

## Trauma to Triumph A Study on the Book of Ruth

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to trace the journey of a biblical character, a Moabite woman named Ruth. Ruth marries an Israelite, who is an Ephrathite from Bethlehem. In Moab, Ruth undergoes bitterness, loss and death. Ruth responds positively to her mother-in-law, who decides to return to her native country Bethlehem, which is known as the House of Bread. Ruth clung to her, and moves from her own place to new place. Ruth during the sojourn just believes that the God, people and land of her mother-in-law would suffice her and determines to move along. It can be seen how Ruth is able to triumph over traumatic circumstances and gains success.

The Bible is a literary anthology which has varied literary genres. It consists of different genres like narrative, prose, poetry, letters and visionary writings. The literary nature of the Bible paves way for it to be studied as a part of literature curriculum. In the Bible, the essential principles of literature has been highlighted and makes the Bible, the best introduction to literature and its techniques. The Bible consists of books that relate diasporic elements that make it truly a pioneer to Diasporic Literature. The Bible has been considered to be the most famous literature in the world and it is the primary source and influence for English and American literature (Ryken 2014). The Book of Ruth is a beautiful narrative that centres around two Moabite women who had married Mahlon and Chilion sons of Elimelech and Naomi. They were Judeans, who had moved from the land of Bethlehem to Moab and settled there due to famine. The husbands of these three women die in Moab and Naomi decides to return to her hometown Bethlehem otherwise known as the House of Bread, and urges her two daughters-in-law to return to their mother's house. Orpah the older, on her mother-in-law's insist, accepts to move to her mother's house while Ruth clings onto her mother-in-law and follows her to Bethlehem. She remains a devout daughter and marries Boaz, who is a distant relative of Elimelech (Britannica 2019).

The book of Ruth can be considered a diasporic piece of literature as it has the contemporary forms of dispossession and their impacts, especially when their oppressive nature is denied. Such denials are reflected on the Zionist discourse of the establishment of Israel, which echoes narrative of diaspora, exile and returning. The word "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek word "diaspeirein" which is a compound of "dia" which means over or through and "speirein" which means to scatter or sow. "Spr", is emerged from Proto-Indo-European root word which can be seen in today's English words like "spread, disperse, sperm and spore". In simple terms, diaspora is about scattering and dispersal (Kenny 1960). Diaspora is a transnational migration. Throughout the history, there are lots of people who moved across the borders (Esman 3). Primarily, diaspora was applied for the Jews and later to the Greeks and Armenians. Usually the diaspora communities have a greater potential to sustain or to maintain their role of responsibility in both their homeland and host land. The

members of diaspora community do not necessarily have the intention to move back or return home. Sometimes they generate due to political conflicts among the diasporic groups based on their rank (Baser 25).

According to James Procter, “diaspora can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon – traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group as well as a theoretical concept; a way of thinking, or of representing the world” (Shackleton 4). Some of the themes of diaspora are the relationship with other communities in the diaspora, thoughts of return, revenge, remain and takeover. Some of the Biblical examples, based on the themes of diaspora are Torah, the five books of Moses i.e. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In these books the Lord God promises His people a land flowing with milk and honey, Canaan. These five books are based on, how Israelites yearned for their return. ‘Revenge’ is also one of the themes of diaspora, where the Jews take revenge over their enemies. As exiles in Babylon, they plead unto God to strike their enemies, “Let all wickedness come before You, and do to them as You have done to me...” (Lamentation 1:22). For the theme of ‘takeover’ the biblical characters Joseph and Daniel would be apt as both of them held high position in foreign lands. And for the final theme of ‘remain’, Esther is the most appropriate and prominent character who remained and succeeded in her life with the help of her uncle Mordecai (Katz and Blondheim 2012).

As there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem, Elimelech the Bethlehemite of the tribe of Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, along with his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1: 1-2). Famine is a common phenomenon and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob also experienced and sought aid in other countries. Elimelech chose to move to Moab, forgetting that famines were God’s symbol of Judgement. The life of Elimelech can be compared to that of prodigal son, who goes away from the place of bread to a far country and suffers a lot. This resembles the act of going away from God, the Provider. Though he is named Elimelech which means “My God is my King”, he fails to put his trust in God during his hardship. Their decision to move to the land of Moab reminds of Lot who stayed in a foreign land and lost his wife. In the same way, Elimelech turned from God who provides, to the land of Moab where there is no providence given to the people of God (Hacking 6-7). “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation ... Because they did not meet you with bread and water on the road... You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever (Deuteronomy 23: 3-6).

Though God didn’t want His people to have any sort of relationship with Moab. Elimelech chose to go there for his family’s survival. But sadly all that was left was Naomi and her daughters-in-law. The Jewish tradition states that the reason for their death might be due to their disobedience in taking Moabite wives (Hocking 8). Abraham was firm in choosing a wife for his son Isaac from his own homeland (Genesis 24:3-4), though Abraham lived in a foreign land but in the book of Ruth, Mahlon and Chilion choose their wives from the land of Moab. Now Naomi decides to return from Moab to the ‘House of Bread’, as she had heard that the Lord had blessed His people again. The famine had ended and there was plenty. Naomi bids farewell to her two daughter-in-law but both show their desire to return with her. On Naomi’s insistence, Orpah turns to her mother’s house whereas Ruth clings to her. When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she accepts her and then she realises Ruth’s real faith and love towards her.

Ruth, being a Moabite woman moves to Bethlehem and wishes to remain in Bethlehem, which is a feature seen in the diasporic attitude. The place Moab was cursed

due to the sinful act of Lot's daughters (Genesis 19:37). But Bethlehem means the 'House of Bread'. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the one to be a Ruler in Israel, whose going forth are from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem is a place which brought forth a King.

Ruth was determined to join her mother-in-law neither because of any circumstance or struggle nor due to any force but out of her own desire. Ruth not only joins Naomi, but also accepts Naomi's homeland, people and God (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth made a rightful decision of moving from Moab to Bethlehem, unlike Elimelech who took the wrong decision of moving from the house of bread to the land of curse.

The book of Ruth brings out the beautiful character of Ruth who is loyal, faithful and an obedient woman. Throughout her journey she faces the reproach of being a widow at a young age she also experience many hardship in the process of being accepted in Israel. Ruth was not sure whether she might get married again or not. But Ruth didn't make her own decision but waited patiently. After arriving in Bethlehem, she took up the responsibility of providing food and shelter for her mother-in-law. She gleaned the field daily for her food and God looking on her loyalty and faith makes Ruth to find favour in the sight of Boaz. As Ruth had left her father and mother and her homeland and came to live with her mother-in-law in a strange land which she didn't know before, the Lord God blessed her and Boaz. Thus Ruth becomes an instrument for a royal lineage. The Lord God was able to redeem Ruth from all her traumatic situation and she was able to lead a triumphant life thereafter.

Diaspora is an involuntary dispersion of mass, especially the Jews from the land of Israel to foreign land. The attitude of diaspora are thoughts of return, relationship with other communities and lack of integration into the host land. Even though the people of Israel move to foreign land or away from God, He brings His people back to their own hometown. "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the exiles of Israel" (Psalms 147:2). Diaspora poses the dilemma of relating to a 'host' society and to that of homeland. Thus the attitude of 'returning' to land or God brings a redemption and reward in the life of Naomi and Ruth, thereby making their lives victorious and worth remembering.

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