

**Women, Drought, and Migration:
Reading the Book of Ruth from a Feminist Perspective
in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia¹**

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Abstract:

Many people around the globe still face the threat of drought and famine. Men and women face these calamities differently. This paper seeks to bring women's experiences of drought, famine, and migration in East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia into dialogue with the narratives of women in the Book of Ruth. I use what Kwok Pui-lan calls "dialogical imagination" to interpret women's narratives in the Book of Ruth and the stories of women's vulnerabilities in the East Nusa Tenggara context.

Keywords: *women, drought, famine, migration, dialogical imagination, the Book of Ruth*

For centuries, humans have been vulnerable to drought and famine. Although in one of his well known books, Yuval Noah Harari wrote optimistically that hunger is no longer a threat to the world today,² in reality there are still many people who are vulnerable to drought and hunger. In this paper, I seek to construct a dialogue between women's experiences of drought, hunger, and migration in East Nusa Tenggara (ENT), Indonesia with Biblical texts from the Book of Ruth to reconstruct relevant theologies in the context of the threat of drought today.

The story of the family displaced by hunger in the Book of Ruth is interesting. Some interpreters say the author of this book is a man who was assisted by a woman. Others argue that this book was written by a woman or a group of women.³ What we find in the Book of Ruth is that women's voices, namely the voices of Naomi and Ruth, are very clearly heard. In fact, this book is one of two books in the Bible that use that name of a woman for its title (the other, of course, is the Book of Esther).

I write as a theologian and a church leader. As a missiologist, I was trained to always see the church's involvement in community issues. My experience as a church leader has helped me to reflect critically on how we read the Bible—either to support the empowerment of poor women and the preservation of nature, or instead to perpetuate practices that contribute to women's impoverishment and the destruction of nature. Here I draw out theological themes from the Book of Ruth for dialogue with my social context in ENT where many people are vulnerable to drought, labor migration, and human trafficking.

¹ Paper presented at the Dom Helder Camara Lecture, on 25 November 2019.

² Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage 2017), 1–78.

³ K. Lawson Younger Jr., *The NIV Application Commentary Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 389. See R. Bauckham "The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic," *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 29–45. A. J. Bledstein argues that Tamar, the daughter of David, was the author, "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written by a Woman," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, edited by A. Brenner-Idan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 116–35. See also Mary Ann Taylor and Wycliffe College, "The Gospel of Ruth: An Evangelical Feminist Reading," *Canadian Theological Review* 3, Issue 2 (2014): 4.

By bringing into dialogue women's stories from the Book of Ruth and women's stories from my own West Timor context, I have been influenced by what Kwok Pui-lan calls "dialogical imagination". As Kwok says, dialogue requires "mutuality, active listening, and openness to what one's partner has to say".⁴ Quoting Sharon Parks, Kwok emphasizes that what she means by "imagination" is "a consciousness of conflict (something is not fitting), a pause, the finding of a new image, the repatterning of reality, and interpretation".⁵ While reading and writing this paper, I learned that the two texts and their respective contexts help to explain each other. I was able to better understand the story of Ruth and its context when I considered the reality of drought and migration in ENT. And, vice versa, the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Orpa, and their choices helped me to better understand the struggle of poor women in ENT who must deal with drought and the threat of starvation.

Drought, the Threat of Hunger, and Migration in ENT

West Timor in the Province of ENT—the island where I was born and raised—is vulnerable to drought. Unlike most areas of Indonesia, such as Java and Bali, that are fertile and have large amounts of ground water, Timor is known as a dry area. One of the reasons for this difference is that most Indonesian islands are the result of volcanic soils, but many NTT islands (outer islands-Sumba, Sabu, Rote, and Timor) are islands originating from rocks that lifted from the sea in ancient times. Ground water cannot be held by rocks, just as water is held by soil contents from volcanoes.

Of all 34 provinces of Indonesia, East Nusa Tenggara has the driest climate. The dry season in this province can last for eight to nine months so that there is often inadequate water for agricultural crops in many areas of the province.⁶ This province is also characterized by "shallow, poorly fertile, and hilly soils, which often cause soil erosion. Thus, agricultural productivity in ENT [East Nusa Tenggara] is very low."⁷ This is the situation even though more than 80% of the population makes a living from farming. Thus the lack of water for agriculture has a great impact on people's lives.

Drought in Timor has often made it impossible to plant and has caused crop failure. For East Nusa Tenggara, drought is a vital issue. In this province, drought can mean hunger (along with the related problems of stunting and malnutrition), genital and skin diseases, the migration of vulnerable groups, and the loss of valuable assets

⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 12.

⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

⁶ Geographically, the islands of East Nusa Tenggara lie east to west between 8° and 12° south, with a population of 4.9 million (Indonesian Central Statistics Bureau, 2014b). These islands have an annual rainfall of 800 mm to 1,000 mm, which is concentrated during three to four months (November to March). For the remaining eight to nine months, these islands remain dry to very dry. During the dry season, the maximum temperature reaches 33–37°C (compared to 28–31°C during the rainy season), but sometimes dry cool monsoon winds from northern Australia dry up the southern island chain, particularly Sumba and Timor islands (Indonesian Central Statistics Bureau, 2014b); these islands have extensive grass savannah that has been traditionally used as pasture for cows and horses.

⁷ Edi Santosa and Nobuo Sugiyama, "Amorphophallus Species in East Nusa Tenggara Islands, Indonesia" (April 2016); [researchgate.net/publication/317846417_Amorphophallus_Species_in_East_Nusa_Tenggara_Islands_Indonesia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317846417_Amorphophallus_Species_in_East_Nusa_Tenggara_Islands_Indonesia), accessed 11 October 2019.

such as large livestock that die or must be sold cheaply.⁸ To this day, the highest rates of stunting nationwide are in East Nusa Tenggara Province.⁹ Besides maternal and infant mortality rates exceed national thresholds.¹⁰

One option for those who suffer from drought and famine in ENT is to migrate to an area that offers a better life. In the 1980s, the Indonesian government began sending migrant workers to various destination countries such as the Middle East and East Asia. The aim was to provide cheap labor to more affluent countries. However, work migration began before that. In the 1970s there more Indonesian men than women became migrants, with a ratio of three to one. By the 1990s, that ratio was one to one, and by 2005 it was estimated that 75% of migrant workers were women working in the domestic sector.¹¹ Since the monetary crisis in Indonesia during the second half of the 1990s, more and more young people and adults from poor families with no fixed income have flocked out of their homes. At that time, Indonesia's economic growth had fallen dramatically from 4.6% in 1996 to -13.8% in 1997. The crisis that had contributed to the collapse of the Soeharto regime coincided with the drought that was prevalent in Timor.¹²

People without sufficient education and skills leave the islands of East Nusa Tenggara. First most of them went out by boat, and later on mostly by plane. They migrate to other islands in Western Indonesia with more developed economies, such as Java and Bali, or to large cities in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Some become migrant workers abroad. The country where most migrant workers from East Nusa Tenggara work is Malaysia, mainly due to the similarity in language. For the past four years, East Nusa Tenggara has been called an emergency area for trafficking in persons. Poor people who seek to work as migrants are vulnerable to being victims of trafficking.

When a severe famine occurred in their land, Jacob told his children to go buy grain in Egypt (Gen. 42). When the famine grew worse, Jacob was fortunate to have his son, Joseph, in Egypt so that he and his children could migrate there (Gen. 46–47). It was also due to famine that Isaac and Rebekah migrated to Gerar and lived as foreigners in this Philistine town (Gen. 26:1–6). Likewise, Naomi and Elimelech, her husband, and their two sons migrated to Moab when a severe famine occurred in Israel (Ruth 1)

⁸ Silvia Fanggidae, “Kekeringan dalam Perspektif Pengurangan Risiko Bencana,” [“Drought from the Perspective of Reducing the Risk of Disaster,”] presentation at the opening of GMT’s Annual Assembly, 25 August 2019, Lahairoi Tofa Congregation, Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara.

⁹ Vox NTT, “Tiga dari Sepuluh Balita Alami Gizi Buruk, NTT Juara Stunting Nasional” [“Three of Ten Toddlers Experienced Malnutrition, NTT Wins National Stunting”] in: <https://voxntt.com/2019/08/08/tiga-dari-sepuluh-balita-alami-gizi-buruk-ntt-juara-stunting-nasional/49590/> accessed 10 October 2019.

¹⁰ Ebed de Rosary, Angka Kematian Ibu dan Bayi di NTT Lampau Ambang Batas Nasional [“Maternal and Infant Mortality Rates Exceed National Thresholds”], in: <https://www.cendananews.com/2018/04/angka-kematian-ibu-dan-bayi-di-ntt-lampau-ambang-batas-nasional.html>, accessed 10 Oktober 2019.

¹¹ See Christina Hutubessy, “Pekerja Migran Indonesia dan Perdagangan Orang: Negara dan Politik ‘Setengah Hati,’” [“Indonesian Migrant Workers and ‘Half-Hearted Politics,’”] in Mery Kolimon et al. (eds.), *Menolak Diam: Gereja Melawan Perdagangan Orang [Refusing to be Silent: The Church Opposes Human Trafficking]* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018), 125–26.

¹² See Indrasari Tjandraningsih et al., “Laporan Studi Penghidupan Masyarakat Pedesaan NTT dan NTB: Krisis dan Perubahan” [“Report on the Study on Rural Life in East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara: Crisis and Change”] (Bandung: Akatiga Center for Social Analysis, 2009), 8; media.neliti.com/media/publications/453-ID-penghidupan-masyarakat-pedesaan-ntt-dan-ntb-krisis-dan-perubahan.pdf, accessed 12 October 2019.

Migration is one of the ways in which poor people cope with drought and the threat of hunger. They came out of their hometown hoping to improve their living conditions. One of the challenges for those who migrated throughout world history is the danger of human trafficking, namely the trade of humans for the purpose of forced labour, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation for the trafficker or others. In Bible times, Jacob and his family, as well as Naomi and her family did not need a visa to enter a foreign land. At present, an overseas migration cost a lot of money and requires a lot of administrative arrangements, which poor people cannot afford. In Timor we learned that migrant workers are often trapped in human trafficking mafia that sells them. Labor migration becomes a business nowadays and the poor are vulnerable to becoming commodities. As Joseph was sold by his brothers, poor women, children and adult men are now vulnerable to being victims of human trafficking.

Seeking Refuge in Moab

The book of Ruth opens with this narration: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons” (Ruth 1:1).¹³ Migrating to Moab was not a favorite choice for the people of Israel as the nation of Moab was considered to be less than the nation of Israel. Genesis 19:37 says the nation of Moab is a descendant of Lot, born of an illegitimate sexual relationship between Lot and his oldest daughter. Therefore, the people of Moab are viewed as “the descendants of deception and incest”.¹⁴ Everything regarding Moab in the Old Testament is stated in a condescending tone. The women of Moab are especially blamed for causing adultery in the nation of Israel. As Robert Martinez has said: “Moab represents a stumbling block to Hebrew religious purity and piety.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the Israelites hated the Moabites because when they came out of Egypt the Moabites asked Balaam bin Beor to curse them (Numbers 22). That is why the Moabites were forever forbidden to enter the community of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3–5).¹⁶

Relations between the two nations was not just one-way hatred where Israel hated Moab. The Moabites also feared the Israelites who greatly outnumbered them (Numbers 22:3). As mentioned above, the Moabites asked a sorcerer to curse Israel. It can be said that with the Israelites expropriation of the land of the Moabites after they came out of Egypt, the two nations experienced a long history of mutual hatred. Therefore, Elimelech and Naomi’s decision to migrate to an enemy country was

¹³ This English version of Ruth 1:1 is taken from the New Revised Standard Version. It is interesting to note that the Indonesian version adds that this family went to Moab to stay there **as foreigners** (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Robert Martinez, “Ruth—A Case for Women, or a Case for Patriarchy?”, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 12, Number 1 (1999): 41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Orit Avnery, “Who is In and Who is Out: The Two Voices of Ruth”, *Havruta*, Issue 5 (Summer 2010): 70–77; shi-webfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/Havruta_2010_Issue5_OritAvnery.pdf, accessed 15 October 2019. See also Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes”, in: R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 20–36. See also its pdf version in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229538750_The_Sign_of_Orpah_Reading_Ruth_through_Native_Eyes/link/5cbf2b8c4585156cd7ad13c1/download, accessed 10 November 2019.

actually unwise. In that foreign country they are vulnerable to hostility. In addition, the decision to migrate to Moab actually contradicts Israeli faith, as the Israelites were forbidden to mingle with the Moabites. Moreover, their two sons then married Moab women. But hunger often leaves poor families with little choice.

How was life for Elimelech, Naomi, and their children in Moab? The narrator of the Book of Ruth doesn't say much about this. What happened was that Elimelech died while they were there. His death was followed by that of their two sons who had married Moabite women. Was this a punishment because they had married Moabite women even though it was forbidden by the scriptures (see Numbers 25)? Or was it because their lives were so hard that they easily fell ill and died?

When I read about the deaths of three men in Naomi's family—her husband and two sons—in Moab, I remember the bodies of migrant workers who originate from East Nusa Tenggara who arrive, now several times a week, at the cargo terminal of El Tari Kupang Airport. According to information from the Bureau for Migrant Worker Management, in 2016, 45 migrant workers from East Nusa Tenggara died—25 male and 21 female.¹⁷ In 2017, that number rose to 62 deaths. Of that total, only one had a proper status as a migrant worker; the other 61 were non-prosedural/illegal migrant workers. All 62 died in Malaysia.¹⁸ In 2018, the number of dead migrant workers rose sharply to 105—102 workers died in Malaysia, 2 in Singapore, and 1 in South Africa; 71 were male and 34 female.¹⁹ The main causes of death cited included work-related accidents, traffic accidents, suicide, murder, illness, and other, unknown causes.²⁰ It is still difficult to prove, but some say that several of the migrant workers who died were also victims of the sale of human organs such as kidneys or heart.²¹

In East Nusa Tenggara, we seek to persuade young people and other members of our congregations so they do not leave their villages. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to keep poor people in their villages. Some insist on leaving. Others, easily deceived by recruiting agents, are trapped in forced migration. For the poor, migration is like gambling, stepping into uncertainty, whether for profit or for loss. Better to give it a try than not to try at all. In this way, humans can become wolves to others, exploiting the vulnerable to gain power and wealth.

As with Naomi, many women in West Timor go to a foreign country with great hopes of returning home with the profits of their labor to build a life in their own country. However, they often return home, if not dead, with bitterness. Naomi said to the inhabitants of her town: "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara." She goes to Moab with full hands because she had her husbands and two sons; with full hopes she left her hometown. Now, with bitterness, she returns home: "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21a). Naomi's story, and that of many

¹⁷ See Cornelius Selan, "Data Tenaga Kerja Indonesia yang Berasal dari Nusa Tenggara Timur yang Meninggal," ["Data on Indonesian Migrant Workers from East Nusa Tenggara Who Have Died,"] in Mery Kolimon, et al. (eds.), *Menolak Diam [Refusing to be Silent]*, 27–29.

¹⁸ Sigiranus Marutho Bere, "Selama 2017, 62 TKI Asal NTT Meninggal di Malaysia" ["During 2017, 62 Migrant Workers from East Nusa Tenggara Die in Malaysia"] (4 Jan 2018), regional.kompas.com/read/2018/01/04/17005731/selama-2017-62-tki-asal-ntt-meninggal-di-malaysia, accessed 11 October 2019.

¹⁹ Sigiranus Marutho Bere, "Tahun 2018, Sebanyak 102 TKI Ilegal Asal NTT Meninggal di Malaysia" ["In 2018, as Many as 102 Illegal Migrant Workers from East Nusa Tenggara Die in Malaysia"] (14 Jan 2019), jogja.tribunnews.com/2019/01/14/tahun-2018-sebanyak-102-tki-ilegal-asal-ntt-meninggal-di-malaysia, accessed 11 October 2019.

²⁰ Cornelius Selan, 34.

²¹ See, for example, "Kasus Sri Rabitah: Pencurian Organ Tubuh TKI Bukan yang Pertama Kalinya" ["The Case of Sri Rabitah: Not First Time for Stealing Organs from the Body of a Migrant Worker"], *BBC Online*, 28 Feb 2017; www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-39112370, accessed 30 October 2019.

migrant women from Timor, is the story of those who have failed in an inhospitable world, where social justice is often just a dream that is difficult to realize.

Drought and Gender Dynamics

In East Nusa Tenggara, drought has the greatest impact on women because women are in charge of preparing food for their families. In the Bible, we encounter the story of Rebecca (Gen. 24), of Rachel (Gen. 29), and also of the Samaritan woman who went to Jacob's well (John 4). These women are responsible for providing water for consumption by both their families and domestic animals. Women's workloads become more severe in times of drought. Often they must walk for many kilometres, or wait in line at the well all night long to provide water for their families. On small islands such as Tereweng in Alor and Nuse in Rote, women cross to neighboring islands, face the threat of currents and sea waves, using rowboats to fetch water.

I grew up in the interior of West Timor where, during the dry season, my mother and we children did not sleep at night for weeks at a time in order to keep watch at the village well to get water for our family. During the dry season we were susceptible to skin diseases. From October to November, children in our village were very susceptible to infectious ulcers that covered their entire bodies. Due to the lack of clean water, we had to prioritize water for drinking and cooking rather than for bathing and other purposes. That situation has not changed. Just this week I read a post from a pastor friend of mine showing a long queue of jerry cans at the edge of a well. A young woman in the village where she was serving wrote a message on a stone at the edge of the well: "O my brother/sister, don't be greedy." The water crisis has fostered solidarity among the people there. A very limited supply of water is regulated in such a way that everyone can enjoy it. Each family gets only five jerry cans a day. Priority is given to the sick and elderly.²²

As I said earlier, drought can cause many health problems including infectious diseases, stunting, poor nutrition, and high maternal and infant mortality. This is compounded by patriarchy—even though women must work hard in facing the reality of poverty, they do not have much authority over themselves and their families. In such situations, migration (which is unsafe) often becomes the choice for women to escape traditional patterns that suppress them. However, due to limited education and skills, women migrant workers are often trapped in a cycle of violence and exploitation. They try to escape from patriarchy in their villages, but then become caught in modern slavery in the arena of labor migration.²³

It is important to note that although more women become migrant workers nowadays, the most migrant workers who died in our context in NTT are men.²⁴ This fact shows that patriarchy does not only affect women, but also men. In a patriarchal society, men are required to be the main breadwinners in the family. So in an unsafe work environment they are vulnerable to illness and even death.

Migration, Vulnerability, and Sexuality

Poor migrant women are vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Naomi returned to her home village of Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth, after she

²² Emma Margaritha Fay, "5 Jergen Cukup" ["5 Jerry Cans Are Enough"] 18 November 2019, www.facebook.com/emma.margaritha, accessed 18 November 2019.

²³ See Wetangterah, "Kerentanan Masyarakat," ["The Vulnerability of People,"] 110–22.

²⁴ See footnote 16 and 19 above.

heard that the danger of famine had passed (Ruth 1:6). If Naomi was a foreigner in Moab, then Ruth was the one considered a foreigner once they went to Bethlehem in Judea. Without husbands or sons, the two women had to find a means to sustain themselves. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest season, and Ruth asked permission from her mother-in-law to seek work gleaning the barley fields. As a young widow, Ruth was accepted by the other workers and their boss, Boaz, to glean the barley in Boaz's fields in order to support herself and her mother-in-law. Boaz was a relative of her late husband (Ch. 2).

It is interesting to consider the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Many commentators have praised their friendship, especially Ruth's loyalty.²⁵ Unlike Orpah, who chose to return to her own mother's house following Naomi's suggestion, Ruth decided to follow her mother-in-law to Bethlehem, saying:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried. (1:16b–17a)

Even so, some interpreters such as Kwok Pui-lan have introduced a distinctly Asian perspective here: "... coming from an Asian society where the mother-in-law has historically wielded so much power over the life of the daughter-in-law, it is difficult for me to imagine an egalitarian and even passionate friendship between the two".²⁶

In this light, Ruth's decision to follow Naomi to Bethlehem may well have been made because she had no future in Moab.²⁷ As women who had married foreign men (and enemies of their people), Ruth and Orpah may have been seen as traitors to their people. Marriages between different nationalities and religions are never an easy matter, especially when each side has an attitude of exclusivism. Therefore, perhaps Ruth had "burned her bridges" and had no choice but to follow Naomi. Interpreters as Laura Donaldson, therefore, praised Orpah. Being different from Ruth, according to Donaldson, Orpah was actually loyal to her culture and society. "Orpah connotes hope rather than perversity, because she is the one who does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors".²⁸

When they arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi did not mention that she returned with Ruth. Naomi's insistence that Ruth and Orpah go home to their mothers could have been an attempt to avoid these Moabite women. It could be that for Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were the cause of God's displeasure with her, so that her husband and two children died in Moab. It is possible that the presence of Moabite women in her

²⁵ Robert Martinez, "Ruth," 41; Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth," in *Women's Bible Commentary, Expanded Edition with Apocrypha*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 84–90.

²⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 111.

²⁷ Cf. Sin-lung Tong, "The Key to Successful Migration? Rereading Ruth's Confession (1:16-17) through the Lens of Bhabha's Mimicry," in *Reading Ruth in Asia*, edited by Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 35.

²⁸ Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes", in: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229538750_The_Sign_of_Orpah_Reading_Ruth_through_Native_Eyes/link/5cbf2b8c4585156cd7ad13c1/download, 167, accessed 10 November 2019.

family was seen as the cause of a curse. Ruth would also be an embarrassment to Naomi in Naomi's hometown, because Naomi brought home a female enemy of her nation.²⁹ Perhaps for these reasons, Naomi said she returned home empty-handed, without mentioning that Ruth accompanied her (Ruth 1:21).

It seems that Naomi benefited from the presence and energy of Ruth who made a living for them both by working in barley fields. This work was risky for Ruth as working in the fields would make her vulnerable to sexual violence by male workers (2:8-9; 22). Naomi also used Ruth to further her husband's lineage.³⁰ When she learned that Ruth was working in Boaz's field, Naomi asked her to dress up and go in secret to sleep with Boaz on the threshing floor (3:1-18). Ruth did not reject her mother-in-law's request. She went to sleep near Boaz's feet. Some interpreters say sleeping near the feet is a euphemism for sexual relations.³¹ This action was intended to trap Boaz. According to Fewell and Gunn, "sexual intercourse, if not pregnancy, will demand either marriage or a payoff."³² Besides financial advantages, it is also possible that Naomi and Ruth wanted Ruth to have a sexual relationship with Boaz in order to help protect Ruth from possible sexual violence by other men and to continue Elimelech lineage.

Women migrant workers from East Nusa Tenggara are vulnerable to sexual violence. This year, 12 Protestant and Catholic theologians in NTT completed a book entitled *Tuhan Tak Berdagang: Perdagangan Orang, Trauma, dan Teologi di NTT [God Does Not Trade: Trafficking in Persons, Trauma, and Theology in East Nusa Tenggara]*.³³ These theologians interviewed victims/survivors of trafficking in persons, wrote their stories, and reflected theologically on them. The stories in the book show that the practice of contemporary slavery in the form of human trafficking and sexual exploitation is very real.

After graduating from high school, Rani (a pseudonym), a girl from Sumba, could not continue her studies because her parents could not afford to pay her school fees.³⁴ When someone asked her to work in Malaysia, Rani persuaded her father to let her go. Rani experienced a very hard life in Malaysia. She worked like a slave, taking care of her employer's elderly mother. She was promised a salary of 450 Malaysian ringgit (around 45 euros). During the first six months she did not receive her salary because she had to reimburse the cost of her travel to the agent who arranged for her departure to Malaysia. At her employer's house, Rani was raped by her employer's brother until she became pregnant. When she reported to the agent, he was angry with her. According to the agent, Rani should work to make money, not get pregnant. She was also scolded for not running away from the employer. Rani said she could not run away because her passport was being held by the employer.

The agent tried to persuade Rani to sell her baby—a girl would be worth around 120 euros; a boy would be worth more. The agent pressured Rani to do this on

²⁹ Martinez, 43; cf. Phyllis Trible, "Naomi," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuteranonical Books, and The New Testament*, edited by Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 130–31.

³⁰ Martinez, *op. cit.*, 42–43.

³¹ Phyllis Trible, "Ruth," in *Women in Scripture*, edited by Carol Meyers, 146–47.

³² Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 78.

³³ This book is in press, BPK Gunung Mulia, a Christian publisher in Jakarta.

³⁴ The story of Rani was written by Rambu Ana Maeri, "Suffering Continues", in: Karen Campbell-Nelson (ed), *God Does Not Trade: Trafficking in People, Theology, and Trauma in NTT*. This book will be published later this year by BPK.

the grounds that she had embarrassed the agent and would be scolded by her family in the village. However, Rani was determined to keep her child. At last, after getting help so should could issue a complaint with the Indonesian Embassy, Rani was able to go home with a little money and the child in her womb. When Rani returned to Sumba, her cousin, Yana (a pseudonym), helped Rani with the cost of giving birth in the hospital. But it turned out that Rani's cousin then stole Rani's son. In Malaysia, Rani managed to keep the child in her womb, but when she returned to her hometown, Rani had to face the bitter truth that her child was forcibly adopted by her cousin.

Poor women migrant workers are vulnerable to physical, mental, and sexual exploitation, even by their close relatives. Ruth and Rani, as well as many other poor women, struggle with their identities as foreigners, as women, and as poor people at the bottom of the capitalist economic structure. Ruth's story ends happily. She married Boaz, a rich man. Ruth was even recorded as an ancestor of King David and Jesus Christ.

But not all stories of women migrant workers end happily. Many women, like Rani, fare badly. Rani is now disappointed in God. She blames God for her unfortunate and miserable condition: she was helpless, working hard without a decent salary, bearing the pain and shame of being raped and pregnant, and finally lost her child. Rani no longer wants to pray and go to church. The layers of trauma she has experienced cannot heal quickly. Rani complains like Naomi: "... call me Mara, because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me" (cf. Ruth 1:20).

Violence experienced by women and men of migrant workers is different. Women are more vulnerable to sexual violence than men. In Boaz field, Ruth needs to be protected from male workers. She then married Boaz and found protection in her marriage. Rani in is still looking for ways to rise from adversity. The stories of Rani and Ruth also show that violence against poor women does not only occur in the arena of work migration. At their own home they are also vulnerable to violence and exploitation. If Ruth returned to "her mother's house," there was also no guarantee that her life would be easier. On Sumba, Rani's baby was seized by her cousin.

Migration and Identity

When she married Naomi's son, Ruth's identity began to change. She was a Moabite woman who married an immigrant from Israel. In particular, when Ruth followed her mother-in-law when Naomi returned to Bethlehem, Ruth was uprooted from the culture of her people. Her identity became mixed, hybrid. In a community context that emphasizes the purity of ethnicity and religion, those with multiple identities are regarded with suspicion, even treated with hostility.³⁵

Kwok Pui-lan argues that the Book of Ruth could have been written after the exile with the aim of showing that a non-Jew could become a worshiper of the God of faith.³⁶ This book is a protest against the teachings of Ezra and Nehemiah which obliges Jewish men to marry only Jewish women based on religious law and principles. In the context of rules that emphasize the importance of kinship and blood ties that distinguish between insiders and outsiders, the Book of Ruth seeks ways to

³⁵ Sin-lung Tong uses the concept of mimicry to show that Ruth was not passive in the face of injustice. Based on the concept of mimicry in Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, Tong shows that in Ruth's conversation with Boaz, she wins his trust while at the same time challenging a hegemonic relationship between indigenous people and migrants to become an equal and just relationship. See Sin-lung Tong, "The Key to Successful Migration?," 39-43.

³⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 104.

embrace those who are marginalized and rejected. In line with Kwok, Ranta wrote that the Book of Ruth was a protest against the purification project of Ezra and Nehemiah, especially that prohibited mixed marriages. In Ezra 10 it is said that Israeli men who married foreign women were told to divorce their wives, and send their wives and children back to their home countries. Thus the Book of Ruth shows that foreign women also play an important role and are a legitimate part of the fellowship of believers.³⁷ In the context of suspicion, fear, and hatred of those who are different, we need religious language and practices of faith that affirms our common humanity.

Theology gives us a horizon to build a vision that overcomes the reality of injustice, violence, and hostility. Faith gives us hope that exploitation, stigma, and discrimination are not the last word. Communities of faith that do theology in the context of the experience of exploited women migrant workers need to find language and life practices that embrace and restore victims/survivors of crimes against humanity. Considering the threat of the clash of civilizations today, including in the form of radicalism and religious conservatism, the Book of Ruth gives us lessons about the willingness to embrace difference and find ways to become friends and relatives for those who are seen as enemies.

Walk with Victims/Survivors: Church Mission as Accompaniment

The role of Boaz in the narrative of the Book of Ruth is interesting to note. When he saw Ruth picking barley in his field, he asked his workers not to disturb her. He even told them to help the Moabite woman. When Ruth was told by her mother-in-law to come quietly at night to sleep at his feet, he did not blame Ruth as the woman who was trying to tempt him. Maybe he fell in love with that foreign woman. But it is important to note that Boaz showed friendliness and generosity to her. He was willing to be a “redeemer” for Naomi and Ruth.

In Timor we have learned that one of the missions of the church in the context of migration and human trafficking is *accompaniment*. The church, as a fellowship, should be with the victims and their families when they struggle against the evil that exploits them. The church might not have the resources to become a “redeemer” like Boaz, but the church can be a friend and companion for victims/survivors.³⁸

As a community, the church needs to build solidarity with victims/survivors in the spirit of interdependence and mutual support. The church needs the life stories of victims and survivors to understand their experiences of suffering and to enable it to produce appropriate structures for accompaniment and solidarity. For their part, the survivors need the church to listen to their stories, witness the bitterness of life that they are sometimes at a loss to express, and walk with them through traumatic experiences toward new hope.

Mission as accompaniment is important, especially when we serve in the context of global capitalism where the poor are treated only as exploited objects. For the sake of achieving continued economic growth, humans are treated as machines to

³⁷ Kaija Helena Anneli Ranta, “The Biblical Book of Ruth: A Feminist Literary Reading” (University of Windsor, 1995), 17–18. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 3775; scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/3775, accessed 11 October 2019.

³⁸ See Mery Kolimon, “Misi Gereja sebagai Pendampingan: Catatan Pengantar,” [“The Church’s Mission as Accompaniment: An Introductory Note,”] in *Tuhan Tidak Berdagang: Perdagangan Orang, Trauma, dan Teologi di NTT*, [God Does Not Trade: Trafficking in Persons, Trauma, and Theology in East Nusa Tenggara.] Karen Campbell-Nelson (ed.), This book will be published at the end of the year by BPK Gunung Mulia, Jakarta.

maintain abundant production. Mission as accompaniment can provide a strong foundation to fight dehumanization.

In our church context in GMIT, sometime people said: “Why we should pay attention to human trafficking? There also another context of poverty and suffering in NTT need to be recognized” That is true that human trafficking is not the only context for theological reflection mission of the church, but trafficking is one of the real contexts to respond to. The fact that NTT is one of the highest areas of trafficking victims in Indonesia has made the church that preaches the peace of Christ cannot look away from the suffering of the victims. The arrival of the coffins of migrant workers a few days a week at El Tari Kupang airport is a real situation that must be addressed theologically.

When the church is committed to carrying out the mission of accompaniment, it cannot position itself as a teacher, let alone a judge, of victims and survivors. In their struggle for survival and resurrection, victims do not need an expert preacher or a great moral teacher to point out their mistakes and weaknesses. What victims and survivors need is the presence of pastors beside them to hear their bitter experiences, even the struggles of family members dealing with the death of a beloved migrant worker. The church needs to be a friend for injured people like Rani to share the hope that no matter how difficult life is, God walks with them. Relating to church mission as accompaniment, it is very important to listen. Sometimes we fail to listen and stand with the survivors because we don't want to meet and listen to their stories. The church is often willing to teach and not humble enough to learn from the stories of survivors.

Friendship with Nature: Planting Water, Planting Hope

The issues of drought and hunger are important themes in the story of Naomi and Ruth. Both of these issues assume a human relationship with nature. However, the narrator of the Book of Ruth makes no mention at all of the importance of restoring and maintaining human relations with nature that is vulnerable to exploitation due to human activity.

In West Timor, we recognize that the threat of drought and famine is related not only to the issue of social justice, but also to ecological justice.³⁹ Drought has become more frequent because people are not friendly to nature. Data released by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia states that from January to August 2019, 135,749 hectares of forest and land were burnt. The National Disaster Management Agency said that the largest area of forest and burnt land in Indonesia during this period was in East Nusa Tenggara, reaching 71,712 hectares.⁴⁰

Since its 33rd Synod Assembly in 2015, our church in East Nusa Tenggara, the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor (GMIT), has promoted the “Water Planting Movement”. Every household of this church is asked to have at least one water hole (biopori) in their yards/gardens. This is intended to ensure that rain that

³⁹ See Wetangterah, “Kerentanan Masyarakat,” [“The Vulnerability of the People,”] 105–13.

⁴⁰ Gloria Setyvani Putri (ed.), “Kebakaran Hutan dan Lahan Terbanyak di NTT, Capai 71.712 Hektar,” [“Burning of Forest and Field, Greatest in East Nusa Tenggara, Reaches 71,712 Hectares,”] *Kompas.com*, 1 Sept 2019; sains.kompas.com/read/2019/09/01/180300123/kebakaran-hutan-dan-lahan-terbanyak-di-ntt-capai-71.712-hektar?page=all, accessed 9 October 2019.

falls in the rainy season does not flow directly into the sea but instead enters the ground to increase groundwater reserves to support the life of the creatures above it.

Nature can survive without humans, but humans cannot survive without nature. Nevertheless, human actions have brought nature to the point of destruction. The suffering of nature will have an impact on human suffering. In such a context, our theological vision and practice of faith must also include restoring relations and peace with nature. If there is chance to sit together with Ruth, Naomi, Orpah, and Boaz, we would invite them to work together in our garden: planting water, planting trees, planting hope for NTT, for Betlehem, for the world, our common home.

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