



Article

# Hannah's Suffering: The Power of Voice

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**Abstract:** Hannah's story in the Old Testament has been written about considerably by Jewish feminists, womanist theologians, and other biblical scholars. This paper strives to build upon these works in asking the reader to consider Hannah's story from a liberatory theological theory of suffering by Sölle, as well as a postmodern and non-religious lens as discussed by Sandoval's Theory of Oppositional Consciousness in *Methodology of the Oppressed* and Lorde's "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action". This paper asks if this narrative can serve as an example of taking back one's power by confronting a complex system of power and oppression for Black women. Intercessory prayer aptly defines the personal as political, especially with the multiple minoritized identities of Hannah. I argue that Hannah's story can serve as a complex narrative of differential consciousness and the reclamation of one's own power, by using her voice. Her audacity to correct a prophet, fight for her valid desire of motherhood, and determine her own happiness is evidence of an empowerment ethic that is necessary for minoritized women in a post-modern era and political climate where the erasure of all forms of difference and consciousness is the priority.

**Keywords:** old testament; womanist; differential consciousness; oppositional consciousness; liberation; suffering; power; voice



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## 1. Introduction

In the ninth book in the Old Testament of the Bible, we find a relatively popular story about a woman named Hannah. Hannah's narrative has been well discussed by womanist theological scholars and Jewish feminist scholars (Brenner 1994; Burgh 2010; Newsom and Ringe 1998) and serves as a complex narrative of differential consciousness and the reclamation of one's own power, by using her voice. Much of the scholarship has only been from the religious or exegetical standpoint as it pertains to the social world. In this article, I attempt to build on their work by discussing Sölle's liberatory theory of suffering, but also to introduce a non-religious perspective via Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness which makes room for those who are not religiously located in the social world. Differential or oppositional consciousness is best described as the power reclaimed and built by marginalized people despite their minoritized status. The audacity of Hannah to correct a prophet, fight for her valid desire of motherhood, and determine her own happiness is evidence of an empowerment ethic that is necessary for present-day minoritized women in a climate that seeks to suppress and erase all forms of difference and agency.

After engaging other studies of Hannah's story and reviewing the biblical story of Hannah, I will outline the theories of suffering by Dorothee Sölle and oppositional consciousness by Chela Sandoval. Finally, I will demonstrate how Hannah's use of her voice illustrates the components of suffering and oppositional consciousness, and how these theories, along with Audre Lorde's "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" can inform specifically minoritized women's resistance and struggle towards liberation.

Hannah's story, which evokes themes of motherhood, agency, religious custom and intercessory prayer has allowed scholars to write extensively about Hannah and her transformation, seeking to understand her from a feminist or womanist perspective instead of

seeking to understand her through patrilineal norms (Bird 1983; Bronner 1999; De Andrado 2021; Fentress-Williams and Knowles 2018; Hamori 2015; Klein 1994; Meyers 1994; Murphy 2020; You 2019). Because of her gender, childlessness, and ethnic lineage, Hannah holds multiple minoritized identities, making this story even more important to understand and consider for minoritized women and mothers (Williams 1993; Klein 1994).

The Hebrew Bible, according to Cook, serves as a larger narrative about the divine intervention of God in Israel, and Hannah's story is just one example of this divine intervention as she moves from a grief-stricken and barren sister wife to a joyous mother of six children by the end of the second chapter in I Samuel (Cook 1999; The Holy Bible 2011). In this case, the focus of divine intervention in this story is through Hannah's first son, Samuel, who grows up to be a prophet. Generally, because Samuel is the focus, much of Hannah's role in the story is overlooked, or as Gafney notes about many Old Testament women, Hannah is not typically seen as anything more than a "womb pressed into service" (Gafney 2021).

Hannah's story is set in a time that is not wholly the same but not entirely dissimilar from present-day society (You 2019). It is still sexist in that men are prioritized no matter their age or position, often over women who are the obvious focus or protagonists of the narrative or experience. While some scholars de-emphasize some of the Hebrew Bible's patriarchal presentations of women (Fentress-Williams and Knowles 2018), they do acknowledge that Hannah's story is set in an era where the value of a marriage and personhood was heavily decided by the number and gender of the children born to the family (Breyfogle 1910).

Scholars have also argued that Hannah's story is a rare narrative in which we get to witness a woman in the Old Testament participating in religious customs and acts. Further, because she is marginally positioned, her narrative offers a perfect opportunity for transformation in the story (Kim 2008). Of the nine female characters featured in the Old Testament, Spangler notes that Hannah is considered one of the good girls in the bible (Murphy 2020), likely because at a quick glance, Hannah desires to fit in with the social norms of her environment in asking for a child. For the purpose of this essay, I am paying explicit attention to Hannah's transformation in alignment with the womanist tradition of centering the most marginalized people first (You 2019).

After a brief review of Hannah's story, I will apply Sölle's theory of suffering and Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness to further extend Lorde's call to minoritized women to speak and not remain silent in their own oppression.

### *Hannah's Story*

Hannah is the first of two wives to a wealthy husband. Hannah is barren, yet her sister wife (Peninnah) has several children. Per the Jewish custom, families made an annual visit to the temple where they offered sacrifices to God, if they could afford to make the trip. Hannah and her family made this pilgrimage every year. In one particular year after the sacrifice was complete and the family was eating dinner, Hannah's sister wife was particularly irritating. The story tells us that she regularly boasted about her fertility, knowing it was hurtful to Hannah. As a result, Hannah would not eat and left the table weeping. However, before she left, the text mentions that Hannah's husband "loved her", and during dinner he inquired, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:5, 8). Hannah leaves the house and walks to the temple, praying fervently. She prayed so hard that eventually, no words were audible. The text says that the temple prophet, Eli, noticed her, assumed that she was drunk, and yelled at her, asking, "How long are you going to stay drunk?", commanding her to "put away [her] wine" (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:14).

Quickly, she corrects him, saying that she is grief-stricken and "deeply troubled"; she is not drunk. The prophet then tells her to "Go in peace" and he hopes that her prayers are answered (Holy Bible, 1 Sam 1:15). Afterwards, Hannah was soon pregnant with a son

who she named Samuel, because she “asked the Lord for him”, and the text paints a picture of a biblical happily ever after for Hannah, one and all (Holy Bible, 1 Sam. 1:27).

Kim writes that Hannah’s transformation from embodying nothingness to an empowered agent allows us to believe in infinite possibility and the relief of her suffering [16]. Minoritized women can use Hannah’s narrative as a road map to aid in relieving their own suffering. Hannah’s story can also be used to explore new insight into liberatory suffering, as discussed by Dorothee Sölle which will be discussed in the next section.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Theory of Suffering

Dorothee Sölle is a theologian who offers a new perspective on Christian suffering. This different theoretical approach to Christian suffering empowers the individual amid their pain. Sölle’s liberatory theory of suffering contains three phases which are simply called Phase One, Two, and Three.

Phase One is marked by powerlessness, isolation, and mute pain. In this phase, the individual does not have language for the pain and suffering they experience. Sölle notes that this is the first hurdle of the sufferer: to find language for their experience through “learn[ing] to formulate things for themselves” (Sölle 1973, p. 71). Sölle emphasizes the importance of the individual arriving to this language on their own, it cannot be given to them. A second component of this first phase is a feeling of “meaningless” which is characterized as confusion of one’s beliefs, determining which reality they should believe and what they should do about their circumstance.

Acceptance of the surrounding social structures is one characteristic of the individual who has moved into the second phase of suffering. Sölle frames acceptance as the first step to determining a plan of action. The individual has explored the current structure and accepted the truth of its impact on their lives. In this phase, the individual has moved from confusion and an inability to accurately name their experience to having language and a desire to act. This phase is marked by expression and communication, so much so that the individual in this phase “produces new conflicts” (Sölle 1973, p. 72).

Phase Three is described as the phase of solidarity, organizing, active shaping of the situation and active behavior. To a casual observer, the individual in this phase likely does not seem that they are actively suffering because they now have language and have shifted from experimental testing and lamenting the circumstance to actively deciding what will be done about it. This phase asks for action now that the structures have been analyzed and understood to be firm in their roots. Most importantly, Sölle tells us that “active behavior replaces purely reactive behavior” which is found in the acceptance and exploration of the social structures surrounding the individual (Sölle 1973, pp. 72, 73). Now that the individual has language and has seen what action looks and feels like, they can more comfortably explore “the conquest of powerlessness” which is best defined as coming into “know[ing] that the suffering that society produces can be battled”. They can then create change (Sölle 1973, p. 73).

Next, I will outline the theory of oppositional consciousness by Chela Sandoval. It is unusual to have multiple theories applied to one concept, but for the purpose of this essay, I find it critical to discuss them both. While Sölle, a theologian, expresses liberation in a religious context, Sandoval discusses a developmental theory that expresses sociological liberation in language that may be more readily accepted by those outside of a directly religious context. I will then highlight and thread these two theoretical approaches with Audre Lorde’s essay, “Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, which serves as a direct call to action for minoritized women and people.

### 2.2. Theory of Oppositional Consciousness

Sandoval argues that there have been barriers (which she names as the “racialization of theoretical domains” in academia) to the reach of the many forms of what she calls differential or oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 2000, p. 70). It is this personal, political

and cultural configuration that permitted feminists of color from very different racial, ethnic, physical, national, or sexual identities access to the same psychic domain, where they recognized one another as “countrywomen” of a new kind of global and public domain, and as a result generated a new kind of coalition identity politics, a “coalitional consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, p. 70).

What links each theoretical domain is that “each is grappling with the hope—or despair—of globalizing postmodern first world cultural conditions by seeking, willing, or celebrating some aspect of the meaning or operation of a differential form of oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, p. 71). Most important to the implementation of an oppositional or differential consciousness is to assume it in everyday life under present conditions. Sandoval believes that we need to detail the technologies of oppositional consciousness because previous forms of resistance are not sufficient anymore.

There are five elements of Sandoval’s oppositional consciousness: first, to name or diagnose the system of power in which the individual finds themselves. Fanon argues that those in the margins need to take full inventory of their circumstance so that they can adequately assess the problem (Sandoval 2000). The next element of developing oppositional consciousness is to disrupt the ideology within oneself. If the internal myths and beliefs about the oppression are not adequately addressed or understood, it is difficult to address the manifestation of the oppression. Minoritized communities have always had to understand signs and symbols in at least two ways: one that is natural to their way of knowing, and another as the dominant paradigm understands and frames it. This is what is meant by Enrique Dussel when he writes, “The slave, in revolt, uses the master’s language; the woman, when she frees herself from the dominative male, uses macho language” (Dussel 1985, p. viii). Hill Collins (2000) shares the Outsider/Within paradigm which rests on the premise of a unique position and access to power held by Black women. Recognition and utilization of this power is a critical component of developing and maintaining oppositional consciousness.

The third element of Sandoval’s theory is meta-ideologizing, which means to build and create new symbols to help with interpreting oppressive structures. Sandoval admonishes that this element can be contaminated by the dominant paradigm, if not done with intentional and meticulous effort (Sandoval 2000). While it is supposed to renew the perspective and set the agenda for the marginalized, meta-ideologizing is also intended to gain the attention of the dominant paradigm. That it is intended to impact those in power is why Sandoval offers the warning. By the time an individual has reached the fourth element or component of oppositional consciousness, Sandoval names it as differential movement. Differential movement takes the established consciousness and allows for challenging within its own perimeters. This is a built-in check and balance system so that, as warned, the movement and the development of oppositional consciousness is not tainted by the dominant ideology.

The last element serves as an indicator or marker of the success of the previous four elements: an ethical ideological code that is committed to social justice categories such as race, gender, sexuality and other identities.

As with any theory that has liberatory potential, a critical understanding of power is key. Sandoval encourages a global post-modernist illustration of power which is much less traditionally hierarchical (vertical) and more circular in nature and allows its citizens to “access their own racial-, sexual-, national-, or gender-unique forms of social power” (Sandoval 2000, pp. 109–10).

In the next section, I will demonstrate the elements of both theories found within Hannah’s story and bring Lorde’s essay into the discussion to further illustrate the importance of this narrative in women’s liberation movements.

### 3. Discussion

Sölle’s theory of suffering and Sandoval’s theory of opposition offer language to Hannah’s narrative that operationalizes the impact the story can have in women’s liberation

movements if we unpack the different theories and elements of both theories. In Hannah's story, we find each phase of Sölle's suffering. She begins in the first phase when she finds herself solemn and enduring ridicule by her sister wife. She is surrounded by the structures of marriage and the expectation of motherhood and a husband who asks why she is crying, but she does not have language to express her experience. Many minoritized women experience this as well, being surrounded by difficult and suffocating structures and expectations of womanhood. These women, who may not have language like Hannah, often just know there is a void that they want filled.

Hannah is in Phase 2 when she leaves the house and begins praying. She has accepted the structure and custom of her faith and in this example, her decision to pray represents exploring the structures to fully understand their bounds. She asks for a child because she can at least verbalize the area in which she feels suffering. For minoritized women, this may look like initiating discussions with other women who are similarly situated and finding the courage to explore the structural reach into their lives, ultimately reconciling the all-encompassing nature of the systems surrounding them. Lastly, Hannah is in Phase 3 when she corrects the prophet and speaks for herself. Her power is in using her voice to ask for what she wants from God. I believe that these phases overlap, operate simultaneously and still reach the final phase, even though Sölle does not mention this as a part of theoretical suffering. This becomes complicated because Hannah uses the surrounding structure and custom of prayer to empower her to speak truth to power in the form of the prophet. For marginalized women, this third phase can look like setting boundaries around work-life responsibilities and instilling balance within the family unit. It could also look like increasing or changing activist behaviors, such as attending protests or voter registration drives or seeking redress for policies against minoritized populations in their district. There is more than one way to develop a liberatory approach to eradicate collective suffering. Individual progression still contributes to the collective liberatory potential.

Similarly, Hannah moves through some of the elements of oppositional consciousness because in each part of her story, she grapples with hope and despair and has a desire for something different. Inherent in Sandoval's theory is a belief of validity. Hannah's desire for motherhood is valid, although we understand and acknowledge that socialization has assigned value to womanhood based upon the norms of motherhood. This serves as a reminder for minoritized women that their desires are also important and can inform and motivate their approach to building oppositional consciousness.

Hannah demonstrates oppositional consciousness in that she names her suffering to God and acknowledges the system that is creating and causing her suffering. This can also happen when marginalized women talk to each other as it is the building block for developing oppositional consciousness. When she encounters the prophet, Hannah exhibits the ability to deconstruct the externalized sign or symbol of drunkenness for herself and to the prophet. As Sandoval mentioned, the deconstruction of internalized myths via signs and symbols that benefit both the marginalized and the dominant must be carefully approached. Coalition-building often gains the attention of other similarly situated minoritized people, as well as those who benefit from their marginalization. In Hannah's case, she is careful in a way that does not fully empower herself. She is also in a unique position in that she still uses deference that positions the prophet above her. Again, [Dussel \(1985\)](#) offers some insight into how the sufferer navigates oppressive spaces in ways that do not always seem sensible or aligned with oppositional consciousness. In a present-day context, this is described as "playing the game", pushing boundaries in a way that the dominant group does not readily perceive. Just as in Hannah's narrative and per Sandoval's warning, this can work in one's favor or it can deter progress, so minoritized women should utilize this tactic with caution.

To an extent, surrendering raises questions about suffering and language—specifically, how the constant state of normalized suffering drains on the spirit of a person, diminishing their ability or desire to fight against suffering for themselves or others. Lorde uses the

racialized understanding and her own lived experience as a call to minoritized women to speak and rid themselves of the belief that their silence will prevent suffering.

#### *Suffering and Language*

Suffering and language work in tandem. The greater the suffering, usually the more silent the sufferer, and yet, silence does not prevent the suffering. Lorde's (2007) speech-turned-essay illustrates this. For context, it is 1977 and Lorde is speaking to a predominantly white female audience and has been battling breast cancer. Using her journey with breast cancer, she discusses her great epiphany: that her silence has not saved her from any of her suffering. She posits to this audience:

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—A Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours? (Lorde 2007, pp. 41, 42)

As such, she vows for the remainder of her life that she will use her voice to speak for the issues that matter and for the systems that seek to abuse her and other minoritized people. She acknowledges the reality of fear in speaking one's truth and speaking against the powers that be but reminds us that we will be afraid anyway, so we might as well say what we are so desperately afraid to say. Lorde says, "And of course, I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (Lorde 2007, p. 42). Lastly, she mentions that what we are most afraid of is a visibility to which we feel cannot carry out. She notes that Black women are highly visible but ultimately rendered invisible through "the depersonalization of racism" (Lorde 2007, p. 42).

While we do not excuse Hannah for showing deference in this moment with the prophet, Lorde gives us context about how language evolves on a similar scale as Sölle's theory of suffering and Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness. Fear is valid, but in the fight for liberation and to rid oneself or one's community of suffering, fear cannot overrule the desire for liberation. Lorde instructs and encourages minoritized women everywhere to speak up for themselves and for their community. In the final section of this paper, I wish to conclude with how Hannah's story and these theories can be useful to minoritized women, as they organize towards their own liberation.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Hannah gives us an opportunity to see ourselves through her transformation. We have been charged by Lorde to speak through the fear we feel about dismantling the systems that bind us. Silence will not save us, and Hannah demonstrates how we can use our voices to advocate for ourselves moving past the social norms to go boldly and directly to our Creator. Sandoval offered us one way of developing non-religious oppositional consciousness and Sölle is a theologian who uses faith to argue that suffering can be used to fight for liberation and doing so on our own terms. It is not typical to use more than one theory, but for the purpose of this essay it is important because Black feminist/womanist approaches emphasize liberating people where they are socially located. Minoritized women—particularly minoritized religious women who are still mired in social norms that require their acquiescence and silence—can use Sölle, Sandoval, and Lorde's work to read Hannah's narrative as one illustration of self-advocacy and liberation in a complex web of oppressive systems. This is particularly important for religious communities of minoritized people because it offers at least one pathway for using faith to eradicate and change social systems—to reclaim power. Black and Brown women are uniquely positioned to reclaim this power (Hill Collins 2000).

The battle against systems of power is never over, but with Hannah's narrative and with Sölle's and Sandoval's theories we have more tools to further chip away at the systems

that cause the suffering. The difference now is the capacity for understanding “that the suffering that society produces can be battled-lead[ing] to changing even the structures” (Sölle 1973, p. 73). Sandoval’s element of differential movement is indicative of this awareness where a community has the tools to refine and adapt their approach to the ever-adapting system(s) of power in place over them. We understand that we have the power and the unique position to dismantle the systemic oppression that we experience.

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