel as a viable and even superlative genre for engaging in feminist biblical criticism, what consistently surfaces is the need for mediation between the two polarized bodies of feminist criticism. My call for a synthesis of the rejectionist and reinterpretationist paradigms that resolves their individual inherent inadequacies and limitations is answered by fictional revisions of biblical women's histories. Voices from the past are emanating from these texts – are you willing to listen?

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