

The Shunammite Woman

(An Indonesian Woman's Reading Of 2 Kings 4:8-37)

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Abstrak

Paper ini bertujuan untuk membaca cerita tentang perempuan Sunem yang terdapat di dalam 2 Raja-raja 4:8-37 dengan menggunakan metode naratif dan sosio-historis. Melalui metode naratif saya menunjukkan bahwa cerita ini menggambarkan perempuan Sunem sebagai karakter utama yang mengontrol kelangsungan cerita ini mulai dari awal hingga akhir. Ia adalah sosok perempuan yang kuat yang menggunakan kecepatan berpikir dan rencana yang cermat untuk melakukan apapun yang dia mampu untuk menyelamatkan anak lakinya. Sementara itu, dengan menggunakan pendekatan sosio-historis, text ini ditempatkan pada abad kesembilan pada masa pemerintahan dinasti Omri dan mungkin juga dinasti Jehu di mana orang-orang Israel dari kelas bawah mengalami penindasan sebagai akibat dari komersialisasi dan militerisasi kebijakan politik kaum elite. Oleh karena itu analisis ini bertujuan untuk memahami peran para perempuan seperti perempuan Sunem yang memberdayakan diri sendiri dan orang lain melalui pertemuan mereka dengan nabi Elisa. Tindakan mereka dapat dipahami sebagai upaya aktif untuk menantang kekuasaan negara. Akhirnya, saya menyajikan implikasi dari cerita ini bagi para perempuan Kristen di Indonesia. Penggambaran perempuan Sunem sebagai seseorang yang berpikiran jernih, fokus, berani berbicara untuk dirinya sendiri, dan memiliki tekad untuk membuat keputusan guna memecahkan permasalahannya secara independent hendaknya menjadi model yang baik untuk para perempuan Indonesia yang tengah berjuang untuk menghadapi berbagai bentuk penindasan di negara mereka.

Introduction

The story of the Shunammite woman is one of Elisha's six individual miracle stories that are listed in 2 Kgs 4:1-7; 38-41; 42-44; 2 Kgs 5:1-27; and 2 Kgs 6:1-7. This story is intriguing because unlike other stories about women in the Hebrew Bible that portray women as always in need and waiting for influential males to protect and help them, the

Shunammite woman is a strong woman character who dares to take initiative and make decisions. She also acts independently to achieve her goal. Thus, the story of the Shunammite woman is good news for all Christian women who struggle to define themselves, make their own decisions, stand for what they believe in, and act independently.

This paper aims to understand the meaning of the story of the Shunammite woman using narrative analysis. This method, according to Yairah Amit, "is based on the assumption that content and form are interlinked; observing the form of a narrative necessarily deepens one's understanding of its content".¹ Meir Sternberg states that narrative is "a functional structure, a means to a communicative end, a transaction between the narrator and the audience on whom he [sic] wishes to produce a certain effect by way of certain strategies".² Thus, as a reader, it is my intention to analyze the communicative role of the Shunammite woman story, by examining its narrative features. Among the several literary techniques that will be used to analyze the story are narrative structure, characterization, repetitions, point of view, narrative time and space, and the narrative gaps.³

A socio-historical method is employed to reconstruct the historical background of Elisha narrative which I place in the ninth century during the rule of the Omrid dynasty and probably by the Jehuids as well where the lower class people of Israel experienced great oppression as a result of the commercialization and militarization of political policies of their elites.⁴ Hence, this analysis aims to understand the role of women like the one from Shunem who empower themselves and others through their encounter with the prophet. Their actions can be understood as their active attempts to challenge state power.

I begin this paper with a discussion of my narrative analysis of 2 Kings 4:8-37. I then discuss my socio-historical reading of this passage. I end this paper by describing the meaning of this passage for the Christian women in my Indonesian contemporary context.

Narrative Analysis of 2 Kgs 4:8-37

In this part, I will analyze the Shunammite story in 2 Kgs 4:8-37 with narrative analysis in order to find the messages of the story. In this analysis, I organize my work by the scenes, as I perceive them. I divide the plot of the story into five major scenes: vv. 8-11, vv. 12-17, vv. 18-25a, vv. 25b-35, and vv. 36-37.

Scene 1: 2 Kings 4:8-11

The narrative begins with an introductory report בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא "one day," that indicates the particular day on which the story takes place. The phrase "one day" also marks the disconnection of the story from the previous verses. Unlike the former story, that took place in an unnamed location, here the narrator informs that this story happens in Shunem which is located about seven kilometers north of the village of Jezreel.⁵ Further, the only character who continues to play a significant role in this new story is Elisha; the characters of the nameless widow and her children who appeared in the former verses are gone and are replaced by different characters. Here, the narrator introduces the new character with brief statement, "there was a wealthy woman." The narrator does not provide a reason for describing the woman as a wealthy person or mention her name. For the rest of the story, the readers will only know the identity of this character from the mouths of the narrator and Elisha as "the Shunammite woman," "the mother of the child," or "that Shunammite." But as the story proceeds, the readers do know the character of this woman through her speech and actions that are depicted by the narrator. The narrator indicates that the woman urges Elisha, who frequently passes by her house, to have a meal. The word urges is derived from the Hebrew וַתְּחַזַּק (חִזַּק). It is a *hiphil* verb with a *waw* consecutive imperfect that can mean "make a firm encouragement or urge strongly."⁶

This woman's insistence to Elisha is well accepted, so whenever (Heb. וַיִּדְהוּל כְּמִתְּנִי) (lit. as often as) he passes by, he stops (Heb. וַיִּגְרַע lit. turns a side) there to have a meal. In vv. 9-10, the woman continues her care for Elisha by urging her husband to build a chamber complete with the

furniture in it so that Elisha can stay there whenever he comes to them. There is no information on the building process of the chamber, but in v. 11 the readers are informed “one day when he came, he went up (Heb. נָסַר lit. turns aside) to the chamber and lay down there.” Here, the readers notice that apparently the husband—like Elisha who keeps “turning side” to accept the woman hospitality—follows the woman’s suggestion to provide lodging for Elisha.

From the narrator’s information about the woman’s actions to provide provisions for Elisha, the readers now understand why the narrator describes the woman as אִשָּׁה גְדוּלָה “great woman”—a title that is given to someone because of her wealth.⁷ Moreover, the woman’s actions can also suggest that she is a person who is self-driven, speaks for herself, and makes decisions as to what she thinks is good for herself and others. She is also a very compassionate person and is willing to share her wealth with others. In v. 9, the readers hear the reason why she shows her kindness to Elisha. In her own voice, the interior view thru her speech, the woman confesses to her husband, “Look, I know that this man is a holy man of God.” The term אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים or the “man of God” appears several times in Deut 33:1; Josh 14:6; I Sam 9:6; 1 Kgs 12:22; 13:1, 17-18; and 2 Kgs 4:8, 16, 22, 25, 27. It creates powerful narrative analogies as this title is also given to Moses, Samuel, Shemaiah, Elijah and an unnamed man, who are also known as prophets. From the rhetorical point of view, when Elisha is put together with Moses and the rest of these influential prophets, he is associated with them. And by so doing, the woman recognizes Elisha’s important role and position in his society. Thus, the readers can draw the conclusion that the woman’s hospitality and generosity to Elisha can be understood as her act of respect.

Scene 2: 2 Kings 4:12-17

As the story continues, the narrator introduces Gehazi, Elisha’s servant. In v. 12, Elisha instructs Gehazi to call the Shunammite woman. He uses the imperative קְרָא לְשׁוֹנַמִּית הַזֹּאת “Call the Shunammite” that will be repeated again in v. 15. This instruction is followed by the Hebrew verb

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָּהָּ "So he called her," in order to report that Elisha's command was obeyed directly by Gehazi as soon as it was given. Elisha is therefore characterized as an authoritative person. At this point, Gehazi acts as Elisha's mediator who speaks on behalf of Elisha. The notion of Gehazi as Elisha's mediator is evident in v. 13. As soon as the woman comes and stands before Elisha, Elisha somehow does not speak directly to her. Instead, he speaks to her through Gehazi. Still in an imperative tone, Elisha orders Gehazi to ask the woman if there is anything he can do to repay the woman's kindness to him. He offers himself to speak on the woman's behalf to the king or the commander of the army. The mentioning of these two important figures by Elisha confirms the woman's statement in v. 9 when she told her husband that Elisha is different from regular people. He is an influential person who is authorized by God. On the other hand, Elisha's decision not to talk directly to the woman is ambiguous and somehow creates a gap for the readers, as the narrator does not explain Elisha's action.

In the next line of v. 13, the narrator informs that the woman gives her answer to Elisha's question. She says, "I live among my own people." This response also creates a gap since the readers cannot determine to whom the woman addresses her answer. Is it to Elisha directly or to Gehazi who later passes it on to Elisha? And, to the readers' surprise, instead of using this chance to ask anything of "the holy man of God," the Shunammite woman refuses the offer by stating "I live among my own people." This statement suggests that the woman already feels secure among her own relatives who protect her and take care of her. Further, it strengthens the readers' observation about the woman's strong character. She is a self-reliant and independent woman. However, Elisha's determination to pay back the woman cannot be deterred by this statement. The readers, who are now getting used to the gaps that occur in the story with the words exchanged between Elisha, Gehazi and the woman, are informed that Elisha decides to ask Gehazi about what he can do for the woman. And Gehazi, the obedient servant, replies to his master by saying that the woman has no son and her husband is too old to give one for her. At this point of the story, the readers are forced to see another gap. One may ask: How can Elisha, who stays with the

Shunammite woman's family whenever he passes by Shunem, not know that the Shunammite is childless and that her husband is too old? Does it suggest that Elisha is not interested in knowing more about the woman who is willing to "take all this trouble to provide foods and lodging for him?" Does it suggest that Elisha is an ignorant person who enjoys too much all the attention and service that are given to him, and his self-importance in relation to those who encounter him? Does it also suggest that Elisha deliberately keeps his distance from the woman in order to maintain his holy status? The narrator does not provide any answers to all these questions. The readers therefore must keep reading the story in order to find out more about Elisha's character and his intention.

In v. 15, after hearing what Gehazi has told him, Elisha once again orders Gehazi to call the woman. As the woman stands in the door, Elisha says, "At this season, in due time, you will embrace a son" (v. 16). The phrase כִּעֵת תֵּיָה "about this time next year" is repeated in v. 17. It also appears in Gen 18:10, 13, where God promises Abraham and Sarah a son. Esther Fuchs, following Alter, argues that the act of birth promised by God's messengers can be categorized as the biblical annunciation type-scene that consists of the three major thematic components: the initial barrenness of the wife, a divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son.⁸ But unlike Gen 18:9-15, which contains the annunciation type-scene in which Sarah is described as barren, in 2 Kgs 4:8-37 the readers finally acknowledge that the woman is childless and that her husband is old only after Gehazi mentions those facts to Elisha. And unlike Gen 18:9-15, which emphasizes that it is God who gives the birth promise to the barren wife and her husband, in this story it is Elisha who initiates it. This story therefore reminds the readers of the annunciation type-scene in Gen 18:9-15 but at the same time, it creates an argument of dissociation because the plot of the story does not follow the typical scene of the birth promise. In this, Elisha's decision not to include God in his quest to find out what the Shunammite woman might need from him or his failure to mention God's name in announcing the child's forthcoming birth (v. 16) alerts the readers of the reliability of this birth promise. It leaves the readers with this question in mind, "will Elisha's birth promise to the Shunammite woman be fulfilled by God?"

Another interesting aspect of this scene relates to the woman's answer to Elisha's announcement. Instead of being happy and relieved because she can finally have son of her own, the Shunammite woman rebukes the man of God by saying, "Do not deceive your servant." At this point, the readers know that the woman's intention to help Elisha is pure. She does not expect anything in return for what she has done. That is why the readers have seen that Elisha has offered two things to the woman twice, and the woman has rejected those offers twice as well. Here, the woman uses a Hebrew verb תִּכְזֹב "lie or deceive" to express her rejection of Elisha's offer. This word indicates that it not the prospect of having a child that the woman rejects. It is a false hope that this woman cannot bear, since Gehazi in v. 14 has informed the readers that her husband is old. Thus, the story suggests that the woman has accepted her childless condition and is satisfied with the company of "her own people" whom she believes will look after her interests; and therefore does not expect any son as Elisha might think. Moreover, the description of this woman's refusal of Elisha's offer demonstrates her courage to challenge the common view in her society that considers a woman as a property of male members of her family. For a woman always belongs to her father when she is single. When she is married, she belongs to her husband. But, when her husband died, she belongs to her son. Hence, the presence of any male member of family is pivotal for the continuation of a woman's life. The Shunammite woman's response to Elisha indicates that she is an independent woman who does not depend herself on males' protection. The narrator closes this scene by informing that Elisha does not give the woman a false hope, because the woman conceives and delivers a son just as Elisha has prophesied.

Scene 3: 2 Kings 4:18-25a

In the next scene, the narrator skips the birth process and everything that relates to the son's childhood in order to quickly move the time of the story. He begins this scene by repeating the phrase הַיּוֹם וַיְהִי "one day," that already appeared in vv. 8 and 11. And just as the readers are relieved that Elisha's birth promise is fulfilled in v. 17, the narrator tells the readers the crisis that ruins the potentially happy

ending to the story in a single scene that happens within a day. In v. 18-20, the readers are informed that the son went to his father in the field and suddenly complained about his head. The servant brings him to his mother. He sits on his mother's lap until noon. And he dies.

In the next verse, the narrator also does not bother to tell the readers about what happens to the woman after finding out about the death of her son or the father's situation after sending his son home. Instead, the narrator rushes to tell the readers about the woman's actions after the death of her son. Describing her almost as a woman without an emotion, the narrator overwhelms the readers without any interruption, with a series of actions taken by the woman. After finding out that the child has died, the Shunammite woman goes up and lays the child on the bed of the man of God. She shuts the door before him and goes out. She calls her husband and orders him to send a servant and a donkey, because she wants to go quickly to the man of God and then comes back again. Time and again, the narrator proves that this woman is clearheaded, purposeful, focused and very determined to take trouble on her own and solve it. She does not even waste her time reacting to her husband's cynical question regarding the useless journey that she is about to make, for it is not a new moon nor a Sabbath. This question indicates that the woman does not tell her husband about their son. Perhaps, she has not had time for that. The story also suggests that this woman believes that only Elisha can solve her problem. Therefore, by saying *שָׁלוֹם* "It will be all right," the woman saddles the donkey herself and orders her servant to move quickly. They both then depart to visit Elisha at Carmel. The readers now wonder what will happen next.

Scene 4: 2 Kings 25b-35

The narrator opens this new scene by informing that as soon as Elisha sees the woman approaching his place, he tells Gehazi to meet her and ask her whether she and the rest of her family are all right. Here, the readers once again sense Elisha's efforts not to deal directly with the woman which we already saw in vv. 12-15. Elisha's attitude is different from that of the woman. Instead of playing along with Elisha to keep

their relationship formal, the woman decides that she has enough. By only answering Gehazi's question with the same answer that she gave to her husband before שָׁלוֹם "It is all right," the woman goes straight to Elisha. To the readers' surprise, she grabs hold of Elisha's feet. The verb "grabs hold" is derived from the same Hebrew word וַתִּחַזַק that appeared in v. 8. Therefore, the readers can see that just as the woman strongly urged Elisha to accept her hospitality, this time too she strongly urges Elisha to help her. Hence, the readers can see that the quickness of the Shunammite woman's actions and her confrontation of Elisha communicate her anger. Gehazi, who is used to his master's formality, approaches the woman in order to push her away. But this time, it is Elisha who decides to allow the woman touch his feet. He says, "Let her alone, for there is bitterness in her soul and Yahweh has hidden from me and has not told me" (v. 27).

At this point of the story, the readers are caught by surprise by what Elisha just confessed to Gehazi and perhaps to the woman who is there. In vv. 9, 16, 21, 22, 25, and 27, the readers have heard from the woman and the narrator that Elisha is a man of God and therefore is similar to Samuel and other prophets who were forewarned by Yahweh in such circumstances. Examples for this can be seen in 1 Sam 9:15 when Yahweh tells his plan to Samuel a day before the arrival of Saul and in 1 Kgs 14:5 where Ahijah is informed about the impending visit of Jeroboam's wife. Thus, the readers expect Elisha to get the same knowledge from God. This unexpected twist from Elisha therefore creates an argument of dissociation that seems to not only disappoint the readers but also the Shunammite woman who then raises harsh questions if not accusations against Elisha. In her anger and grief the woman declares, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me'?" These questions indicate that the woman demands Elisha to accept responsibility for the miraculous deed that neither God nor the woman has wanted. She expects Elisha to go back with her to her house and clean up the mess that he has made.

As the scene continues, the readers now turn their eyes to Elisha in order to see what he will do next. But instead of taking the matter into

his own hands in order to show that he understands the woman's demand, Elisha once again turns to Gehazi and orders him to take his staff and go to the woman's house to revive the child. He even instructs Gehazi to avoid people who might delay his mission. From a rhetorical point of view, Elisha's staff that will be used to revive the boy creates an analogy and a symbol of liaison. Here, Elisha—a man of God—is portrayed more and more like Moses, who also possessed a staff that was used to perform miracles. But not every one is impressed with Elisha's staff. It is evident that the Shunammite woman is not satisfied with Elisha's reaction to her demand. Just as she asked him twice so as not to deceive him, this time too she refuses to be deceived by Elisha. She then declares an oath, using the name of Yahweh, that she will not leave Elisha until he follows her. And by so doing, the story suggests that the woman doubts that Gehazi and Elisha's staff can restore his son's life. Verse 30 indicates that Elisha finally gives up and without saying anything he follows the woman to her house. It seems that the woman's insistence has paid off.

The story proceeds with two things that are significant for the development of the story. In v. 31, Gehazi, who went before Elisha and the woman, finally comes back to inform that the staff that Elisha gave him had no effect on the child. There is no sound or sign of life from the child. Here, the analogy and the symbols of liaison that were planted by the narrator in the readers' minds are falling apart. It is evident that Elisha's staff does not have the power of Moses' staff. Moreover, this single verse that mentions Gehazi's failure to revive the child confirms the woman's doubt in both him and Elisha's staff. Thus, the readers begin to question Elisha's reliability as the man of God. Is he trustworthy? For it seems that nothing that he does or says works out.

The development of the story in vv. 32-35 shows that it is not only the Shunammite woman and the readers who begin to question Elisha's authority as the man of God. Here, Elisha himself, whose own self-doubt is already seen directly in v. 27, begins to question his authority. In vv. 32-33, the narrator informs that as soon as he sees that the child is indeed died and that his staff has no effect on him, Elisha

shuts the door and for the first time he does what a man of God is supposed to do. He prays to Yahweh, seeking for Yahweh's help to revive the son. The readers at this point finally realize that what has gone wrong with Elisha and his miraculous deed from the beginning of this story is that he has not relied on God. As a man of God, Elisha forgot to include God in his birth promise. He failed to find out whether or not God was in favor for what he was about to promise to the woman. Further, with his arrogance and ignorance, he acted as if he knew what was best for the woman without giving any option to either the woman or God. Another lesson that Elisha learns from his failure is that it is God who can perform a miracle and that he is only God's agent who only does God's will.

Verse 34 describes the ritual done by Elisha to revive the child. With a strong will that now matches the Shunammite woman's determination, Elisha puts his mouth upon the child's mouth, and his hands upon the child's hands. But, in contrast to his expectation, the child's flesh only becomes warm. His is not yet alive. In v. 35, Elisha expresses his fear regarding the prospect of failing to revive the child. The narrator captures this by describing *בְּבֵית אִתָּת הַנְּהָל וְאִתָּת הַנְּהָל חָאָהֶת* *וַיֵּשֶׁב וַיֵּלֶךְ* "he got down, went about in the house here and there." There is no information about how long Elisha does this. The narrator goes on to report that on his second attempt, Elisha finally succeeds in reviving the son, who sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. Here, the readers know that the crisis is finally over and the woman and Elisha's problem is resolved.

Scene 5: 2 Kings 4:36-37

This story concludes with Elisha's final meeting with the woman. Using the same protocol that he did before in v. 12, Elisha instructs Gehazi to call the woman. But this time, Elisha does not order Gehazi to talk on his behalf. To the readers' surprise, Elisha turns directly to the woman and says to her "Take your son." Whether it suggests that Elisha's encounter with the woman made him realize his own faults and therefore changed his attitude is not clear. The narrator leaves it to the

readers' imaginations. In v. 37, the narrator relates that as soon as the woman sees that her child is alive she shows her gratitude to Elisha by falling at his feet and bowing to the ground. This gesture can be understood as an act of respect and awe. And without saying anything, she takes her son and goes out.

My close reading of the Shunammite woman indicates that the story itself places emphasis on Rahab as the central character who controls everything from the beginning till the end. She is a strong woman who uses her quick-thinking and clever plan to do whatever is necessary to save her son. Moreover, she is depicted as someone who does not depend herself on males' protection. Despite of her lack of a name in the story, the woman "has a voice, speaks for herself, makes decisions, and acts independently as a fully human subject."⁹ She does so by refusing Elisha's suggestion that he speaks on her behalf to the king or the commander of the army. She is also a true initiator of her son's resurrection. She is the one who acts quickly to seek Elisha at Carmel to revive her son despite the cynical question of her husband. And when Elisha does not show any sign to revive the son himself, the Shunammite woman forces him to do so and, as a result, the prophet does as she says. Hence, the story in 2 Kgs 4:8-37 is meant to celebrate the Shunammite woman as a strong and independent figure who is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals.

III. Historical Setting of 2 Kings 4:8-37

Scholars have engaged in serious efforts to reconstruct the historical background of the Elisha narratives. Jones argues that the Elisha stories in 2 Kgs 2:1-10:36 and 13:14-21 that now appear as a unified whole do not belong to the reign of one king. Instead, these stories have been inserted within the regnal forms of three kings: Joram (3:1-8:24), Jehu (9:1-10:36) and Joash (13:14-21). This fact, according to Jones, indicates that some parts of the text have been changed purposely in order to accommodate the Elisha traditions. Jones argues that "it is evident ... that collecting Elisha narratives into one large complex extending over the reigns of three kings gives them no more than a superficial appearance of unity."¹⁰ This notion has been proposed before

by Whitley, who points out that the collection of the ministry of Elisha that is described in the context of Jehoram's reign, belong to the period of the Jehu dynasty.¹¹

Judith Todd is in line with Whitley. She points out that the Elijah-Elisha stories were created in order to legitimize Jehu's reign in Israel. In the context of the Elisha cycle, Todd asserts that "the work of Elisha among the 'sons of prophets' fomented the rebellion against Joram's rule and brought events to a crisis point. The stories demonstrated physical refuge and sustenance for bands of people who had been forced out of the old protective tribal structures by the monarchy and social stratification."¹² Sweeney agrees with this argument. He states that the Elijah and Elisha cycles form a part of the Jehu Dynastic History, although it seems to have an independent compositional history prior to being taken up and edited into the Jehu history. He goes on to argue that "such redaction would have taken place in conjunction with their inclusion in the Jehu narrative in the early to mid-eighth century B.C.E."¹³

Agreeing with Todd's notion that the Elijah-Elisha stories were selected to support Jehu's coup d'état, Tamis Renteria goes on to focus her investigation on the reasons why the Jehu dynasty included the short stories regarding the prophets' relationships with common women and peasants. In order to reveal why Jehu included such narratives in his legitimation document, Renteria applies both social and cultural anthropology to describe the probable social dimensions of ninth century northern Israelite life.¹⁴

Renteria bases her investigation into the social context of the Northern Israelites under the reign of Omrid dynasty on William and Thompson's concept of "hegemony." According to Renteria, the hegemonic dynamics in Omrid Israel is marked by the putrefying conflict between a centralizing monarchic hegemony and a regional village counter-hegemony. It started in united Israel with the first king, and continued in northern Israel until the Assyrians overthrew the monarchy in the eighth century. In the ninth century, the period where the Elijah and Elisha miracle stories were located, the Omrid kings

preserved policies which helped maintain the dominant monarchic hegemony. And as a result, the regional counter-hegemony increased its resistance until the Jehu revolution destroyed the Omrids.¹⁵ Further, Renteria observes that even though the dominant hegemony and the counter-hegemony in Israel existed side by side, the monarchic hegemony that formed itself with an agrarian state political economy and cosmopolitan values dominated and endangered the hill-country life of Israelite villagers, who valued political-economic practices and a tradition of Yahwistic history. The growing power of the monarchy, according to Renteria, happened because of the wider changes in the political economy of the Near East.¹⁶ Several examples of the consequences of this changing pattern of production on the villagers and the regular people of Israel and their resistance to this state hegemony are depicted in the Elijah-Elisha miracle stories.

Moreover, Renteria goes on to indicate that the northern Israelite villagers' resistance is not only visible through their political movements led by Jehu, but also through their cultural practices that are rooted in the daily lives of hill-country villagers. Renteria asserts that "in the case of village Israel, this included the practice of relying on local Yahwistic prophets ... to link people with supernatural powers, rather than trusting a monarchy that claimed to control the rain and supply subsistence, and yet failed to do so."¹⁷ Renteria also suggests that another form of the villagers' resistance to monarchic efforts to monopolize power can be seen in the use of the prophetic genre in living oral warfare among clans. She proposes two different reasons to support this notion:

First, the practice was tribal and regional, threatening the creation and maintenance of a monarchic state by leaving power up for grabs in struggles between clans. Omri tried to circumvent this by putting himself out of the clan arena through foreign alliances. Second, the practice as it continued even after Jehu's coup threatened all monarchic claims to power because it left open the question of who the most Yahwistically legitimate family to rule was. Jehu attempted to consolidate his authority by commissioning

a public narrative that authorized him as a king anointed by the most authentic spokesperson of Yahweh, Elisha, successor to Elijah. However, he was unable to suppress completely the Yahwistic practices in his subjects, whether elites or peasants, and prophetic stories continued to circulate as a genre of monarchic resistance.¹⁸

In addition to those forms of resistance that were mostly performed by men, Renteria argues that in the Elijah-Elisha miracle stories Israelite women also openly show their resistance to the state monarchy by feeding and giving shelter to prophets while at the same time managing to demand that the prophets provide things the women desperately need. Renteria goes on to argue that, at one level, it is more likely that the women's resistance is not much different from the men's resistance in the stories because they simply demonstrate their support of Yahwistic prophets. However, the close reading of the stories in terms of gender dynamics indicates that "women may have been reaching out to the prophets out of their sense of subordination as women. They were vulnerable not only within the monarchic system, but also within the traditional Yahwistic village system, since both were patriarchal."¹⁹

In the context of the story in 2 Kgs 4:8-37, Renteria shows that even though the Shunammite woman described in the story is not a widow or poor, she is willing to provide foods and lodging for Elisha and to let the prophet solve a problem that she shares with other Israelite women, regardless of their social class. Renteria observes that although the woman is probably a wealthy peasant or a member of the latifundial upper class in the Esdraelon valley area near Jezreel, as a woman who lives in the patriarchal society this woman's life is at stake because of her childlessness. Here, it is apparent that a woman without a son possesses only a tentative position in the family of her husband. Therefore, in this respect, Renteria understands that when the Shunammite woman attaches herself to Elisha she is pursuing her own interest as a woman, namely, to let Elisha grant her a child.²⁰ I accept Renteria's anthropological treatment of the vulnerable status of a childless woman in patriarchal society but my narrative reading of this

passage indicates a different understanding of this woman's motivation to help Elisha.

Moreover, Renteria demonstrates the active attempt of this Shunammite woman, like other Israelite women who live under the oppression of their monarchic and patriarchal systems, to fight for a positive change in her life. As this story has shown, when her son died the woman, despite the opposition that she gets from her husband, Gehazi, and even Elisha himself, demands an immediate, personal, service: a miracle from the prophet with whom she has built a transactional relationship. This story therefore describes "two equal partners in a transactional relationship: a strong woman forming a relationship and claiming her rights within it, and a prophet whose power and Yahweh-derived authority cannot be duplicated."²¹

Renteria's historical setting of Elisha tradition and her treatment of the forms of the northern Israelite resistance against the monarchic system during the reign of Omrid dynasty has helped us to understand the social context that influenced the composition of the prophetic stories in the book of Kings. Moreover, her explanation helps us to understand the historical background that shaped the Shunammite woman story in 2 Kgs 4:8-37.

IV. The Implication of 2 Kgs 4:8-37 for Christian Women in Indonesia

I often say openly that if you are hard [keras] I will also be hard. But I say that because I work hard to defend myself and fight against violence towards women and other victims of men or outsiders in military uniforms or from the civil government or Freeport. Whoever they are. You could say I am not like other women. I speak up and fight. Never mind if my Indonesian isn't very good. I convey what I feel as a woman. And I think that my attitude and my struggle represent the attitude and experience of women in Papua every day. I can't turn back now.²²

This quote is from, Yosepha Alomang, the indigenous Amungin human

rights defender who grew up in the shadow of the huge Freeport/Rio Tinto gold and copper mine and under Indonesian military oppression in West Papua Island. She survived numerous hardships as an indigenous woman in a world dominated by men and by the Indonesian security forces. I shall go back to talk more about the impact of the mining practices for West Papua's indigenous people when I describe the effect of the building of multinational corporations in West Papua Island, Indonesia.

Those who travel to Indonesia will soon realize that Indonesia is a rich country with many islands and oceans. It has multiple cultures and religions and therefore cannot be considered as a monolithic entity. Indonesia is located at the crossroads of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans and is the largest country of Southeast Asia.²³ With a population of 222 million people in 2006, it is the world's fourth most populous country after China, India, and the United States. Although data presented by the World Bank indicates that, in 2000, 50.2% of the Indonesian population are women and most of them live in rural areas,²⁴ the differences between men and women in terms of rights and responsibilities as well as in public activities are still found in many domains. Indonesian women do not have the same access as men to education, jobs, and status positions in society. In the education sector, a gap exists between women's literacy rate of 86% and that of men at 94%.²⁵

It is widely known and accepted that both men and women are given the same opportunity to obtain higher education in order to pursue a better future. Even so, there are still many women who cannot get access to it because of the high costs and distance between their houses and the institutions. Another factor that hinders women from attending higher education especially in the university level is a dominant gender ideology in Indonesia that clearly regards women's intellectual abilities as being beneath men. They are regarded as less able to reason and use their intellect and are considered to be more attached to emotional and physical excesses.²⁶ Women therefore are reckoned to be spiritually, morally, and socially beneath men; therefore

they should submit to men.²⁷ Further, girls and women are prevented from accessing tertiary education because of the socio-cultural values and norms of Indonesian society. In Indonesia, boys and men are regarded more highly than girls and women because they are the rice-winners and are responsible for the public domain, while women are responsible for the domestic domain. Therefore, many Indonesian parents are skeptical and reluctant to send their girls to school because they believe that at the end of the day the girls/women will end up staying at home to serve their parents, husbands, and children.²⁸

Another problem that women in Indonesia face is related to their participation in the labor market. Due to the financial crisis that has been going on in Indonesia since 1997, many lower-class women who used to be homemakers have been forced to work outside their houses, because their husband's salaries are no longer enough to cover their daily needs. Almost all of them have insufficient skills to allow them to compete with other women workers who have good educations. Therefore many of these lower class women were forced to work in manufacturing, agriculture, trades and services, and they make up 70-80% of the textile and garment industry. Textile and garment industry women workers accept very low wages. The minimum wage is Rp5200 (US\$2) per day. The government established that the minimum daily amount required to meet basic needs is Rp 6200, but this number is based on the lowest of living standards. It is clear that many employers do not pay even the minimum wage, and women workers are paid less than the men in most industries. Becky Ellis points out that a 1989 study of a range of factories in north Jakarta found that 72.55% of workers were paid below the minimum wage. Many companies get away with this by bribing government officials.²⁹

The conditions of women workers include long hours, abusive environments, unhealthy conditions and the restriction on the right to organize. As Ellis points out, a recent study at a Bandung textile and garment factory indicated that the women workers worked 12-14 hours each day. Another study of a Nike factory in Java found that women workers were allowed to have only two days off a month. The

same factory will not allow women to leave if they are too sick to work. This policy is against Indonesian law that protects women workers' rights to sick, religious, holiday, menstrual, and pregnancy leave. Further, if women workers make mistakes in their work places that cause fabric flaws or broken needles, they must take responsible by having their wages deducted. Some factories like a shrimp paste factory in Java even demands their workers to pay Rp50 for the "privilege" of washing the smell of shrimp paste off their hands. In addition, women worker face verbal, physical and sexual abuse in their work places. Ellis states that a former supervisor at a Nike factory informed that he was taught to yell bad words at the women workers who worked slowly. Other women workers reported experiencing physical abuses from their supervisors. Several examples are found at a shoe factory, where supervisors hit women workers on their behinds with the out-soles of shoes when they slowed; at many factories women were punished by being made to run laps around the building; and at several Nike factories, women workers were forced by supervisors to run between their various work sites.³⁰

Indonesian women also become victims of the global capitalism especially when the U.S. – backed dictator Suharto led Indonesia for thirty years (1967-1998). In April 1967, during Suharto's leadership, a multinational corporation owned by Freeport McMoRan Cooper & Gold, Inc. of Louisiana, which concentrated on gold and copper mining, was built in West Papua. The impact of the mining practices for West Papua's indigenous people is immense. For 30,000 years, West Papua's indigenous peoples lived a sustainable existence, but three decades of mining practices permitted by the Indonesian government have destroyed rainforests, polluted rivers, and displaced communities. Freeport dumps at least 200,000 tons of tailings into local rivers every day, spreading deadly pollutants over vast areas.³¹ Moreover, the West Papua Advocacy Team and the East Timor and Indonesia Action Network state that another impact of Freeport mines for Papuan people is "the marginalization of the local population as a consequence of a massive infusion of non-Papuans organized by the Indonesian Government and Freeport to operate the mine."³² The West Papua Advocacy Team and the East Timor and Indonesia Action Network go on to assert that "the

military-organized and protected prostitution and other criminal enterprises that have accompanied this invasion have debased Papuan society and culture. It has also meant an explosion of HIV-AIDS in the Papuan population that lacks even the most basic health care infrastructure and other central government services.”³³

Moreover, Indonesian women’s participation in the political arena is still restricted. Even though Indonesia was governed by a woman president from 2001-2004, Megawati’s appointment did not happen smoothly. Mayling Oey-Gardiner points out that, according to Indonesian law, when Megawati’s party won the first democratic election in 1999 Megawati should have been appointed president of Indonesia. But instead of her, powers in the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) supported Abdurrahman – who had the advantage of being a man and the leader of the Islamic party – to be the president. Thus, it is clear that Megawati’s sex was used as an argument against her holding the reigns of government. However, Megawati was finally appointed as Indonesian’s first woman president after Abdurrahman failed to lead the country.³⁴ Later, when Megawati stepped out from her presidency, she was accused of being a “puppet” of several men who worked behind her. This accusation was raised because Megawati rarely made public statements and her silence was often interpreted as a sign of weakness or a lack of capability. And most of all, it was argued, she was silent because she was a woman. Meanwhile, in the current National Legislature (DPR), there are 62 women out of its 549-member body. And in the new Regional Representative Council (DPD), voters elected 27 women to 128 available seats. These numbers are considered as an improvement, because in the last 3 decades of the presidency of Suharto with his New Order period (1967-1998), women’s political participation was very low in both the national and local levels.³⁵

The issue of women’s leadership also becomes an important topic in the life of the Christian Church in Indonesia. It is obvious that until today there are only a few number of women who are appointed leaders in the church. In the National Council of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), women are usually appointed as the secretaries or treasurers

because these tasks are considered to be related to women's world. In the churches, the elders are still reluctant to choose ordained women pastors to be the heads of the churches because women are regarded as less capable than men to lead the congregations than men.

My description of the situations of Indonesian women have shown that Indonesian women still live under "double colonization."³⁶ It is a condition where Indonesian women are oppressed by two structural systems: imperialism and patriarchy. For even though Indonesia has been independent since 1945, after living under the colonization of Dutch people for more than three and a half centuries and of Japan for almost three years, it is obvious that the power of white master colonizers is still visible through global capitalization. The globalization process, especially with the building of multinational corporations, has denied women's rights to land and water. This directly affects their livelihood. It has prevented access to food and basic amenities. Meanwhile, the patriarchal value that considers men to be superior to women has prevented women from gaining higher education and exercising leadership roles.

To this end, the Shunammite woman story becomes a good news for Christian women in Indonesia who struggle to define their own identity as the ones who are capable of making their own plans and decisions in order to determine their own future. The characterization of the Shunammite woman as someone who has a voice, speaks for herself, makes decisions, and acts independently functions as a reminder that Christian women in Indonesia too can empower themselves to resist the double colonization that they experience in their everyday lives. Moreover, the depiction of the Shunammite woman as someone who is clearheaded, purposeful, focused, and very determined to solve her own problems should become a powerful role model for Christian women in Indonesia. Like the Shunammite who is not afraid to challenge the authority of men like Elisha who think that they know the best for women, the Christian women in Indonesia should also dare to speak on their own behalf. Instead of waiting for their male counterparts to make a decision for them, they should step up and decide things that are best

for them and act independently. In the Shunammite woman's case, she can act freely because she is independent financially. In Indonesian Christian women's case, they can reach such levels, when they obtain higher educations and find good positions in the churches that they serve. As such, Indonesian women can show their male counterparts and their state power that they are strong and are capable of being the leaders of their country. In so doing, they will show that they should be treated as equal to men.

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