

Literature And Ethos Of Public Space: Is There A Heaven Space For The Woman?

Anthonia I. Umoren, and Rose Acholonu

Anthonia I. Umoren, Head of Department, Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Rose Acholonu, Professor, Department of English, Imo State University, Nigeria

Abstract

Salvation which has to do with the redemption of mankind by the Blood of Jesus Christ is bedeviled by sexual politics. It is palpably evident that the various religious divide have connived as it were to leave the woman as a negligible minority on the Nigerian Church pulpits. Again, there seems to be a collaborative agreement by both the Nigerian patriarchal and the biblical Jewish cultures that “a woman be silent in the church”. The ‘silence of the woman would have robbed the world of the many laudable contributions of the woman in all life sphere. The statistics of the research recently conducted by these presenters in the sampled churches in the South-South Nigeria and references made to some acclaimed women novelists’ works corroborate the fact that even when a woman is ‘saved’, her sex militates against her being ordained as a pastor or a priest to preach salvation messages on the churches pulpits. This is a political incarceration of the woman’s abilities even in the church where she forms the bulk of the population. This is paradoxical. Riding on the feminist’s theories, our research finding exposes the politically motivated sexist’s tragedy of the woman’s history which frustrates her salvation and self-actualization. The research also finds out that “the dialectics of sexism lies in the presence of only two sexes” male and female without a mediation (Chukwuma 1974:9). The paper periscopes two outstanding Nigerian female novelists of two different generations and debunks the farce that “...intelligence, sensitivity and creativity [which are Godly attributes] are poisoned gifts for an African Woman” (Aidoo 1985:5). This paper thus sues for a balance between salvation and politics across the sexual divide for the most desired global accord.

Introduction

Literature as a creative arts draws her breadth from the society employing the highly skillful manipulation of language as its cloak. Hence, literature is an exploration of experience(s) located in time and space.

According to (Brown (ed.): 1973:7), Literature is a:

Work of art... always produced by a certain man in a certain time and place, and it is always related to its author’s other works, his contemporaries, his sources and traditions, his intellectual, political, economic, and aesthetic climate.

A dimension of the above definition of literature by Brown is a pointer to even the tripartite nature of man with the spirit, the soul and the body which must work in harmony for a wholistic him. The work of arts thus encapsulates these man’s essences. It is worth noting that man is virtually on a journey to self-discovery on this planet earth. He tries his hand on a number of things in this course. He asks many questions and seeks answers in several ways. Some of the basic questions man asks are: Who am I? Where am I? Why am I? How was I made? When was I made? Who made me? What am I doing here? Where did I come from and where am I going to? Attempted answers to these questions reveal the perplexity and complexity of man’s life. Man’s inability to reconcile with himself and often times others or his frustrating attempt to do so, manifests in his desire for a higher authority to look on to for help, and answers in order to demystify himself. It is in this quest that man locates the various gods which he worships. As an outlet to vent his confusion, the woman, the female,

becomes the bin into which man's frustration is dumped. Man's quest to know the creator of the universe, life and the meaning of life is at the centre stage of religious inquiry. In man's attempt to unravel this mystery, many answers and perspectives have emerged from his religious heritage for instance:

What, the yogas mean for the Hindus, Budha's analysis of the cause of life's dislocation' ideal of the Gentleman, who Lao Tzu was, Islam's Five Pillars, what the Exodus meant to the Jews, the substance of the Good News for the early Christians... the worth of an answer depends more on the adequacy with which it is defended than on whether it is right or wrong in any objectively demonstrable sense (Smith 1965:350-1).

The above quotation highlights the allusions to God in our Arts' Literary tradition globally; that of British and American Literatures are delineable from this also. Worthy of note is the common Divine ground each of man's religions toes. This includes the 'Golden Rule'—this Rule holds man's self-centeredness as the source of his troubles and seeks to help in its conquest—this self centeredness gives birth to the gender war palpable in our Arts' Literature.

Another common ground of all man's religions is that there is a "Belief in God—if there be God", and "Life is worth living—sometimes" (Smith 353:). *This may account for the dwindling population of men in Churches where women are permitted on the pulpit and vice versa where there are mostly or all men*. It is in the light of the above that this paper interrogates the incredibly limited gender space for the woman, challenges our brothers, fathers, sons, uncles and nephews to search the scripture afresh with a view to getting their prayers to heaven unhindered.

Another keyword in the topic in focus is "Heaven". Heaven according to *Crudence Complete Concordance* (1967:294) is:

The abode of the redeemed after death and the second resurrection. It is also used for God, without whom there would be no Heaven... sometimes used of the air... and for the sky, wherein the sun, moon and stars are placed... it is located above the earth... it is the firmament.

Again the Holy Bible defines Heaven as the:

'New and Holy Jerusalem', 'tabernacle of God',
"the throne of God", 'a place where God will wipe away tears from his people', 'a city of Gold with twelve pearly gates', 'a place where God is', 'the temple', 'a place for overcomers of sinful life', 'a place not for the fearful', and whoremongers and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars (Revelation 21 verses 1–22).

The above definitions of heaven set the tone for the criteria for its candidature irrespective of sex.

Furthermore, the other requirements have to do with a new life in Christ Jesus and being 'Born Again' (John 3 verses 1-7). Again, the Book of Romans corroborates John's position by stating categorically extra ingredients for entry into heaven:

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness, to everyone that believeth... For with the heart man [including woman] believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is

made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, *Whosoever* believeth on him shall not be ashamed... For *Whosoever* shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10 verse 4, 9, 11 and 13).

The above criteria has no respect for gender rather it is “*Whosoever*”. It then stands out that *Whosoever* fulfills the requirements for heaven will make it. This proves man’s dogmatic manipulation of the Holy Scripture to favour him at the expense of the woman as a serious breach of world accord. Man must stop bending God’s WORD in order to have peace.

It is pertinent to reiterate here that the WORD of God is light that must be placed in all the corners of the *world* to chase away darkness given the fact that many men are shying away from going to the church, how then shall the people who do not know but need this light come to this knowledge:

How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they are sent...? How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things (Romans 10 verse 14 – 15).

From the foregoing, it is evident that God is not a chauvinist; it is rather man’s self-centredness and egoistic nature that is his undoing.

Ample reflections of man, his nature, and his search for God manifest in several study disciplines including the Arts Literature in the genres of poetry and prose which is the focus of this conference. Most of Nigerian Literary Arts pieces have God at the centre of man’s strength or weakness as a microcosm of the macrocosm of the human society. God’s presence in Nigerian Literature is central, prevalent, prevailing and ubiquitous, reflecting on the titles of the works like: *The Gods are not to Blame*, and *Hopes of the Living Death* by Ola Rotimi, *The Virtuous Woman*, and *The Initiates* by Zaynab Alkali and so on.

Since the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Law that fights the decadent traits in the society irrespective of the gender, whosoever accepts and obeys the gospel, preaches it, has shone the light. The Bible reading and study requires ability to read and write, which is not an exclusive preserve of man. It could be recalled that Nigerian men had early contact with the outside world like Britain that colonized Nigeria and became the first beneficiaries of formal education, so, they were the first to write and be published.

For instance, the internationally acclaimed Chinua Achebe’s literary career has clocked fifty years this 2008. many others like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Elechi Amadi and several others have documented man’s experiences with different types of God at the centre. For instance, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) painstakingly contrasts traditional worship with the Christian worship. According to *Things Fall Apart*, everything in the Ibo society of the novel was intact. There was harmony when man faithfully did obeisance to the various traditional gods that governed fertility, safety, the night, the day and so on. There were norms and values that guided their worship and also shaped and sharpened their beliefs. For instance, the gods forbade the keeping of twins. So, twins were thrown into the “Evil Forest” to die. The mothers of the twins were also either killed or thrown away in order not to pollute the society anymore. Like the Jewish men who took the woman caught in adultery to Jesus for judgement (John 8 verse 3), the men in the society of the novel responsible for the reproduction of twins were free to live while the women paid the supreme price. The

second half of *Things Fall Apart* shows the arrival of the Missionaries, the introduction of Christianity, the rescue of twins and their mothers, the demolition of the 'evil forest', etc. When those Missionaries did not die from their actions which challenged the Ibo gods, many were won for God including the elders of the land. Their gods began to lose worshippers and according to Achebe (1958) 'the white man (Missionaries) has put a knife on the things that held us together, we no longer think and act as one, the centre can no longer hold, things have fallen apart – this is the note from which the novel derives its title.

Like Achebe, Elechi Amadi, a contemporary of Achebe in *The Concubine* (1966), *The Great Ponds* (1969) also documents the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient nature of the gods. For instance, Ogbunabali is said to be the god that kills by night:

Ogbunabali was therefore non-directional, distant, menacing, and ubiquitous. He was king of the night; darkness was his agent. In a way, everyone worshipped him, for, who did not fear the dark with its unpredictable dangers...? Invisible, elusive woven into the very bodies of their worshipper for one was born only at their pleasure, one committed an unpardonable offence against them (*The Great Ponds* p. 50).

In *The Concubine* (1966), the sea-king is the Ikwerre god to whom people run for protection and justice. A very powerful god whom they did not quite understand:

'I do not feel like the daughter of the sea...' Ihuoma [the heroine] belongs to the sea, when she was in the spirit world, she was a wife of the sea-king, the ruling spirit of the sea. Against the advice of her husband she sought the company of human beings and was incarnated. The sea-king was very angry but because he loved her best of all his wives, he did not destroy her immediately she was born. He decided to humour and let her live out her normal earthly span and come back to him. However, because of his great love for her he is terribly jealous and tries to destroy any man who makes love to her (Amadi 1966:195-6).

The above quotation is an evidence of the diminutiveness with which the people of the novel follow their gods. It is interesting to note that the literary works of both Achebe and Amadi which took them a longer time to achieve took the Nigerian women, Zaynab Alkali and Ngozi Adichie a shorter time and with elegance too. Through their female characters, both Alkali and Adichie have contributed enormously not only to the corpus of African Literature but also to the public space which was hitherto dominated by the male writers. They therefore create a blend of cultural nationalism presenting the gender – balanced society. This stride has reduced the yawning gap of gender inequality in our literary tradition.

Women's writings are populated with female concerns generally, and her devotion to the gods. She like her male counterpart covers both the traditional and contemporary settings and issues.

Zaynab Alkali was born on February 3, 1950 in Borno State and is married with five children. She is currently a Professor of English Literature and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the Nasarawa State University in Nigeria. She has four published novels and a short stories collection, *The Cobwebs* (2002). Her other works are: *The Still born* (1984), *The Virtuous Woman* (1985), *The Descendants* (2005) and *The Initiates* (2007). In her novels generally, the gods are not very centrally located but splashy; god is rather built into the

strong, virtues of the heroines in the works. That is, there is a strong moral character built into the female characters which reflect a strong reposition of trust in God:

Two hours after he left, he was brought home in a shroud. All Magira Mill, had to say, over and over again, was that the night before, the owls never rested. They had hooted until morning. She should have known that Azreel was just around the corner. “From God we come, and to God we shall return (*The Descendants* 2005:208)

On another level, in the Alkali’s *The Initiates* (2007), God’s presence is integrated into the voice of reasoning of the main characters:

‘God has been good to me’, he muttered. ‘Like my father, the prophet of God, would say, so will I. ‘Shall I take only good from, the Lord’, what about the bad also...? If my son fights for a good cause, almighty God will help him fight the battle. If he fights for an unjust cause, then like a man, he must bear the consequence, for God does not help the evil doer (*The Initiates* 2007:89).

Though *The Initiates* targets moral bankruptcy of individuals and governments especially on corruption, Alkali intones that those perpetrators will be punished by God (p. 44).

The old woman, Mama Tata who is central to the story is a strong voice of reason which is a great godly attribute: She “seemed to have more information than Batapchi (the man and a sage in their society) knew and he did not like it” (p. 44). She is referred to as the old “prattling woman” probably because the information from her was from a woman and not a man. This is akin to the Jewish account in the Bible where the two women on the way to Emmaus first saw the Risen Lord (Mathew 28 verse 8-9) and announced it. They were disbelieved until the men confirmed and authenticated it. Mama Tata’s rich reservoir of knowledge only labeled her as the village tale bearer. If it were a man who knew that much, he would have been celebrated as the custodian of knowledge – how far apart this negative label on the woman stresses the frontier of peace.

Like Alkali, Adichie though younger in age and of a younger generation of writers, is nauseated by the oppressive governance of Nigerians both under the civilian and the military regimes. Born in 1977 in Nigeria, Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie is one of the newest and strongest female voices in the arts literary world. She has two great novels to her name: *Half of A Yellow Sun* (2004) and *Purple Hibiscus* (2006). She directs her novelistic camera at the power position in the Nigerian society. She is angered by the human and woman right abuse by the post colonial Nigerian leadership.

Religion is more central in her work than in Alkali’s. The Christian religious denomination under focus is Catholicism. “The deep respect Eugene (the hero) portrays for his religion, masks at one level, a misrepresentation of the Christian doctrine and at another level, the kind of male chauvinism” (CALEL 2008:101). This is an expose of the novelist’s contempt for religious hypocrisy combined with male chauvinism. The class contradictions highlighting the economic squeeze on the woman even in a society and a family that is ‘deeply’ religious is a worrisome trend that holds no good for harmony at any level let alone global.

Adichie mediates between Christianity and her “Igbo” culture as she stresses that both are not opposites of each other since both preach love and have God at the centre. The

overbearing posture of the leadership of the family and the government in the novel is approached with petition to heaven for help: “God will deliver us”.

From the foregoing, it is evident that allusions to God is not restricted to only male – authored works. Infact, at the age of twenty-five years, Adichie had won the commonwealth writers prize and Alkali had also been celebrated in the arts literary world. This outstanding feat is enough to qualify the woman for a heaven space if the same criterion will be used for the man.

If the woman has proved her mettle in all life spheres even in those that were male exclusives the pulpit should not be an exception.

- The story of creation in the Bible has that “male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27).

The Holy Bible in Galatians 3 verse 28 says that “in Christ, there is neither male nor female”. Ample assurance exist in the Holy Bible that there is not just a heaven space for the woman but “whosoever will” let him come and drink. Again, Galatians 3 verse 6 – 9 says:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, *there is neither male nor female*: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to pause and examine the statistics of the research conducted by these researchers in the sampled Churches in the South-South Nigeria specifically in Cross River and Anambra States. The result as per the charts below in Figures I and II is that there is 6.80% female ministers in the Presbyterian Church, 1.96% each in both the Pentecostal; and the Baptist, 0.98% in the Apostolic Church and zero percentage in the Catholic Church.

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Location	Name of Church	No. of Female Pastors	No. of Female Deacons
Onitsha Urban	Deeper Life Christian Church	3	6
Ogbaru District	Deeper Life Christian Church	2	4
Nnewi Zone	Deeper Life Christian Church	3	5
Awka Municipal	Deeper Life Christian Church	2	2
Onitsha Urban	Grace of God Church	3	5
Nnewi Zone	Grace of God Church	2	1
Awka Municipal	Grace of God Church	1	2
Ogbaru District	Grace of God Church	-	1
Onitsha Zonal Area (as they named it)	Presbyterian Church	2	2
Nnewi Zone	Abundant Life Ministry	2	1
Onitsha Urban	Abundant Life Ministry	2	2
Onitsha Urban	Overcomer Bible Church	2	1
Nnewi Zone	Overcomer Bible Church	-	2
Ogbaru District	Overcomer Bible Church	-	1
Onitsha Urban	The Redeem Christian Church	2	1
Nnewi Zone	The Redeem Christian Church	-	2
Ogbaru District	The Redeem Christian Church	-	1

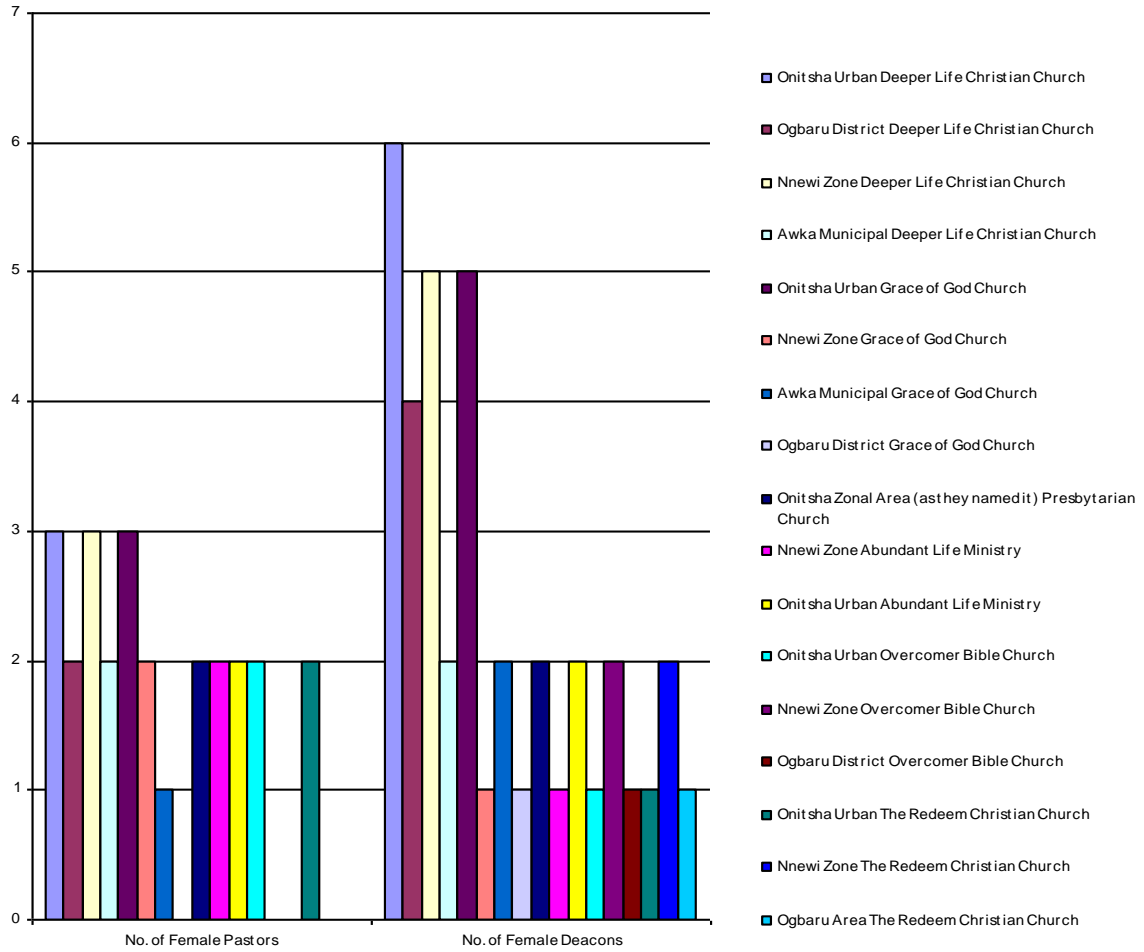


Figure I: Raw data and chart of selected Churches in Anambra State, Nigeria

Selected Churches In Cross River State, Nigeria

Location	No. of Women Leaders	Percentage
Presbyterian Church	7	6.80%
Baptist Church	2	1.96%
Pentecostal Church	2	1.96%
Apostolic Church	1	0.98%
Catholic Church	-	0%

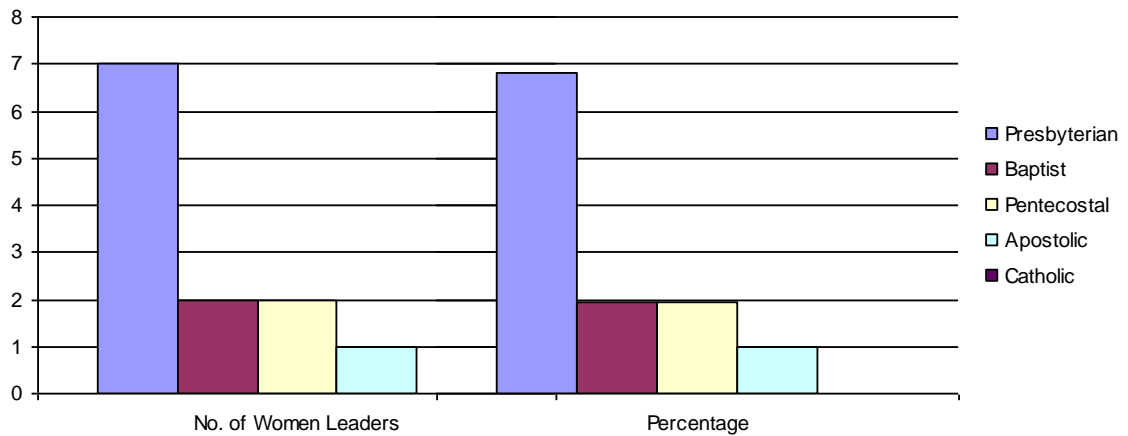


Figure II: Raw data and chart of selected Churches in Cross River State, Nigeria.

If the church with the *WORD*, segregates against the female gender even in official Church positions, what does the church expect of the *WORLD* out there? There is therefore a fundamental problem with the practitioners of the faith in allowing the carnal to rule over the spirit. This outrightly contradicts John 3 verse 6 which says that, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit”. The Gospel of Jesus Christ really has to do with setting of the captive free. Again, the Bible posits that “wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the LORD is his treasure” (Isaiah 33 verse 6). The ‘fear’ of the LORD before whom all shall be judged should therefore put paid to the massaging of the male gender ego.

The above scriptural references from the Holy Bible allude to the fact that the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom takes the primacy of place in the global knowledge economy. This is especially so when man is in search of peace with himself, God and his/her fellow being. God hates oppression especially of the ‘weak’, like the fatherless, orphan, widows; here is *Isaiah 49 verse 26* on this:

“And I (God) will feed them that oppress thee – with their own flesh... and all flesh shall know that I the LORD am the Saviour and thy Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Again, in the preceding verse of *Isaiah 49 verse 25* the LORD boasts that “even the captives of the Mighty shall be taken away”. If God feels so strongly against oppression and the oppressor, should man not take heed to give the global accord a place? For, from the foregoing, it is clear that the answer to the much desired global accord is in the Bible, God’s Blue print for man. It is not in doubt that America and Britain, the two major world powers have a tremendous influence on the world and its literatures. This influence includes Nigeria. According to Houston Smith (1965:254) “the United States carries the indelible stamp of its Jewish heritage in its collective life: The phrase “by their creator” in the declaration of Independence; the words “Proclaim Liberty throughout the land” on the liberty Bell... the Question of realism springs a rude shock when “we go back to the land, the people and the history. The Jewish heritage also rubs on the names answered by the Americans and even the British which also explains why some Africans and Nigerians answer those names.

From the beginning to the end, the Jews have been in search of God and who he really is despite the fact that He was labeled as the king of the Jews. The Jewish philosophy “that mankind has issued from something other than itself” (Smith 256). The Jews concept of the “other” focused “its personalism in a single, supreme, nature-transcending will” (Smith, 256). This Jewish concept distinguishes between the Jews and her other neighbours like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Syriac and the lesser Mediterranean peoples. Psalms 82 verse 6 and 7 attest that the God of Israel is the Immortal and the Creator of all things including the other gods who are creatures of his creation (man). The Jews are monotheists. It then means that an attempt at polytheism is tantamount to a split personality.

In conclusion, ample evidence in the Bible attest that God is not a chauvinist which is further substantiated in the Mary Magdalene episode, the woman caught in adultery in the Book of John. With this Jesus of the Bible who is Righteous and Just, there is definitely not only a heaven’s space for the woman but as much space as she can access in line with the Creator’s Blue Print—The Bible.

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