



School of Divinity

Mary, Martha, and Jesus the loving Lord: from the mouths of South Asian women in London

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Introduction

Luke 10:38-42 portrays Jesus in the home of two sisters, Martha and Mary. This thesis will address the question: can the characters of Mary and Martha, in relationship to Jesus as Lord (Luke 10:38-42), offer South Asian Christian women in London a form of liberation despite patriarchal contexts, whilst illuminating their lived experiences? With female biblical characters in dialogue and hence in relationship with Jesus, perhaps this passage may offer the reader a new way to conceptualise their own relationship with Jesus as Lord and point to important theological concepts which reveal the love of God. Since there has been debate surrounding the use of this text to stereotype women and subordinate their roles in church environments, because of the respective roles that Mary and Martha seem to be holding in this text, women can identify with these characters and the stereotypes that have been placed upon them.

This is important because for many South Asian Christian women their faith and lived realities are intertwined. Their interpretations of the Bible, or the interpretations they have been taught, affect their roles in the church and their identities. This biblical passage addresses multiple social issues such as the role of women in church, stereotypes of (Asian) women and women in leadership. Therefore, in their reading of this passage through interviews conducted in London, perhaps a nuanced form of liberation will be offered: one where South Asian women find themselves in the text and can relate their lived experiences to a reading of this passage. Especially when considering women from charismatic backgrounds, a spiritual liberation may be on offer: where Christ is the liberator, and scripture itself can bring life and enhance identity. This can pave the way for a distinct theological understanding which affirms women's identity in Christ – specifically, British South Asian women.

This dissertation will not necessarily entail a feminist lens because a more theological approach, which focuses on the divinity of Jesus, would be convincing to South Asian women who may not identify with the waves of feminism which are mostly defined for and by non-Asian women in the West. Though feminist theology aims to merge the two, for Asian women who are not concerned with questions of gender or language of patriarchy, though some are, pointing to a firmly theological understanding

drawing on eschatology, can be more relevant. When South Asian charismatic women read the Bible, they treat it as living. Therefore, their interpretations of biblical passages speak directly into their lived realities and can offer meaning to non-Asian people also. This dissertation will point to a two-form liberation: affirmation of identity, attempting to overturn social hierarchies and significantly, a form of spiritual liberation which is concerned with the nourishment of faith and soul.

As a South Asian woman born and raised in London, I recognise my positionality in relation to the women interviewed, as well as the scholars drawn upon. I recognise the tension between the insider-outsider relationship, particularly when conducting interviews with South Asian Christian women in London. Being in the process of receiving a master's degree in theology, being British born Asian and the daughter of ministers, I understand that my experiences and insights cannot speak for every South Asian Christian woman. However, as a South Asian woman who regards the importance of scripture, being brought up in a Tamil church, I hold some insider perspectives. I have attempted to balance the breadth of backgrounds, in terms of first- and second-generation immigrants from India and Sri Lanka and asked about concepts and cultural ideas that I was not familiar with. Through this dissertation, I aim to bring light to the experiences of women, through their own articulation, to point to issues within the church and the transformation needed within society at large.

Chapter 1 – Biblical Interpretation

The passage

Luke 10:38-42 shows Jesus entering a village, where he is welcomed by Martha into her home. Mary, Martha's sister, is sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. In verse 40, we begin to see a characterisation of Martha, where she is 'distracted by her many tasks' and asks Jesus as 'Lord' if he does not care that she has been left by her sister to work alone and implores him to ask her to help. We then see a response from the 'Lord', beginning with a repetition of her name 'Martha, Martha'; he acknowledges that she is worried and distracted by many things, but says that 'few things are needed – indeed only one.' He tells Martha that Mary has chosen the 'better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

This passage has been said to portray the different dimensions of service to the Lord, 'ora et labora' as often associated with the *Rule of St Benedict*. Martha represents work (*labora*), that is active dimensions of spiritual life, and Mary represents praying (*ora*), as she is sat at Jesus' feet, not physically serving but listening to his words. In Luke 10, Jesus is instructing his disciples as they are about to go on mission, how they should be received, and their return having been sent out. This is proceeded by the parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches about acting in love and hospitality to all, despite cultural barriers, and the command to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27, NRSV). Therefore, Luke 10:38-42 must be read as a significant and fitting end to this chapter.

Although a short passage, much has been discussed surrounding the characterisations of Mary and Martha. We find Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to the Lord and Martha distracted by her many tasks. Since this chapter involves the theme of mission, and it is within the context of the early house church movement, perhaps we could say that Martha's tasks were not in the kitchen but readying to receive the Lord into her home. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has stated that the text itself does not directly place Martha in the kitchen, rather, she is just 'preoccupied with too much serving' (Fiorenza, 2005: 64). Therefore, the idea that Martha is 'busy in the kitchen'

is not only ‘simplistic and caricatured’ but could be reducing the theological implications of what the text can offer the reader (Forbes et al., 2015: 24). Though serving (*diakonia*), found in verse 40, can be associated with meal preparation, the stereotypes that are often associated with women in the kitchen can be unhelpful when formulating theology. Moreover, Mary sat at Jesus’ feet as a disciple does not characterise her as submissive and passive, but as being empowered and in relationship with the Lord. As a rabbi’s disciples would sit at his feet to learn and consequently go on and teach, we see that Mary is sat to learn, perhaps to go on and teach. Rather than an angry woman in the kitchen, and her submissive sister at the feet of Jesus, we find two women who are empowered by Lord, ready to serve in their different capacities.

Although one might find tension between the sisters when Martha questions Jesus in verse 40, it could in fact show a close relationship between herself and the Lord. She feels free enough to ask for help. His response ‘Martha, Martha,’ shows a sense of familiarity and care. He does not state Martha’s actions to be wrong, rather that Mary has ‘chosen the better part’, both affirming Mary’s choice whilst inviting Martha to be unburdened and to sit with him. Warren Carter points out that the verb *synantilabētai*, meaning ‘help’, echoes its use in the LXX to ‘designate God’s saving and sustaining help in time of crisis.’ By asking the Lord to tell Mary to help her, ‘Martha seeks the Lord’s intervention to bring about Mary’s active help’ (Carter, 1996: 275). She knows that the Lord can help her. Jesus says that this better part ‘will not be taken away from her’, which is significant because it can suggest a deeper eschatological understanding. It might suggest that Mary will always be able to sit at his feet, even if he is not physically present. Mary’s choice could represent a specific way of life: to be constantly hearing from the Lord in a position of humility and love. As women are often burdened with ‘many tasks’, Jesus also invites the reader to rest at his feet and hear his words. It is from this position of rest, that we can return to our assigned tasks.

With Jesus’ death approaching, his response could show that he wants Martha at his feet because he knows she will not get this chance again. He acknowledges that she is ‘worried and distracted by many things’, but shows her freedom is found when coming to him like Mary has. This invitation is loving, rather than a rebuke. It is the

Lord, knowing what is to come, beckoning her. Robert Brawley says that ‘Mary transcends the gendered hierarchies of dominance and sits in the position of a disciple at Jesus’s feet and listens to him.’ The issue is ‘how the βασιλεία [kingdom] of God breaks into and alters perceptions of reality as they are embodied in expectations of roles in domestic, kinship, and gender hierarchies of dominance’ (Brawley, 2020). Thus, in discussing the eschatological implications of the kingdom of God in relation to this passage, it enables the reader to interpret over and beyond social hierarchies, speaking into the lived experiences of people. In this way, we might be able to discern an element of faith and discipleship that is redemptive, discovering a story which moves beyond domestic hospitality.

Characterisations of Mary and Martha

The perceivable tension between Mary and Martha is understandable considering that they are sisters. Rather than serious antagonism, it could just be a common sibling interaction. Since Martha is the houseowner and she welcomes Jesus into the home, it is plausible that she is the eldest. So, this passage could resemble a situation where an older sibling asks their parent to ask the younger sibling to help them. When considered within this dynamic, a close relationship between the sisters and Jesus as part of the family is established, whilst diminishing elements where these women are pitted against each other. Instead, we can focus on what each character could be representing in terms of discipleship or another theological concept, which women’s actions should not be generalised to.

Martha and Mary, as women in conversation and relationship with Jesus, can offer the female reader characters which they can find themselves in, offering them a new way to hold onto the person of Jesus in this passage. Rather than relegating women to a position of submission or condemnation, having been distracted by many tasks - which are placed on them involuntarily - by looking at this passage with the resurrected Lord in mind, who is in the home of friends who are like family, we find a compassionate Jesus. He invites women to learn from him, to become disciples. Rather than a reproach in verse 41, ‘you are worried and distracted by many things’, Jesus acknowledges the worries that women hold, the distractions caused by burdens placed

upon them, and lovingly offers rest. Perhaps the Church has not been coherent with how Jesus sees women: faithful, in service to God, obedient to his voice and wanting to be close to Him. The Lord affirms this by saying that this ‘will not be taken away from her’, but the Church seemingly has.

Commentary tradition

Much of the commentary tradition seems to be less forgiving of Martha’s character and emphasises that Mary chose ‘better’. Also, the emphasis on serving is apparent. Warren Carter says that by the end of Acts, Luke’s audience has seen the noun *diakonia* eight times, not in the context of kitchen activity but in relation to participation in leadership and ministry on behalf of Christian community. Therefore, we might conclude that this passage is indeed about service to God. This is important for the female reader because of restrictions placed on women in institutional church settings, where they have not been allowed to preach and relegated to roles in the background. Carter says that it is the stereotyping of women’s roles that has placed Martha in the kitchen: she was doing church tasks, ‘priestly and prophetic callings, heavenly revelations’ (Carter, 1996: 270).

Martha has often been characterised as a complainer, or her character is admonished because she has seemingly chosen work over Jesus. For example, this reading which suggests that Martha is like one who spends her life working hard but loses track of those things which are most important. Dale and Smith use the example of someone who gives themselves tirelessly for others without allowing them to get close to their heart, like someone who wishes they spent more time with a relative who has died. This reinforces stereotypes of the hardworking or successful woman who is emotionless and unable to look after her loved ones. The text does not say that Martha ‘lost track’ or that she did not let people close to her heart. She is stereotyped as an overworked woman, who is detached and cold. Here, Mary is either elevated above Martha, or Martha is commended for her ‘unique giftedness’ in hosting (Dale and Smith, 1998: 629-630). Frederick Danker also suggests that in verse 40, Martha is embarrassing her guests by showing how much trouble Jesus’ visit has caused her,

stating that ‘she upbraids him for his lack of consideration.’ He says, ‘had Martha given more thought to what it means to love the Lord, she would have considered it a privilege to do all the serving herself’ (Danker, 1988: 225). This is a harsh characterisation of Martha, making her seem inconsiderate and suggests that women should delight in working hard alone.

Mary Rose D’Angelo proposes that according to the textual variant in verse 39, the relative pronoun *hē* is omitted, implying that Martha first sat at the feet of Jesus before she became distracted. So, both sisters were disciples (D’Angelo, 1990: 78-79). Furthermore, the word *henos*, meaning ‘one thing’ in verse 42 refers to discipleship: it is ‘undoubtedly spiritual with reference to the “good portion” chosen by Mary’ (Wasserman, 2018: 454). In verse 40, the passive verb *periespato* means ‘to be pulled, dragged away’, hence ‘to become distracted, busy, overburdened’, which could imply that Martha wanted to hear Jesus ‘but was prevented from doing so by the pressure of providing hospitality’ (Marshall et al., 1978: 452). This suggests that Martha was indeed sat at Jesus’ feet at some point. The passive verbs show that Martha was *being* distracted in service to Jesus; she was not deliberately choosing to be busy instead of spending time with him. This removes blame from Martha and subsequent negative characterisations are unjustified. Women can relate to this idea of ‘being made busy’ and often pressured by society, carrying homelife and church responsibilities, they are overburdened by no fault of themselves. Therefore, considering the text exegetically can explain why Martha, and women who identify with her, are unable to just choose rest.

Feminist scholarship

Feminist biblical scholarship tends to focus on the negative characterisations of Martha as cold and unloving, and Mary as submissive and silent. They point to how these are damaging to the female reader, and consequently women in society. Scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza are more critical of the text itself, whereas others like Turid Karlsen Seim wish to redeem the text.

Schüssler Fiorenza says that the ‘characterisation of Mary as a listening disciple

corresponds to the narrative's interests in playing down the leadership role of women. By paralleling stories about male and female characters who are objects of healing and instruction, Luke genderized membership in Jesus' community' (Fiorenza, 2005: 65). Stevan Davies, building on Schüssler Fiorenza, says that there is no elevation of women's status in Luke 'unless one presumes the society of the time' where 'women were regarded as despised, disreputable, beyond the pale of respectable society' (Davies, 1991: 186-187). However, the subjugation of women is not implied – women are depicted as self-reliant. For example, through Martha being the homeowner. Even if the Lukan author is not liberating the status of women explicitly, the text can implicitly do so through these resourceful women.

Readings such as these are helpful when considering how traditional interpretations pit Martha and Mary against one another. The polarisation of their characters is often read into this passage, but it is damaging to those who find themselves in either, or both characters. Though Jesus protects the rights of Mary to be free from domestic duties and to be a disciple, it suggests that 'women's learning to find a voice which will be faithful to their experience might initially be fraught and will require patience on their part and on that of the community' (Dale and Smith, 1998: 631). This puts the onus on others and is reductive of the characters of Mary and Martha, who could have been prominent spiritual leaders. Robert Tannehill says, 'a woman's happiness and fulfilment is not simply a by-product of her role as a wife and mother' but is the result of 'her attentiveness to God's call to her' (Tannehill, 1991: 137).

Schüssler Fiorenza has rightly criticized polarising interpretations. By dichotomising Martha and Mary, this 'forces readers to choose between the active and the contemplative life, between every day or spiritual life, between domestic responsibilities or service of Jesus, between the secular, active Martha and the submissive quiet Mary' (Carter, 1996: 277). Her emphasis on the *Kyrios* (Lord) as the centre of action is striking. She says that Mary as 'the silent woman' is given approval from the Lord, and Martha is silenced. She concludes that Mary's role as a disciple does not include 'proclamation', but is just listening (Fiorenza, 2005: 62). For Schüssler

Fiorenza, this ‘master-centred’ passage sets women in opposition against each other, it silences women whilst applauding submissiveness. However, when considering the term *Kyrios* to mean eschatological Lord, rather than ‘master’ in a worldly sense, we find Jesus as Lord of the kingdom of God; we discover ‘mercy and compassion of Jesus who frees women (and others who are marginalised) to assume a different place in society’ (Dale and Smith, 1998: 634). Considering Jesus eschatologically in this passage, we discover how to live and serve God, and it frees the characters to be alongside one another, rather than against.

Other scholars such as Seim offer a more sympathetic reading. She says that Martha and Mary ‘have a disciple’s learning relationship to Jesus’, both portraying essential forms of discipleship. This interpretation does not take away from the experiences of the female reader; the ‘two sisters are cast in roles which, without becoming caricatures, are almost stereotypes.’ Since Martha is characterised as a positive counterpart to the Good Samaritan, her character is elevated to reach Mary, rather than being held against her. Seim points to the consistent use of *Kyrios* throughout the passage, characterising Jesus as ‘the teacher and as the authoritative Lord of the community.’ Though she agrees with Schüssler Fiorenza concerning the emphasis on *Kyrios*, she adds that this term ‘gives the narrative a transience in terms of time’, suggesting that it points to eschatological reality (Seim, 1994: 98-100). With this Lord in mind, for the reader today, ‘Christ admits a woman to an equal place with men in that preparation which will enable her to be actively engaged in the establishment of the kingdom’ (Brennan, 1971: 52). This is a useful interpretation where the text is redeemed, women can find themselves within it, and they are empowered in the kingdom of God.

Considering women’s lived experiences is important because as Gerda Lerner says, ‘as long as men believe their experiences, their viewpoint and their ideas represent all of human experience... they are unable to describe reality accurately’ (Lerner, 1986: 220). Also, not all women can relate to the feminist biblical interpretations formed by Western scholars, therefore it is essential to consider how women read this story, how it informs their faith and behaviour, and how Jesus speaks into their realities. Though scholars rightly point to harmful characterisations of

women in biblical texts, for those who find themselves within this passage, such readings can be reductive of their faith and their holding onto the person of Jesus.

Adele Reinhartz, a Jewish author, suggests an ‘act of resurrection which would release Mary and Martha from the narratives and commentaries in which they are entombed, and make them breathe, act, and most important, speak to us.’ Through the lived experiences of South Asian women, we may look beyond the androcentric culture of the time and find what it means to these women today, and generally for the reader. By this means, we find ‘those unnamed, silent and faceless individuals in the early church who knew and reacted to these narratives’, consequently finding the unnamed, silent women of today (Reinhartz, 1991: 161, 163).

Asian theology

Monica Melanchthon discusses how the Bible has sometimes been used as ‘an instrument of oppression.’ Since it holds ‘cultural and religious authority’, it defines women’s position in church and society. She says that it is necessary for women to re-read scripture to reclaim their histories. The oppressed often internalise their oppressor’s ideals, and women are likely to do this because they believe scripture to be divine. This might be why women can be ‘highly resistant to feminist interpretations’ (Melanchthon, 2005: 212). Though they might agree with interpretations, not all women identify as feminist or relate to how biblical scholars approach texts. Peter Phan says in the Asian context, there is a different interaction with philosophical systems when theologising. In the West, reason is interacted with in terms of human sciences, such as psychology and anthropology. Whereas in Asia, interactions are with the Hindu and Buddhist philosophical systems (Phan, 2017: 124). Though not all Asian Christians in the West associate themselves with these thought systems and view them as un-Christian, there is still a cultural difference in thinking, and hence theology.

For diasporic South Asian Christians in the West, ‘in the imagination of many white people... an Asian person is completely “other”. She is “heathen”. She cannot be a Christian.’ Mukti Barton has pointed to the complexity of identity and how even

though there are more Christians in India than white Christians in Britain, ‘Indians and Christians are often seen as polar opposites’ (Barton, 2005: 227). She quotes James Cone who says, ‘creative theological thinking is born out of conflict, the recognition that what *is* is *not* true, that untruth has established itself as truth’ (Cone, 1984: 51). Thus, it is important to not solely lean on Western biblical interpretation as the objective truth. In Luke 10:38-42, feminist scholarship has pointed to the androcentrism of existing commentary tradition and even the text itself, but this may be unhelpful to South Asian Christian women living in the West, who identify with neither. Though, Melanchthon has stated that ‘Christian women have questioned the Bible and sought to determine if it is an ally or an adversary in struggles of women in India for freedom’, this is not indicative of all Christian Indian women. For certain women from charismatic backgrounds, they might be aware that society is patriarchal but do not want to question the authority and hence divinity of scripture. Though it is true that in the Indian context ‘cultural reform is downright impossible without a critical rereading of the scriptures’, with this re-reading, a re-telling must also be done, but from the women themselves (Melanchthon, 2005: 212, 218).

Ranjini Rebera discusses the importance of storytelling when South Asian women read the Bible. It enables them ‘to creatively identify with the women in the biblical story’ and can make people feel secure to abandon ‘traditional insights derived from Sunday school teachings.’ She draws on Kwok Pui-lan: ‘Bible study among Asian women is a communal event... searching for wisdom for survival and empowerment. They treat the Bible as a living resource rather than an ancient text’ (Rebera, 1997: 94, 95). The way that Asian women approach biblical texts can be different to feminist scholars, which means that they glean different insights. For example, In Rebera’s contextual reading, she sees Martha as the ‘older classificatory sibling’, where we can find her “mother figure” concern – Martha’s worry and distraction were connected to the reputation of her younger sister. Moreover, her cultural context also emphasises that Martha, as the owner of the home despite the presence of a brother, makes her an ‘icon for authority, rather than an icon for home-making and serving, within the life of the church’, and this offers a double affirmation of a woman, particularly in South Asia. Jesus’ response validates both Mary and Martha as single women to ‘build their own

journeys in their own manner' (Rebera, 1997: 99, 102-103). For Martha, Jesus is not a stranger, but a close friend and Lord, who lovingly responds to her plea.

There is a perceivable distinction between feminist scholarship and the lived reality of South Asian Christian women; there is a contextual difference in theologising. For feminist scholars, there is a social-political framing of the text and they operate within a discourse where oppression is addressed in a multi-religious setting. However, for South Asian Christian women in the West, their situatedness points to a different contextual reality, for example marked by experiences of racism, fleeing war and charismatic faith. This methodological difference means that a different form of liberation must be offered, where faith and spirituality are emphasised. Though this dissertation draws on Asian and feminist scholars who form their interpretations on postcolonial theories which focus on a social-political liberation, we might find that nourishment and liberation of the soul is what could bring freedom. Esau McCaulley suggests that spiritual liberation (for the soul) in turn brings social liberation (for the body); 'a careful and sympathetic reading of the text brings a blessing', (McCaulley, 2020: 184). There can be holistic liberation when considering spirituality – not just socio-political liberation for Asian women, but the freedom to see themselves how God sees them. Through finding Jesus and themselves in scripture, women are given agency and their Christian identity is validated.

Women can find themselves in the characters of Martha and Mary because this story 'reaches into a large sense of the psycho-social reality of women's experience of belonging to the Church' (Dale and Smith, 1998: 632). And so, despite the patriarchal culture of the biblical author's time and subsequent androcentric subtext, this passage still allows women to find themselves within scripture. When considering South Asian women's interpretations, we might be less critical of the text and find a situation where Jesus is relied upon, to relieve burdens. In this episode, we see that 'women independent of male supporters such as fathers and husbands can be active in the world', and it affirms the 'activity of women not only in the rank and file of the church but also in its inner circle of authority' (Reinhartz, 1991: 184). This is important for South Asian women who may be experiencing discrimination perpetuated by patriarchal culture and the Church in Britain.

Jesus as Lord, an eschatological reality

Focusing on Jesus as Lord might offer a more helpful reading of this story for Asian women who hold onto the person of Jesus, since some have found him to be the ‘only one who really loves and respects them as humans with dignity’ (Chung, 1993: 224). Heil points to the importance of ‘Mary listening to the words of Jesus that includes a call for disciples to realise that Jesus will attain heavenly glory only after his resurrection, suffering and death’ (Heil, 1999: 78). Thus, Mary’s sitting at Jesus’ feet does not make her ‘an ideal model of passive contemplation or silent subordination for the audience, since the word of Jesus demands the action of putting it into practice’ (Heil, 1999: 71). Women are liberated spiritually and socially when focusing on Jesus and the eschatological reality that this passage alludes to. Occurring within Luke’s travel narrative, Jesus instructs about discipleship and verse 38 ‘particularly recall[s] aspects of the mission of the Seventy from earlier in chapter 10.’ Also, the verb *hypedechato* meaning ‘received’ expresses openness to the word and work of God. Thus, Martha is obedient but in a different way to Mary. When viewed in the context of discipleship, we find that ‘Martha’s receiving Jesus signifies her commitment to Jesus’ mission and to the God who sent him’ (Carter, 1996: 267, 268). She is a model disciple, in contrast to those in Luke 10:13-16 who did not receive the disciples.

Jesus’s response in verse 42, ‘but few things are needed - indeed only one’ implies urgency - he is imploring Martha to sit with him. Jesus did not condemn Martha’s actions, but out of love and knowing what was to come, calls her to spend time with him. This is important for women reading this story who hold onto Jesus: recognising that instead of a perceivable chastisement, Jesus is lovingly calling women, who are not incorrect in their serving, to rest. To sit, listen and learn in order to go on and teach. This is redemptive for South Asian women who have suffered discrimination in churches and relegated to roles in the background. Danker says that ‘Jesus refused to permit tradition to endorse second-class status for women.’ Jesus said the time is now, the kingdom has come and ‘prophetic ministry does not permanently, if indeed ever, enjoy institutional support’ (Danker, 1988: 172). This is a story which condemns the subjugation of women in the Church, offering spiritual and socio-political liberation.

Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges that Luke is writing to early Christian communities: the title *Kyrios* appeals to the authority of the resurrected Lord, not the historical Jesus, ‘discovering the theological-pastoral interests of the author’ (Fiorenza, 2005: 62). However, Whitney says that Schüssler Fiorenza misjudges the ‘import of the passage, neglecting Luke’s otherwise positive and liberating treatment of women throughout his gospel’ (Price, 1997: 184). At times, in discovering the author’s interests, certain theological claims that the text is making become side-lined at the expense of uncovering androcentrism. Yet, these theological concepts could indeed be liberating. Forbes and Harrower say that the ‘key reference point for Luke’s characterisation of women... established by kingdom parameters not socially regulated norms’, which can be seen in the final clause ‘which will not be taken away from her.’ Jesus’ teaching has eternal value, ‘whereas the performance of domestic chores does not.’ Through this passage, Luke ‘expands the category of discipleship to include women as well as men’ (Forbes et al., 2015: 108-109). Rather than using the starting point of harmful connotations of Martha’s domestic duties and Mary’s submissiveness, considering what this passage tells us about Jesus and eschatological reality, shows that Martha and Mary can represent profound theological truths about how to live. Therefore, it is valuable to first point people to the true meaning of the passage, in the context of discipleship and the kingdom of God. To find socio-political liberation, people must first be spiritually freed.

Readings like Schüssler Fiorenza’s, in which Luke places women in silent, passive roles in submission to male leadership, ‘muzzle the narrative’s powerful message about Jesus’ regard for women and the nature of their membership in the kingdom of God.’ This episode ‘yields a powerful narrational proposition... listening to the words of Jesus, full-fledged discipleship, and membership in his true family provide the coordinates for a new realm of life for women who believe in Jesus’ (Forbes et al., 2015: 110). Therefore, looking beyond worldly structures and uncovering truths about discipleship and the kingdom of God, this story can offer women a ‘new realm of life’, where they are liberated as disciples of Jesus, who can advance the kingdom of God.

Chapter 2 – From the mouths of South Asian women

Interviews were conducted in London with five women of South Asian descent, who come from charismatic backgrounds, identifying as Pentecostal, Baptist, or non-denominational. These aimed to discover how these women interpret Luke 10:38-42, their lived experiences, if they identify with the characters and if they indeed struggle with the perceivable androcentrism that feminist biblical scholars point to. The interviews began with introductions about how long they have been a Christian, how and why they had come to London if they were not born there, and time was spent getting to know one another. They were then asked to read the passage - two women used the Tamil translation. After providing their initial thoughts about the passage, personal questions about church experience, practising faith, and what Jesus means to them were asked (see Appendix 2). This was important because the participants opened up about hardships they had faced, some of whom gave emotional responses. They were then asked to re-read the passage for the second time and were asked about any new and different ideas they had. Perceivable differences in interpretation were found after the second read having discussed their lived experiences. Pseudonyms are used in the discussion of their responses (see Appendix 1).

Jesus

Having read the passage, the participants were asked about their relationship with Jesus. All the women described a deeply personal relationship. ‘Rehana’, first generation Indian says, ‘He’s just my everything, every decision he needs to be a part of... He’s now every part of my thoughts.’ Similarly, another first-generation Indian woman, ‘Sheela’, described Jesus as her ‘everything’. She said, ‘Jesus knows everything. He is in control of everything. I have a very close thing with Jesus all the time [*sic*], with God.’ After describing certain hardships of life in London, having moved at twenty-three knowing nobody but her husband, when asked again about her relationship with Jesus, Sheela shed a few tears. She said:

Jesus is my husband actually. He is my creator, he is my friend. Yes. I'm sort of crying. That is more. After all this hard path in my life [sic], you know it's not easy. I just came from India. Because my husband is Sri Lankan, I don't know anything about him. I had only hope and faith was with God [sic], with Jesus. He was there all the time with me, he never let me down... He's been faithful, he's been protecting our children and till now he is so faithful.

For Sheela, Jesus has been a constant source of strength. He had been 'faithful' to her as she moved countries, integrated into a new culture, whilst navigating familial relationships. Her description of Jesus as her 'husband' is striking, emphasising their closeness, and implying certain struggles she had with her husband whilst being newly married in London. Likewise, 'Prema', also first-generation but from Sri Lanka, described her difficult relationship with her husband before defining her close relationship with Jesus. She said, 'my husband is non-believer [sic]. He was so aggressive to me. I try to be so nice. I know Jesus is grip in my life [sic]. I grip to him.' Her words 'Jesus is grip in my life', suggest that Jesus is the only one she has been able to hold on to, who does not fail her. We see a deeply personal relationship, in which these women have known Jesus to be a source of stability and have clung to him since being away from their homeland. This was evident in Sheela's emotional response: she repeated 'hard path' several times, saying, 'we did sacrifice, I did sacrifice quite a lot.' But her responses always ended with 'God has been faithful. I thank God.' Here, we find faithful women who cling to Jesus.

The younger participants were less emotional in their responses but still revered Jesus. 'Elsie', 1.5 generation Indian, moved when she was eight years old, then to London for university. She said: 'I feel close to God. I feel like this year has meant that I have been clinging on. I have been a bit far because of everything that happened. I am trying to hold on as tight as I can.' In response to a question asking about her relationship with Jesus, Elsie uses the term 'God' in her response. For her, Jesus and God are one and the same; in her interview she used these terms, as well as 'Lord', interchangeably. This was also apparent in the other interviews. This shows that the

term 'Lord' implies divinity, perhaps corresponding to how 'Lord' can be read in this passage. Jesus is Lord, but also God, making his words, defined in love, point to a deeper meaning. Again, we see a relationship with Jesus marked by 'clinging on' in hardship, where Jesus is the only one who understands her - relationship with him is indispensable. She continued,

I love the Lord, his love is so unconditional, I don't deserve it... I talk to God constantly. I am in constant communication, and it can just be like God I'm struggling with this, or God what do you think about this? I am constantly speaking to him. We just check in with each other.

This describes a two-way communication with Jesus, where Elsie can be completely herself and honest in her struggles. Much like Martha, who voiced her desperation to Jesus having been burdened, he hears her and invites her to himself. 'Helena', a second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil woman says that in this passage,

Jesus is without judgement. Feels like he meets her where she is in a way. He can tell she is worried and distracted by the many things that need to be taken care of. There is work to be done, but he is like just sit with me in this moment and it won't feel like such a burden.

Here we find a sympathetic interpretation of Jesus in this passage, whereas some scholars have suggested Jesus's disdain towards Martha's questioning. Since these women know Jesus personally, marked by their life experiences, they can confidently say 'Jesus is without judgement.'

The meaningful and positive relationships these women have with Jesus have affected their reading of the passage: having experienced Jesus as a comforter for Elsie, husband for Sheela, friend for Helena, and Jesus as their everything for Rehana and Prema. In their lived experiences, they have witnessed an omnipresent Lord who is loving. In this passage they do not see a Jesus who rebukes, but a Jesus who lovingly listens and responds, not only to the characters but to them also.

For Elsie and Helena, also Sheela when reading the Tamil translation, verse 42 stuck out to them. Particularly the phrase, ‘it will not be taken away from her.’ They found that Jesus is the very thing which ‘will not be taken away from her.’ Sheela said:

Verse 42, that is the strong word [*sic*]. I have found what I have discovered. And that is not taken away from me. So, Jesus is never ever taken away from me. He is there. So, I have the good part. I have discovered it, I discovered Jesus. I discovered who God is.

Like Elsie, Jesus is already God for Sheela; his divinity is apparent in this passage. Elsie said that she does not think Jesus’ response to Martha is unkind, ‘because by him saying “Martha, Martha” it shows quite a caring side. I think he’s just affirming to Martha that I’m not going to be taken away.’ This is significant because rather than choosing to hear Jesus’ words, it suggests that Mary has chosen Jesus himself. The women have seen that Jesus is offering himself to Martha and see that they themselves have chosen Jesus. Through Sheela’s description of Jesus as her ‘husband’, Elsie’s experience of being ‘basically raised by a single mum’, Prema’s difficult relationship with her husband, and Helena’s struggles being a pastor’s daughter, we find that South Asian women navigate a world where Jesus is not just a historical person in the past. He is Lord over their every sphere of life, present today. This view is confirmed by scholars like Sharon Jacob who says that ‘the quest for equality, liberation, and the ability to lead a life free of violence and assault is an ongoing fight for the average Indian woman’ (Jacob, 2020: 124). Jesus loves and cares for women, where men have perhaps not adequately. Chung Hyun Kyung quotes Komol Arayapraatep who says, ‘we women are always grateful to Jesus... because of him we can see God’s grace for women’ (Chung, 1993: 224).

Church and culture

This clinging on to Jesus, and their characterisation of him in this passage as

loving exemplifies these women as faith-filled, particularly because they described certain negative church experiences. Chung says that Asian women have ‘believed in Jesus in spite of many contradictory experiences of families, churches, society’, which became apparent in the interviews (Chung, 1993: 224). Both Helena and Elsie have chosen to leave the Tamil and Malayalam speaking churches they grew up in to attend English speaking churches. Helena explained,

I think I won’t be going back to Tamil speaking church, will only go for occasions and things. I felt quite distant or isolated sometimes, there wasn’t a community of people my age with the same values, the same understanding. And I couldn’t be myself and I think what’s the point of being in that space if you can’t really be yourself.

Perhaps Helena felt like she could not be herself because she grew up in London, whereas her congregation consisted of predominantly first-generation Tamil immigrants. Elsie said, ‘I didn’t agree with some of their theology as well, it was very religious. There was a huge focus on sin and not love of Jesus [*sic*]. Gender norms were really heavily prescribed as well.’ Both Elsie and Helena seemed to leave because their ‘values’ did not align with certain aspects of culture being perpetuated in these South Asian churches. This is confirmed by Eleanor Nesbitt who states that certain cultural norms which ‘include the dominant role of males’, have been integrated within South Indian diasporic churches, and these ideologies could mirror the discrimination against women occurring in wider Asian society (Nesbitt, 2016: 29). It is important to say that leaving was difficult because they enjoyed participating in their culture and attending church with their families.

When asked about which church she attended in London, Sheela opened up about leaving the Tamil speaking church she first joined to start a new church with her husband. This came after a negative experience in which she was accused of laughing at the pastor during a sermon. She felt it was deeper than that: the male leaders were intimidated by her outgoing character and her spiritual giftings. She said,

The pastor was preaching then I was sitting there [sic], one lady was passing through I was looking at her and smiling but the pastor misunderstood. He thought like [sic] I am looking at him and laughing at his preaching. So, everyone and the congregation were very angry with me because they said I insulted the pastor.

She explained how it was a difficult time for her family; she felt isolated and judged. I asked Sheela if this incident may have been caused because she is a woman. She responded,

Yes. My husband is a bit quiet and shy that time [sic]... and he was very close with his friend the pastor. He didn't argue at all he goes quietly [sic]. But I, all the time, I always ask something. If I pray something they will be trying to find the fault [sic]. So many things.

Sheela also explained how her husband felt 'intimidated' by her spiritual giftings and her position within the church when they first started it, but as time progressed, he started encouraging her.

In his culture women were not supposed to preach or stand in the pulpit. So sometimes it was really hard, especially when the gift operating sessions come. God will use me mightily in one service and people would come and talk to me, then he will argue in a way. Most of the time before going to service he was very rude. He'd say because you don't have what do you call [sic], *saatchi*. You don't have proper *saatchi*, so you not supposed to be on the pulpit, you're not going to worship. But no other choice only me is there [sic] to go and do the worship. So, we will go to church then in the last minute he will tell me to go and do the worship.

Here, we can see how women are needed in the running of church but are mistreated in the process because they are perceived to be a threat to male leaders, perhaps corresponding with deeply instilled harmful cultural norms. Sheela was accused of having no *saatchi*, a Tamil word meaning 'truth' or 'testimony', suggesting that she

was a hypocrite. Not only was Sheela looking after her home, but she was also a spiritual mother as a pastor and would fill in the gaps wherever needed. Therefore, this accusation of her having no *saatchi*, suggests that she is not the same in public church life as she is at home in domestic life. These unattainable standards that women are often held to may be seen in Luke 10:38-42 and could explain why Sheela could find herself in Martha's character, portraying a busy woman burdened in both spiritual and domestic life.

The women noticed that what the Church has said about women is different to what Jesus says, resonating with Chung who says that the Church's teachings are similar to what men say to Asian women, rather than what Jesus actually says. She says that an Asian reader might benefit greater when focusing on the person of Jesus, and they are their own 'meaning-makers', where they shape 'a new Christianity out of their own experience' (Chung, 1993: 225). For example, apart from Rehana, all these women attended churches where women were not allowed to preach, because it was deemed unbiblical. But as Sheela noted, it is in the Sri Lankan Tamil culture that 'women were not supposed to preach or stand in the pulpit.' Helena also said,

I encourage and support women in leadership in church. I think it's underrepresented. I think there's a lot of stigma around it. I think it comes from interpretations of passages that have been written... it makes you think that if you're taking those passages, there's a part of you that believes those things. If you believed in equality, you'd question those passages and find more out about it instead of taking it as a blank statement.

Here, Helena is suggesting that church leaders problematically take their ideologies and apply it to scripture. This has affected how women are treated. She continued saying that in her Tamil church,

Women have not preached yet. Bit of a sticky subject. I believe that maybe there's a subconscious belief that women shouldn't or that they can't to the same ability. Which is one of the values which I have are not compatible [*sic*] with what I believe.

Selvanayagam says, ‘Tamil traditions have not questioned power structures; and in the church the gospel has become enmeshed in power conflicts’ (Selvanayagam, 1996: 54). Rather than these women taking what is being taught, they understand that it is culture that subjugates women, rather than scripture. This has allowed them to redeem this passage for themselves, and not affect their view of Jesus.

Prema was more careful about how she described her church experiences, saying ‘it’s good place [*sic*]. I can have friends and come with family. I am happy to worship then preparing *thethanni* for everyone [*sic*].’ She previously explained that she ‘grips’ on to Jesus, and so, even if women are subjugated, she can find freedom in making *thethanni* (tea) and being in the kitchen because she does it for Jesus. Prema had described her challenging relationship with her husband since coming to London over ten years ago. She says, ‘my husband is a good man. He just angry sometimes [*sic*]. He was in the war, you know. He needs me.’ This complex dynamic for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees makes for an even more meaningful relationship with Jesus. Since she cannot ‘blame him for what he does’, but it ‘hurts my heart sometimes’ because of a traumatic past, she finds relief in Jesus and her church community.

Women in church

All the women interviewed have experienced or witnessed women being disrespected within the church. And so, this passage, which could suggest ideas of women in church leadership, as well as Jesus affirming the work of Mary, without condemning Martha as wrong, could be helpful for these women. Helena, who is younger and grew up in the West, seems to be more critical of the lack of women in leadership in Tamil churches. Yet, Elsie, also younger, seemed ambivalent about the idea of women in Church leadership. She said, ‘I have no huge experience of female leaders in church, but I definitely think it should be a thing. But saying all of this, do you think you’d go to a female lead pastor church? I am more used to co-pastors’ - that is, men and women leading together. Rehana also said that ‘women do have a lot to offer but I don’t limit that as women need to spearhead everything.’ Therefore, it is equality and partnership that these women want. Rehana continues,

If you see a woman who's got that calling to beautifully be on the stage and speak and be a vessel that the Lord wants to use, and you should encourage that regardless of what you think what norm she needs to fit in. And if you see that in a man you call that out. And within a marriage you both call out each other's... A beautiful partnership. Calling out the gold in each other.

It is noteworthy that Rehana mentioned marriage because Martha and Mary are both single women. Once pointed out to her, Rehana asked if she could 'be honest' after her second read of the passage. She noticed it is 'harder for single women to get into positions of leadership' because 'people who are married get recognition or somehow as if marriage were a thing that qualifies them and that's a question I still have.' She asked herself, 'is it because I'm a single woman I'm prone to slipping or making more mistakes?' Rehana said, 'I'm battling this with the Lord.' Noticeably, after her second read, she opened up about questions she had concerning churches not allowing single women to be in leadership positions. She resolved,

I am exactly where I need to be, if an opportunity presents, where I need to be in a different season, it's up to the Lord to make, to change that new place that requires a married woman. I could get married then I'll understand why.

For Rehana, rather than wanting change, she believes that marriage will provide opportunities for her. This might be because she has grown up watching married women preach, including her mother.

Mary or Martha?

The initial responses to the characters of Mary and Martha were mixed, however after the second read of the passage, there was an increased sympathy towards Martha. As the women discussed their experiences of being women in church, at home, and in the workplace, they began to see themselves in her character. After the first read in Tamil, Sheela had a less sympathetic reading of both characters saying,

Mary, she don't care [*sic*] about the people around her, about visitors or anyone. We can say she is selfish, and we can say self-focused as well... God wants us to enjoy the world as well but there's a time for everything.... But God doesn't say to spend all the time at his feet [*sic*]. Martha actually missed the main part, so she's about the worldly things, go around satisfying [*sic*] other people's needs. That is too much as well.

At first, Sheela felt more removed from the characters. She also did not want to use the Tamil translation and continued the interview in English after her first read in Tamil. This could underscore the confidence that she has in herself, and the desire to articulate her theology in English despite it not being her first language. Helena was similar in her view of the female characters:

When I read the Bible, I don't identify with them. I never thought of it that way. Especially when they are women. Now that I'm thinking about it, I've never tried to identify with the women in the Bible but with the men I feel quite neutral... But when it's women, I kind of reject that fate for me. I don't know, because it was way back when and they had traditional roles and stuff like that, I mean which still exist today.

After discussing her experiences as a first-generation immigrant to London, the burdens of being a mother and pastor, and difficulties in navigating relationships, Sheela was asked to re-read the passage and her thoughts had changed:

Being concerned and worrying about so many things, that is too much in Martha's life [*sic*]. The same way as a lady, as a woman or a mother sometimes we worry too much for all those small things. We worry about our children's future, we worry about finances and we worry about what we are going to do.

Sheela was able to find herself in the character of Martha, and so became sympathetic towards her. Similarly with Mary, after her second reading, she says:

It's more important than anything else to seek the kingdom of God first. She is very clever, she is a wise woman, Mary's like me. Yeah, before that I was like Martha, but now I've come to a position like Mary. For me, I had to be Martha first before I can be Mary.

This is a profound difference in the characterisations of Mary and Martha. After the second reading of the passage, Sheela had changed her view from Mary being careless and Martha missing the 'main part', to them both representing important ways of living and serving - you cannot have one without the other.

Significantly, having spoken about their lived experiences, when these women re-read the passage, they brought Martha and Mary together because they could identify with both characters, depending on their season of life. Prema says, 'sometimes I am Mary. Like when I am at church. I am Martha at home with my children and husband. I can't sit down.' This mirrors the idea that Martha and Mary represent different aspects of life: domestic and spiritual. Sheela observed that this passage 'shows both things. The worldly things and also the spiritual things.' After her second reading, she took this further to represent only 'the spiritual things', that this passage says to 'seek the kingdom of God first... I had to be Martha first before I can be Mary.' Here, Sheela is suggesting that Martha was indeed seeking the kingdom of God in her work. She had to first be busy in serving the Lord before she could be invited to rest at his feet.

Consequently, the theology of South Asian women aligns better with ancient interpretations, which emphasise spiritual aspects, rather than social aspects which Western feminist biblical scholars focus on, such as androcentrism and a woman's social standing. Though they aim to liberate women, perhaps for South Asian women who 'cling' to the person of Jesus in their daily lives, there is no divide between their spiritual and domestic lives. Jesus is a part of and 'in control of everything', as Rehana described. Therefore, South Asian women may relate better to interpretations where Jesus is the focus, and the women represent a spiritual reality. Not only do they feel

seen in Jesus' acknowledgment of a woman's burdens, but the idea that he wants to be near to them, by inviting them to sit at his feet and receive his word, is redemptive.

On hearing the women's thoughts after they re-read the passage, I explained that Mary was in the position of a disciple, which suggests that Jesus was preparing her to go on and teach. I also mentioned that Martha was a single woman, the owner of her house and even perhaps leading a house church with Mary. This seemed to bring a sense of excitement and awe. Prema said, 'Wow. I did not know that. Nobody told me. I been thinking [*sic*] Martha was in the kitchen, but I see she is not in the kitchen at all.' All the women agreed that men and women should be treated the same way, in terms of serving, to advance the kingdom of God. Sheela said:

'It's good. I don't see any difference men and women [*sic*]. I want everyone to be in God's kingdom, I would really love everyone, both of them to serve in the same way. There mustn't be any partiality, no.'

For Sheela, this passage affirms that both men and women are useful in serving God. The word 'partiality' might suggest that men have been unjust towards women in church. These South Asian women are not wanting to 'spearhead' or take charge, as Rehana explained, which is perhaps what the Church is fearful of. They want partnership, to be treated with respect and dignity.

The words 'better part' in verse 42 stood out to the women. Elsie said, "'better part'" is still important. It doesn't mean what Martha was doing was bad, just that what Mary was doing was investing more time in God.' Helena, also in her twenties, noticed this too saying, 'Jesus did not tell Martha what she was doing was wrong.' After the first read, all the first-generation South Asian women interpreted Jesus's words, that Mary chose the 'better part', to mean that what Martha was doing was wrong. Perhaps because they have been used to condemnation, or that culturally, things are black and white – either right or wrong.

Rehana, Elsie and Helena also acknowledged that if they could situate themselves in the story, they too would have reacted as Martha did. Elsie says,

A part of me does think that if the house was disgusting, Jesus would have been like, do you not know that I am the son of the Lord. I have come into your home. And here you are in a tip. I don't know, I think people take this a bit too far. I think that Jesus saying you've chosen the better does not mean best.

Elsie laughed in this response, placing herself in the story and imagining a humorous response from Jesus. She sees that Martha is often subjugated to the role of hostess, needing to prepare the house for the visitors, aligning with the hospitality culture of the time. After her first read, Helena noticed how Martha 'kind of throws her [Mary] under the bus,' but once she re-read the passage after speaking about her lived experiences, she said that she could 'kind of see myself in that.' She said, 'actually, I feel like I've been Martha sometimes and that I've been Mary sometimes. And that's what's a bit confusing with identifying with just one of them. If I was in Martha's situation, I would do the same I think.' She explained further saying,

I think I have that internal patriarchal desire to satisfy men or to serve. Even though I completely disagree with how gendered the role is, like if guests come to my house, I'll be making cups of tea. But if someone tells me to do it, I'm like who are you to tell me to do that. What more do you want from me. I'm a Martha through and through, I'm trying to be Mary.

Rehana also identified moments she could relate to Martha, but found that she could be Mary too:

There are phases where I'm just like okay I can't be at your feet at all times, I must also get up and like set these things right because I feel like... sometimes I just feel like Martha. Like let me just do this then I'll come to you, let me just fix that and I'll come to you. But there are seasons where I'm a Martha, there are seasons where I'm a Mary.

From the mouths of South Asian women

Overall, having described a personal relationship with Jesus, this has shaped their biblical interpretation, where they do not find a rebuke from Jesus, but loving affirmation towards Mary and acknowledgement of Martha's burdens. Speaking about their lived experiences has affected how these women have interpreted this passage; Jesus' invitation to rest at his feet is significant and freeing. As Rebera suggests, 'the re-telling of this pericope from an Asian perspective is imperative if Asian church women are to be released from androcentric interpretations that continue to polarize women, define women's ministry, and hold us captive within kyriarchal traditions' (Rebera, 1997: 103).

However, in contrast to Rebera's idea, these South Asian women have articulated for themselves a theology. A journey in their theologising can be seen: beginning with their initial ideas after a first read of the passage, then discussing their relationship with Jesus and lived experiences, and finally hearing again what they think about the passage after a second reading. Rebera and other Asian theologians have undertaken the important task of telling women's stories, and formulating theology on behalf of the voiceless in Asia. However, those women are perceivably in a more passive role and rather than a re-telling from the women's perspective, there is just a 'telling' to them. In this study, women are given agency, and the reader can connect with *their* own theology on a more personal level.

This dialogical method merges together a storytelling technique of reading scripture with lived experiences, where women can re-tell the story to themselves, having brought their own faith and experiences to the forefront. They recast themselves within the narrative, thus creating a more discursive and inclusive reading of the Bible. Rather than just discussing the passage, the women are empowered in using their stories to communicate their theology, relationship with Jesus and church, and individual women are given more agency in the process. This participatory engagement enabled these women to explain their theology for themselves, and alongside the Asian feminist theologians underscoring the dynamic of the voices of South Asian women, the feminine voice that is not necessarily feminist can be heard. This methodological approach is empowering and identifies them as Christians who can articulate theology.

These interviews provide an insight into the way that South Asian women hold onto Jesus despite difficulties, and particularly how they know Jesus to be a source of stability and strength despite being in a different cultural environment, facing harm perpetuated by patriarchal society.

Chapter 3 – Jesus the benevolent Lord

This chapter will discuss the extent to which Jesus as Lord, in this passage *Kyrios*, brings meaning to the lived experiences of women, and consequently their reading of scripture and subsequent theologising. As Asian theologians have suggested, Asian women suffer harm and this is where they often meet Jesus, as the ‘suffering servant’. However, for these South Asian Christian women living in London, this idea might be less relatable to them. Feminist scholars have rightly critiqued the patriarchal connotations of the term ‘Lord’, but what if the initial conceptualisation of ‘Lord’ for these South Asian women is one of love? Since the resurrected Lord was already apparent to these women during their first reading, with their interchanging of the terms Jesus, God and Lord, and their clinging on to him, this could make a more relevant starting point which is representative of these women.

Suffering

Priscilla Pope-Levison suggests that the starting point for Asian theology is the Asian social reality, religious reality and socioeconomic reality; the Bible is the ‘primary conversation partner with each of these’ (Pope-Levison, 1992: 57). If all theology is contextual, then there is a specific context for the realities of South Asian Christian women in the diaspora. Nuam Hatzaw in her PhD thesis on Zomi women discusses them as a ‘minority of minorities’, and how even within their Asian context, these diasporic Christian women have certain contextual nuances in their thinking and experiences, which is different to their Asian counterparts in South Korea, India and Sri Lanka – particularly if they are 1.5 generation immigrants (Hatzaw, 2024). Thus, ‘the Christ who meets Asia’s needs must be continuous with the incarnate Jesus’, and we find the incarnate Jesus in Luke 10:38-42, and his interaction with women (Pope-Levison, 1992: 60).

Asian Christology consistently emphasises suffering: ‘Asians do not have to look for suffering; it comes to them.’ This idea that Jesus is the ‘eternal companion’ of those who suffer and ‘this one experience can unite all people together, regardless of status or class’ (Pope-Levison, 1992: 68). Though the women interviewed described

experiences of suffering, particularly the first-generation women aged over thirty, I am not convinced that they would identify as ‘the suffering’ because they believe that they are strong in Christ. These women ‘cling on’ to Jesus because of their devotion - desperation coupled with strength and unwavering faith. Since they do not mention a clinging on from Jesus towards them, there is the sense that to them, he is the Lord who has *overcome* suffering.

Chung says that since Jesus’ suffering was salvific, Asian women are starting to view their own suffering as redemptive (Chung, 1993: 224). This suggests why these women do not view themselves as the suffering, but as redeemed. Feminist writers discussing Christ as the fellow sufferer could raise theological implications for these South Asian Christian women: can God suffer? This might imply that God the Father is not static and that He is suffering with the world – historically seen as the Patripassian heresy. In contrast, the Jesus that these South Asian women know is steadfast and unchanging, and they acknowledge God the trinity even in passages that only mention Jesus, perhaps because of their charismatic backgrounds. They hold the belief that Jesus suffered on the cross, the Spirit comforts in suffering, and God the Father does not suffer. Jesus is God holding these attributes, with their interchanging of the terms Jesus, Lord, and God. Thus, Christology moving towards the idea of God’s continued suffering can be unconstructive for South Asian women living in the diaspora, who are trying to succeed in their new lands.

Danny Moses’ Christology for the South Asian diaspora is more coherent with what these South Asian Christian women were beginning to articulate. He suggests an eschatological view, where God as the ‘supreme judge’ is at the forefront. Jesus, Lord of the cosmos, is in control and ‘His judgement will be just and for this he has set a day’ (Moses, 2018: 20). This could explain why these women ‘cling on’ to Jesus. They hold onto his benevolence and faithfulness towards them, but also an eschatological hope, that their hardships will be seen by Jesus and they will be given rest, like he does with Martha. Moses also includes the Holy Spirit in this Christology, which is helpful for these women who come from charismatic backgrounds. He says that people receive the Holy Spirit, which is the promised eschatological Spirit. This Spirit enables the

experience of Christ and helps create a community, with spiritual gifts, who wait for Christ's return. He says, 'many Sri Lankans have found the Lord in the countries of their exile' (Moses, 2018: 27). This eschatological realisation can enhance identity for South Asian diaspora Christians because Jesus is Lord from their homelands to the 'countries of their exile'; he has delivered them before and will deliver them again. These women serve for a higher purpose beyond themselves: they do not need immediate change and action, because they wait on the Lord. Jesus sees their hardships, he is in control and he will bring freedom.

The Christology that Asian theologians articulate tend to use the starting point of religious plurality since homelands such as India are religiously plural. Samartha says that we should accept cultural and religious plurality with courage and hope, rather than doubt and fear, since it is the 'inescapable fact of history.' Yet for Christians, 'conversion, instead of being a vertical movement toward God, a genuine renewal of life, has become a horizontal movement of groups of people from one community to another' and so they become resistant to interreligious dialogue (Samartha 1991: 148). Orevillo-Montenegro says that Samartha's 'bullock-cart Christology' moves slowly but 'wheels turn on Asian soil and it speaks to the daily life of the majority of Asian people' (Orevillo-Montenegro, 2006: 46). This suggests that interaction with different belief systems can enable contextual articulation of Asian Christian belief.

However, the starting point for theologising must be God, rather than the Bible and church, which have been open to different interpretations (Phan, 2017: 127). When we consider their relationships with Jesus, and conceptualisations of him as Lord, we find a more genuine theology which represents South Asian Christian women. They find a God whom they know personally when they read the Bible; he is unchanging and always loving, not dependent on human interpretation, at the risk of anthropomorphising. Phan says that in these third world theologies, the historical Jesus is liberator and Christ is universal, without borders. This Lord of the cosmos is then taken with these people into their new lands. He acknowledges that in some countries where Christianity is minority, there is a need to have interreligious dialogue, even with issues pertaining to church (Phan, 2017: 129-130, 137). However, this may not be

representative of the beliefs of all Asian Christians, particularly women in the diaspora. Though their homelands may have been pluralistic, this does not mean that they engaged with society in this way, particularly in countries like India and Sri Lanka where Christians have been persecuted. In countries where they are a minority based on their ethnicity, as well as faith, a 'minority of minorities' as Hatzaw suggests, the idea of interreligious dialogue becomes all the more unappealing - especially for conservative Christians like some of the women interviewed.

South Asian Christian women in London do not live in a society which is antagonistic to Christianity. Though religious plurality exists, and these women do experience a reality of patriarchy and suffering, it is perhaps not as strong and ontological as in Asia. For my women who bring their faith in Jesus from their homelands into their new lands, they do not want interreligious dialogue, they just want Jesus. He is as faithful in London as he was in India and Sri Lanka, since he is Lord over all. In the British context, there is an additional layer of racism and prejudice. Since Britain has held cultural dominance in Christianity, for south Asians there is the myth of it being a 'white people's religion', which can affect how South Asians interact with British culture and perhaps faith (Barton, 2005: 227). Though Britain is growing in religious plurality, for South Asian Christians living in London, perhaps racism and classism are more pressing issues, where they seek Jesus to deliver them.

With the uniqueness of South Asian Christian identity for women in the West, there must be a sense where they wish to protect this identity. When hearing the women in this study, we find that conversion, connecting with people of other religions and being free from hardship is not their main point of focus. Rather, their 'clinging on' to the person of Jesus, and his presence in every area of their life is principal. Their navigating of marriage, looking after family, being part of a church community, obeying Jesus, and facing life as an ethnic minority in London are their priorities. After hearing their stories, we ask the women how they view Jesus, and find that they can articulate for themselves their Christology. Jesus is Lord over all, fully human and fully God, able to see them through their difficulties. It is because of this that they are assured of their faith and continue hopeful despite negative experiences.

A Christology for South Asian Christian women in London

Rather than a ‘co-sufferer’, Jesus for these women is a source of strength and divinity, a close friend, partner, and God. Orevillo-Montenegro quotes M. M. Thomas, who says that Jesus Christ on the cross shows true manhood. For these women, Jesus represents the ‘true gentleman’, despite men in their lives not being able to understand them. She also quotes Aloysius Pieris who says that Christ ‘corrects our preconceptions about what it means to be divine and what it means to be human.’ Women constantly adapting to the words and actions of those around them, do not have to with Jesus. He is unchanging, loving, and gentle. Jesus as Lord over all shows that ‘the gospel is about what God has done in the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth in one particular historical moment. This Christ-event gives all history a spiritual relevance and affirms God’s acts “through, in, and for Jesus Christ”’ (Orevillo-Montenegro, 2006: 32-33). This Christology shows the perspective of the women interviewed: Jesus provides strength to carry on, Christ is the origin, the sustainer, and the goal of creation. The ‘scope of Christ’s presence is cosmic’ so it is not limited to a certain country or sphere of life (Pope-Levison, 1992: 61, 63).

Chung says that Western colonialism used Jesus as Lord to justify political and economic domination over many Asian countries – the coloniser’s Lord was the ruler of the whole cosmos (Chung, 1993: 228). Through Jesus as *Kyrios* in this passage, and the insights from these South Asian women, this understanding of patriarchal lordship can be subverted and liberated. Since they know their Lord to be loving, they hold a contrasting view of lordship. Chung says that the liberative image of Jesus as Lord ‘frees Asian women from the false authority of the world over them’ (Chung, 1993: 227). Consequently, for these women who know Jesus’ lordship to mean benevolence, this could represent what true authority should look like. Perhaps this could be the Lord of the cosmos that M. M. Thomas and Pieris allude to, without necessarily entering interreligious dialogue.

Chung argues that the freer Asian women become from patriarchal authorities, the more creative they become in naming their experience of Jesus Christ (Chung, 1993: 232). However, based on the interviews, it seems to be the other way around. In naming

their experiences of Jesus Christ first, they were able to look at scripture in a new way, with the benevolence of Jesus at the forefront. The female characters are empathised with, consequently enabling them to see the restraints being placed on them by ‘patriarchal authorities’. Through lived experiences, one is empowered to name their relationship with Christ, instead of waiting to be freed from patriarchal authorities. This embracing of Christ within the hardships they face can offer a new way for these women to participate in their faith. Rather than dichotomising men and women or putting the onus on men and institutions to change, it gives women an equal standing with the educated elite, to articulate for themselves their faith. Chung says that some Asian women find Jesus in the most ordinary everyday experience and seeing revelation of God from below is important, where women find God as ‘the saving presence within their daily lives’ (Chung, 1993: 241). However, she seems to generalise this Lord as not descending from heaven but emerging from broken-body experience. Which again suggests that lordship must come from co-suffering for Asian women. However I ask, can Jesus not do both? He descended from heaven *and* emerged from broken-body experience, to conquer death and resurrect, bringing salvation to all. Jesus does relate to hardship and humiliation, but he overcame it in every sphere of life for humanity, and through him, we also ascend in glory.

Like other feminist and Asian biblical scholars, Chung talks about the term Lord and what it means socially and economically. However, for these South Asian women living in London, the term Lord at first glance is a spiritual term reminding them of the resurrected Lord, his strength and benevolence, having experienced these qualities themselves. Orevillo-Montenegro says that ‘the Jesus of Asian women is the Asian Christ who accompanies them in their daily struggles.’ We can see that despite the importance of recognising patriarchal limitations placed on women, a good starting point would be the loving nature of Christ. This cannot only redeem the androcentrism found in scripture, but also allows women to be managers of their own faith and resources them to navigate different hardships to their counterparts in Asia, such as racism. She says that ‘Jesus’ Christhood is known through his praxis of love.’ This is important for women because it ‘focuses on one’s capacity to give out of an abundance

of love.’ The language of self-denial and sacrifice can be draining for women because it can take away their sense of self (Orevillo-Montenegro, 2006: 194, 195). Much like Martha, who is invited to rest and participate in the love of Christ, this can be achieved through the re-telling of women’s stories, where they can rest, and form a theology of scriptural passages.

Out of the five women interviewed, only one identified as a feminist, and she was a second-generation immigrant. Gnanadason says that feminist theology is usually received with suspicion and even hostility among some in India, because what is meant by feminist theology in India, and the third world, is a ‘theology from the perspective of women in struggle’ (Gnanadason, 1989: 117). This label ‘women in struggle’, should not be placed upon women without asking them if they identify with it. As scholars, this is a privileged place to stand from, and perhaps even demeaning. It is up to the women being represented to decide if they are struggling or not. For some women, they view themselves as overcomers, because this is the Jesus they hold onto. Moreover, issues for women in the diaspora are complex. For example, Prema, whose husband fought in the Sri Lankan civil war. She would not say that she is suffering abuse at the hands of her husband because she understands his behaviour to not be his own; his anger is not towards women, rather it is the after-effects of having fled war. Therefore, labels such as ‘feminist’ and ‘suffering’ are reductive because they are not indicative of how these women really feel.

It is true that the ‘demanding silence of women, treating women as property denying to women their rightful place in ministry - including ordained ministry – are all biblically explained away, time and time again from the pulpits of our churches’, as seen in the experiences of the women interviewed (Gnanadason, 1989: 120). So, with their relationship with Jesus at the forefront, it is the Bible that should be used to free these women. They have a commitment to church as part of their unwavering faith, and it is a place where they can participate in their culture and community; despite damaging church experiences, these women stay and advocate for equality. This is different to other Asian and feminist theologians where church is not a commitment – it is solely a patriarchal institution. But for those in the diaspora, first, 1.5 and second

generation, it can be an important place where Tamil culture is kept alive and family values are upheld. In their clinging on to Jesus, they remain in church because it is the house of God. Gnanadason says that ‘Indian women will not easily reject the Bible because of its patriarchal content... we cannot afford to do so.’ Despite its misuse, the Bible has also ‘provided authorization and legitimisation for struggles of human dignity and justice’ (Gnanadason, 1989: 125). By hearing women’s stories, their relationship with Christ and then their reading of scripture in this light, this can offer a more empowering, distinctive way to articulate Christology.

Feminist scholarship is hence different from the lived biblical interpretation. Through these interviews, we can see that it is also ecclesially oriented, and rooted in charismatic faith. Janette Ok speaks about ‘ecclesially oriented Asian American biblical interpretation’, where interpretations ‘remain on the ground while also being rooted in sociohistorical and theological contexts of the biblical texts.’ This is important for Asian women from charismatic backgrounds, who prioritise their church community and faith in Jesus - their theology should be representative of this. When biblical interpretation is ‘done in connection with the church’, which is important for evangelical and charismatic Christians, it ‘gives voice to the rich traditions of resistance, liberation, community, and spirituality that have nourished and sustained Asian American ecclesial and parachurch communities’ (Ok, 2024). Using this methodology of hearing about lived experiences in-between two readings of scripture, we hear voices which demonstrate resistance, liberation, and ecclesial community.

Jesus for South Asian women

Jesus is everything to these women, the Lord who is beyond the world but also in it, the rock on which they build their faith. He is slow to anger, the perfect partner, a source of comfort and love personified. Melanchthon offers her Christology, which may be more representative of South Asian women, being Indian herself. She says that the redemptive work of Christ includes both men and women; this is seen in the Bible where Jesus pays special attention to women. He ‘took women seriously, ministered to their needs, challenged them to go beyond their ideas of themselves.’ Her emphasis on

love is important because this is how these women have interacted with Jesus first, and then read scripture through this lens. She says, 'Jesus showed love, respect and honour to women', sometimes misinterpreted as pity or 'condescending male benevolence' to helpless, sinful and ignorant women. She continues, 'we in the Church need to overcome the existent sexist biases and work towards the full incorporation of women into the life of the church' and that 'women have to be recognised as equals, as co-workers, with a sense of dignity and worth' (Melancthon, 1989: 21-22). However, perhaps it is through the hearing of women's stories that they can be recognised as equals first, *then* existent sexist biases can be overcome and women incorporated into the life of the church. Like Jesus who first hears Martha's plea to be seen, he acknowledges her burden, and then brings change to her circumstances by asking her to rest.

Augustine's interpretation of Luke 10:38-42 offers an eschatological understanding, where Mary and Martha represent the present age and the age to come, respectively. Augustine says that Martha was blameless in her work, that she and Mary symbolise two lives: 'laborious and restful, toilsome and blessed, temporal and eternal.' This is consistent with what these women said after their second reading of the passage: Martha was not wrong in her work, but it was necessary to be able to enter rest, Martha is a 'ship at sea' and Mary is 'already in harbour.' This is important because it does not pit these women, or the ways of life they may be representing, against each other. 'The two lives of the women were both blameless, both praiseworthy: one laborious, the other leisured: neither sinful, neither slothful.' This is coherent with the thoughts of the interviewees where Jesus' response was not a rebuke but an implicit statement that her work will come to an end, and she will rest at Jesus' feet. Augustine says that rather than choosing one way of life, Martha is our reality now and Mary is what the future holds. So, Martha is not a foil for Mary, but she is a model too. This is significant because she is the one that all the women could identify with, though they understood Mary to be the ideal. Augustine says, 'toil passes, and rest will come, but we cannot attain rest except through toil' (Augustine, 1945: 172,

175). To reach Mary's position, you need to be Martha first; this corresponds to Sheela and Rehana's thoughts.

Unlike feminist theologians who discuss Mary and Martha as representing different types of women, these women have understood Mary and Martha to represent different seasons of life or service, which is coherent with Augustine. This shows an ecclesially oriented interpretation, where spirituality is at the forefront, showing their different conceptualisation of 'Lord' as loving. Augustine's valuable recognition of the importance of two phases of life gives these women confidence that they are pleasing God. The women recognise Martha's reality and aspire to move towards Mary's position. In contrast to Augustine, these women do not see Mary's position of rest solely as an eschatological promise, but an attainable goal for this life.

Therefore, Augustine's interpretation can be redeeming for South Asian Christian women in the diaspora because it acknowledges that both Martha and Mary are doing the right thing. By returning to an ancient Church father like Augustine, we benefit from the simple message of what Jesus offers – the kingdom of God. Rather than sociological analysis, perhaps for these South Asian Christian women, a spiritual and theological dimension is more helpful and liberating. Here, women are not reduced to their suffering, and they maintain scripture for what it is – the living word of God.

Conclusion

This dissertation began with a reflection of Luke 10:38-42 and how the female characters illustrate theological concepts such as discipleship, hospitality, and the kingdom of God. The use of the term ‘Lord’ for Jesus in this passage offers an eschatological reality that this passage may be alluding to, one which Augustine articulates. Though the term Lord has been a point of contention for feminist theologians, since it has connotations with the patriarchy, colonialism and the subjugation of peoples, for South Asian Christian women living in London who read this passage, the term Lord signifies love and divinity. In contrast to feminist theologians, the women interviewed saw Mary and Martha to represent different seasons of life or serving, rather than representing different types of women. Therefore, Augustine’s reading may offer these women a more relevant interpretation, where their lived experiences are not reduced to ‘suffering’, and the spiritual aspects of Jesus’s words are apparent. It is through illuminating lived experiences that the characters of Mary and Martha, in relationship to Jesus as Lord, offer South Asian Christian women in London a form of liberation despite patriarchal contexts.

The interviews have revealed the unwavering faith of these women despite hardships in every sphere of life, including church. After their initial reading of the passage, they seemed to be more far removed from the characters of Mary and Martha, and saw them as representing competing ways of living, however after discussing their lived experiences, their love towards Jesus, and the love they perceive to feel from him, a re-reading of the passage allowed for a renewed understanding. After the second reading, a new perspective can be seen, where the women identify with the characters. With their own experiences at the forefront, South Asian Christian women in London can articulate for themselves a theology, whilst finding themselves and their God within the text.

A theology and a Christology, which is better representative of women in the diaspora, and does not label them as merely ‘the suffering’, is voiced. This is important because it is from privileged, educated positions that we call these women ‘suffering’ when they might not identify as such. Moreover, since the difference between

scholarship and lived realities are perceivable, with the tendency of Asian and feminist scholarship to focus on socio-political liberation, these women seek spiritual liberation first, where they can be free to spend time with Jesus and their identity affirmed as children of God. Though, they have experienced hardships in life, their relationship with Jesus is the most important, and this brings transformation, in both their souls and their lives. Since Jesus matters, the church also matters, which explains their continued service despite harmful experiences, and is indicative of their charismatic backgrounds.

Through the methodological choice to discuss lived experiences in-between two readings of the passage, in contrast to the Asian feminist theologians discussed, I have found a feminine voice that is not necessarily feminist. Here, lordship is important and loving, a re-reading of scripture having discussed lived realities is transformative, and the difference between scholarship and lived reality is apparent. When theology is not necessarily representative of the grassroots, though the people studied are from the grassroots, this methodological contribution can offer a subject contribution, where women can engage and share their theology, even if they are not (theologically) educated.

In their moving responses to questions asked about their lives, their faith permeates every area, from asking Jesus what they should wear in the morning, serving him in churches where they are often side-lined in their participation, to praying earnestly for him to heal their husbands who have subjected them to harm and violence. In this clinging on to Jesus, we find that the Bible offers these women a priceless hope, an ‘anchor for their soul’, which keeps them going, for their children, their families, and themselves (Hebrews 6:19). I hope that in these interviews, they have felt empowered to express their faith and that through this study, the reader is able to recognise the remarkable way that these women navigate life in London - often a pillar of strength to those around them. In their stories, I have found Jesus in a profound way, a Jesus who sees and knows women, who is faithful towards them. The words of the Psalmist ring true from the mouths of these women: ‘with passion I pursue and cling to you. Because I feel your grip on my life, I keep my soul close to your heart’ (Psalm 63:8, TPT).

Appendix 1

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in June 2024 in London, with participant consent obtained beforehand. The interviewees consisted of women from charismatic and Baptist Christian denominational backgrounds, all of whom have volunteered, or continue to volunteer in different capacities in their churches:

Sheela (52). Indian – Telugu and Tamil. First generation; moved to London from Chennai. Pentecostal.

Prema (42). Sri Lankan Tamil. First Generation; moved to London from Jaffna. Pentecostal.

Helena (24). Sri Lankan Tamil. Second generation; born and brought up in Croydon, South London. Baptist.

Rehana (30). Indian – Tamil. First generation; born and brought up in Bangalore, moved to London from New York. Pentecostal/non-denominational.

Elsie (21). Indian – Malayalee. 1.5 generation; Moved from Bangalore to London. Pentecostal/Charismatic Anglican.

Appendix 2

As the interviews progressed after the first read of the passage, each headed in a different direction, and we proceeded speaking about what the participants seemed to want to discuss. Below is the interview guide that was used, though the conversations strayed, every interviewee was asked about their church experiences and relationship with Jesus.

- What is your name?
- Where do you live?
- Were you born in London? If not, where were you born and brought up?
- Would you describe yourself as Christian? How would you describe your faith?
 - Pentecostal? Charismatic?

Please read the passage.

What do you think of the characters of Mary and Martha?

What do you think of Jesus in this passage?

Do you identify with Mary or Martha? Or none of them? Or both of them?

Tell me how this passage makes you feel.

If first generation:

- What brought you to London?
- What do you think of life here in comparison to life in India/Sri Lanka?

If not:

- Did you grow up in a Tamil speaking church? Why did you move to English church?

Church

- How did you come to faith?
- Are you part of a church?
 - What's your role?
 - Which language do you worship in?
- Can you describe your experiences growing up in church in London?
 - Or Can you describe your experiences of church (in general)?
- What does church mean to you?
- Do you hold a leadership position in your church?
- What's your experience of church? In London? Versus in India/Sri Lanka?
- What are your thoughts on women in leadership?
- How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
- How do you facilitate your faith at home? Versus in church?

Then return to the passage and return to questions about Jesus.

Do you have any new thoughts about this passage?

What do you think of the characters of Mary and Martha?

What do you think of Jesus in this passage?

Do you identify with Mary or Martha? Or none of them? Or both of them?

How do you see Jesus in this passage?

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