**Howard University School of Divinity**

***“Sarah, Agency, and Redemption”***

**Submitted to Dr. Alice Ogden Bellis, Professor of Hebrew Bible**

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**By**

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**ABSTRACT**

By interrogating womanist and feminist hermeneutics and their hostile portrayal of Hebrew Sarai, this paper presents an alternative reading to vindicate her role and agency. This goal is pursued by critically examining scholars such as Renita Weems, Delores Williams, and Phyllis Trible, particularly how they interpret Sarai for her mistreatment of Hagar. Womanist presents Hagar as a metaphor for the African American woman, which in turn casts Sarai as the ethnic twin of the white mistress. This binary representation creates a problematic divide; in response, I adapt Harrison’s hermeneutic of rejection to challenge these limiting portrayals by incorporating literary works outside of biblical texts.This approach engages with womanist critique and seeks to reimagine sacred texts without discarding them, offering space for complexity, redemption, and divine revelation.I explore how sacred stories can be reframed to support Black thriving, female agency, and reproductive justice by turning to interdisciplinary voices, such as rap, bell hooks, and Mikki Kendall.

At the beginning of this course, the question was presented: Do you identify as a feminist or a womanist? My initial thought was, “Men can’t be either.” But after deeper reflection, I responded, “If Tupac can be a feminist, then so can I.”

Through my sociology studies and independent readings of bell hooks and Mikki Kendall, I interpreted these perspectives through the lens of my mother and the Black women who raised me. Both hooks and Kendall call everyone to engage the world through women's lived experiences. hooks reminds us that feminism is for everybody,[[1]](#footnote-2) Kendall expands the discussion by claiming food insecurity, eviction, and domestic violence as feminist issues often overlooked by mainstream feminism. She contends that concerns affecting women of color—particularly those raised by hood feminists, Black women, and womanists, must be central to the feminist movement because they affect *all* women.[[2]](#footnote-3)

These ideas resonate deeply when I consider my mother, who raised me while navigating many of these same struggles. Her lived experience became its own hermeneutic—a way of interpreting the world, affirming hooks’ argument that I too, as a man, can benefit from feminist perspective. As her first child to attend college, I carried the weight of her unrealized academic dreams, a failed marriage, periods of eviction, and the reality of raising four children on a $10-per-hour wage. Through this personal lens, I aim to illustrate concern through my mother.

This paper explores the complex intersection of race, gender, and power through the biblical narrative of Sarah and Hagar. While feminist scholars have long wrestled with Sarah’s role as either victim or participant in patriarchal structures, womanist theologians recast Hagar as the embodiment of Black female survival and resistance. Through the works of Renita Weems, Delores Williams, bell hooks, and others, I argue that the story of Sarah and Hagar is not merely about reproduction or ethnic tension—it is about how systems of social power, rooted in patriarchy, manipulate women’s bodies for political ends. This paper suggests that redemption emerges not through reproduction but through womanist theological imagination, agency, and collective refusal.

I aim to accomplish this by applying the hermeneutic of rejection as offered by Dr. Renée K. Harrison in her work  *Hagar Ain’t Workin’ Gimme Me Celie* . Harrison challenges biblical stories that depict African American women as always oppressed, and never thriving.[[3]](#footnote-4) This is vital because, for many, literacy is a theological path to self-realization. Her approach reclaims biblical stories, offering space for positive representation. Drawing on Alice Walker, Harrison critiques portrayals of Black women while affirming their dignity.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Frederick Douglass once said that reading was both a blessing and a curse. Through literature, he recognized the brutal conditions of slavery, and this awareness provoked deep theological questions. How could the God of the Bible align with the actions of the European church?[[5]](#footnote-6) This tension continues in Black theology, where scholars like James Cone and Frederick Ware have asked how the gospel of Jesus Christ can coexist with its historic misuse.  
Douglass’s sense of helplessness after reading—knowing the truth yet feeling powerless—echoes the experience of many who encounter sacred texts that negatively reflect their identities. Harrison’s hermeneutic recognizes this pain and offers resistance by rejecting the character of Hagar.

However, I do not argue for total rejection. Instead, I suggest adapting Harrison’s interdisciplinary method. Rather than abolishing the story, we must build upon it—drawing from a chorus of voices to move toward redemption. The need for womanist interpretation emerges from the shortcomings of both Black theology and mainstream feminism—each of which has failed Black women. Kendall articulates the struggle for black women in these shortcomings. She points to her grandmother’s emphasis on education as a source of womanist pride—though her grandmother would never identify as a feminist, seeing little solidarity with white women.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Bellis reveals that the need of womanist interpretation emerged from the hope of black women to dialogue with white feminist perspectives, she critiques the “stepsister” status of Black women in feminist circles.[[7]](#footnote-8) This marginalization recalls Malcolm X’s observation that Black women are the most disrespected and unprotected people in America.[[8]](#footnote-9) Weems echoes this sentiment when she notes the haunting familiarity Black women feel in always being “last.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

bell hooks argues that this crisis stems from a culture of lovelessness—yet she sees potential for healing in music. Rappers, she says, give voice to Black communities.[[10]](#footnote-11) Tupac, in *Keep Ya Head Up*, directly challenges misogyny and abandonment. His lyrics provide a sonic backdrop of resistance, urging Black women to persevere.[[11]](#footnote-12) Tupac’s call for dignity and protection mirrors the aims of a womanist interpretation—one that seeks not just critique, but life-giving transformation and Black thriving. This points to one of Harrison’s idea that we incorporate voices like Tupac, bell hooks, and Mikki Kendall and even Malcom X to understand the bible[[12]](#footnote-13). Tupac offers an idea that men can be a part of this critical conversation through understanding that a patriarchal world affects *everybody.*

I hope that through this interdisciplinary approach by Harrison, I can adapt and address the problem through hooks and Kendall, and dismantle the idea that all men want to benefit from patriarchy.

The narrative of Genesis 12 opens with divine speech: "I will make you a great nation… I will bless those who bless you…” These promises are made directly to Abram, establishing a covenantal relationship between a man and God—a relationship that will shape generations. However, in this patriarchal frame, Sarah, his wife, is introduced not as a covenant partner but as an appendage: first as Abram’s wife, and second as a barren woman.[[13]](#footnote-14) The covenant is proclaimed over Abram, while Sarah remains silent mainly, her identity shaped by what she lacks—children. The silence around Sarah is not incidental; it is structural. She becomes a theological footnote, which, for feminist and womanist scholars, demands attention.

In the patriarchal structure of the Hebrew Bible, a woman’s worth is filtered through her relationship to men—first her father, then her husband, and most significantly, through her reproductive capacity. Sarah's barrenness is more than a physical condition; it is a social disgrace. Despite her wealth and status, Weems note that Sarah’s womb is her legacy.[[14]](#footnote-15) In this context, a woman’s body is not historically regarded as an agent, but as a legacy—used to secure lineage, power, and social order. Thus, Sarah's silence is not empty but full of theological implications. It raises ethical and interpretive questions: What happens when a covenant excludes half its participants? How do we interpret the story of salvation when women’s voices are marginalized from the beginning?

It is precisely this silence surrounding Sarah that invites deeper interpretive engagement. While Abram is granted divine promises and status, Sarah’s story unfolds in the shadows of patriarchy, making her both complicit and confined. This tension becomes even more pronounced when Hagar enters the scene, bringing with her a different kind of vulnerability—one marked by race, servitude, and exploitation. It is here that feminist and womanist scholars like Renita Weems, Delores Williams, and Renée Harrison challenge us to read not just what the text says, but what it *does*—emotionally, ethically, and politically. Their readings reframe the story as one not merely about family structure or divine favor, but about survival, agency, and what it means to be seen by God in the margins of power.

This is where interpretation becomes an act of resistance. As Cornel West, citing Karl Marx, reminds us, “To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter.”[[15]](#footnote-16) The root here is the interpretive tradition itself—one that has too often privileged patriarchal readings and silenced the voices of women like Sarah and Hagar. A radical reading asks not only what the text says, but also what it conceals, whose interests it serves, and what kind of world it imagines for women, especially those on the margins.

Dr. Bellis argues that if we approach the Old Testament solely through the lens of historical or scientific accuracy, we risk missing its rhetorical and theological depth.[[16]](#footnote-17) A careful exegetical approach does not require uncritical acceptance of the narrative’s surface claims; instead, it invites us to question the motives and strategies of the biblical rhetoricians. More crucial than factual validation is our interpretive work — what we can draw from the text. The Bible’s plurisignificant nature, its capacity to bear multiple and sometimes ambiguous meanings, demands this kind of inquiry. This allows us to (1) reimagine figures like Sarah beyond their traditional representations and (2) critically interrogate how our inherited understandings have been shaped — particularly through the lens of hermeneutics as applied to the stories of Sarah and Hagar.

Sarah is described as so beautiful that on two occasions, Abraham claims she is his sister to protect himself.[[17]](#footnote-18) As Bellis observes, the narrator never tells us how Sarah feels about Abraham’s actions, signaling an intentional narrative silence that invites rhetorical analysis. This silence opens space for theological and literary interrogation, particularly within the interpretive traditions of the Hebrew Bible

Because biblical reception shapes theology as much as its content, grappling with hermeneutical theory becomes essential to evaluating the moral weight of characters like Sarai and Hagar. Ultimately, the narrative is less about historical facts and more about how it is interpreted—about what we take from the text and how we carry its meaning into our lives and theology. Rhetorically, our reading should appeal to reason through consistency, to the heart through emotion, and to ethics through integrity of character. A deep analysis of the concepts that the rhetoricians leave us with must be explored and even understood. By doing so, we can destabilize the binary of oppressed (Hagar) versus oppressor (Sarai) and explore these women in unity. Furthermore, I extend Harrison’s approach by bringing in contemporary voices from rap, blues, literature, and current events to show modern discourse can illuminate ancient ambiguities. This approach critiques the text and activates it, offering readers a model for how sacred stories might still speak to us today about justice, agency, and the divine.

The interpretative argument lies between Williams, and Harrison. Williams argue that God is not a liberating God, because Hagar returns back to her oppressors[[18]](#footnote-19). The idea of a God who liberates is argued by black theologians like James Cone—in which Williams realizes that black theology does exclude the voices of African American women[[19]](#footnote-20). She reveals that the God of this story—is the God of survival.[[20]](#footnote-21) Harrison boldly refuses to accept a liberating, or survivalist God, because it perpetuates a negative portrayal of African American women.[[21]](#footnote-22) She ask us to discard this story from conversations as such.

While it is commendable, there are certain things we cannot eliminate. I believe the sacred text, particularly this story, deserves to be advanced. Even though I have some critiques regarding Dr. Harrison’s hermeneutic of rejection, I see a beautiful sense of redemption in Esau McCaulley when he says, “I propose instead we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses.”[[22]](#footnote-23) The empirical evidence in this text establishes that Sarah evokes the image of a white mistress for black women.[[23]](#footnote-24) Sarah has an advantage over Hagar; she is economically relevant and described as beautiful. To illustrate this, we can incorporate Trible’s quote: “power belongs to Sarai and the subject of action, and powerlessness marks Hagar, the object”[[24]](#footnote-25)—power is associated with the feminist, who is the subject of action, while powerlessness characterizes the womanist, who is the object. This pattern is followed in Mikki Kendall’s “Hood Feminism”—She states that her grandmother was the person closest to a feminist for her. Yet her grandmother never viewed a white woman as a sister or helper; instead, black women have always had a place in the mistress’s kitchen. Womanist scholars like Dr. Yolanda Pierce, “In My Grandmother’s House” and Melanine Jones Quarles, “Up Against a Crooked Gospel,”[[25]](#footnote-26) echo their grandmothers’ experiences as instruments to explain the issues of theology and the Black experience.

Historically, slavery in America reached its peak nearly two decades after it was abolished in Great Britain. During this time, cotton became the cornerstone of America’s economic infrastructure, and enslaved Black bodies were its engine. At slave auctions, white men treated young, fertile women as prime possessions—not only for labor, but for sexual exploitation. Rape was not incidental; it was systemic. Fertility meant profit, and Black women were forced to reproduce under violent conditions. The biblical story of Sarah and Abram reminds daughters of Hagar of these realities, evoking deep pain, generational trauma, and theological questions about Black womanhood.

Sarah holds a distinct advantage—she is not treated as property. Though a woman herself, she is free, beautiful, and married to a wealthy man. Within the framework of Black womanhood, Sarah is remembered as the one who sat on the plantation porch sipping lemonade while the master raped enslaved women at night. She is the woman who teaches Black children to read, but does nothing to stop the violence inflicted upon their mothers. Sarah permits Hagar’s abuse, and to many Black women, she represents the woman who failed their grandmothers. At least she isn’t a slave. At least she is beautiful. At least she has a husband. At least she owns a home. At least she is elite. But none of these things console her barren body—because in a world where fertility equals worth, her womb yields no harvest.

This story does not end in ancient times—it resumes today. Sarah becomes, in modern hermeneutics, a symbol of the white feminist who ignores the needs of her Black feminist counterpart, Hagar. This interpretive framework leaves its audience grappling with the fallout of deferred dreams. Sarah is what happens when hope is placed on a timeline—caught between festering like a sore or drying up like a raisin in the sun, echoing Hughes' haunting question.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Renita Weems introduces Sarai within the constraints of her time—first as Abram’s wife, then as a barren woman.[[27]](#footnote-28) In the ancient world, a woman’s status was measured through her husband’s social power and the number of children she bore. Weems asserts that regardless of Sarah’s wealth, her fate remains connected to her womb. This conversation, though rooted in reproduction, extends far beyond it—into the deeper cultural binaries of barrenness and fertility, control and freedom, patriarchy and potential collective agency among women.

Some feminists see Sarah as an instrument of patriarchy, others view her as marginalized and wounded, and still others see her as an abuser.[[28]](#footnote-29) But womanist theology is not focused on Sarah’s role in the feminist spectrum—it is grounded in Hagar. Hagar, through her ethnicity and experience, becomes the symbolic voice for Black women in America, especially those whose ancestors were sexually exploited on plantations. Womanist interpretation gives voice to that pain and places it within the biblical narrative for reclamation and truth-telling.

Because of Hagar’s Black, enslaved, and oppressed identity, Black women often draw assumptions about Sarah. While Sarah does not directly represent white women, the interpretive connection is emotional and symbolic. Weems insists that the divide between these two women mirrors the historical divide between white and Black women in America.[[29]](#footnote-30)

From a rhetorical and ethical perspective, the story begins with Abram’s faithful covenant with Yahweh. But the moment women are introduced—Sarah and Hagar—the narrative deepens. Emotional complexity, barrenness, oppression, and questions of survival fill the space. Theological interpretation is no longer merely about divine covenant—it’s about ethical inheritance and emotional resonance. What are we truly hearing? What images of God, humanity, and power are we constructing?

To liberate Sarah, we must view her not through ethnicity but through social power upheld by patriarchy. Although it is difficult to move beyond the ethnic tensions in this story, doing so is necessary. When we cling too tightly to a single perspective shaped solely by our own experiences, we risk doing harm—especially in a world where power and money often win, and love rarely does. We must resist internalizing these harsh realities. Instead, our interpretations should aim toward the virtues of a beloved community—one where freedom, understanding, and love are extended to all people. Even in our most wretched conditions, these narratives can offer hope. But only if we dismantle the dangers of the single-story narrative. A true community listens to every voice, which must be the posture we bring to this story.

bell hooks reminds us that patriarchy thrives within capitalism and nationalism.[[30]](#footnote-31) Sarah thrives under that system. Bellis suggests this is a story without heroes—a claim that becomes debatable.[[31]](#footnote-32) Abram, even when selfish, greedy, and opportunistic, walks away as the winner. He passes Sarah off as his sister for his own survival. Hagar returns to her oppressors to survive. All three—Abram, Sarah, and Hagar—make choices within systems of power and survival.

To address the dismantling of the ethnic claim, we begin with the fact that Sarah and Hagar are both women of color. The issue isn’t color—it’s who holds power. Sarah has it; Hagar does not. Weems notes the reversal later in Exodus: the Hebrew now belongs to the Egyptian.[[32]](#footnote-33) The oppressor becomes the oppressed—proof, perhaps, that the turtle always catches the rabbit . Still, asking Black women to look beyond race is difficult, especially when the trauma persists. In reproductive politics today, Black women are still more likely to die during childbirth. And all women are now facing assaults on their reproductive rights. We live in a world that demands procreation without protection, children born from trauma, and a refusal to offer love where it's most needed.

We all are shaped by Sarah and Hagar—either opportunists or survivalists. One seeks advantage; the other endures. Procreation becomes currency. We marry to survive, we return to abuse to survive, we give birth for others to thrive. This is not thriving; this is adaptation to systemic violence.

Our hope lies in the imagination of this story. What if all women resisted? What if they refused to lend their wombs to a world that thrives on division and greed? What if they declared the story incomplete—and used their agency to rewrite its ending? Reproduction has become political, commodified, and weaponized. But when women withhold reproduction from a world that refuses to protect its children, we make space for transformation. Women can dismantle the "I have, you do not" system and birth something new: reconciliation.

This story is an act of resistance. We miss opportunities to imagine and change the narrative if we read too literally. A simple adjustment to how we read lends us hope; by recognizing agency as currency, we uncover the power to change the world. The story is not about Abram’s promise alone—it’s about the reproducers. Women who could make few decisions about the matter of their wombs. Women, long denied agency over their own wombs, are central to this narrative. This story reminds us that the restrictive and audacious reproductive narratives imposed on women did not begin with the Trump administration—they are deeply rooted in history. Yet, this ancient account holds power: it can serve as a catalyst and guide for those challenging today’s reproductive discourse and pushing for reform.

Women's agency lies in collective resistance to systems unworthy of reproduction. In a world that prioritizes productivity over humanity, reproduction has become a tool for oppression. But barrenness—chosen or circumstantial—can be resistance. If we pause and deny this system the bodies it craves, we can repair broken men, rebuild communities, and deconstruct harmful power. When we choose love and refuse to reproduce for hate, we redeem Hagar, Sarah, Abram—and ourselves.

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