

○ REVIEW OF GALE YEE'S *POOR BANISHED CHILDREN OF EVE: WOMAN AS EVIL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE*

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Roland Boer reviews Gale Yee's *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2003).

The great thing about Yee's book is that it marks in many ways the increased currency of Marxist analysis of biblical texts. It is no longer necessary to speak of pioneering studies in Marxist biblical criticism, for this book connects with existing debates. It does not have to create them. But that is not all: many of the categories that Yee uses in her book have seeped in various ways into other work in biblical studies. In other words, one doesn't need the explicit identification of 'Marxist' (whatever that may mean) to make use of those categories – such as mode of production, ideology and class.

Let me focus on three areas, which should be more than enough. There is, firstly, the whole question of materialist feminism, particularly the way Yee seeks a confluence of the connected questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity and colonialism. Secondly, I would like to tarry for a while with her use of what she calls extrinsic and intrinsic analysis. Extrinsic analysis designates the effort to reconstruct the social situation of a text while an intrinsic analysis gives attention to the literary nature of that text. And lastly, I am interested in one of the four texts Yee discusses – Proverbs 1-9 with its 'other woman' or *ishsha zarah*. She also analyses Genesis 2-3, Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 16 and 23, but the Proverbs text draws me in.

So that we don't get bogged down in the theory, let me begin with the text. I have written elsewhere on her interpretation of Genesis 2-3, but what intrigues me about the Proverbs text is that Yee invokes a crucial idea concerning texts: a literary product is an imaginary resolution of real social contradictions. The idea comes from Claude Lévi-Strauss and was most famously developed by Fredric Jameson. Without other means of dealing with social tensions, works of art such as literary texts often attempt to resolve those contradictions. Thus, in his studies of indigenous groups in South America, Lévi-Strauss noticed that the Caduveo use facial decoration to ameliorate and repress the social tensions between social groups within the tribe. But those decorations have their own tension, for they are based upon an axis at an oblique angle to the face. That is, rather than use the natural lines of nose, mouth and eyes, the Caduveo patterns follow another axis at an angle to these natural lines. There are, in other words, two axes in these face decorations. The reason? Unlike the neighbouring Guana and Bororo, who have the social checks and balances of moieties to mitigate their caste system, the Caduveo have no such social solution. Their art then becomes another means of dealing with the social tensions: the catch of course is that in the very effort to deal with such a tension, the art shows up the tension at a formal level. Hence an imaginary resolution of real social contradictions.

This is the underlying logic of Yee's reading of the 'other woman' (her translation of *ishsha zarah*) of Proverbs 1-9. In a nutshell, Yee's argument is that Proverbs 1-9 attempts to remove class tensions, but these tensions show up elsewhere in this text. In representing the crucial life

choices for a young man between the wise woman and the other woman, the text represses the social situation of Persian period Yehud (537–323 BCE). Those tensions may be found between returning exilic ruling elites and the ones who remained in the land during the exile. The tensions come to a head over the question of ‘foreign wives’, or if you like exogamy and endogamy. The returnees – wealthy Persian functionaries – initially had to marry Jewish residents of the land and foreign landowners. However, too soon the Jewish returnees wanted to restrict marriage to Jewish partners, to the correct wife as they saw it. Hence the wise woman is in fact an endogamous woman, one from within the ethnic confines of the community, while the ‘other woman’ of Proverbs 1-9 is the exogamous woman, the one who comes from outside and threatens the community with her evil ways. Proverbs 1-9, then, is a classic example of an imaginary resolution of a real social contradiction. Although it seems to exclude class by focusing on the tensions between the wise woman and the other woman, the very distinction itself marks the presence of class in this text.

There are a couple of things I want to say about this reading. To begin with, it needs a distinct social location to make sense of the text: Persian era Yehud relatively soon after the return from exile to Babylon, i.e. late fifth or early sixth century BCE. This is in fact an example of the extrinsic analysis that Yee uses in all her readings in this book. Further, there is a tendency to read other questions in terms of class: thus the opposition between the wise woman and the other woman turns out to be a literary signal of class tensions between richer returnees and poorer residents of the land. Both questions allow me to move to the two other issues I mentioned earlier, one dealing with the relation between extrinsic and intrinsic analysis, and the other with that complex of class, gender, race/ethnicity and colonialism – all of which are present in her reading of Proverbs 1-9. Let me pick up the issue of identity politics first. In an earlier part of the book, Yee argues strongly for an approach that links questions of gender with those of race/ethnicity, economic class and colonial status. That they cannot be separated is a crucial point over against the whole monocausal debate: gender is primary, no, class is, well no, ethnicity is, and so on. Such arguments simply get us nowhere. Yet she also writes that she wants to avoid privileging gender ‘as the fundamental category of analysis’ (164). Further, in her discussions of the texts, what does Yee do? In the reading of Genesis, the relations between the man and the woman are a code for class struggles between the newer tributary mode of production and domestic mode of production. In Hosea we have a feminised metaphor attacking the ruling elite. Ezekiel’s pornographic excess expresses the trauma of colonial occupation upon an emasculated priestly class. And in Proverbs, Yee argues that gender acts as a code for class: the opposition between the two women is in fact a code for the class struggles between wealthy returnees (who had Persian favour) and the poorer class that remained in the land. Now, my Marxist proclivities are taken with such moves, as are my suspicions of identity politics. But what we have here is a contradiction in the good Marxist sense of the term: on the one hand, Yee espouses an approach that involves a fruitful mix of class, gender, ethnicity and colonial concerns. On the other hand, her reading practice is a more traditional Marxist one in which class is primary. The interesting thing about contradictions is that they don’t exist in blissful isolation; they are, especially in written works, signs of deeper social and political contradictions. In Yee’s case I wonder whether her situation as an Asian American woman teaching in a liberal theological seminary plays a role. In a nation state where class is so often obscured by race, where the working poor are black, Latino and Mexican, where the most consistent political movement is feminism, usually

at the expense of any Left agenda, it is worth emphasising that race or gender, while very real elements, should not obscure the fundamental Marxist category of class.

Finally, I am interested in the formal feature of the book that combines extrinsic and intrinsic analysis, history and text, into one argument. And that is based on her assumption that 'literature is grounded in historical real-life relations' (10). My own sense is that this assumption would be shared by most biblical critics and that it loses some of its Marxist specificity in the process. But Yee's notion is more specific than that: this is how she reads the Marxist debates over *base* (socioeconomic relations) and *superstructure* (culture, ideology, politics, legal system). For this is, after all, a book of Marxist biblical criticism.

But note what happens with her textual analysis: the extrinsic analysis *precedes* her intrinsic analysis. Each of her readings of the four texts – Genesis 2-3, Hosea, Ezekial and Proverbs – makes use of the social sciences to set up a context for the text. I hardly need to say that I find her use of Marxist categories a great benefit in these sections. In the case of Proverbs, she locates it in the context of the early years of Persian Yehud. The key elements here are: the transitions from a native tributary mode of production to a foreign tributary mode of production; the exacerbation of social tensions by the Persian policy of supporting the *golah* community; the manifestation of this tension in the issue of foreign marriages; and the forcing through of a policy of endogamy. Now what interests me about this is how this situation is constructed. Apart from relying on recent materials from Charles Carter (1999), Kenneth Hoglund (1991) and Jon Berquist (1995), Yee relies on data from Ezra-Nehemiah. Indeed, she states that although Proverbs 1-9 cannot be dated specifically, opinion tends towards the context she assumes. With the limited material available for the work of reconstruction, Ezra-Nehemiah must come in to supply crucial information. But is this not a text too, just like Proverbs? And should it not be subject to similar sorts of analysis that Yee directs at Proverbs?

In other words, I am uneasy about the confidence with which Yee reconstructs the context for the text. Apart from the Marxist categories she uses, how is this different from the long-held practice in biblical studies of constructing a context in order to make sense of a text? It is an old point but one worth reiterating. Biblical studies in many respects invented the hermeneutical circle: texts are used to reconstruct a social context that is then used to make sense of the texts in question. And of course the other question is: what would happen if Proverbs turned out to be from a different social context? Is it possible to develop a reading that does not ignore history (God forbid), but one that is sensitive to such potentially varying contexts. In fact, I would suggest we need to turn this into an element of analysis. The very anonymity and difficulty of dating and locating a text like Proverbs should become a key element in its interpretation.

It may boil down to preferences: where we have mainly texts and then a few mute and difficult-to-interpret archaeological materials, then I would rather start with the text. Don't get me wrong, however. One of the curious binds of biblical studies is the division between various groups – the so-called historical groups, the theological ones, the theory ones, etc. And so we find that strange opposition between history, which tends to be frustratingly positivist, and literary readings which react to this situation and relegate history to the garbage bin. By contrast, one of the great values of Marxist analysis is that it is an inclusive method, and Yee's book is an example of that. But it is in many respects a first step, for it seems to me that we really do need to think of other ways to read these texts as historical texts.

Now I actually hinted at all of this in my earlier point that Yee's reading of Proverbs is based on the idea of an imaginary resolution of a real social contradiction. Yee is keen to pin down the texts with which she works into specific historical contexts. This is one way to go. But we have a text that is notoriously difficult to locate in terms of date, location and authorship. It floats in a way that often belies our efforts to grab it and hold it in one place. Would it not be possible to begin with this problem as a *formal* problem with this text? Thus, we might argue that one of the ways the text removes social tension is to remove any sign of its social location. In a fashion similar to the way the text floats, refusing our efforts to tie it down, so also we get a picture in which social tensions are absent. All a young man need do is to choose the wise woman over against the foreign woman and everything will be fine! Frugal wisdom over sex and money any day! This is how I would recast the section where Yee argues that Proverbs presents us with a fiction of a classless society. In this way the other major formal feature of Proverbs 1-9 comes into our discussion, namely the opposition between the wise woman and the other woman. Although even here we have not one other woman but many – strange woman, alien woman, evil woman, the wife of your youth, prostitute, wife of another, neighbour's wife and foolish woman. This multiplication then becomes part of the text's curious ability to avoid being pinned down. From here we might then begin to ask what the class and ideological implications of such formal features might be. In whose interest does it lie to present a text that excises its location, one that sets up questions of life in terms of timeless categories such as wisdom and folly, one that multiplies the other women but locates wisdom with one woman, and one that foregrounds the language of sex and love?

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