

# “Ruth and Marriage Migrant Women in Korea”

Yeong Mee Lee (Hanshin University, Korea)

## I. Introduction

Korea now became a multicultural and multiracial society since 1990s when migrants from all over the countries of Asia flowed into the nation. Population of migrants in Korea is mainly consisted of foreign workers and women of international marriage. This paper reads the book of Ruth in light of migrant women of modern Korea. An exegetical examination of the book that explores the mistreatment of the natives against the foreigners by means of silence will alert modern Koreans, who have been living in such a long period of uni-racial country, that the silence can be a form of violence to exclude or ignore someone's presence. Then the biblical reading will call them to embrace migrants as their neighbors in the community.

The analogy between the biblical story and the story of modern Korea will be drawn from several hermeneutical links found in two stories. First, the poverty is the main reason for the family migration to a foreign land. Second, the migrant women in both societies experience cultural discrimination by means of silence. Third, the life of migrant women in Korea and Ruth is a struggle to survive for her family. The fact that the divine providence is silently presented in their life, despite of hardship in the migrant women's life, may provoke the power of prophetic voice that encourages us to care for the marginalized in the society, overcoming the prejudice against them.

## II. A Biblical Story of Marriage Migrant Woman, Ruth

### 1. Migration from the poverty

Migration is a process of movement of people from one place to another in order to take up employment or establish residence or change their place of residence for various reasons.<sup>1</sup> The book of Ruth introduces us a story of migrant family in ancient Israel. The story begins with the emptiness of Judahite migrant family in Moab. Elimelech and his family moved from Bethlehem to Moab, escaping from famine for fertile life. Yet they faced a series of tragedy of childless marriages and the deaths of three men. The story transforms the view from Moab to Judah. Naomi resolves to return to Bethlehem when she heard that there was food in Judah. The famine, that is the poverty, again became the main reason of the move.

## 2. Ruth, the Moabite

Ruth is introduced as a Moabite. Fewell and Gunn explain the meaning of literary allusion of ‘Moab’ in the Book. Recalling the story of Lot in Genesis 19, they see that attitude of Israelites toward Moabite shows a righteous chauvinism, a moral superiority.<sup>2</sup> The tale of the sin of Baal-Peor also associates Moab with sexual perversity: “When Israel dwelt in Shittim the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. The land is also associated with hostility(Numbers 22-24; Judges 3:12-30). The people of Moab invited the Israelites to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate, and bow down to their gods (Numbers 25:1-5).

Amy-Jill Levine also points that Ruth’s Gentile background remains a stigma: her Moabite

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<sup>1</sup> Md. Shahidul Haque, “Ambiguities and Confusions in the Migration-Trafficking Nexus: A Development Challenge,” Regional Seminar on the Social Implications of International Migration, held in August 24-26, 2005, in Bangkok, 4. Recited from Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, “The Status of Human Trafficking in Migrant Women around the World and the Role of International Community,” in Byung Chul Hyun, *Seoul International Conference Against Human Trafficking in Migrant Women* (Seoul: Hanhak Munwha, 2010), 6..

<sup>2</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “‘A Son is Born to Naomi!’: Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth,” Alice Bach ed. *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 236.

ancestry associates her with an aggressive form of seduction and with the taint of idolatry.<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine sees the reason why Ruth could not fully mingle/incorporative with the women of Bethlehem with two reasons. That is, Ruth, the foreign woman, is sexually manipulative and therefore dangerous. Moreover, her unconventional actions are acceptable in this book only because she is a Moabite. Her Gentile associations prevent her from being fully incorporated into the covenant community. Ruth remains “Ruth, the Moabite.”

Deuteronomy 23:3-6(cf. Neh 13:1; Num 20:14-21; 21:21-24) excludes both Moabites and Ammonites from the “Assembly of God,” and the context of this legislation reinforces the association of Moab with improper sexuality. Moabites, along with Ammonites, cannot enter into the Assembly of YHWH, because they are *mamzer*. The Hebrew, *mamzer*, appears twice- here and Zechariah 9:6. In Zechariah, the word refers to the future people living in Ashdod. It refers to the children, born between Judahites and Ashdodites.

The emphasis of Ruth’s identity as Moabite implies biblical prejudice against the nation, an aggressive form of seduction, the taint of idolatry, and the mixture of races. It also reveals the superiority of Israelites over Moabites.

### 3. The Silence as a Cultural Violence of Discrimination against Foreigners

Moving from Moab to Bethlehem with her Judean mother in law, Ruth faces various forms of cultural discrimination. Obvious is the exclusion of her presence among people by means of silence. The silence ignores, if not denies, her presence in two occasions: One is when Ruth enters into the city of Bethlehem and the other is when Ruth bears a son.

When Ruth comes to Bethlehem, neither women of Bethlehem nor Naomi, pays attention to Ruth. Donna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, unlike Phyllis Tribble who finds Naomi to

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<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “Ruth,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992), 78-79.

be a model of selflessness and supportive of Ruth, read the character of Naomi a less sanguine. They point out five notable silences in the book of Ruth: 1. Naomi's silence at Ruth's final determination to go on with her to Bethlehem; 2. Naomi's silence about Ruth on her arrival in Bethlehem; 3. Naomi's silence about her kinsman Boaz, until prompted by Ruth's story of success at gleaning; 4. Ruth's silence about her own part in the threshing floor scene when she returns to Naomi the next morning; 5. Naomi's silence about Ruth at the birth of Obed. Out of these five silences in the book of Ruth, Fewell and Gunn find Naomi to be selfish, a woman of her own self-interest.

If Fewell and Gunn find the selfishness of Naomi in five notable silences, I find the cultural discrimination of the natives against foreigners through the silence of Naomi. It is like a black woman comes to the United States after marrying to a white man. Or it can be compared to a migrant woman from a developing country comes to Korea after getting married to Korean man. In the scene of arrival among the women of Bethlehem, Naomi cried out that she had gone away full but returned empty. She speaks as though Ruth were invisible. Tribble interprets it as "this aged widow is overpowered by her sadness of divinely inspired calamity."<sup>4</sup> Fewell and Gunn sees that Naomi is silent about Ruth because "at the heart of Naomi's speech is Naomi."<sup>5</sup> Naomi's conversation with Ruth in chapter 1 shows that she is the woman of tradition. She believes that a woman's happiness and fulfillment require men, a husband or sons. She seems share Israelite traditional view on foreign daughter-in-law with Rebekah who displeased with Esau's Hittite wives(Genesis 27:46). She insisted her daughters in law to return to their mother's house. The silence of Naomi is rooted in her internalized cultural discrimination or prejudice against the Moabites. She might be even humiliated by the company of her Moabite daughter in law. Like Naomi, the women of the town speak as

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<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!", 234.

though Ruth were invisible. The silence turns down the existence of a woman in the midst of people.

Another place that shows cultural discrimination through silence is chapter 4. The women of Bethlehem acclaimed the mother of Obed Naomi, not Ruth (4:17). Fewell and Gunn interpret that “Naomi’s perception of the event is again mirrored through the speech of others.”<sup>6</sup> She sees the baby as her own. Amy-Jill Levine interprets it as the ambivalent attitude toward foreigners.<sup>7</sup> The silence about Ruth in the celebration of Obed’s birth and the attribute him as Naomi’s son indicate the social exclusion of Ruth by claiming the legitimacy of social tradition and the laws. According to the Levirate law in the Bible, the son whom Ruth bore is the heir of Elemelech, the husband of Naomi and the father in law of Ruth, because Boaz is the *go’el* of Elemelech. Although the tradition lists Obed as the son of Ruth in genealogy later, the custom behind the book regards the son as the son of Naomi, which is proper according to the ancient law.

If the town women ignored Ruth through silence, the town elders devalued her by referring her “the woman” and “this young woman”(4:12). Ruth was never called by her own name in their speech, while the ancestral mothers of Israel, Rachel, Leah, and Tamar were compared to Ruth by names(4:11-12). And the speech of the elders shows that these men see Ruth as fulfilling the traditional values of fertility and the continuation of a male lineage.

#### 4. Life of a Marriage Migrant Woman: Humiliation & Survival

The story of Ruth is not a beautiful folktale, although it seems to have a happy ending. The life of Ruth in Bethlehem was harsh. Tribble explains her story, saying “chapter two portrays Ruth’s struggle to survive physically, chapter three represents her struggle to survive

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<sup>6</sup> Fewell and Gunn, “A Son is Born to Naomi,” 235.

<sup>7</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “Ruth,” 79.

culturally.”<sup>8</sup> She gleaned in the field to support her mother in law and herself. She was about to be abused by the town men. The field was a place of some menace for an unattached young foreign woman, as the constant reference to the risk of unwelcome attention and molestation makes clear, and this is something of which Naomi herself should have been aware. And Ruth had to seduce an old man and marry him.

She brought herself to the place of humility, the threshing floor to restore the covenant responsibility of Boaz as *go’el*. The threshing floor represented a place of humility in Hosea 9:1. It says, “You have loved a harlot’s hire, upon all threshing floors.” The woman of Levites in Judges 19 was found at the threshing floor after molested by town men overnight. Ruth is directed to make herself attractive and go down to the threshing floor to “sleep”(shakab) with the man(3:4). She is to uncover his “feet,” a euphemism for genitals, and then he will tell her what to do.

The use of Hebrew words that contrasts Boaz and Ruth in chapters 2 and 3 show the wisdom of survival of Ruth. In chapter two, Boaz invokes blessing upon Ruth from YHWH under whose protective “wings”(kenapayim) she has taken refuge(2:12). In answering to Boaz, Ruth tells him, “Spread your wing(kanap) over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” By a wordplay on wing, Ruth challenges Boaz to heed his earlier prayer for her blessing. This foreign woman calls an Israelite man to responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Ruth is a woman of *chesed* (1:8; 2:20; 3:10) in terms that she provides a corrective to Boaz’s initial passivity for being a *go’el* of Elimelek. She arranges their meeting, motivates his willingness to serve as a redeemer, and provides him with a rationale to make his relationship with the Gentile widow socially acceptable.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Ruth,” in Carol Meyers et al ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids/ Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 146.

<sup>9</sup> Trible, “Ruth,” 147.

The Hebrew word, *chail*, is also applied to both Ruth and Boaz. Boaz is called as the man of worth, *ish gibbor chail* in 2:1. In 3:11, Boaz calls Ruth as the woman of worth, *'esett chail*, the same phrase that Proverbs uses to depict the ‘capable woman’ (NRSV; Prov 31:10). However, after being loyal to her family and restore the house of her family in law, Ruth received no credit but Naomi did in the women’s applaud. The genealogy accredited Boza as great grandfather of David.

#### 5. Biblical Reaction to the story of Ruth

Ruth’s action may offer no means for improving the social system of Bethlehem. Her story may offer no prescriptions for changing the circumstances of women, impoverished and unprotected. Although Ruth was like Tamar who is more righteous than Judah, she gained no credit or blessing in the Book. Yet, outside the book of Ruth, the Gospel of Matthew claims Ruth as the mother of her child. Moreover, it places her alongside Tamar, the wife of Uriah, and Mary as the only women in the genealogy of Jesus(Matt 1:3, 5, 6, 16). Her various actions of the covenant love toward her mother in law and God, which contravene social expectations, locate Ruth not only among David’s ancestors but also among the other unconventional women-Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, who appear in the genealogy of Jesus(Matt 1:5).

### III. A Modern story: Migrant women in Korea

#### 1. Migration from the poverty

Globalization increased the exchanges of people among nations. According to UN report, there are more than 200 million estimated international migrants in the world today. Migrants

comprise 3.1 percent of the global population in 2010.<sup>10</sup> Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants are 49.0.

Korea now became the exporting country from importing country of the labor. In 1960s, Korea sends the nurse and miner to Germany; in 70-80s, the construction workers to the Middle East. In the late 1989s, Korea is changed to be the country that imports the labors from the nations. The numbers of migrants in Korea is as follows:<sup>11</sup>

Indicator	1990	2000	2010
Population (thousands)	42,983	46,429	48,501
Estimated number of international migrants	572,053	568,071	534,817
Estimated number of female migrants	264,807	284,542	281,620
Estimated number of male migration	307,246	283,529	253,197
International migrants as a percentage of population	1.3	1.2	1.1
Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants	46.3	50.1	52.7

According to the statistics of Justice Ministry in September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008, foreign workers with working permit are about 700,000, 50% of which consist with Koreans in China. Foreign workers are divided into three categories: first is from Islam countries such as from Pakistan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh; second is from Buddhist countries, such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia; third is from communist countries such as Mongolia, Main China, and Vietnam. The channel for labor migration in Korea has been centralized to

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision* (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008). cited from <http://esa.un.org/migration/> on June 6, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision* (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2008). cited from <http://esa.un.org/migration/> on June 6, 2012.



employment approval system based on inter-government, the risk of labor migration turning into human trafficking was relatively reduced.<sup>12</sup>

There are around 300,000 female migrant women from Asian countries, which include 140,000 migrant labors, 6,000 women in the adult entertainment business, and 160,000 marriage migrant women.<sup>13</sup> Marriage migrants means, “Foreign residents in Korea who married to Koreans or in marriage with Koreans.”<sup>14</sup> Marriage migrants are mostly from Japan and China in 1990s and now from Vietnam and Philippines. The increase the number of the married migrant women is influenced by several social factors. First is the need of bride in rural area. Men in rural area had difficulty in finding wives and the poor man in the city also have difficulty to find a wife. Men with low income in the urban area also have difficulty to find their wives. Second, the numbers of brokers were increased as Korean government challenged the policy on the business of marriage broker that they can open the business by permit to report. Third, Korean women tend to avoid early marriage as they began to live as career women with high education.

Most marriages of migrant women from Asia are arranged by international marriage brokers in Korea. Despite of slight differences country by country, general procedure of international match making by marriage agency is as follows: Marriage agency arranges a group visit to the country. In cooperation with the local brokers, they set a meeting with prospective wives of the country. After Korean man chooses his future wife, he marries her next day and fills out the documents at the local Korean embassy or consular office. After

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<sup>12</sup> UN, 2006; 남북현, 『한국과 베트남 국제결혼을 통해 본 다문화 가족의 이해』 도서출판 장서원, 2010), 103 에서 재인용.

<sup>13</sup> Kuk Yum Han, “Importance of a Transnational Network in Asia to Prevent Marriage Migration of Human Trafficking Nature: Based on Marriage Migration Case of Korea,” in Byung Chul Hyun, *Seoul International Conference Against Human Trafficking in Migrant Women* (Seoul: Hanhak Munwha, 2010), 124.

<sup>14</sup> 재한외국인 처우 기본법(법률 제 11298 호(난민법)) 제 2 조(정의) 3 항에 나타난 결혼이민자의 정의.

spending the first night together, the Korean husband leaves the country and invites her to Korea. About 45 days after she receives the spouse invitation from Korea, the bride comes to Korea.<sup>15</sup> Employment fraud or sexual exploitation on women who entered into the country under entertainer visa represents practical inexistence of distinction between migration and human trafficking.

## 2. Life of migrant women in Korea

Heavily influenced by Confucianism, Korean family expects a daughter in law to be modest and diligent and serve the family in laws. This patriarchal view on a wife and a daughter in law enforces foreign women to be submissive to her husband and the family in laws. The family often exercises the power by controlling her visa. Social status of migrant women in Korea is insecure and unstable. Their status is vulnerable especially first two years of their marriage. Marriage migrants hold F-2 visa. It allows the visa holder to reside in Korea for a year. But the foreigner can apply for a green card(F-5) two years after the marriage, which means that marriage migrants have to renew F-2 visa first year after their marriage. And if they travel outside of Korea, they have to renew their F-2 visa. Because of the unstable visa status, migrant women live depend upon their spouse.

The human rights of migrant women are threatened by their own husband. Among the counseling cases, three main concerns are domestic violence, visa status, and conflict with family in laws. The divorce rate of migrant women has been increasing from 2,382(2005) to 8,300 (2009).<sup>16</sup> Many migrant women live under poor condition even though they want to divorce, because if they divorce, they have to reimburse all the expenses for the marriage or

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<sup>15</sup> Kook Yum Han, “Importance of a Transactional Network in Asia to Prevent Marriage Migration of Human Trafficking Nature,” 127.

<sup>16</sup> 남복현, 『한국과 베트남 국제결혼을 통해 본 다문화 가족의 이해』 도서출판 장서원, 2010), 112.

pay penalty for termination of marriage within one or two years.

The more serious problem for marriage migrant women, especially from developing countries, is that they are the victim of human trafficking, deceived by international marriage brokers. As explained above, the international marriage is arranged by international marriage agency that pursues to make high profit from successful marriage. They often provide false information about the future bridegroom, such as their occupation, drinking problem, mental disability, and promise a rich and comfortable life in Korea. Some marriage migrant women end up in sex industry. Those deceived by international marriage brokers and those divorced migrant women before they earn green card through marriage flow into the Korean local sex industry and the so-called red-light districts near US military bases. Since mid 1990, 3,000 to 4,000 women came to Korea under entertainment visa per year. Most are from Philippines. From the early 2000, large number of migrant women came from former Soviet countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Far East Russia.<sup>17</sup> The foreign women in sex industry, especially the red-district in the area of the US military camp, suffer from the delayed payment of salary, confiscation of passport, and forced prostitution.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Korean Church's response and Governmental policy

Korean government changed the policy to support migrant family in 2005-6. The program includes the prohibition of illegal intermarriage brokerage, support to adjust to Korean society, support for the victims of domestic violence, support of children from international

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<sup>17</sup> 2,022 people in 2008; 2,095 in 2009 came to Korea with E-6 visa. Recited from "International Standards on Human Trafficking: Implementation Strategy of Korea, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Durebang, a Christian center for women in sex-industry of US camp in Gyeonggi Province, Korea, surveys migrant women who work in the clubs around the US military camps. These three are the main exploitation they answered. "International Standards on Human Trafficking: implementation Strategy of Korea," 34.

marriage, support programs to change cultural prejudice of foreigners, etc.<sup>19</sup> However, the program shows the limitation in that it does not focus on developing migrant women's potentiality and help them to manage their subjective life but attempt to adjust them into patriarchal society.

Besides to the governmental organization, churches involve to protect migrant workers and help them to survive in the society. Church mission centers for foreign workers began their activities in 1990. Sungseongwon, Galilee Church, Jubilee Church started to work for the foreign workers. Korean Church Mission Council for Foreign Workers is organized in 1993. In the early stage of mission, the churches acted upon the protection of their human rights. Now the centers actively involved in helping to live as a member of Korean society, not as a foreigner.

#### 4. Conclusion:

Some similarities between the situation of Ruth as the marriage migrant in the Bible and that of marriage migrant women in Modern Korea are apparent. This paper highlights the similarities in three categories: 1) Migration is made out of suffering of the poverty. 2) They both suffered from cultural discrimination by the natives. Ruth is ignored by the silence of her own mother in law and by the town women. She devalued by the town elders who named her "this young woman" instead of calling her name. 3) The life is exposed to humility and danger. Ruth was exposed to dangerous place of threshing field and slept with Boaz. She gained no credit for her sincerity to her family and society. Yet the biblical tradition and the narrator paid her attention through memory.

Like Ruth, marriage migrant women in Korea suffer from cultural discrimination by native

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<sup>19</sup> 남복현, 『한국과 베트남 국제결혼을 통해 본 다문화 가족의 이해』 도서출판 장서원, 2010), 108.

Koreans. Those who buy the conventional prejudices of a society are also those who will impute those to others and who will adhere to the fundamental value systems of the social structure. The dominant system in our present concern is nationalism, xenophobia, and exclusivism in Korea. Living in a uni-racial society for thousands, Koreans tend to exclusive to the foreigners. Under the Confucian influence, Korean family tends to oppressive and enforces daughters in law to be modest and submissive to the family in laws. Those who fail in surviving in marriage enter into sex industry and suffer from economic as well as mental and social oppression.

Like the biblical tradition and divine voice in the book of Ruth, Korean church needs to be aware of the situation of marriage migrant women in Korea and act upon it to support them. Korean mission centers for marriage migrant women exist, naming some names from those of PROK include Durebang, Seoul Migrant Women Center, Chungbuk Migrant Women Center. The centers are yet small and need more support from government and from churches. For example, Human Right Center for Migrant Women in Chungbuk runs various programs for marriage migrant women. One of them is Rainbow program that helps migrant women to work in co-op company. They manage restaurant, shop, and market as well as school for children from international marriage, "Happy Rainbow School." It is to help the self life management of migrant women economically.

We need to see them as a member of our community not as a foreigner. Xenophobia is another thing to overcome in our society. As Christians, we need to remember that God reminds Israelites that they were *ger*(sojourner) in the land of Egypt(Eoxd 23:9; Lev 19:33-34) and us to be *ger* in this world and asks to embrace the foreigners of the land as neighbors and even as families.

Key words:

Ruth, migration, international marriage, multi-culture

## Abstract

The present article reads the biblical story of marriage migrant woman, Ruth in the context of multi-cultural modern Korean society. An exegetical reading of the book of Ruth reveals the similarities in the story of Ruth and modern Korean migrant women through international marriage. In both cases, the poverty is the main reason for the family migration to a foreign land. The life of migrant women in Korea and Ruth is a struggle to survive for her family. And in both context, the migrant women in both societies experience cultural discrimination by means of silence. Although the town elders and women in Bethlehem neglected the presence of Ruth, the narrator reminded the readers of the divine providence in the life. Some Korean churches and migrant centers showed solidarity with migrant women in Korea. This study may contribute to raise consciousness to see the violent feature that lies behind the silence against foreigners and invite Christians to speak for the marginalized in the society, overcoming the prejudice against them.

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