

The Sacred Matrix: Reclaiming the Feminine Body as Ontological Vocation in Hebrew and Malagasy Cosmologies

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Abstract

*This theological reflection embarks on a profound comparative exegesis, plumbing the depths of the female body's symbolic resonance within two disparate yet remarkably convergent sacred traditions: ancient Hebrew biblical anthropology and the Malagasy cosmovision. Employing a rigorous interdisciplinary methodology that weaves together exegesis, symbolic anthropology, linguistics, and contextual theology, this study illuminates how both traditions imbue the feminine form with rich layers of sacred, ontological, and relational meaning. Central to this exploration is the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נָקֵבָה), commonly rendered "woman." Far from a mere biological descriptor, *neqēvāh* is here unpacked as a potent theological metaphor — a signifier of ontological openness, spiritual receptivity, and sacred fecundity. This understanding is then brought into a generative dialogue with evocative Malagasy expressions such as *mitondra rano* ("water bearer"), *trano zaza* ("child's house"), and *tratra masoandro* ("touched by the sun"). Strikingly, these seemingly disparate metaphors converge towards a unified theological apprehension of femininity not as a state of biological passivity, but as a dynamic, vivifying space of creation, transmission, and cosmic mediation. This inter-epistemic approach not only unveils the profound richness inherent in localized sacred traditions but also underscores the urgent theological imperative to revalorize the female figure within contemporary theological discourses. It invites us to perceive the feminine body as a locus of divine immanence and a conduit for cosmic flourishing.*

Keywords

Feminine body; Hebrew anthropology; Malagasy cosmovision; *neqēvāh*; fecundity; symbolism



I. Introduction

The perennial quest to comprehend the human, particularly the feminine, within foundational sacred texts and cultural narratives frequently encounters a profound symbolic richness, often occluded by prevalent modern interpretations that lean predominantly towards the biological or patriarchal. This theological reflection embarks on a profound comparative exegesis, plumbing the depths of the feminine body's symbolic resonance within two distinct yet remarkably convergent sacred traditions : ancient Hebrew biblical anthropology and the Malagasy cosmovision. Employing a rigorous interdisciplinary methodology that thoughtfully weaves together biblical exegesis (Ukpong, 2002 ; West, 2014), symbolic anthropology (Froidevaux-Metterie, 2020), semiotic linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), and contextual theology (Gathogo, 2022), this study illuminates how both traditions imbue the feminine form with rich layers of sacred, ontological, and relational meaning. Our inquiry is impelled by a fundamental question : How do these cosmologies symbolically conceive of

the female body, transcending its purely biological functions, and what profound convergences do these two visions offer within a cross-theological and anthropological perspective ?

At the heart of this exploration lies the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נְקָבָה). Far from a mere biological descriptor, *neqēvāh* is a potent theological metaphor for ontological openness, spiritual receptivity, and sacred fecundity (Meyers, 2013 ; Scholz, 2021). Derived from a root signifying "to pierce" or "to open" (Trenel, 1865), and related to the act of "naming" or "marking" (Numbers 1 :17 ; Frymer-Kensky, 1992), this term transcends simple sexual differentiation. It evokes a profound symbolic space—a living, foundational matrix and sacred dwelling—deeply embedded within the very order of existence. In this biblical light, the feminine is a site of inherent vocation and dynamic presence, consistently linked with matricial and domestic elements like the well, house, and womb (Genesis 16 ; 21 ; 29 ; 37) as a mediatrix of sacred history.

This profound understanding finds a generative dialogue in evocative Malagasy expressions, which remarkably parallel this sacred dimension. A pregnant woman described as *mitondra rano* ("carrying water") or whose womb is named *tranon-jaza* ("child's house"), alongside concepts like *feno rano* ("filled with water") for childbirth pain and *renin-tantely* ("mother of honey"), underscore a vibrant, active sanctuary of life (Andriamamonjy, 2019 ; Rajaonarisoa, 2021 ; Razanamparany, 2000). These metaphors portray fecundity as a profound spiritual and cosmic act, articulating the feminine's essential role in cosmic order, life's transmission, and even public discourse through the *kabary* (Andriamalala, 2020). This convergence reveals a unified theological apprehension of femininity not as biological passivity, but as a dynamic, vivifying space of creation, transmission, and cosmic mediation.

This theological exploration inevitably enters into a nuanced tension with Simone de Beauvoir's renowned assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949). While this statement profoundly shaped prolific critiques of the social construction of gender, it is currently undergoing significant re-evaluation by contemporary thinkers who emphasize the feminine experience as fundamentally rooted in a lived, carnal, intimate body, irreducible to a mere social construct (Froidevaux-Metterie, 2020; Scholz, 2021; Trible, 1984). By offering a cross-reading that illuminates these indigenous perspectives, this study not only unveils the profound richness inherent in localized sacred traditions but also underscores the urgent theological imperative to revalorize the female figure within contemporary theological discourses. It invites us to perceive the feminine body as a locus of divine immanence and a conduit for cosmic flourishing, challenging universalizing paradigms and advocating for a decolonized understanding of gender rooted in living wisdoms.

II. Research Methods

2.1 Interdisciplinary Lens on the Feminine Body: Hebrew and Malagasy Perspectives

This theological exploration employs a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, thoughtfully weaving together biblical exegesis, symbolic anthropology, semiotic linguistics, and contextual theology. Our analysis draws a parallel between two distinct cultural and religious traditions : ancient Hebrew anthropology and the Malagasy cosmovision. Our core objective is to understand how each tradition constructs and articulates the meaning of the feminine body through its unique symbolic frameworks, moving beyond any reduction to its purely biological or social functions.

Our biblical investigation primarily relies on the Masoretic Text of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), focusing particularly on the foundational creation account in Genesis 1:27. This pivotal passage provides the anthropological basis for sexual distinction, especially concerning the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נָקָה). This term derives from the root נָקַב (nqb), which literally means "to pierce" or "to open." This very root, signifying "piercing" or "opening," points to a dynamic of openness, receptivity, and fecundity. Scholars like Meyers (2013) and Duby (2023) interpret these three dimensions as clear indicators of the matrilineal sacredness of the feminine body. Far from being seen as a passive or merely biological entity, it emerges as a foundational matrix deeply embedded within the very order of life itself.

Turning to the Malagasy side, our research is firmly rooted in ethnographic materials derived from the vibrant oral traditions and cosmologies of the Highlands, specifically among the Merina and Betsileo peoples (Andriamamonjy, 2019 ; Rajaonarisoa, 2021). We meticulously examine cultural expressions such as *mitondra rano* ("carrying water") and *tranon-jaza* ("child's house") for their profound symbolic depth. These vernacular terms articulate a vision of the feminine that transcends mere biological or social definitions; instead, it delves into the cosmic order, the inherent sacredness of life's transmission, and the legitimate authority of the feminine voice in the public sphere, particularly through the *kabary* (public discourse) (Andriamalala, 2020).

The intersection of these two distinct cultural universes—the Hebrew and the Malagasy—allows us to clearly delineate the continuities and divergences in their symbolic constructions of the feminine body. Our overarching objective is to cultivate a contextual and decolonial reading of the feminine, one that is deeply grounded in the ancient texts and living practices of peoples who embody profound theological and anthropological wisdom.

2.2 Méthodology

Drawing from the aforementioned textual and oral materials, we've established three methodological approaches to illuminate the symbolic meaning of the feminine body within both traditions.

a. Interdisciplinary Crossover: Articulating Meaning, Embodiment, and the Sacred

Our joint reliance on symbolic anthropology, contextual theology, semiotic linguistics, and biblical exegesis is crucial for fully appreciating the richness of the feminine body. Here, it isn't viewed merely as a biological object but rather as a meaning-laden space, carrying within it memory, sacredness, and social organization.

1. Symbolic Anthropology: The Feminine Body as Sacred Container

Drawing from contemporary approaches in the anthropology of gender and symbolic systems, this analysis conceives of the feminine body as a sacred container. It's understood as a matrix of the world, a space where nature and culture intertwine, where cosmic rhythm meets cosmic structure. In this view, the body becomes a locus of mediation between the visible and the invisible, between the biological and the ritual. As Froidevaux-Metterie (2020) has compellingly demonstrated, women's bodies cannot be reduced to mere anatomical realities; they are shaped by cultural imaginaries, traversed by norms, and deeply invested with social, spiritual, and symbolic functions. Within Malagasy culture, women stand at the very heart of the ancestral symbolic order, a pivotal point where filiation, fecundity, authority, and ritual speech converge (Andriamamonjy, 2019).

2. Semiotic Linguistics: Unveiling the Embodied Language of the Feminine

Our semiotic analysis of the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נֶקֶבָּה), stemming from the root נ-ק-בּ (n-q-b), reveals a powerful symbolism of openness, cavity, and receptivity. This profound lexical understanding finds compelling parallels in Malagasy metaphors, where the female body is frequently likened to fundamental elements such as water (rano), the house (trano), or the womb (tranon-jaza). Together, these linguistic expressions unveil an intuitive anthropology of the feminine.

Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) theory of conceptual metaphors, we understand that thought structures are deeply influenced by bodily schemas, rooting language in physical and social experience. This theoretical framework helps explain why the lexicon of the feminine in both cultures we're examining is so consistently associated with fluidity, fertility, and welcoming reception.

3. Biblical Exegesis : A Critical Inculturation of the Feminine

The exegetical method employed here is rooted in a critical inculturation hermeneutic. This approach involves re-reading the Scriptures through the lens of local cultural symbolisms, carefully avoiding distortion or essentialization (Ukpong, 2002 ; West, 2014). This methodology, widely embraced within African theologies, facilitates a profound connection between biblical feminine figures and Malagasy symbolic referents.

By bringing these cosmologies into dialogue, our approach reveals compelling convergences between biblical creation narratives and traditional representations of the feminine body. Both traditions conceive of the feminine as a central axis of fecundity, order, and blessing. Furthermore, this method prompts us to critically examine, directly from ancient texts, the intricate relationship between linguistic construction and the theological shaping of sexes in biblical Israel. (Scholz, 2021 ; Trible, 1984)

b. Epistemological Stance : A Critical Inter-Epistemic Approach

Our study adopts an inter-epistemic posture, acknowledging the plurality of knowledge forms while fostering a reflective and critical dialogue among them. Instead of imposing a singular model for understanding the feminine, we articulate insights from modern humanities with those from indigenous, religious, and ritual knowledge systems. This stance aligns with the work of Scholz (2021) and Trible (1984), who highlight the limitations of universalist gender readings, often shaped by a Western analytical framework.

In this light, Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949) merits re-examination. Both biblical cosmologies and Malagasy traditions suggest that the feminine is not solely a social or political construct; it constitutes an original given, inscribed within the very structure of being. The Hebrew term *neqēvāh*, derived from the root *nqb* meaning "opening" or "piercing," points to a foundational matrilineal power. Similarly, expressions like *tranon-jaza* (child's house) and *mitondra rano* (carrying water) in Malagasy oral tradition attest to a vision of the feminine body as a sacred space, a bearer of life, rather than a mere social receptacle.

This posture thus opens a space for the co-elaboration of meaning, considering the diversity of interpretations, the complexity of contexts, and the richness of oral or matriarchal religious traditions present in Malagasy culture (Ramamonjisoa, 2003 ; Rajaonarisoa, 2021). The inter-epistemic approach allows us to rethink feminine heroism not as a conquest achieved through conflict or demand, but as an active presence, deeply rooted in the invisible structures of the symbolic, the ritual, and the sacred.

c. Towards a Theology of the Feminine Body as a Site of Revelation

The comparative methodology we've employed rests upon a fundamental hermeneutical gesture: to conceive of the feminine body not as a neutral biological casing, but as a theological space where divine presence is incarnated, where the dynamic of creation unfolds, and where the world itself is structured (Meyers, 2013).

The Hebrew term *neqēvāh*, found in Genesis 1:27 and 5:2, literally translates to "hole" or "opening" and directly references the female sexual organ. This designation is neither pejorative nor reductive; on the contrary, it expresses a matrilineal power, a potential for life inscribed at the very heart of the feminine (Trenel, 1865; Scholz, 2021). This "opening" should be understood not as an emptiness, but as an active site of passage, mediation, and fecundity.

Within Malagasy culture, we find a comparable symbolism in expressions like *tranon-jaza* (child's house) or *mitondra rano* (carrying water). These metaphors reveal a vibrant and sacred conception of the feminine body, not as a mere passive receptacle, but as a structure of cosmic gestation, a foundational hearth. The parallel with *neqēvāh* is not simply linguistic; it is profoundly ontological.

Here, contextual theology finds its full meaning. By valuing symbols within local lived experiences and oral traditions, it shifts the hermeneutical center from dominant readings to the peripheries, embracing a situated, embodied, and critical posture (West, 2000; Gathogo, 2022). The feminine body thus becomes a site of revelation: where the memory of origins is bound, where the world's fecundity resides, and where the very possibility of salvation unfolds.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 An Etymology That Speaks: *Neqēvāh* as Sacred Opening

A careful lexical analysis of the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נֶקֶבָה), derived from the root נ-ק-ב (n-q-b), reveals a profound semantic field associated with "opening," "hollowing out," and the capacity to contain. Far from being a mere biological designation for the female sex, this word denotes a living cavity, an inner space symbolically imbued with fecundity. The "opening" alluded to here doesn't solely refer to the sexual organ but also signifies the uterus as a sacred dwelling, a matrix of life, and a threshold of passage. Intriguingly, some Rabbinic traditions even interpret *neqēvāh* as a receiver or antenna, emphasizing a profound complementarity with the masculine.

3.2 Symbolic Convergences : Between Hebrew Cavity and Malagasy Womb

This powerful symbolism of the cavity resonates deeply within the Malagasy cosmopolitan vision. A pregnant woman is tellingly described as *mitondra rano* ("water bearer"), her uterus is referred to as *tranon-jaza* ("child's house"), and the pain of childbirth is articulated as *feno rano* ("filled with water"). These metaphors transcend mere biological description, conveying fecundity as a spiritual power no less than a physical one. Here, we encounter an implicit theology of the feminine body, not as passive, but as an active sanctuary of life. Further expressions, such as *renin-tantely* ("mother of honey"), underscore the gentleness, wisdom, and ontological centrality of the feminine as the source of a sweet and balanced life. These striking parallels invite us to consider how diverse cultural traditions articulate a shared profound reverence for the generative power and sacred space embodied by the feminine.

3.3 Deconstructing Fragility: The Feminine as Vital and Prophetic Core

Far from the image of the "fragile vessel," the re-interpreted feminine figure emerges as a sacred core, embodying creative, mediatorial, and spiritual power. The feminine body is conceived as a house, sometimes even as fonja (a symbolic prison or closed matrix), or lavaka famoriandrano (a well or cistern) in the spirit of Proverbs 5 :18 – an ambivalent metaphor encompassing pleasure, danger, and wisdom.

The inter-epistemic approach adopted here thus highlights that women are already strong and heroic in their traditional roles. They act without necessarily resorting to classical feminist demands, instead incarnating a theology of gesture, active silence, and matricial presence. This perspective reveals a profound, inherent power that often operates beneath the surface of overt claims.

3.4 Discussion

a. From Anguish to Agency : Redefining the Feminine Body in Theological Anthropology

The analysis of the Hebrew term *neqēvāh* (נְקָבָה), frequently rendered "female," articulates a profound symbolism of openness and creation. Far from merely denoting an anatomical distinction, this word evokes a fundamental matricial capacity: that of receiving, bearing, and transmitting life (Meyers, 2013). The Hebrew root נִקְבָּה (nqb) signifies "to pierce," "to hollow out," or "to make a hole," extending semantically to the verb *naqav*, meaning "to mark, to name," as seen in Numbers 1 :17, where the tribal leaders are "designated by name" (בְּשֵׁם, beshem). The feminine, in this light, becomes a site of marking and vocation, rather than one of passivity (Frymer-Kensky, 1992).

This understanding stands in radical contradistinction to the conventional interpretation of Genesis 3 :16, traditionally read as a divine punishment: "In pain you shall bring forth children." A modern philological reading, however, suggests that the text does not create pain but rather emphasizes its intensification. Pain is presented as a pre-existent reality within nature, akin to other female creatures, and thus acquires a symbolic, rather than penal, significance. Suffering thereby transforms into a locus of trial and transmission, not condemnation. This resonates powerfully with the Malagasy concepts of tranon-jaza (child's house), fonja (a protective place of enclosure or symbolic prison), and lavaka famoriandrano (a water reserve or well), where the feminine body is perceived as an active and sacred space. This cross-cultural dialogue invites us to consider pain not as a curse, but as an integral, albeit arduous, dimension of the feminine's profound participation in the cosmic process of life-giving.

1. Reframing Genesis 3 :16 : From Punishment to Profound Revelation of the Feminine

This theological anthropology challenges the conventional interpretation of Genesis 3 :16 : "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." The Hebrew verb employed here, *harbēh 'arbēh* (הַרְבֶּה), is an intensive infinitive absolute form of the verb *rābā* (רָבָה), which fundamentally signifies "to multiply," "to increase," or "to make abundant" (Brown et al., 1907).

Crucially, this linguistic nuance indicates that the text does not introduce a new form of pain or suffering as a novel curse. Instead, it underscores the intensification of a process already inherent: the inherent pangs of childbirth. This physiological reality, common across all female species, is here inscribed within a trajectory of revelation, not divine retribution. The biblical text does not institute pain as a malediction, but rather imbues it with an existential depth and an intensity that profoundly reveals the foundational role of the woman in the very continuity of life. In this reading, the arduousness of childbirth becomes a testament to the feminine's pivotal agency in sustaining creation. (Westermann, 1984).

2. From Anguish to Consecration: Reframing the Feminine Body in Theological Anthropology

Building on this understanding, the suffering associated with childbirth transforms into a site of fertile trial, a profound journey that both reshapes and consecrates. It is not the outcome of transgression, but rather the expression of a vocation. This re-reading resonates powerfully with robust Malagasy representations where the feminine body is frequently depicted through metaphors such as tranon-jaza (child's house), fonja (protective enclosure), or lavaka famoriandrano (underground water reserve). These are all potent symbols of nurturing interiority, silent transformation, and the continuous flow of life.

The convergence between the Hebrew concept of *neqēvāh* and these Malagasy cosmic expressions suggests a shared vision : woman is less an entity to be corrected than a sacred space to be recognized. She embodies a power of maturation and passage, an organic sanctuary of life itself. Through this approach, Genesis 3 :16 (**Bible, Genesis 3 :16**) ceases to be a text of subjugation, instead becoming a text of revelation. It unveils the feminine body as a locus of covenant, a sacred threshold between God, humanity, and collective memory.

3. Reinterpreting Maternal Suffering: Agency and Vocation

From this observation, we discern that the suffering associated with maternity isn't passively endured as a punishment, but rather embraced as a necessary, sometimes perilous, yet fundamental passage. This perspective reveals a profound depth of feminine agency: the woman isn't merely a biological conduit, but an embodied subject who chooses, decides, and acts within the very confines of her body. This re-interpretation underscores a theology of the body where even within suffering, there is a powerful display of human will and vocation.

b. Interdependence and Creativity: Towards a Non-Hierarchical Theology

The complementarity between man and woman, far from being a hierarchy fixed by patriarchal order, is here re-articulated as an ontological cooperation. Man "sows," but woman "transforms": she is the earth, the dwelling place, and the matrix. The Malagasy proverb, "Tany vadin'Andriamanitra"—"The earth is the spouse of God"—as noted by Razafintsalama (1985), profoundly embeds this perspective within an agricultural and cosmic metaphysics. In this elevated understanding, woman emerges as a vital mediator between heaven and earth, bridging the human and the divine.

This perspective profoundly resonates with biblical traditions, where figures like Mary, the mother of Jesus, experience maternal suffering not as a burden but as a path of profound faith (Luke 2 :48 ; John 19 :25–27). Her anguish at the foot of the cross, for instance, mirrors the transformative pain of childbirth, revealing a sacred participation in redemptive history rather than a punitive consequence. This shared understanding across distinct traditions underscores a theology that champions interdependence and co-creation over fixed hierarchies, recognizing the feminine's indispensable role in the ongoing unfolding of divine purpose within the cosmos. (Luc 2 :48 ; Jean 19 :25–27).

1. The Enduring Feminine in Malagasy Tradition : Beyond Biology to Ontological Depth

In Malagasy tradition, the feminine transcends a mere biological function of reproduction ; it embodies a far vaster anthropological and symbolic reality. The mother is perceived not only as the giver of life but also as the one who carries the memory of lineages, transmits the wisdom of ancestors, and ensures the continuity of the social order. The profound Malagasy proverb, "Reny tsy maty fa miandry anaka"—"The mother never dies, she awaits her child"—powerfully illustrates this ontological depth. Even beyond physical absence, the maternal figure remains perpetually present in the collective memory, serving as a silent guardian of hope and transmission.

According to Malagasy customs, the feminine is not solely confined to the reproductive role. The mother simultaneously embodies memory, speech, and sovereignty. She is the living keeper of ancestral wisdom, the one who transmits essential values through the gestures of daily life, as articulated by Rakoto (2018). This perspective emphasizes that the maternal presence extends beyond the physical realm, becoming a locus of memory and silent resilience. Rakoto's insights underscore this constant, protective presence, enduring even beyond biological death. This enduring spiritual and communal presence firmly positions the feminine as a vital, non-hierarchical cornerstone of Malagasy existence.

2. The Enduring Heroism of the Feminine: A Quiet, Foundational Strength

Feminine heroism, viewed through this theological and anthropological lens, is thus inscribed in endurance and sustained presence. It doesn't necessarily manifest in overt triumphs or visible battles, but rather in a daily faithfulness, in the profound capacity to quietly bear the weight of the world, and to cultivate hope even in the most arduous contexts. The woman, in this light, emerges as a moral compass, a figure of stability and steadfast resilience.

According to Raharinjanahary (2015), the mother is often perceived as *fonjan'ny fiarahanonina*—the moral matrix of the community. She undertakes essential functions without always occupying a public space of overt recognition. Yet, her educational, nurturing, and spiritual role is utterly fundamental for the cohesion and continuity of society. This quiet, steadfast heroism, rooted in enduring presence and generative acts, offers a compelling counter-narrative to more conventional understandings of valor.

3. The Unclaimed Heroism of the Feminine: A Foundation of Being

Feminine heroism, in its deepest theological and anthropological sense, requires no overt claim to exist. It is intrinsically woven into a continuous practice of responsibility, vigilance, and relationality. The feminine body, therefore, transcends a mere biological vessel to become a profound space of transmission—not only biological, but also deeply symbolic and political, intrinsically linking care, utterance, and memory. The feminine thus emerges as a cosmic space of relationship, regeneration, and identity.

Through its rich proverbial tradition, Malagasy culture places women at the very heart of the world, not as a marginal figure, but as a symbolic center and an ontological bedrock. The heroism of the feminine resides in this remarkable capacity to inhabit the interstices of collective life with discretion, yet simultaneously with an undeniable force, enduring resilience, and inherent authority. This silent, foundational strength underpins the very fabric of existence.

c. Subverting Gender Approaches : Toward a Situated Hermeneutic

The observed limitations of classical feminist approaches—particularly those championed by international programs since Beijing—stem from their inherent difficulty in generating sustainable and universally applicable change. These approaches often tend to impose standardized demands onto profoundly diverse cultural realities. However, a theological and anthropological re-reading of the term *neqevah* compels us to shift our gaze. It's no longer about merely integrating women into a pre-established system ; rather, it's about recognizing within them a symbolic space already imbued with inherent power and vocation. This situated hermeneutic advocates for an understanding that honors the unique cultural expressions of feminine strength, rather than seeking to fit them into a universalizing, and often Western-centric, paradigm.

1. The Feminine Body: A Primary Sanctuary and Site of Revelation

The feminine body, in this theological anthropological framework, is not a passive object of study but rather an active subject of revelation. Woman does not need to "become"; she already is. The Hebrew term *neqevah* signifies not a deficiency to be filled, but a foundational openness. It is humanity's first sanctuary, the primordial dwelling place of the human species. This matricial, sacred, and carnal locus does not need to be constructed; it is given, inherently bearing a profound potential for transformation.

Consequently, it becomes imperative that women themselves recognize the invaluable worth of their bodies, not based on external criteria, but from this deeply incarnated theology. To be *neqevah* is more than merely giving birth; it is to receive, to shape, and to guide. This isn't a status to be acquired through learning or struggle, but an original gift that must be cultivated, refined, and protected.

This hermeneutical approach does not oppose the achievements of feminist movements; rather, it re-grounds their foundations. It operates not from a logic of confrontation, but from a desire to return to source. It proposes an alternative grammar: that of the living, inhabited, and meaningful body. In doing so, it restores to the feminine body its profound symbolic density, transforming it from an ideological battleground into a vibrant space for theological discourse and anthropological experience.

2. A Situated Hermeneutic: Reclaiming the Embodied Feminine

In this vein, a situated hermeneutic invites us to bring together biblical readings and Malagasy wisdoms. This isn't about simply adding them up, but about allowing an incarnated vision of the feminine to emerge—a profound space of relation, memory, and transmission. This cross-cultural dialogue doesn't universalize women's voices; rather, it reveals their deep, inherent roots.

Consequently, liberation is no longer primarily about conquering social territory. Instead, it becomes about realizing an inner sanctuary, where a woman knows she already carries a vocation, rather than searching for an identity. In this interwoven reading, the feminine doesn't need to claim her place in history; she already embodies it, silently yet powerfully, in every transmission of life, in every breath sustained, and in every pain endured. *Neqevah* thus becomes the starting point for a theology of the everyday, where the woman's body is recognized as a place of covenant and human maturity. It is this internal recognition, more than external struggle, that establishes a lasting and transformative resistance.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949), significantly shaped gender debates. It postulates that femininity is not a biological or ontological given but a culturally imposed construct. While foundational for Western feminist studies, this idea implicitly suggests that the feminine is initially devoid of inherent meaning, with society alone bestowing its often alienating value upon it.

3. Reconsidering the Feminine: An Ontological Vocation in Biblical and Malagasy Thought

In stark contrast to prevailing existentialist frameworks, the biblical tradition, through the term *neqevah* (נֶקֶבָה), introduces an alternative epistemology for understanding the feminine. This Hebrew term designates woman from the very genesis of creation, not as an entity in process of becoming, but as a form already inherently invested with profound significance. Literally signifying "opening," "cavity," or "hollowing out" from the root נ-ק-ב (n-q-b), it also relates to the verb *naqav*, meaning "to mark," "to name," or "to designate"

(Numbers 1 :17). Thus, to be neqevah is to be designated from the very origin as a recognized entity, marked within the foundational structure of creation itself. Unlike Beauvoir's existentialist hypothesis, the feminine here is not merely a consequence of culture ; it is a symbolic and vocational expression rooted in being.

This concept finds powerful resonance within Malagasy cosmological thought. The woman is reverently called trano (house), fonja (protective enclosure), or lavaka famoriandrano (underground water reserve) —expressions that denote places of reception, transformation, and preservation. She is also proverbially known as "reny tsy maty fa miandry anaka" (a mother who never dies because she awaits her child), underscoring that her role transcends mere biological function to embody memory, utterance, and sovereignty. Furthermore, through the profound proverb "Tany vadin'Andriamanitra" (The earth is the spouse of God), we comprehend that the feminine, akin to the earth, serves as a locus of covenant, fecundity, and divine mission (**Rakoto, 2018**). This rich inter-epistemic dialogue reveals a deeply ingrained understanding of the feminine as a foundational and active principle within the very fabric of existence.

4. The Feminine as Primordial Vocation : An Inter-Epistemic Critique of "Becoming"

The feminine, within this refined theological anthropology, is not a void of meaning to be socially filled, but rather a profound call and vocation. To be neqevah is to inherently possess, from the very beginning, the capacity to inhabit the world, to order it, and to transmit its essence. It is to be the "primary house of humanity," a wellspring of living water, and the original school of knowledge. This inherent power is not acquired; it is received and embraced. It does not necessitate external formation, but rather an internal and collective recognition of the inherent dignity of the feminine body. Far from being "that which one becomes," woman is—from the very origin—and her role is essential to the very construction of the world.

Thus, our inter-epistemic critique of **Simone de Beauvoir**'s assertion does not deny the significant influence of culture on the feminine condition. Instead, it serves as a vital reminder that in other traditions—notably biblical and African cosmologies—woman is neither a mere cultural product nor an object of societal assignment. She is, instead, a matrional and active figure, a living memory, and an ontological reference point. Far from being a blank slate, she is a word already inscribed within creation itself. This perspective invites a deeper reverence for the feminine as a foundational and self-possessed force.

5. Reconsidering the Feminine: An Ontological Vocation in Biblical and Malagasy Thought

Simone de Beauvoir's foundational assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," rests upon an existentialist conception where feminine identity emerges from a progressive social construction. However, the biblical tradition, particularly through the Hebrew word neqevah, suggests a profoundly different understanding: woman is born as such because she is named this way from the very origin. Society does not assign her an essential femininity; rather, it is the foundational word that recognizes her, designates her, and imbues her with inherent meaning. To be neqevah is to bear a primal mark, inscribed in creation itself, preceding any form of cultural or ideological elaboration. It is, therefore, not an identity to be acquired, but a reality to be embraced and fully unfolded.

From this perspective, woman does not have to become what she already is. She is called to inhabit this reality, to live it fully, not under the influence of societal norms, but in fidelity to what she embodies from birth. African traditions, particularly Malagasy ones, affirm this same insight. They recognize in woman a source, a refuge, a living memory. To

say that "one is born woman" in these traditions is to assert that femininity is not a socially manufactured status but an ontological presence, a living word inscribed in the body, in the function of transmission, and in the covenant with the earth and life itself. Consequently, neqevah does not contradict the cultural experiences of feminine conditioning, but it relativizes them: woman is not an empty project to be filled; she is an already significant being whose vocation is inscribed within the order of creation.

Thus, in response to Beauvoir's famous dictum, we propose : "One is born woman; one assumes it." This formulation, an original contribution from an inter-epistemic reading of the feminine is not based on a progressive social construction of gender, but on an ontological recognition founded in creation itself. To be neqevah is to be called to assume what one already is.

IV. Conclusion

This cross-reading of Hebrew anthropology and the Malagasy cosmovision powerfully underscores how the feminine body is fundamentally conceived as a symbolic space—a life-bearing locus and a central, dynamic actor within both cosmic and social economies. Moving beyond reductionist biological determinisms or patriarchal assignments, this study reveals the feminine as an enduring generative, protective, and nurturing force. Through the theological lens of *neqēvāh* and its profound parallels in Malagasy concepts like *mitondra rano* and *trano zaza*, we recognize woman as an ontological center of creation, memory, and transmission. This re-evaluation of the feminine is intrinsically tied to a decolonial re-reading of traditional narratives, particularly in deconstructing the perception of maternal suffering as divine punishment and re-framing it as an heroic, transformative vocation rooted in gift and resistance.

The inter-epistemic approach employed here has thus enabled a re-assessment of biblical categories through the lens of corporeality, unveiling a dimension often overlooked in texts: the sacred potential of feminine flesh as a site of promise. This perspective allows us to rethink woman not as a "fragile vessel," but as a pillar of life, embodying profound meaning, inherent strength, and a sacred dimension in both cosmologies studied. The ethical and theological imperative emerging from this research is clear: to foster a more profound recognition of the feminine body as a primary sanctuary, a given reality that is already whole and significant.

Ultimately, by asserting, "One is born woman; one assumes it," this study provides a nuanced response to contemporary gender discourse. It advocates for an understanding of the feminine not as a social construct to be acquired, but as an ontological reality to be embraced and lived out. This recognition, rooted in ancient wisdoms, paves the way for an embodied, inclusive, and resolutely decolonized theology of the feminine—one that champions an inherent dignity and active presence over externally imposed roles or narratives of lack. The heroism of the feminine, often quiet and unseen, thus stands revealed as a fundamental force for both human flourishing and cosmic continuity.

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