International Journal of Sino-Western Studies, Vol. 25, December, 2023
国学与西学国际学刊第25期, 2023十二月
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37819/ijsws.25.1761

Women and Aged Disability: A Study of Naomi's Gender identity and its Transformation in *the Book of Ruth*

Zhengyi MO

(Associated professor of Zhejiang Yuexiu University)

Author: Mo Zhengyi, associate professor at the School of English of Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Tel: +13957851492, Email: mozy11@163.com

Abstract: This paper attempts to investigate Naomi's gender identity and its transformation based on the integration of feminist and aged disability perspectives. Focusing on dismantling and restoration of Naomi's gender identity in the story of Ruth, the investigation exposes how such a transformation is related to the norm of womanhood set in the patriarchal society of biblical Israel. Naomi's case reflects how the patriarchal values of ancient Israel obscured and shaped identities of the post-menopausal women, some of the most vulnerable members of the society. This investigation offers contemporary readers an opportunity to contemplate similar instances within their own communities and to reflect on what different individuals and communities can do to protect the dignity and well-being of the oppressed.

Key words: gender identity, aged disability, transformation, womanhood, biblical Israel

1. Introduction

Increasing frailty is a common identifier for an aging person in the Hebrew Bible. There are several mentions regarding the failing, blind eyes of the old man in the case of Issac (Gen 27.21) and Jacob (Gen 48.10), and the waning vitality in in case of Barzillai (2 Sam 19.35). In 1King1.1-4, David loses his reproductive vigor and is deemed insufficiently masculine. On the other hand, it is uncommon that Hebrew Bible has biases in favour of senior aged men. For example, Abraham (Gen25.8), Gideon (Judg 8.32) and David (1Chron 29.28) are three "gray headed" individuals and whose age is described as the "good old age" (*sêbâ tôbâ*) at their late life stage. In addition, the biblical texts also highlights examples of aged able-bodied men, such as Caleb and Moses. For example, Moses was a hundred and twenty years when he died, his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated (Deut 34.27). By comparing of physical conditions regarding the old age of Moses and David as example, it shows that old age could be a source of disability for men, but not always so. In contrast, the biblical text provides no direct information about the physical state relating to senior age of women.

It is widely recognized that a male-centric perspective is adopted in the Hebrew Bible.[1] If a favourable description of the relation between man and his old age is made based on this

1 E.g. Ilona Rashkow, "Ruth: The Discourse of Power and the Power of Discourse," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible,* ed. Althalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 26; Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 23-24.

male-centric perspective, what is the perspective toward woman of old age in biblical Israel society? By examining the life of Naomi from the book of Ruth as an example, this paper investigates her gender identity and its transformation with a focus on the dismantling and restoration of her femininity.[2] It is expected that through the investigation, the relation between the transformation of Naomi's gender identity and the norm of womanhood set in biblical Israel, as well as the self perception of her female identity, can be disclosed. Based on this, a conclusion is to be reached that the post-menopausal women of the biblical Israel, represented by *'almāná* Naomi, suffer from being denied recognition as women under their final incapacity to bear children, and gender practices of a patriarchal structure pose a fluid, complicated and more significant impact on their gender identities than biological sex.

2. Research Perspectives and Background Information

Gender, which refers to the social roles ascribed to femininity and masculinity, is applied as a means to describe its distinction from the biological sex.[3] While biological sex is fundamentally determined by chromosomal makeup and physiological structure, gender is a social and cultural construct, an outcome of various arrangements, and as a means of legitimizing one of the most fundamental divisions of society.[4] Gender intersects with race, sexuality, ethnicity, social class, and nation in variegated and situationally contingent ways, and can be understood as external to the individual, and is perceived and expressed via a series of ongoing judgments and evaluations by others, as well as of others.[5] Moreover, gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.

---

2 Hans Wolff provides a typical example of traditional interpretation of the biblical data on the understanding of three distinguished life stages of the human lifespan, which is on the measuring stick of physical maturity: children, young but fully-grown men and women, and the mature or elderly.

> children (*yōnéq*, the sucking child, Deut 32.25; *náar*, the boy, Ps148.12; *tap*, toddling but not capable of walking, Ezek 9.6); young but fully-grown men and grown-up girls (*bāhūr* and *bĕtūlā*, Deut 32.25; Ezek 9.6 and Ps148.12); and mature, elderly, men and women (*zāqēn*, who wear a beard, Ezek 9.6; Ps.148.12; *išsēbā*, the grey-haired man, Deut 32.25; *išš*ā Ezek 9.6).

See Hans Wolf, *Anthropology of the old Testament* (Columbia MD.SCM Press, 2012), 120. In addition, we may find similar expression to Wolff's phases of lifespan in Lev 27.1-7. In general, Wolff's perspectives of phases of the life basically focus on visible physical characteristics. However, his interpretation meets problems in that it offers no clue as to the social meaning behind these physical characteristics. For instance, it fails to touch the gendered cultural issues of old age for women. On the whole, Wolff's interpretation reinforces the male lens encoded in the biblical text based on the scholarly presuppositions he brings to his work. It is especially impressive when he parallels "fully grown men" with "grown-up girls " in his interpretation, implicating his male-centric position.

3 Jeanne Marecek, Mary Crawford, Danielle Popp,"On the Construction of Gender, Sex and Sexualities," in *The Psychology of Gender* (Eagly, Alice H.;Beall, Anne E.; Stenberg, Robert J. eds 2nd., New York. Guilford press, 2004), 190-261.

4 Candace West, Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," in *Doing gender, doing difference. inequality, power, and institutional change,* eds., S. Fenstermaker; W.Candace (New York. Routledge, 2013), 3-25.

5 Ibid.,

This is especially true in ancient world where women were dominated by men in terms of power and privilege, and women's gender was defined through a hierarchical power structure, typically manifested and exercised by a system referred to as "patriarchy".[6] Overall, one's gender is somewhat ambiguous and has certain room for fluidity due to the ongoing influence of many complicated social aspects. [7]In view of it, variability or transformation of gender deserves our attention and is worth following.

Like gender, disability is also a cultural production. It refers to a physical or mental conditions or state, negatively affecting categories of persons especially on account of social meaning and has contributed significantly to the generation and maintenance of inequality in societies.[8] Disability relies on cultural perceptions of the nature of embodiment.[9] Disability, which intersects with different aspects of a person's identity such as gender, race or social class, creates a unique experience of discrimination or oppression. Indeed, disability and gender intersect to create a unique experience that is not simply the coincidence of being a woman and having a disability separately, but the combined experience of being a woman with a disability. Women with disabilities, even move intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imaginations as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless.[10] For instance, a barren woman was perceived to be deficient and denigrated in ancient Israel since she was unable to meet the norms of the reproductive function of female set in a man's world.[11] Therefore, feminist understandings of disability—the gendering of disability aids the modern interpreters of the Bible to understand how gender frame social relations and how these arrangements play out in the family and in work and into the later years of an Israelite woman's life.[12]

Prior to the discussion of Naomi's case, a brief background introduction to the status of the Israelite's women will be made. The studies of women's status in biblical law indicate that the biblical legislation, like ancient Near Eastern social policy in general, assumes women's subordinating roles to the dominant male in her life, either as daughter, wives, or mothers.[13]An unmarried woman of biblical Israel is under the ownership and control of her father. She does not inherit from her father unless she has no brothers, in such cases, she must subsequently marry

6 Manohar D. Berkowitz & J.Tinkle, "Walk Like a Man, Talk Like a Woman. Teaching the Social Construction of Gender," *Teaching Sociology* 38 (2010), 132-143.

7 Kate Bornstein, Gender Outlaw. On Men, Women and the Rest of Us (Vintage,1995),51-52.

8 Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the the Hebrew Bible. Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2008),2-3.

9 Claire McKinney, " Cripping the Classroom: Disability as a Teaching Method in the Humanities " in *Transformations: the Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol 25,No.4(Fall 2014/Winter 2016):114.

10 Garland-Thomson Rosemarie, "Feminist Disability Studies," in *Signs* 30 (2005) :1557-1558.

11 Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2011),16-17.

12 Martha Holstein, *Women in Late Life. Critical Perspectives on Gender and Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield,2015), 9.

13 Tikva. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddness. Women Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York, 1992), 121.

with her father's clan to prevent the dispersal of tribal property among outsiders (Num 36.2-12). [14]When getting married, she was bought by her husband from the house of her father by paying a certain amount of bride's price or *machor*.[15] This man *bayal* owns and controls her, as a rule, wife, slaves as well as castles are listed altogether as belonging to the husband's house (Exod 20.14). Besides, a vow made by a married woman could be annulled if her husband persuaded her against it immediately, and she was forgiven by God (Num 30.8,12).

In a patriarchal society of ancient Israel, in which women were dominated by men in terms of power and privilege, it is not surprising that women's gender roles are prescribed and established by men. Having applied insights gleaned from sociology, anthropology, and archaeology to reconstruct modes of Israelite social life and the ordinary of biblical history, Carol Meyers argues that women are prescribed roles in the areas of textiles, food production, childbearing and-raising, and household education. [16]Meyer's view finds support among other scholars.[17]

Compared with other factors, childbearing is the most essential function in conforming to the norms of womanhood defined by the ancient Israel society. Like other ancient societies, women of biblical Israel married for the purpose of bearing children, particularly sons. The reproduction of further generations not only offers sustainable labour forces for the family, but is also the way to maintain the continuity of the line of the male dominated house.[18] This is especially true in agrarian societies of the biblical period (1200-600BCE) with the high rate of infant mortality and maternal death during childbirth. Thus, giving birth to the next generation constituted a woman most important contribution to the house of her husband.[19] Accordingly, it is assumed in

14 This is typically known as regulation of Zelophehad's daughter and will be discussed in part IV.

15 In the account of the quest for a bride for Issac in Gen 24, Abraham's servant on several occasions bestowed jewelry and other gifts on Rebekah and her family. In responding to Jacob's demand of returning to his native land, Leah and Rachel said that their father regarded them as foreign women. This could refer to the fact once married, they are no longer considered his responsibility, but part of Jacob's family. The use of the verb *mākar* "sell" (Gen 31.15) indicates that Leah and Rachel understood their marriage to have involved a purchase. Exod 22.16 and Deut 22.28 also provide hints of marrying a violated girl by paying the bride's price. In addition, in Gen34.2, Shechem's infatuation with Dinah led him to say to her father and brothers, "ask of me ever so much a bridewealth (*machor*) and gift (*mattan*) and I will give as you say to me."

16 Carol Meyer, "Everyday Life of Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* , eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 252-259. Although domestic units may be different, women's influence and even dominating multifarious facets of economic life, social and parenting activities in household are not to be ignored. The " worthy woman" poem of Prov 31.10-31 reflects such a case. Nevertheless, women's sphere of influence is conceived of as limited to private, domestic-centered activities, not to public sectors of men's world, see Carol Meyers, "Returning Home: Ruth 1.8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible,* ed. Althalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 26; C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 98-99,107,111.

17 E.g. Block argued that childbearing and doing housework were involved as main tasks of married women of ancient Israel, see Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* ed.KenM. Campbell (Intervarsity Press, 2003), 72-76; Carolyn S. Leeb, "The Widow: Homeless and Post-Menopausal," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002) :161.

18 Carol Meyers, " The Family in Early Israel, " *in Families in Ancient Israel,* ed. Leo G. Perdue (Louisville. Westminster John Knox Press,1997), 27; Daniel I. Block, " Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel " , 73.

19 Daniel I. Block, " Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel, " 73.

the Hebrew Bible that a woman with a childbearing body is to be able bodied.[20] Infertility would indicate ultimate female disability because she does not conform to ancient Israel's expectations of womanhood.

In addition, motherhood also has a religious significance. In his monograph on the social meaning and the qualities of the gendered life cycle as it pertains to the religious life of an Israelite or Babylonian woman, van der Toorn argues that it was fixed that beginning from her nursing period, a girl would be expected to bear and raise children. He maintains that the experience of motherhood "formed the high point of the religious life of the average woman. Motherhood was her destiny… It was a climax in her religious life. The kindness of gods was tangibly present in the fruit of the womb."[21]In biblical Israel, fertility was considered a blessing from the deity, and children were believed to be a reward to the family from YHWH.[22] The loss of reproductive capabilities of a woman was often attributed to some hidden wrong, sin or flaw which was consequently related to being unblessed or even curse by God, referring to her shameful religious identity.[23] Therefore, in consideration of social and religious consequences, a woman's infertility indicated her female disability and ultimately resulted in the deprivation of her femininity .

3. Dismantling of Naomi's femininity

According to chapter one of the book of Ruth, Naomi lost her husband and her two sons, thus, she became *'almāná*. The Hebrew term *almāná* like the Akkadian *almattu* and the Sumerian NU.MU. SU or NU. MA.SU, is a legal-technical term that is more restricted than the English "widow". [24] It refers to a married woman, whose husband and her father-in-law are deceased, and she has no

20 In contrast, barrenness is mentioned in close context with illness, Exod 23.25-26: " I will remove sickness from you midst. No woman in you land shall miscarry or barren." In Dent 7.14-15, barrenness and sickness are aligned, see Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and Biblical literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19.

21 Karel Van der Toor, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave. The Role of Religion in the life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle; The Biblical seminar 23; Sheffield. JSOT Press,1994), 23. Likewise, young women who are barren in the the Hebrew Bible are often attributed to the cause that YHWH closed their wombs (Gen 30.22; 1Sam 1.5), and they were unable to bear a child until YHWH opened their wombs, emphasizing the divine role in conception and birth, also see Ps 113.9.

22 YHWH blessed men by saying " be fertile and increase, fill the earth... " (Gen 1.28) and this idea is to be found throughout the Hebrew Bible, such as Gen15.1-6;17.6; 22.17; 26.3-5,24;28.13-15; 24.60; 48.16; Rut4.11; Ps 127.3-5;128.3-4.

23 For example, Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children to her dying clay because she despised David for his leaping and whirling before God (2 Sam 6.12-23). Other typical cases of treating communal barrenness as a curse or punishment are found in Gen 20.17-18, Exod 23.25-26, Deny 7.14-15, Hos 9.11,etc. However, infertility related to unblessed or curse from YHWH should not be perceived to be universal. Sometimes there is no indication of reason of infertility in the biblical text, to name a few, the cases of Rebekah or Rachel. It is not that they are barren because of divine curse or punishment for their wrongdoing. Rather, they are simply barren, see Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability studies and Biblical Literature*, 19-20.

24 In contrast, widow in English simply means a woman whose husband is dead, and who has not remarried, see Martha T. Roth," The Neo-Babylonian Widow," in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 43/45 (1991-1993):2-3.

son to provide her with financial support. In this respect, Naomi was left alone and in need of legal protection. [25]

In a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel, Naomi became a member of her husband's family when she married. With the death of her husband Elimelech, she was still considered to be part of his family, and was subject to the authority of a male of his kin. In other words, even though death had ended the physical relationship that existed between Elimelech and Naomi, it had not terminated the relationship between Naomi and her husband's family, with the mutual rights and obligations incumbent upon both parties.[26]

Nevertheless, with the end of the Elimelech's line, Naomi, as *'almāná*, had to turn to the kinsman of her husband's house to fulfill the law obligation to Elimelech by conducting a levirate marriage. Such a marriage might have also provided her legal protection which she desperately needed. Naomi could have had a chance to contract a levirate marriage with kinsman such as Boaz or the unnamed sandal off drawer (Rut 4.1-4), had she not been too old. Nevertheless, as Naomi was past childbearing age, she was not able to fulfill the law obligation any more, and thus no longer conformed to the view of womanhood of biblical Israel. [27]In this case, Naomi was understood to be deficient. It was not the physical changes themselves in a woman's body that happened when she was post-menopausal that led to her being marked as disabled, but rather the meaning that ancient Israel assigned to these changes.[28] In short, menopause represented the ultimate irreversible physical change in Naomi's body that stamped her as no longer being a woman. In other words, Naomi' body with disability makes her vulnerable to being denied recognition as women. In light of this, we find a dismantling of Naomi's femininity, meaning that her female identity was deprived by the Israelite's patriarchal society. Consequently, Naomi

25 The etymology of the Hebrew word *'almāná* is uncertain and the word is very old, it has cognates in the other Semitic languages. Akadian *almattu*, Ugaritic *'lmnt*, phoneician *'lmt*, Aramaic *'armaltā* and Arabic *'armalat*. See S. Moscati, *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammer of the Semitic language*, Porta Linguarum Orientalium, cited by Paula S. Hiebert, "'Whence Shall Help Come to me?'. The Biblical Widow " in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* ,ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis,Fortress,1989),127-128.

26 E.g. Ruth was still called in the name of the wife of her dead husband Mahlon (Rut 4.10). The case of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah (Gen 38), also illustrates this point. When Tamar's husband's death left her a childless widow, Judah was obliged by the levirate law to provide another son for her. When this procedure proved futile with his second son and since his third son was under age, Judah told Tamar to return to her own kin. Yet even after Tamar had resumed living with her paternal kin, it was still Judah who claimed control over her. When told she was pregnant, it was Judah who ordered her to be burned. Nothing from any member of Tamar's family could be heard.

27 According to the socioeconomic settings of real life in ancient Israel, the poor, who constituted the vast majority of the people, had to endure a labor-intensive existence all their years, experiencing hardships, exploitation, demands from the powerful, diseases and accidents, little food, etc. Material evidences indicate that life expectancy must have hovered around age 40, which means persons in their 40s were considered to be old, see Douglas A.Knight, "Perspective on aging and the elderly in the Hebrew Bible", *in Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68 (2014):138,144. Accordingly, when Naomi decided to return from Moab to Judah, she was probably about age 45, which suggests that she has past the age of childbearing.

28 Naomi Steinberg,"Women Who Used to Be Women but Aren't Anymore. Gender and Aging as Disability in the Hebrew Bible", in *International Conference on Cross-Textual Interpretation of Chinese and Hebrew Classical Writings* (at center for Judaic and Inter-religions studies of Shan Dong University, Jinan, June 14-17, 2019), 51.

obtains no social-cultural validation in the Israelite system of family life and is in a defenceless, isolation and bereavement situation, living on the fringes of society.[29]

The ideology that a menopausal woman is no longer a woman reflected by Naomi's example finds support in the Hebrew biblical text. In persuading her two daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' house, Naomi states in Ruth 1.12 that she is *zāqān*, "too old to have a husband". *Zāqēn* is derivative of the noun *zāqān*, " beard".[30] It is a stative verb which in the Qal denotes the state of being which follows being young (Ps 37.25). Of the 178 occurrences of the root *zqn*, approximately one third of the references relate to the meaning "old", e.g. we meet the phrase "old and advanced in years" (Gen 24.1, Josh 13.1; cf. 1 Sam 17.12) or "old and full of days" (1 Chr 23.1). On the one hand, *zqn* relates to the physical state of man of being old.[31] During this period of life, grey hair appears (1 Sam 12.2). There is failing of sight (Gen 27.1; cf. 1 Sam 3.2;4.15), etabolism and mobility (1 Kgs 1.1, 15), and a danger of falling (1Sam 4.18). A description of the onset of age in poetic symbols is found in Eccl 12.1-5. Death is an imminent prospect (Gen 19.31; 24.1; 27.1-2; Josh 23.1-2), and leadership is due to be relinquished (Josh 13;1; 1 Sam 8;1,5; 1 Chr 23.1). On the other hand, one in the period of advanced age is closely attached with tradition and cultural meaning. e.g. one is to be respected (Lev19.32) and not despised (Prov23.22). The ageing man wants to proclaim power and righteousness, which YHWH himself has taught him from his youth up to a future generation (Ps.71.17-19).[32]Indeed, *zāqēn* as a substantive, usually plural, is used as a technical term referring to the social group of official community leaders as "elders", matured aged men with beards, who form the juridical assembly, and has to pronounce judgment at the city gates (Deut 21.2-6;22.15-18; 25.7-9; Ruth 4.2,4,9,11; Jer 26.17). In fact, of the 178 occurrences of the root *zqn* in the Hebrew Bible, almost all of them refer to males. In contrast, in only six cases does the word group deriving from *zāqēn* apply specifically to females (Gen 18.12-13; 24.36; Zech 8.4; Prov 23.22; Ruth 1.12).[33] For example, In Prov 23.22b " do not disdain your mother when she is old (*zāqēn)* " where *zāqēn* still implies us a disrespect to an old woman, who is taken as to be deficient since she has irreversibly lost her vigor. While *ziqēnot* (old women) and *zāqēnim* (old men) appear

29 This also finds textual support where her indignation and desperate feeling is reflected through her cry. " call me the bitter one " (Rut 1.20). Moreover, the shifting of the reference of *šnaim* reflects the course of events that sets the story in motion. At the beginning of Ruth, the two sons of Elimelech and Naomi are the principal pair who five times are mentioned with the word *šnaim*. However, even those five instances reveal the family's changing fortune, since in 1:1-2 they are "his [Elimelech's] two sons"(*šney*-b*ānāyv*), after Elimelech's death in v.3 it leaves Naomi a single parent, they are called "her two sons"(*snēy bāneyhā*).When the two sons die inv.5 they do so together , and their coupling is reiterated by the description of Naomi's bereavement: she was left without her husband and hey two sons (*mišnēy ylādeyhā*). In 1.8-9 Naomi's bitter and despondent characterization begins with her habit of addressing Ruth and Orpah with irregular masculine plural suffixes *lêhēm*, y*imāhēm*, which may be the narrator's first hint of the emotional turmoil and are the sings Naomi's preoccupation with the sons she has lost, see Andrew R. Davis, " The Literary Effect of Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth, " in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013) :501,504-505.

30 R.Laird Harris; Gleason L. Archer. Jr; Brucek Waltker, *TWOT*, II (Moody publishers, 2008), 249.

31 Ibid.

32 Hans Wolf, *Anthropology of the old Testament,* 124.

33 *TDOT*, IV, 123.

side by side in Zech 8.4, the identities of the former derived from the basic from of *zqn,* originally applied to the latter, thus indicating a subordinating status of the females.

Among these six cases four instances connect the senior age of women directly with childbearing (Gen 18.12-13; 24.36; Ruth 1.12). The verb *zāqēnti* in Qal stative in Ruth 1.12 is specifically applied to Naomi where she is referred to as a woman past age of reproduction. Here, the literate translation of " being too old to have a husband " (Ruth 1.12) certainly does not mean she is too old to remarry, but rather implies that she is beyond age to have a sexual relation that would result in pregnancy.[34] By using *zqn*, it indicates that Naomi has no expectation of bearing children due to her advanced age.

In fact, there are other common words for advanced age in the biblical texts, such as *yāšēš/yāšiš* (old) (Job 12.12; 15.10; 29.8; 32.6) and *sêbâ* (gray head) (1 Sam 12.2; Job 15.10) .[35] In some cases, *yāšēš/yāšiš, sêbâ* and *zāqēn* are in mixed use in the biblical texts for the description of one's senior age. In 1 Sam 12.2, *zāqēn* and *sêbâ* are put side by side to indicate that Samuel was at an advanced age. The word *sêbâ* may or may not be appropriate for Naomi, since a post-menopausal woman is not necessarily gray headed. In this situation, the word *yāšēš/yāšiš* could have been well applied to Naomi. Nevertheless, using *zāqēn* in Ruth 1.12 is to stress that she no longer fits the norm for able bodied women and is thus labeled literally as "someone with a beard". It is mindful that the expression of *zāqēn* is not a biography of Naomi, an actual ancient post-menopausal woman, but rather a textual representation which is delivered through a kind of rhetorical construction of the male author/s.[36] Naomi's case finds echos in the life of Sarah in Gen 18.12-13 and 24.36, where the root *zqn* is used to to imply her status of being post-menopausal with no children. This should not be understood to mean that both Naomi and Sarah are the beneficiaries of the power status of men. Instead, when a woman no longer menstruates, she does not appears to assume new roles of importance, rather her biology limits her access to opportunities through other institutions besides motherhood. In ancient Israel with a binary gendered society, women lost their gender identities when their bodies were no longer childbearing ones. Thus, to be a woman with a beard was a category of identity quite distinct in its meaning from being a man with a beard since men were always assumed to be fertile.

Focusing on the Hebrew root *zqn* and cultural norms about women's gender reflects how ancient Israelite women viewed by men. Aged women whose bodies were no longer able to bear children are labeled to the class of " bearded individuals ". They suffers from oppression and have

34 Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,2016),95.

35 Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel", 95.

36 Such a textual representation is further identified through textual evidence of *stēyhem* (1.19) and *hēmmāh* (1.22), which referred to Naomi and Ruth with masculine forms. It is anticipated that Naomi and Ruth, without husbands and sons to support them, must become husband and sons to the other, highlighting their newly emerged male responsibilities to be assumed in Bethlehem, see Andrew R. Davis, " The Literary Effect of Gender Discord in the Book of Ruth,"506. On the other hand,the case of Ruth is different from Naomi because of different ages, which will be discussed in the later part of III.

none of the power, status, honor, or other benefits of being a woman.[37] As for Naomi, she becomes a disabled one since her body falls short of the norms assumed by ancient Israel for an able bodied woman. Furthermore, in the male author's narrative, the use of *zqn* by Naomi in the first person in describing her body as " disabled " and stigmatized suggests that she herself has already internalized the construction of ideology of women's disability by ancient Israel. She sees herself as empty, without social value, and with little self-worth and names herself "bitter one" (Rut1.20). Such an internalized notions could also be identified with Sarah when she acknowledged that she was *zāqēn* (Gen 18.12), too old to have enjoyment with her husband. From the context where YHWH responds to Abraham " Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, *zāqēnti* as I am? '", we may infer that " enjoyment " refers to sexual intercourse that leads to conception (Gen.18.13).

While *zāqēn* is used to link women's advanced age with their sexual infertility , another Hebrew word *'aqar* (meaning "one deprived of a root") is applied to those young women who are barren---whether for a short time or a long time.[38]For example, when Sarah is barren from her early age, she was described as *'aqar* (Gen 11.30). The same word is used for Rebekah (Gen 25.21) and Rachel (Gen 29.31) for their early infertility. In addition, the cases of Abigail, Bathsheba and Hannah implicate the distinction between the cultural meaning of ages of the women, as opposed to barrenness in the Hebrew Bible. Abigail is nowhere referred to as *'almāná* after the death of her husband Nabal. She simply transfers her residence, sexuality, and possessions to the household of David by becoming his wife (1 Sam 25.39-42). That Abigail still retained childbearing potential is made clear by the report that she bore to David his second son Chileab (2 Sam 3.3).[39] In case of Bathseba, the transfer of her fertility to the king's household is accomplished prior to her husband's death, but she likewise is never called *'almāná* (2 Sam11, 2-2b).[40]As for Hannah, who is unable to bear a child until YHWH intervenes and reverses her infertility, she is according to the biblical text still on womanhood, "YHWH had closed her womb" (1 Sam 1.5).

Compared with *zāqēn*, the word *'aqar* has no direct negative link to the gender status of a woman. Instead, using this word may hint that young women who are infertile still have potential to give birth to children in the future. This is especially significant for young widow of the ancient Near East. Data of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian shows that women had first married between the age of fourteen and twenty and men between the age of twenty-six and thirty-two.

37 Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012) :662.

38 This term in the biblical text explicitly addresses human barrenness and applies only to females (Gen 11.30, 25.21, 29.31; Exod 23.26; Judg13.2-3; 1 Sam 2.5; Job 29.21; Ps 113.9) and the personification of Zion as a woman (Isa 54.1). It describes a woman whose womb is closed so that male seed could not enter, see Baruch A. Levine, "'seed' versus 'womb': Expressions of Male Dominance in Biblical Israel," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East*, ed.S.Parpola, S. and R.M. Whiting (Proceedings of the XL VIIe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Compte Rendu. v. 47/1-2; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 2:337-343.

39 Carolyn S. Leeb, " The Widow: Homeless and Post-Menopausal," 161.

40 Ibid.

This decade or more of age difference between spouses suggests that many women would outlive their husbands, producing a relatively young widowed female populations, still fertile and capable of reproduction.[41] Relating to the story of Ruth, it is not inappropriate to label Orpah and Ruth as *'aqar* since these two young women were barren given that they were married to their husbands for quite some time but failed to bear children. In contrast, Naomi's sorrowful response with "my lot is far more bitter than yours [Ruth and Orpah] "(Rut 1.13) is worth noting since it reveals the hidden distinction between the fate of the aged widow and the young one.

In consideration of the distinctive applications of *zqn* and *'aqar* to childless women with regard to their ages in biblical texts, it indicates that the perception of post-menopausal women were influenced by a social and traditional construction, rather a medical one.[42]

4. Restoration of Naomi's femininity

In contrast to her irreversible menopausal physical state, Naomi's deprived gender identity, which is implicated with a bearded image, can possibly be restored. Although Naomi identifies herself as someone who is devalued, she attempts to make her efforts to seek a solution to the problem. Nonetheless, Naomi is to display her ingenuity within the bounds of the patriarchal structure of the society. The regulation of Zelophehad's daughter, to which two regulations of the kinsman redeemer and levirate marriage are subjugated, is not unknown in the story of Ruth (Rut 3.20;4.2).[43] The regulation of Zelophehad's which daughter is first and foremost, concerned with the perpetuation of Zelophehad's name, indicating an example of norm of male dominated society (Num 27.1-4;36.5-9).[44]In the case of Ruth, she has the inheritance of the land of Elimelech as a daughter along the lines sanctioned by Zelophehad's regulation, in light of the fact that no male heirs remain. In this mean, Ruth is no longer treated as a daughter-in-law, but a daughter, a

41 Martha T. Roth, 4.

42 Related studies see. Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility. Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton. Princeton University Press, 2015),2-4; Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant,*2; Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (eds.), *This Abled Body. Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta. Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

43 Embry convincingly argued that the kinsman redeemer and levirate marriage are concrete measures of Zelophehad's regulation. In addition, as the historical settings for the story of the kinsman redeemer and levirate marriage daughters was the post-exilic period, the purpose of which was to stabilize a rather insecure period as it pertained to inheritance matters. Since Ruth is most likely post-exilic, it may be that the author of Ruth shared the sense of marriage as a transaction in the case of females who had inherited the land with Number 36, see Bard Embry, "Legalities in the Book of Ruth: A Renewed Look" in *the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41(2016): 31-44.

44 Critical to the regulation of Zelophehad is the preservation of their father's name. This may be the principle behind why the child produced from Boaz and Ruth ends up accounted as Naomi's and, by default, Elimelech's. Obed thus preserves Elimelech's name and secures it to the land for Elimelech in a way that marriage of Zelophehad's daughters were to have done for Zelophehad, Ibid, 39.

full-fledged family member.[45] It is identified at the beginning of chapter three when Naomi called Ruth " my daughter ", a reflection of essential relationship on the level of mother-daughter. This can be compared to when Naomi addressed to Ruth and Orpah as "my daughters" (11b,12a,13c) in persuading them to go back to their " mother's house", which implies the end of mother's and daughters-in-law's relationship.[46] In the beginning of chapter three, Naomi's statement providing Ruth with a sense of security:" My daughter, must I not seek a home (*mānoāh*) for you (3.1) " resumed, and upgraded the status of Ruth from daughter-in-law to be daughter. Thus, it implies that Ruth resumed her status of being an unmarried woman within the household and under the authority of Naomi.

According to the Zelophehad's regulation, Ruth has to marry a man from within the tribe of Elimelech, through whom the restoration of Naomi's gender is to be possible. As Boaz showed a willingness to act as a kindred redeemer when allowing Ruth to glean in the portion of the field that he held, Naomi understood that he would probably continue to serve in this capacity not only through the provision of food, but through marriage as well. In consideration of this, Naomi arranged a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. By taking the responsibility for the welfare of her daughter-in-law, she ultimately ensures the continuity of Elimelech's line.

Even when Naomi outlines her scheme to Ruth, she does so within the set of man's world.[47]Above all, she gives Ruth explicit instructions to wash, anoint herself, dress, and go down to the threshing floor, and not to disclose/uncover herself to Boaz until he has finished eating and drinking (3.3).[48]Then, Naomi limits the role that Ruth is to take: "He will tell you what you are to do" (3.4). Not only does Naomi know that Boaz would be a man of action (3.18),[49] she also knows how her proposal would function best in a patriarchal society. Ruth is to make her availability for marriage known, but then the initiative is passes to the male, who knows best how to manipulate the androcentric system in which he lives. As for Ruth, even when she displays her own initiative in providing extra incentive for his acceptance (3.9), she is only strengthening the plan already set

---

45 Peter H.W. Lau, *Indentity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Ibentiy Approach* (Berlin/New York, Walter debGruyter, 2011),134.

46 Matthew Michael, "The Art of Persuasion and the Book of Ruth: literary Devices in the Persuasive Speeches of Ruth 1:6-18" in *Hebrew Studies* 56 (2015) :155.

47 Peter H.W. Lau, *Indentity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth,* 139.

48 According to Naomi's instruction, Ruth shall uncover her dress and lie down at Boaz's feet when he finished eating and drinking. Uncovering the body is used with various forms of the root *šākāb*(to lie down) may imply a euphemism for sexual activity (Lev 20; 11,18,20; Deutsch27:20), see Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* 143.

49 For Naomi's advice to Ruth " uncover his feet " (*vgilliyt mārglotāyv*), two points are at issue: Firstly, the verb---used in this form often means'to uncover nakedness' for sexual purpose (Deut 23.1; 27.20); Secondly, the use of---which Ruth was to uncover is ambiguous. The term ' foot'is a common enough biblical euphemism for 'penis' and difference in Hebrew between'uncover his feet' and 'uncover his foot/penis' is subtle. In this context, and with an appropriate hesitation after 'uncover', could Ruth miss the sexual intent implicit in Naomi's instruction? Naomi quickly assures Ruth that any further 'action' in the relationship would be up to Boaz. Apparently, Boaz is to respond to Ruth's gesture with some instructions of his own, see Ilona Rashkow, "Ruth: The Discourse of Power and the Power of Discourse", 37-38.

by Naomi, not deviating from it. In general, Naomi guides Ruth and the both function as examples to encourage Israelite women *gua* women in similar situations of defencelessness, isolation, or bereavement.[50] Nevertheless, they utilize the men's system to their advantage, and do not subvert it.

Finally, the utilization becomes successful when Boaz married Ruth. With the born of Obed, Naomi took the child and held him to her bosom and she became its foster mother (Ruh 4.16-17). It is unlikely that she has become the child's wet-nurse or adoptive parents.[51] The child symbolizes continuation of Elimelech's family, the complete reversal of Naomi's ill-fortune, and restoration of her to fullness. It does make a more important implication of restoration of Naomi's gender identity, indicating she has regained her lost femininity by becoming the mother of Obed. Indeed, the recovery of her lost gender identity finds textual support in the book of Ruth. The women neighbors' celebration of a son born to Naomi, and their naming action (4.17) represent a restoration of the affirmative notion toward Naomi by the ancient male-dominated Israelite society. Ruth's cooperation to fulfillment to the norm of the Zelophehad's regulations contributed to such a restoration. In this mean, Ruth's social and personal value is highly acknowledged through the crowd's acclamation of being more valuable to her mother-in-law than seven sons.

The son will *lāk lmēšiyb nepeš* (renew your life), *ulkalkel' et sēybātēk* (sustain your old age) in 4.15 certainly conveys a stronger social-cultural meaning than a physical one. The son will "renew or restore your life" implies that Naomi is once again full by regaining her mother status and can rejoice. More strikingly, *sēybā* instead of *ziqnâ* being used to refer to Naomi's old age suggests that she has now been set free from being labeled as a bearded individual.

Naomi and Sarah share a similar life course in that both post-manupausal women experienced a transformation from dismantling to restoration of their female identities, namely from the gendered stigma of bearded to becoming a mother. While Sarah's infertility was ultimately removed and she became a mother through the intervention of YHWH, Naomi as *'almānā* restored her gender by becoming mother of Obed whose birth was as an outcome of a fulfillment of Zelophehad's regulation. Hence, the prescription and transformation of woman's gender is based on the fulfillment of the norms of womanhood set in male dominated biblical Israel. Yet, Naomi's case indicates that such a fulfillment is not always necessarily preconditioned through a natural and biological process of childbearing by oneself. Instead, we can see that gender practices of a patriarchal world pose a fluid, complicated and more significant impact on women's identities compared to biological sex. [52]

---

50 Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth: Further Reflections," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 144.

51 *The Jewish Study Bible*,eds., Adele Berlin and Mare Zvi Brettler (New York. Oxford University Press, 2004),1585.

52 Indeed, we find that even not aged women in the Hebrew Bible cope with their infertility with an alternative similar to Naomi's in order to meet the social norm of being a woman. It is not infrequent to see that a barren woman initiates, though unwillingly, to share her husband with a handmaid in order to bear children for her in a kind of proto-surrogacy, to name a few,

5. Conclusion

The investigation of Naomi's gender and its transformation is conducted based on the integration of feminist and aged disability perspectives. Through the investigation, it helps us deepen our understanding of the dismantling and restoration of Naomi's femininity in respect to the norm of womanhood in the biblical text. The transformation of Naomi's gender reflects how aged women's identities, dignity, basic rights, and needs are not respected by male power hierarchies in ancient Israel. To a great extent, biblical Israel with its patriarchal structure not only shaped women's world, but also shaped women's views toward their own identities.

Naomi's case creates a space for moral reflection since the dignity of women and men who are created in the image of God deserves respect. As John Barton claims that the authors of ancient Israel's narratives "realized that human ethical enquiry needs to be anchored in specific cases, and it is only through the richness of storytelling that we come to understand what it is to be human and to make informed choices in a world that is only partly predictable."[53]The moral reflection is with great significance since Israelite cultural values that devalued the bodies and identities of women who did not conform to the norm of womanhood are very popular in many cultures. For instance, in China, Japan and Korea, an infertile woman is often stigmatized as " a woman made of stone." This is still true today. In such a context, this paper makes proposals that to be human, we should firstly be able to see or recognize the plight of some of the most vulnerable members of society, that is, be bearing witness to the stereotypes of post-menopausal women, and secondly to protest and resist those forces that seek to assault violence, or obscure one's human dignity, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually. As for a woman, only in her fully humanity will it be possible to fully understand what it means to be a woman.

Rachel and Leah share their husband Jacob with Bilhah (30.3-8) and Zilpah (30.10-13). By dong so, the barren woman hopes to meet the norm of what it meant to be a woman and thus can restore her femininity.

53 John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics. Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville. Westminster John Knox,2003),11.

中文题目：

女性与年老失能：《路得记》中拿俄米性别身份及其转换研究

提要：本文在融合女性和年老失能视角的基础上，探讨了《路得记》中拿俄米性别身份的丧失与恢复过程。拿俄米的案例反映出古代以色列的父权制生育观如何模糊和塑造作为社会最边缘群体的绝经后妇女的身份，揭示出对古代以色列女性身份的规范如何深受父权制的影响。本文的研究提醒当代读者，应关注并维护社会受压迫群体的尊严与福祉。

关键词：性别身份、 老年失能、 转换、 女性、 古代以色列

作者：莫铮宜， 浙江越秀外国语学院英语学院副教授 从事于圣经文学研究与比较文学研究　电子邮件：mozy11@163.com　电话：+13957851492