

## Gender, Narrative Agency, and Testimony: A Feminist Literary Reading of the Samaritan Woman in the Gospel of John

M. Godson Roosevelt<sup>1</sup>   & Dr K. Prem Kumar<sup>2</sup>  

### Abstract

*The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.1–42 has traditionally been interpreted within theological frameworks that emphasise evangelism, repentance, or moral transformation. However, such interpretations often marginalise the narrative agency of the Samaritan woman and overlook the gendered dynamics embedded in the text. This paper offers a feminist literary re-reading of the pericope, arguing that the Samaritan woman functions not merely as a passive recipient of revelation but as an active theological interlocutor and narrative catalyst. Employing feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis, the study examines how the Johannine narrative destabilizes patriarchal assumptions regarding gender, ethnicity, and religious authority. The analysis advances three claims: first, that the dialogue structure of the narrative foregrounds the Samaritan woman as an intellectual participant in theological discourse; second, that the narrative subverts social and cultural boundaries related to gender and ethnicity through the well-scene encounter; and third, that the Samaritan woman emerges as a proto-apostolic witness whose testimony facilitates communal belief. Through these claims, the study demonstrates that the Gospel of John strategically constructs the Samaritan woman as a transformative figure who mediates divine revelation to her community. This reinterpretation contributes to feminist biblical scholarship by foregrounding marginalised voices within canonical texts and by situating the narrative within broader discussions of gendered authority and witness in early Christian literature. The Samaritan woman emerges as a figure of female discipleship whose dialogue and testimony establish her theological agency within the Johannine narrative.*

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<sup>1</sup>M. Godson Roosevelt, PhD Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli – 620017, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620024, Tamil Nadu, South India.

<sup>2</sup>Dr K. Prem Kumar, Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli – 620017, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 620024, Tamil Nadu, South India.

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## **Introduction**

Scholars have long examined Gospel narratives for their theological significance and historical context; however, patriarchal interpretive traditions have often filtered the representation of women within them. One of the most significant encounters involving women in the New Testament is Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.1–42. While traditional interpretations have focused on themes of conversion, moral reform, or missionary expansion, scholars have paid comparatively less attention to the Samaritan woman's narrative agency and theological voice.

Within first-century Jewish and Samaritan socio-religious contexts, interactions between Jewish men and Samaritan women were socially transgressive. The Gospel writer deliberately situates the encounter within this cultural tension: "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4.9). The research paper foregrounds intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religious authority.

Existing scholarship has often interpreted the Samaritan woman primarily as a symbol of sinfulness or moral deficiency, largely based on the reference to her multiple marriages (John 4.18). Such readings tend to reduce the character to a narrative device to illustrate repentance rather than recognising her as an agent in the dialogue. Feminist scholars, however, have begun to question these interpretive assumptions, arguing that the text presents a far more complex portrayal. As a result, these interventions leave a research gap in integrating feminist literary analysis with close narrative reading that emphasises the dialogic structure of the encounter and its implications for female discipleship and testimony. Many interpretations acknowledge the woman's role as a witness but stop short of framing her as a theological interlocutor within the narrative framework.

This study addresses that gap by proposing that the Samaritan woman functions as an active participant in theological discourse and as a mediator of revelation within the Johannine narrative. A feminist literary re-reading of John 4.1–42 reveals that the Samaritan woman is deliberately constructed as a theological interlocutor and proto-apostolic witness whose dialogue with Jesus challenges patriarchal norms and redefines the boundaries of discipleship and religious authority.

## **Literature Review**

Contemporary research in feminist biblical criticism has significantly reshaped interpretations of female figures in the New Testament by challenging traditional readings rooted in patriarchal assumptions. Scholars such as Gail R. O'Day highlights

the narrative importance of dialogue in the Gospel of John, arguing that extended conversations often function as key moments of theological revelation. Within this framework, the Samaritan woman is positioned alongside figures like Nicodemus as an interlocutor who participates in the unfolding of theological discourse. Similarly, Turid Karlsen Seim emphasises that women in the New Testament often serve as witnesses in early Christian communities, suggesting that the Samaritan woman's proclamation to her town represents an early form of evangelistic testimony that challenges conventional assumptions about gendered religious authority.

Other scholars approach the narrative through broader critical frameworks. Musa W. Dube interprets the encounter through postcolonial feminist perspectives, arguing that the well becomes a symbolic space where tensions related to ethnicity, gender hierarchy, and religious authority are negotiated. Contemporary scholars have also re-examined the traditional interpretation of the woman's marital history, proposing that her situation may reflect social vulnerability within patriarchal structures rather than moral deviance. Whilst these studies acknowledge the Samaritan woman's significance in the narrative, few examine the literary mechanisms that construct her as a theological interlocutor. Recombining feminist literary analysis with narrative criticism, this study foregrounds her intellectual agency and highlights her role in mediating belief within the Samaritan community.

### **Methodology**

The research article draws on three theoretical principles within feminist criticism: recovering women's narrative agency, examining patriarchal interpretations, and recognising women's testimony and witness. These principles guide the analysis of female characters as active participants in biblical narratives and inform a reassessment of readings that reduce their roles to moral judgements or overlook their contributions. They also provide a basis for examining how women communicate revelation and shape their communities' faith. Guided by these principles, the study combines feminist literary criticism with close reading to examine the Samaritan woman's agency, dialogue, and testimony. Feminist literary criticism examines how gendered power relations shape both textual representation and interpretive traditions. In biblical studies, feminist hermeneutics seeks to recover marginalised voices and interrogate patriarchal assumptions embedded in canonical texts and their interpretations.

Methodologically, the study uses close textual analysis of John 4.1-42 in the New International Version (NIV), focusing on dialogue patterns, narrative structure, and character development. It pays particular attention to speech acts, thematic progression, and the narrative transformation of the Samaritan woman from an isolated individual to a communal witness.

### **The Samaritan Woman as a Theological Interlocutor**

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is among the longest recorded conversations in the Gospel of John. The Samaritan woman's active participation distinguishes this encounter from narratives in which women remain

silent. She questions, challenges, and interprets Jesus' statements, responding to his offer of "living water" with intellectual curiosity and critical reasoning. "Sir . . . you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" (John 4.11).

Her response engages metaphorical language and theological symbolism. Rather than passively accepting Jesus' words, she interrogates them, prompting further explanation. Feminist theologians argue that the Old and New Testament texts were generally written by men and contain anti-women discourses. In passages where women are rarely mentioned, the roles assigned to them are negative. Therefore, in order to end discrimination against women, religious texts must first be reevaluated. The claim that the Bible is a product of patriarchal religion in a patriarchal culture has raised the question of authority. Feminist theologians all agree that patriarchy must be overcome, but they differ in their understanding of how to do so. In this sense, two different approaches have emerged: the rejectionist/revolutionary group, which believes that the Judeo-Christian tradition is essentially patriarchal and should be rejected completely, and the reformist group, which tries to find a redemptive essence in the text despite the destructive effects of patriarchy (Saraldi 1).

Later in the dialogue, she raises a sophisticated theological debate about the proper place of worship: "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4.20). This question situates the conversation within a long-standing Jewish-Samaritan dispute over sacred geography. Through her engagement with this theological question, the Samaritan woman becomes an active participant in doctrinal discourse. Her role parallels that of other Johannine interlocutors, suggesting the narrative recognises her intellectual agency.

Feminist biblical scholarship has increasingly called for a reassessment of female figures in scriptural narratives traditionally interpreted through patriarchal frameworks. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that biblical interpretation has often marginalised women's roles within early Christian traditions, noting that feminist scholarship seeks to recover women as "active participants in the early Christian movement rather than passive recipients of male authority" (33). This perspective encourages reconsidering female figures whose narrative agency has historically been minimised.

Within this framework, the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman should not be read merely as a moral lesson but as a moment of intellectual engagement within the narrative. Narrative critics such as Gail R. O'Day similarly emphasise that dialogue functions as a central literary strategy in the Gospel of John. According to O'Day, Johannine conversations reveal theological meaning through interaction, since characters who question Jesus become part of the narrative process through which revelation unfolds (497).

Scholars, including Adele Reinhartz and Turid Karlsen Seim, further suggest that questioning within Johannine dialogue often functions as a rhetorical mechanism that leads to deeper theological understanding. Reinhartz notes that misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel frequently becomes “a narrative strategy that moves both characters and readers toward greater revelation” (82). In this sense, the Samaritan woman’s inquiries about living water and the proper place of worship cannot be read as mere ignorance; instead, they generate the theological discourse that culminates in Jesus’ teaching about worship “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4.23).

Postcolonial feminist scholar Musa W. Dube also interprets the encounter as a negotiation across intersecting boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and religious authority. She argues that the narrative stages “a conversation across social and political boundaries,” allowing a marginalised woman to articulate the concerns of her community (118). Although traditional interpretations often portray the Samaritan woman primarily as a moral exemplar, the narrative’s dialogic structure suggests a more complex role. Through a feminist literary lens, the Samaritan woman emerges as an active participant whose questioning and interpretive engagement contribute significantly to the unfolding of theological revelation in the Johannine narrative.

### **The Narrative Subversion of Gender and Ethnic Boundaries**

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman challenges multiple social boundaries within the first-century context. Jewish men typically avoided public conversation with women, particularly Samaritan women, who were considered religious outsiders. The woman herself articulates this cultural tension: “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (John 4.9). The narrative explicitly acknowledges the hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus challenges the social divisions of his time when he speaks to the Samaritan woman and asks her for water.

The disciples’ reaction further highlights the interaction’s transgressive nature: “They were surprised to find him talking with a woman” (John 4.27). From a feminist literary perspective, this narrative moment exposes the gendered assumptions embedded in the cultural context. The Samaritan woman’s presence in theological dialogue destabilises these expectations, suggesting a broader inclusivity within the Johannine vision of community.

Scholars of the Johannine narrative have noted that the encounter at the well deliberately disrupts entrenched social boundaries in the ancient Mediterranean world. In first-century Jewish society, interactions between men and unrelated women in public spaces were generally discouraged, especially in religious settings. Craig R. Koester observes that the Gospel of John repeatedly situates moments of revelation within encounters that cross conventional social lines, thereby demonstrating the universal scope of Jesus’ mission (246). Within this framework, the Samaritan woman’s interaction with Jesus becomes significant not merely as a

personal conversation but as a symbolic crossing of ethnic and gender divisions.

The narrative setting, a public well at midday, further intensifies the interaction's transgressive nature, since the well scene traditionally served as a literary motif in biblical narratives for significant encounters and covenantal relationships. The Samaritan woman's central role in this scene gives a familiar biblical setting new meaning, presenting a marginalised figure as an active participant in the revelation of Jesus' identity.

Feminist and postcolonial scholars have further interpreted this episode as a narrative strategy that challenges hierarchical assumptions embedded in both gender and ethnic identities. Musa W. Dube argues that the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman represents a "boundary-crossing encounter" in which competing cultural identities are negotiated through conversation rather than exclusion (104). Similarly, Turid Karlsen Seim notes that women in early Christian narratives often appear at moments when established social categories are destabilised, allowing marginalised voices to enter theological discourse (67). Despite these scholarly observations, many traditional interpretations continue to frame the Samaritan woman primarily as an individual sinner or convert rather than as a representative figure within a broader socio-cultural negotiation. By foregrounding the intersection of gender and ethnic boundaries in this narrative, the present study contributes to feminist literary readings that emphasise the Samaritan woman's role in exposing and challenging structures of exclusion within the Johannine narrative world.

### **The Samaritan Woman as a Proto-Apostolic Witness**

The narrative culminates in the Samaritan woman's transformation into a messenger who brings her community to encounter Jesus. After the conversation, she leaves her water jar and returns to the town, proclaiming: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4.29). Her testimony sparks a communal response, leading many Samaritans to believe. The text explicitly states: "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4.39). This statement positions the Samaritan woman as the primary catalyst for the spread of belief within the narrative. Her testimony functions analogously to apostolic witness in other Gospel accounts.

Within feminist hermeneutics, this moment matters because it attributes missionary authority to a female character. The narrative therefore challenges patriarchal assumptions about who can mediate divine revelation and initiate communal faith.

Scholars of the Gospel of John have frequently observed that witness (*martyria*) occupies a central theological position within the Johannine narrative. Characters who testify to Jesus' identity function as mediators of revelation for others within the story. Craig R. Koester notes that testimony in the Fourth Gospel is not limited to formal disciples but extends to individuals whose encounters with Jesus lead them to bear witness within their communities (135). In this narrative

framework, the Samaritan woman's proclamation to her town performs precisely such a function.

The Samaritan woman's invitation, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (John 4.29), begins the Samaritan community's movement toward Jesus and ultimately leads to collective belief. Gail R. O'Day similarly emphasises that the Samaritan woman becomes "a witness whose testimony leads others to encounter Jesus for themselves," illustrating the Johannine pattern in which personal experience of revelation becomes the basis for communal faith (503). Her role therefore parallels other witnesses in the Gospel, including John the Baptist and the disciples, whose testimony directs others toward recognising Jesus' identity.

Feminist biblical scholars have further argued that this narrative moment carries important implications for understanding women's roles within early Christian witness traditions. Turid Karlsen Seim observes that women in the New Testament frequently appear as the first proclaimers of significant revelations, thereby challenging assumptions that early Christian testimony was exclusively male (92). The Samaritan woman's return to her community and public declaration of her encounter with Jesus demonstrates precisely this form of witness. Akin, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that recovering these narrative moments is crucial for recognizing women's participation in the formation and transmission of early Christian faith traditions (140). Building on her role as a catalyst for the Samaritan community's belief, this study highlights the narrative's portrayal of the Samaritan woman as a proto-apostolic figure whose testimony mediates revelation and expands the community of believers within the Johannine account.

## **Discussion**

The feminist re-reading proposed in this study aligns with recent scholarly efforts to reinterpret female figures in biblical narratives as active participants rather than marginal characters. Rebounding on the Samaritan woman's dialogue, testimony, and narrative transformation, the study challenges long-standing interpretations that frame her primarily in terms of moral deficiency. In comparison with previous scholarship, this analysis extends feminist interpretations by emphasising the narrative mechanics that construct the woman as a theological interlocutor. Her conversation with Jesus parallels other Johannine dialogues that reveal central theological themes, indicating that the Gospel writer intentionally grants her narrative authority.

From a broader literary perspective, the Samaritan woman also functions as a bridge figure who connects marginalised communities with the emerging Christian message. Her role shows how early Christian narratives incorporate voices from social and ethnic margins into revelation and witness.

Generally, feminist conceptions of women's empowerment and liberation from patriarchal oppression and domination assume that liberation is better attained and sustained within secular institutions. Therefore, women's rights advocates and feminists are often wary of the location of rights activism within religion and

religious institutions. Given the generally assumed secular origin and situation of Western feminism, which also unambiguously advocates a separation between church and state, there is some concern as to whether or not religiously motivated gender-equity and women's rights activism can be considered feminism (Bawa 1).

In contemporary global contexts, feminist readings of biblical texts contribute to ongoing discussions about gender equity within religious institutions.

Worldwide, feminist politics is increasingly marginalised and faces resistance from governments and societies. In post-socialist Eurasia, gender discourses are dominated by international donors promoting a neoliberal approach, as well as states mobilising patriarchal norms for nation building. (Kluczevska and Luciani 1)

Recognising the Samaritan woman as a proto-apostolic figure invites reconsideration of women's roles in leadership, theological discourse, and spiritual testimony.

### Conclusion

This study has presented a feminist literary re-reading of John 4.1–42, arguing that the Samaritan woman at the well is portrayed not merely as a passive recipient of revelation but as an active theological interlocutor and witness within the Johannine narrative. For a long time, the Bible has been used to justify patriarchal and gender discrimination among the church communities. All too often Christianity has been used to remind the woman of her subordinate role. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrated three central claims: the Samaritan woman participates in theological dialogue with intellectual agency, the narrative subverts gender and ethnic boundaries through the well encounter, and the woman ultimately functions as a proto-apostolic witness whose testimony initiates communal belief.

These findings contribute to feminist biblical scholarship by highlighting how canonical narratives contain transformative representations of marginalised voices. "We are still in a gender crisis. Women are still oppressed because of their gender. Men are still struggling with their identities and with the meaning of masculinity, which is also experiencing a crisis on its own. While there is a lack of desirable and positive role models, the 'thug' figure has become an acceptable role model" (Ndlazi 63). The Samaritan woman's story shows how a woman's questions and testimony can shape a community's faith. Her role invites Christian communities to listen to women and recognise their contributions to religious life.

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