

## **Esther: Victim of and Accomplice to Shadowy Patriarchal Violence?**

Let us reflect on Esther and make her a part of our conversation. Esther was a special woman, called to leadership under very complex circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Patriarchy colludes with dominant power structures, for the domination and oppression of the powerless, among whom are women. Patriarchy also delivers in the name of culture. In our struggles with patriarchy, we therefore struggle with the larger questions of power as domination for the sake of exploitation. Esther was called to exercise leadership in such a context.



### **Getting to Know Esther**

Esther, a young Jewish woman was orphaned at an early age and was raised by her cousin Mordecai, a Jew, who worked in King Ahasuerus's palace. She was a poor orphan endowed with great beauty that earned her a place in the royal harem. She later became Queen Esther when the sitting Queen Vashti was deposed for defying the king. Esther became a wife of a powerful man whose Kingdom spanned from India to Ethiopia!

The king was accustomed to displaying his kingdom's wealth and the splendor of his majesty. He had military might, was feared and could sign orders to destroy any real or perceived enemy.

Under Mordecai's tutelage, Esther concealed her identity in order to survive in the orbit of the dominant power structure she had become a part of. We often consider Esther the daring and courageous woman who used her position and risked death for a good deed, namely, the salvation of her people. If we complexify her story, the following questions demand our attention:

- Was Esther's power real or merely derived?
- Was she a good strategist or was Mordecai making all the decisions, and using Esther for his own ends?
- Was Esther compelled by her situation to use her body, looks and sex appeal to manipulate the King?

---

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the presentation made at a CWM consultation, by Omega Chilufya Bula themed, 'Loving Esther' for some of the adapted ideas and structure.



**World Council  
of Churches**

- How do we relate to Esther's apparent lack of solidarity with Queen Vashti, a fellow woman who refused to be paraded under the gaze of drunken men?

Esther's life played out within the complexity of exploitative power structures. Like Esther, many women who are subject to gender-based violence have to make difficult ethical choices.

**For reflection:** What does it take to resist complicity within such exploitative structures while preserving one's ethical integrity?

### **Gender Justice in Exploitative Power Structures**

South African feminist theologian Denise M Ackerman explains that feminist theological understanding of power begins with analyses that acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences. She asserts that

One of the shadowy sides of power is found in violence toward women. Analyses of women's experience of power should uncover both women's collusion with the forces that sustain power as domination over them and their participation in the domination of others.<sup>2</sup>

In light of that we reflect on Esther and Vashti's varied experiences within the same context:

- Vashti resisted male domination.
- Esther became complicit in the patriarchal system of power.
- Queen Vashti disobeyed her husband in a culture that called for strict obedience to the authority of men. She broke the traditional expectation of her society and paid the price – expulsion!
- Esther took advantage of her position to work with a powerful man, armed with only her beauty and the favor of the King. She uses her vulnerability in a powerful way.

Esther and Vashti's world is not very different from our world today. Women struggle with masculinity issues in many cultures. Violence against women, the treatment of women as objects, incest, rape, kidnapping, polygamy, extramarital relationships, the use of women's bodies as battle fields in time of conflict and war – are all behaviors that continue to violate women's dignity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Dictionary of Feminist Theologies eds. Russel and Clarkson, 1996 pg. 221.



The lack of power for women to say no to unwanted sex, the lack of economic control over their own lives, all make women vulnerable, ceding power to men power to dominate their bodies.

**For Reflection:** How might the church find the language and analytical tools for understanding the root causes and to locate gender based violence in the personal, political and structural aspects of systemic injustice?

### **Gender Injustice: A Struggle for Women and Men**

Much of the struggle for gender justice is rooted in the economic injustice. For this reason, men are equally victims of socially constructed masculinities which expects men to have power over women, and some more powerful men over other men. Men who are poor and unable to support their families may suffer low self-esteem which may lead to alcoholism and violence.

God calls us to seek justice that concretely seeks to root out systemic injustice. Jesus proclaimed that he came that all may have abundant life (John 10:10). Justice emerges when rights and dignity are restored for the entire community of life.

Jesus discouraged the victim mentality. He urged victims of injustice to claim and exercise power. "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."<sup>3</sup>

**For reflection:** What kind of power do you seek in your struggles for gender justice? How can the power you seek help promote healthy partnerships between men and women?

---

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/15083-the-most-common-way-people-give-up-their-power-is> (accessed 7 December 2019).