The ‘outcry’ of the dissected woman in Judges 19-21: Embodiment of a society

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ABSTRACT

Body and voice are not categories read into a text but categories in which a text announces itself. This investigation concentrates on these two categories in an effort to shed more light on the literary embodiment of both gender bodies (women and men) and societal bodies (socio-political) functioning in Judges 19-21.

A INTRODUCTION

History books throughout the ages helped to transform the nation-state into place and indeed into person. Written down history is a well-known and powerful tool for the image building of a nation (Tuan 1977:177) like the case with the so-called Deuteronomistic History of which the Book of Judges forms part. For the purpose of the discussion that will follow both an early redaction during the time of king Josiah (Yee 1995:146-170), or a later redaction during the Babylonian Exile (Boling 1975:29-30) would fit into my argumentation. My own preference, however, would be to interpret Judges 19-21, the section which forms the basis for the discussion, as part of the Deuteronomistic editing during the sixth century BCE exilic period.

Having said this, the main aim of the discussion that follows will be to look into the functioning of two specific categories in which texts announce themselves, namely ‘body’ and ‘voice’ (Scarry 1985:182), in the process of literary embodiment of engendered as well as societal bodies in Judges 19-21. Before I interpret these chapters, a few remarks on bodies, voices, silence and space as elements utilised in symbolisation of persons are necessary in order to guide you into my argumentation.

B BODIES, VOICES AND SILENCE – SYMBOLISING PERSONS

1 Body and person

Symbolisation of the body constantly occurs in myths, cosmogonies, art and
literature because the body is perhaps the foremost of all metaphors for a society’s perception of itself (Benthal 1975:10). The body in discourse not only provides us with insight into cultures, but also functions as a powerful political tool for maintaining, changing or constructing social reality (Vorster 1997b:391-392). Body symbolisation can therefore be seen as socially formative speech acts with persuasive influence on the world view and culture of a people (Clines 2000:8). During the time of king Josiah as well as the end of the monarchical period of Israel’s history it was not different in this respect. The rhetoric of the Deuteronomist shares the practice of body symbolisation as a persuasive strategy with the rest of the literature in the Hebrew Bible.

One should draw a distinction between ‘body’ and ‘person’. ‘Person’ expresses the sociality of the body and as such plays an important role in strategies of persuasion (Vorster 1997b:390). A body comes into existence, grows up to adulthood and dies within social relations. Social interaction between the body and its social environment forms the person. Is this social interaction successful, then the body survives. But if not, the body is rejected by society (Vorster 1997a:456).

The narrator personified the main female character in Judges 19 as an unfaithful person. She was the concubine of a Levite, a second-hand wife acting as his sexual commodity, playing the harlot by walking out on her husband (19:2), deserving the fate that was to befall her. The word hn<Tiw: (she was unfaithful) carries the connotation of committing adultery, one of the worst accusations that could befall an Israelite woman. Dissociating herself from her husband implied loss of social status, including sexual status, loss of economic status and loss of personhood for the woman. That is why she had the need to be associated with her father (another ‘man’) again by returning to her father’s house.

The Levite, on the other hand, is at first glance rated in a very positive light. In society he occupied the position of a man of God, wanting to speak to his concubine’s heart, highly respected by both the woman’s father and the older man in Gibeah. After he had sent out the twelve dissected pieces of his concubine’s body, all the Israelite tribes immediately accepted his message without questioning his version of the events. Behind this socially acceptable mask, however, another person appears as soon as we read the story in more detail.

2 Body and space

When we speak about ‘body’ the concept of ‘space’ is also inherent in our discussion. Because of one’s intimate experience with one’s own body and with
other people, one organises space so that it conforms with and caters to one’s biological needs and social relations (Tuan 1977:34). The spatial movement of the characters in this story should be dealt with in this context.

The concubine of the Levite was by marriage, which is a social relationship, removed from her initial intimate space, her father’s house in Bethlehem Judah, and transferred to a foreign space, the domain of her husband the Levite, a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim (19:1, 18). This spatial displacement could have been part of the reason why she became, according to Israelite law, adulterous by walking out on her husband. Mentioning it twice in 19:1, 18 emphasises the remoteness of her new abode. To any person ‘home’ forms the centre of one’s world. To be removed from home means to be removed from one’s own cosmos. Although human beings have strong recuperative powers and can easily adapt in another cosmic space, this might not have been the case with this woman. In addition, as Tuan (1977:150) points out, ancient cities in the Near East and in the Mediterranean Basin, were not only believed to be home to the people living there, but also to their guardian spirits and gods. One can therefore imagine that this new orientation was not at all easy for this woman.

Not only did she have to adapt spatially but also socially and sexually. The transition from virginity to concubine status in order to satisfy the sexual lusts of a husband must have had great impact on the person and body of any woman. Her sense of her father’s home as a place where she could recover under solicitous care, therefore probably urged her to go back ‘home’. Within this context the woman of her own accord chose to ‘depersonalise’ and ‘dissocialise’ herself by leaving her husband.

3 Body, voice and silence

Voice goes hand in hand with body symbolisation, usually as an instrument of power. When analysing a piece of literature one ‘listens’ to the voices in the text, not only the voice of the author or editor, but also the voices of the characters. Permitting a character in a story to speak is usually taken as empowering that character. On the other hand, to impose silence on a character may be a way of disempowerment. In the various scenes in Judges 19-21 it is evident that the place of men lies in their voices, while the place of women lies in their bodies and in their silence. Men are the ones who act by means of speech, while women act through their bodies only, being deprived of speech. It is also clear that God’s
place in Judges 19-21 is in his ‘voice’ while ‘body’ is the place of humans (both women and men) in their bloody relationship with Him (Scarry 1985:182-183).

C INTERPRETATION OF JUDGES 19-21

To be socially torn apart already at the outset of the story left the concubine of the Levite with little chance of survival, living in a world fabricated by men and based on suppressive legislation. Her effort to escape from her husband as well as her heimat sentiment would in the end determine her final fate. This irony reflects the narrator’s concealed suggestion of justice befalling her, which is of course also a reflection of the society’s attitude towards women.

The concubine as well as the other women in these pericopes uttered no word or sound. Silence was imposed on them by the author, pointing to a total neglect on the side of men of the bodily orientation and feelings of women. Silence imposed on women goes hand in hand with namelessness in this story as well. The concubine, as well as the daughter of the older man, as well as the six hundred virgin women of Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh is nameless, which points to the author’s intention of silencing all the women completely. The status of the woman and the attitude of men towards women in Ancient Israel are mirrored by this. The portrayal of the woman as a silent ‘partner’ in society and literature is social embodiment of the individual woman as well as of the societal body at large. A patriarchal society rules out women and uses or abuses them at will.

By taking the Levite into her father’s house on his arrival (19:3), the conduct of the woman not only mirrors hospitality peculiar to that society, but implicitly the Levite again forced himself into the woman’s own space where she was experiencing the safety of her father’s house. It could have been either his speaking to her heart (persuasive speaking) or his enforcing speech that opened his way into her father’s house. Again her security was shattered, her honour and her space defiled. Her father’s overwhelming hospitality and the prominent voicelessness of the Levite during his visit also illustrate the relationship between voice and body. The Levite found himself in a weakened position (Yoo 1997:39-40). The father’s aim with his overwhelming hospitality probably was to protect his daughter from being abused again by her husband.

In the scene of her father’s house the author only refers to the woman as הַנִּקְנָה (‘the girl’) and not as concubine (עֵרֶת הַנִּקְנָה) is a designation used by parents for their newly married daughter, an intimate way of speaking of the daughter (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:623). It may in this case be interpreted as a
designation of relative freedom and security. The author clearly points to the protective attitude of the woman’s father by using this term. Depersonalisation through abuse was temporarily transformed into personhood again. Under her father’s care she could to a certain extent become a ‘young woman’ again (instead of being a concubine), designating a stage in her life when she had become a socially accepted ‘person’ (Vorster 1997a:459). But this virtual ‘status’ did not last for long. The dominating attitude of the male prevailed and ‘in obedience’, without uttering a word, she had to return with her husband to the remote area in the hill country of Ephraim again.

After the scene in her father’s house she is designated as ‘concubine’ again. One notices the author’s skill in literary control over the status of the concubine as a character in his story. We could call it the author’s voice.

During their return journey the concubine found herself to be exposed again, for a second time being torn apart from her personal space, her father’s house. The author again imposed complete silence on her during the scene of the journey (19:9-20), while the men, even the Levite’s male servant, acted as speakers and decision makers. She is referred to by the author in conjunction with the donkeys in 19:10, and with the donkeys and the rest of the company in verse 19. Increasingly she was degraded by the male voices of both the author and her husband. She was also presented to the older man who had met them on the square as ‘your maidservant’ (19:19). Coming from her father’s house where the author called her hr[amburger]; (the girl), her own husband now referred to her as the older man’s maidservant (hm’a’).

Again man’s place was to be found in voice, while the woman was trapped in her degraded body and personhood. Man’s word was empowered to enslave a woman by offering her to another man.

During the journey the house of the older man in Gibeah became the shelter against the dangers of darkness, a place of safety not only to the woman, but also to the accompanying men. ‘Wicked men of the city’ infringed the hospitality of the older man and the safety they were experiencing. These men are personalised in a bad light because of the social code into which they were that determined their moral quality (Vorster 1997a:463). They were drawn into a subculture of sodomy and rape which in effect reflected a major aspect of the dominant culture which the author/editor wished to highlight, namely that ‘everyone did as he saw fit’. They were constructed as wicked persons because of the damage their conduct had brought to the societal body. This is exactly part of the reason why the tribes of Israel reacted
so vehemently when they saw the dismembered body of the woman.

First the Levite’s honour was at risk because the wicked men wanted to sodomise him. But soon the tide turned against the women in the house, viz the older man’s virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine, who were offered to the wicked men by the older man instead of the Levite. Verbally the older man protected his male guest and condemned both his own daughter and the Levite’s concubine. The power of the male voice saved a male body but initiated the breaking down of a female body. Male voice and phallus take hands against the body of the woman within the context of violence. The phalli of the wicked men extended the male voice of the older man. The woman had no opportunity to escape behind words or screams. Her body was thrown out to be consumed by the lust of men whom the author reckoned to be sexually disoriented. If done to a man, such an act was a vile thing; but if done to women, it was “the good in the eyes of men” (Trible 1984:74). Aschkenasy (1998:18) is of the opinion that in many of the stories of the Hebrew Bible the man is time or history (and in my view ‘speech’ as well), whereas ‘the woman is translated into a spatial element, an object with an opening, or a territory to be invaded.’ To be female meant to be rapable, to lose the ability to speak, and to occupy as little space as possible (Aschkenasy 1998:56). The handing over of the concubine to the wicked men of the town implied her final loss of status as wife of the Levite.

The Levite was inferior to the wicked men, hence his speechlessness. Without saying a word, he saved his own body, reputation and status by pushing both his concubine’s body and her status as a person out into the darkness. His own voice as a mechanism to control his concubine’s body had disappeared. His voice could not save his own body and it was not powerful enough any more to control his concubine’s body in a situation where his own life and reputation were at stake. Only physical force could turn around his fate. The body of the woman rescued him from being silenced himself. The older man’s house which was supposed to be the only safe space *en route*, turned out to be a space of horror.

Usually space is a common symbol of freedom. But combined with darkness and forced upon you, space becomes a life-threatening experience. It was not of her own will that she stepped into the dark space, but she was forced into it by someone who was supposed to protect her. Open space became terrifying narrowness with the bodies of brutal men so close to her own that they pierced her womb with their phalli. Not only her personal space had forcefully been intruded and violated,
but also her body. Her honour as a person was finally torn apart and she was finally depersonalised. In the early morning after the horrific experience she had to return to ‘her master’ on her own, because she had nowhere else to go but to her husband who had rejected her. The depiction here of the Levite as her ‘master’ (19:26-27) points to his control over her body. In this context the author uses the designation ‘the woman’ for the concubine. She was depersonalised, not being ‘his concubine’ any more, but just ‘the woman’.

When the Levite opened the door of the house in order to leave without his concubine, he saw her body lying with outstretched hands on the threshold. The first thing he used was his voice, ‘Get up, let’s go!’ (19:28). His vocal instrument for controlling the woman’s body had returned to him, but to little avail. Her horizontal body-posture is a depiction of her body’s lost struggle against men and their voices. Even her dead body with outstretched hands screaming a silent scream for help had little effect on him. At last male voices and their extension pieces, the phalli of brutal men, had completely destroyed a woman’s physical body and her person. The woman would, however, still live on as a dissected body, personalising a scattered people.

The Levite who, as a man of God, was supposed to care for people, showed himself to be an egocentric, self-protecting cultic person misusing his position as a Levite. He not only sacrificed his wife by pushing her violently out to be abused by brutal men, but also dissected her body by means of a sacrificial knife. The body-parts of the woman were symbolically converted by the Levite into twelve repulsive visual sermons addressed to the twelve tribes of Israel in order to put all the blame on the Benjaminite tribe of which the wicked men of Gibeah formed part (19:29-30; 20:4-7).

The cause of dissecting his dead concubine’s body is stated as, ‘because they committed this lewd and disgraceful act in Israel’, referring to the men of Gibeah. The body-parts of the woman became the voice of the Levite and seemingly spoke on his behalf. In contrast to the complete silence of the woman the Levite was a well-spoken orator who evoked a reply from the massive crowd that gathered at Mizpah to discuss this awful thing that had happened among the tribes of Israel. Where the body-parts of the woman in the opinion of the Levite would only save his own skin, the author eventually succeeded in personalising them as the scattered tribes of Israel, a horrifying shame to those who gazed at the pieces. This is substantiated by the fact that her body-parts were related to history when
everyone who saw it said, ‘Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the
day the Israelites came up out of Egypt’ (19:30). The sight of the body-parts became
‘language’, especially in combination with and enforced by the voice of the Levite
talking to the crowd. On the one hand the male look of the Levite, when he saw the
levelled body of the woman, only evoked a nonchalant reaction from him. On the
other hand the male look of the tribal men, when they saw the dissected female body-
parts, evoked huge retaliating reaction from them, which brings us to the next wave
of violence in the subsequent scene.

The violence that followed is a further illustration of the broken status of the
societal body during the tribal period. In 20:1 it is stressed that all Israelites came
out ‘as one man’ to assemble before Yahweh in Mizpah (of Benjamin). The mighty
voice of ‘all the people (who) rose as one man’ (21:8), responding to the Levite’s
distorted version of the events, echoed the voice of the older man in Gibeah. Violence
against one woman was to be reciprocated by even greater violence against the whole
tribe of Benjamin including both men and women. The extensive description of the
war against Benjamin emphasises this (20:8-48).

In this scene the sword extended the mighty ‘single voice’ of men and of God.
Yahweh’s voice is depicted as being in control of the situation after the initial
independent decision of the tribes to go up against Gibeah (20:8-11). Yahweh’s
voice of authority three times stepped into the lives and bodies of humans, destroying
them (20:18, 23, 28). Eventually it is said that Yahweh himself defeated Benjamin
before Israel (20:35). Almost a total wipe out of the cities of Benjamin occurred
(20:48), including all the women, a fact which is not mentioned explicitly. Only six
hundred men of Benjamin could escape to the desert. Severe violence against both
men and women resulted from violence against a single woman. The voice of Yahweh
brought about change in human bodies through the sword in order to change the
societal body. By depicting Yahweh as the authoritative voice who was responsible
for the breaking down of the present culture through the breaking down of human
bodies, the author is actually implementing an argument from authority to accomplish
his goal of persuading people to change.

In chapter 21:8-12 a subsequent battle is described, namely against the people
of Jabesh Gilead who did not assemble before Yahweh in Mizpah. Not only were all
the men of Jabesh Gilead killed at the command of male voice, but also all the
non-virgin women (21:10-12). The main aim of the gathering at Mizpah was to
work out a plan to save the Benjaminites from total extinction. Chapter 21:7 spells it out: ‘How can we provide wives for those (Benjaminites) who are left?’ This time the voice of Yahweh was silent, although the tribes had gathered to consult him. Nothing is said of Yahweh’s initiating this battle of which the purpose was to obtain women violently for the six hundred men of Benjamin. Voice and phallus again took hands against women bodies within the context of violence. Male voice was again extended by the sword and in effect also by the phalli of four hundred of the six hundred men of the Benjaminite tribe who had escaped the sword and had fled into the desert.

In the last scene (21:13-23) the rest of the Benjaminites were instructed by the men of Israel to grab (steal) the daughters of the city of Shiloh like animals lying in ambush during the annual festival of Yahweh. Yahweh was now openly held responsible for the extinction of the Benjaminite tribe (21:15). His voice, however, was not directly involved in this final violent grabbing of women bodies either, although the event took place within the context of cultic activities. Unwillingly these girls had to make their bodies available to the two hundred remaining Benjaminites who forcefully took them as their wives. Again the voices of men determined the fate of women. Male voice and phallus again took hands, this time even disrupting the festival of Yahweh. The rape of one woman becomes the justification for the rape of six hundred other women (Trible 1984:83).

D CONCLUSION

The thesis that has been stated at the beginning of this paper is that body and voice are categories in which a text announces itself. The body lies at the centre of any culture and the sociality of the body is expressed by means of personification (Vorster 1997b:389-390). By symbolising the body through language the body takes on political meaning and can serve as a strategy to influence the thinking of people or to empower or disempower people.

Judges 19-21, as part of a semi-final or final redaction process of the Deuteronomistic History, is an excellent illustration of this thesis. Judges 19-21 forms a transition from one period in the history of Israel to another, be it from the period of the judges to the monarchy, or as motivation for king Josiah’s reformation policy, or as part of a final interpretation of Israel’s history during the Babylonian Exile. The author of Judges 19-21 used a clear interplay between male voice and female body in order to convince his audience of the necessity of social and cultural
change.

By means of body symbolisation, (especially the female body is in focus in this paper) the author deconstructed the dominant detrimental culture of the societal body at the time of the judges, namely that ‘everyone did as he saw fit’, in order to reconstruct a new societal body in which a king would play a major role. In this way the negative past was to be transformed into a prosperous future under kingly rule. By implementing female body symbolisation in combination with male voice, this envisaged change is practically illustrated by the author in order to persuade his audience to accept the challenge of change.

Violence forms the environment in which male voices operate against women bodies in this story. The physical extension of the male voice often shows itself in either the phallus of man or in armed hostility between the tribes of Israel. In the case of God’s voice only the latter is applicable, but in a very subtle way the male voice and conduct are supported by either God’s voice or his presence in the form of cultic objects like the ark or cultic place. When the issue of procreation is at stake, God’s voice disappears into the background, but the cultic activities performed by the men involved endorse their violent procreative intentions and conduct against women.

The degenerating female body of the Levite’s concubine introduces the process of societal and cultural purification of one limb of the scattered body, namely the Benjaminite tribe, in order to purify the body as a whole. This process of purification is initiated by the deconstructive influence of the male voice, including the voice of God. First a process of total deconstruction has to take place and is symbolised by the broken body of the Levite’s concubine. Then, on male command, the seed for a new body to be born is planted into six hundred virgins in order to restore and revive the societal body as a whole.

The conclusion of the Book of Judges must in my view therefore be read against the background of violence and procreation, initiated by the powerful destructive male voice which influences the female body to change constantly. By these means the author calls for a new beginning. From the viewpoint of the author the body of the concubine and the bodies of the other women in the story play a significant and eventually positive role, namely that of changing agents. The concubine’s body symbolises the scatteredness of the societal body and the six hundred virgins symbolise the envisaged new societal body that was to come into being.

In order to get closer to our own time I wish to point out that Brenner
(1993:12-13) reminds us of the fact that all the characters in the story under discussion, women and men alike, are nameless, which has two functions. ‘The non-specificity both distances us from the plot, in the sense that anonymity is detrimental to the story’s credibility as meaningful ‘history’. On the other hand, this device enlarges the scope of the horror told. Anonymity points to generalisation in the sense that the redactor wishes to convey the idea of ‘this is what society looks like’. In this sense anonymity in the text cooperates in symbolising the societal body not only of Israel of old, but also of any modern nation today.

Transformation of bodies will always happen to a greater or lesser extent within the context of some form of violence initiated by empowered voice. This also applies to the current situation in South Africa and in the world at large. The important question is, however, to what extent can we minimise bodily pain in this process? What can we learn from the embodiment of female bodies in Judges 19-21 in the Hebrew Bible in order to bring about positive change in our own society? Should we enhance the status quo situation implemented by the author of Judges 19-21 in order to bring about change, or should we empower the women’s voice to such an extent that our Biblical example becomes reverse engendered domination?

No, I would opt for neither of these. The present scattered societal body in South Africa and in many other countries are still mainly because of the male voice extended by the sword and by the phallus. War and rape are still the order of the day in many countries, including our own. Let us rather raise a mutual engendered voice, an equal female and male choir that will persuade all cultures and religions in our country to accept the challenge of positive change towards a gender equal society. This can only be accomplished if both women and men familiarise themselves with the bodily harm brought about by dominant voices, and by cooperating in the process of establishing such an equality of voice.

NOTES
1 Tuan (1977:156) speaks of Heimat sentiment, the landscape filled with the history of families, towns, and villages. ‘Landscape’, according to him (157), ‘is personal and tribal history made visible.’
2 In this regard Webb (1987:188) refers to Samson who did what was right in his own eyes and ended up with his eyes put out, as well as Abimelech who killed his brothers on a stone and was killed himself by having a stone dropped on his head.
3 The Hebrew word used for knife in 19:30 (tl,k,aM;h;-ta, ) occurs again only twice in Genesis 22 where it is implemented as a sacrificial tool to slaughter a male human being, Isaac, son of Abraham, but the killing was prevented by God.
4 See Bal (1993:221) in this regard.
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