Reading the Intersectionality of Ruth in the Context of Asian Migrant Women in Hong Kong

Jasmine Sum-Yee YUNG
The Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

According to the UN report in 2015, 73.4% of 11.5 million migrant domestic helpers were women.[1] Hong Kong in particular had over 356,000 foreign domestic helpers in 2024, with 97.5% being women and the majority amongst them being Filipinos (56%) and Indonesians (41.4%).[2] These Asian migrant women embody the intersectionality of the biblical figure Ruth—a migrant woman, a racial and social other. Previous feminist readings have interpreted Ruth as either heroes or victims of patriarchy, racism, and classism, shared by Asian migrant women. Through feminist hermeneutics, this paper aims to unwrap the ideologies embedded in the interpretation of Ruth that intertwines with the experience of Asian migrant women in Hong Kong. The intersectionality of Ruth will be contextualized alongside the experience of Asian migrant women in Hong Kong to explore how the oppression stems not only from their presence and work in Hong Kong but also from the compound interlocking systems of social identities and power dynamics including their government, families, and working agencies. Such ideological discourse drives further oppression for these women to work abroad even being viewed as second-class foreigners in a foreign land. The last part of the paper will explore how Boaz symbolizes hospitality and the intervention of intersectional justice in the system of oppression. The fluid theory of class as becoming offers new subject positions for both Ruth and migrant women, challenging the static, opposing narratives of heroism and victimization. This perspective seeks to restore hope to the marginalized and reimagine cultural and religious understandings shaped by the racial and sexual other.

Ruth and Asian migrant women as ambivalent heroines

Asian migrant women in Hong Kong, with Filipina and Indonesian contract migrants being the second largest ethnic population, are usually represented by two dominant pre-established fixed points: by the government discourse as national heroes or by the non-governmental

[1] Maria Gallotti, "Migrant Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Estimates," Briefing note, June 13, 2016,http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/projects/gap/publications/WCMS_490162/lang--en/index.htm.
[2] "C&SD : Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics," accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/EIndexbySubject.html?scode=460&pcode=B1010003.

organizations (NGOs) as the vulnerable victims to be assisted.[3] Filipina migrant women have been praised as 'national heroes' since 1988 when Philippine President Cory Aquino first addressed the domestic workers in Hong Kong. This nationalist discourse rides on the success of the government's Overseas Employment Programme in 1972, when it converges with a shortage of live-in domestic workers in Hong Kong. The 2.33 million overseas Filipino workers generated over 40 billion dollars of annual remittances in 2023, making them the fourth largest remittances globally.[4] It has become a major source of the national economy and raised the living standard for thousands of Filipino families. Similarly, the Indonesian contract migrants are also called *pahlawan devisa* or 'heroes of foreign exchange,' contributing hugely to Indonesian economic development. Interestingly, the interpretation of Ruth also moves along the two discourses of heroine or victims of the patriarchy. The altruistic move of Ruth getting out of their plight is praised in the first- and second-wave feminism. Naomi, the designer of the plot, dispatches Ruth as a capable woman, a heroine to solve the two crises set at the beginning of the Book — lack of food and lack of male heir for the family.[5] Women of power fight against social and cultural obstacles to achieve success.

On the other hand, several studies have interpreted the story of Ruth as the marriage of migrant women and explore its implication for migrant women today.[6] They are applauded for their supportive role in preserving the patrilineal system by loyalty. Some suggest Ruth can be read as a female voice within the Hebrew Bible that Ruth demonstrates *hesed* (kindness or covenantal fidelity) to Naomi (another woman) instead of concerning the relationship with men alone.[7] By marrying Boaz, a highly respected man, Ruth is accepted into society and restores

[3] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 11–14; Katherine Gibson, Lisa Law, and Deirdre McKay, "Beyond Heroes and Victims: Filipina Contract Migrants, Economic Activism and Class Transformations," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 3, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 365–66.
[4] "Beyond Remittances: Overseas Filipino Workers Support Climate," IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, June 15, 2024, https://roasiapacific.iom.int/stories/beyond-remittances-overseas-filipino-workers-support-climate-resilience-philippines.
[5] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 196; Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, Biblical Seminar (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 201–2.
[6] Athalya Brenner, "From Ruth to Foreign Workers in Contemporary Israel: A Case Study in the Interaction of Religion, Politics and the Economy," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, 2016, 159–62; Han Kuk Yom, "Migrant Women and International Marriage in Korea: Looking at Human Rights with Help from the Book of Ruth," in *Korean Feminists in Conversation with the Bible, Church and Society*, ed. Kyung Sook Lee and Kyung Mi Park, Bible in the Modern World 24 (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2011), 90–100.
[7] Peter Hon Wan Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft , 416 (Berlin ; De Gruyter, 2010), 416; Susan Niditch, "Legends of Wise Heroes and Heroines," ed. D. A. Knight and G.M. Tucker, *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, 1985, 454–56.

the covenantal relationship with God.[8] Within the androcentric system, the integrity of women is preserved. Both Trible and Nidtch illustrate women's faith and humanity in Ruth and accentuate human experiences beyond mere textual analysis. Thus providing reasons for life's challenges from women's perspectives and even advocating a new beginning with men'.[9] Ruth is not acknowledged for her otherness but for her successful assimilation into Israel through marriage and the birth of a male heir.[10] However, Kwok is critical of white feminists putting too much emphasis on the individualist female subjectivity, which might 'overshadow other power dynamics at work in the story and suggest the heroic acts of the protagonist can solve all problems.'[11]

Ruth and Asian migrant women as victims

Opposite to heroic depiction, recent feminist studies focus on Ruth as a victim of the systemic oppression of patriarchy, sexism, and classism, shared by many overseas migrants. At the beginning of the Book of Ruth, the verb וַיִּשְׂאוּ (root נָשָׂא) means Mahlon and Chilion 'lifted' or 'took' wives, Ruth and Orpah, for themselves (Ruth 2:4). This verb is found at the end of Judges that Benjamite men 'lifted' or 'took' wives for themselves, treating women as possessions(Judg 21:23). It is suggested to be an idiom used nine times in the Hebrew Bible to describe the marriage of non-Judean women with Judean men. Following the deaths of men, Naomi and Ruth are never described as אַלְמָנָה (*'almānâ*), usually translated as widow.[12] They are called into a relationship with their male guardian, referred to as 'daughter-in-law' and 'mother-in-law,' and marriage is considered to be passive with no economic agency. Recent studies have indeed characterized three types of widows found in the Hebrew Bible[13]: אַלְמָנָה—a widow with limited economic support; אִשָּׁה־אַלְמָנָה (*'iššâ-'almānâ*)—an inherited widow with sons and אֶשֶׁת־הַמֵּת (*'ēšet-hammēt*)—an inherited widow without sons.[14] Ruth is outside of the protection of the clan and lies in the more vulnerable status as an אַלְמָנָה (*'almānâ*). Ruth and Naomi are in

[8] Susan Niditch, *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods* (New Haven, 2015), 120–33.
[9] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 196.
[10] Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 132, 138–41, 143,
[11] Pui-lan Kwok, "Finding a Home for Ruth. Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness," in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 142.
[12] Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible ; Volume 7D (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 47.
[13] Naomi Steinberg, "Romancing the Widow: The Economic Distinctions Between the Almana, the Issa-Almanah, and the Eset-Hammet.," in *God's Word for Our World: In Honor of Simon John Devires, Vol. 1*, ed. Deborah L. Ellens et al. (New York & London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 327–46.
[14]Steinberg "Romancing the Widow", 334.

the socioeconomic destitution. Boaz is a *gibor chayil* (גִּבּוֹר חַיִל), a prominent rich man in Ruth 2:1, to indicate his public social status in contrast with the poverty shown by Ruth and Naomi. In Ruth 2:10, Ruth asks a rhetorical question of why she deserves חֵן favour from Boaz. The socioeconomic power of Boaz is depicted by Ruth's prostration, usually used as an act of respect given to a king or deity. Boaz's servants' prompt reply and action show their loyalty to his question and order (Ruth2:4-6, 15-16). This socioeconomical narrative style easily indicates the contrasting status of the protagonists.

Under the global capitalist discourse, NGOs actively highlight the negative impacts of labor migration, with migrant women as exploited victims in the global labour market. These migrant women are pushed to leave home by the high unemployment in their countries. Like Frades, a Filipina worker in Hong Kong spoke up that she was heavily in debt after graduating college and was unable to find a well-paying job in her hometown.[15] The dominance of the capitalist system worldwide has commodified migrant women with passive economic property that reproduces prior colonial relations, just like Ruth being treated as objects with no economic subjectivity. Indeed, over 25 NGOs operate offices in Hong Kong to address issues such as illegal recruitment, exploitation by placement agencies, minimum wage, maternity protection, and serious cases of physical and psychological abuse. Critics of the state-sponsored Overseas Employment Program argue that remittances from migrant workers often flow into small-scale, 'unproductive' investments or increased consumption in the Philippines.[16] Many migrants feel pressured by their families to return abroad to sustain household incomes, perpetuating cycles of 'circular' or 'recurrent' labour migration.[17] This creates immense pressure on workers to send money home, simultaneously bolstering national revenues while entrenching them deeper into systems of economic and social oppression.

[15] Jessie Yeung and Xyza Cruz Bacani, "The Philippines' Migrant Workers, and the Children Left Behind," accessed November 8, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/11/asia/hong-kong-filipino-helpers-dst/.
[16] Victoria Paz Cruz and Anthony Paganoni, *Filipinas in Migration: Big Bills and Small Change* (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1989).
[17] Deirdre McKay, "Migration and Masquerade: Gender and Habitus in the Philippines," *Geography Research Forum* 21 (2001): 45–56.

Ruth as a foreigner—the social otherness of Asian migrant women under the tension of assimilation

Ricoeur's mimesis theory reveals the subjective identity of migrant women, that they are either seen as objects of assimilation or categorized as 'the other' or as a social minority.[18] The otherness of Ruth is shown in her affiliation with the Moabite identity (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2,6,21; 4:5, 10). This repetition serves as an emphasis and a motif of social otherness. Judahites are the majority dwelling in their homeland, while Ruth seeks entry from outside the boundaries. Moab has been depicted as an enemy of Israel in different texts (e.g. Judg 3:12-30; 2 Sam 8:2; 2 Kgs 3:4-27; 13:20; 24:2) and appears to be condemned in prophetic oracles (e.g. Isa 15:1-16:14; Amos 2:1-3; Zeph 2:9).[19] Yet, there is no negative assessment of Moabites in the book of Ruth. Some suggest Moabites were not negatively assessed during the monarchic and post-monarchic periods, but Schipper reminds us that the book of Ruth does not necessarily endorse Moab and simply does not condemn it. The repetition of the Moabite label serves as a function to alter the purpose of the book. Moabite is a stigma, linking Ruth to ethnicity with an aggressive form of seduction with the taint of idolatry.[20]

Under the label of a Moabite woman, the one time she introduces herself to Boaz as a foreigner. נָכְרִיָּה, a feminine form of נָכְר, indicates someone that is unnoticeable, disparaged, a minority surviving within a vast foreign culture, under migration and displacement far from her homeland and fighting for her existence. Ruth's foreignness is further illustrated by her report to Naomi in Ruth 2:21, where she confuses 'the young men' for 'the young women.'[21] Boaz asks Ruth to follow his young women (תִּדְבָּקִין עִם־נַעֲרֹתָי) and Naomi confirms this in Ruth 2:22 that you go with his young woman (תֵּצְאִי עִם־נַעֲרוֹתָיו). Bush argues that 'the reapers' (הַקֻּצְרִים) include both males and females and the confusion created by Ruth's report is intentional.[22] This shows that Ruth the Moabite is not familiar with both the language and customs of the Israelites. Indeed, Ruth 2 depicts their survival physically, and Ruth 3 portrays their survival culturally. Very often, foreigners can become noticed only when they work hard within the contours of

[18] Kyung Won Byun, "An Interpretation of 'Ruth and Naomi' in the Old Testament for a Subjective Identity Formation of Married Immigrant Women: A Focus on Paul Ricoeur's Mimesis Theory.," *Journal of Education & Culture* 22, no. 1 (2016): 287–307.
[19] Jeremy Schipper, "Translating the Preposition 'm in the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 63, no. 4 (2013): 38, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12301138.
[20] Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth" in *The Women's Bible Commentary* ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, (London: SPCK, 1992), 78–79.
[21] Timothy Lim, "The Book of Ruth and Its Literary Voice," in *Studies in Historiographical Tradition* (Brill, 2006), 278.
[22] Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary ; v.9 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1996), 121–22.

the law with pluckiness, and so can Ruth. 'She stands on her feet for gleaning from early morning until night, not rest for a moment' (Ruth 2:7).

Similarly, the otherness of migrant women can be shown in the struggle to assimilate in Hong Kong. Their identity is often defined only by their work, which invokes the imagery of slavery, the 'new foreign slaves,' working very hard under global capitalism.[23] In Hong Kong, a former British colony, the discourse of slavery resonates strongly, partly due to the historical practice of acquiring bonded servants, or *muijai*—young girls, around 10 years old, brought from mainland China to perform household chores. This practice was outlawed by the late 1920s, following Britain's anti-slavery legislation. It was soon replaced by an influx of adult women migrants or refugees from China. Known as *amahs*, these women had greater autonomy than the *muijai*, as they were not bought as debt-bonded servants but rather formally employed by families with a nominal wage. Today, foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong are often likened to *amahs*. They are required to live in their employer's home, work under fixed-term contracts, and are generally not allowed to switch employers, leaving them with limited time off and restricted personal freedoms. This situation is frequently described as 'forced migration' or the 'maid trade,' evoking comparisons to the 'slave trade.'[24] Asian migrant women from poorer countries are forced to accept unskilled work abroad, which defines them as second-class citizens in Hong Kong.

To break out of the stigmas as a social other, another way of being seen is through marriage. Marriage in Ruth illustrates an assimilation strategy into society. Marriage and procreation with the locals are seen as ways for the assimilation of migrant women to achieve better positions in society.[25] Those who cannot remain marginalized and second-class citizens. The subordinate role under the mother-in-law and submission to authority is tolerated within the patriarchal framework to benefit the men's order. In the end, the voice of Ruth disappeared in the celebration of women in town. She once again loses subjectivity under different forms of oppression.[26] Under patriarchal-patrilineal social assimilation, Ruth exemplifies self-sacrifice

[23] Gloria Rodriguez, *Filipino Women Migrant Workers : At the Crossroads and Beyond Beijing*, ed. Ruby Beltran, 1st edition (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 1996), 66; Anon, "Canada Immigration Imports Live-in Slaves," *Interpinoy* 2, 24. Also the documentary film 'Modern Heroes, Modern Slaves' produced by Telefilm Canada in 1998 http:/www.telefilm.gc.ca/en/prod/tv/tv98/065.htm.
[24] Noeleen Heyzer, Geertje Lycklama a'Nieholt, and Nedra Werakoon, eds., *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration* (Kuala Lumpur: APDC: Zed Books, 1995).
[25] Athalya Brenner, "From Ruth to Foreign Workers in Contemporary Israel: A Case Study in the Interaction of Religion, Politics and the Economy," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, 160.
[26] Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth: Further Reflections," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Feminist Companion to the Bible 3 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 141.

and chastity by following Naomi across the borders. Her subordinate role to the patrilineal family and dependence on men signify the longstanding gender, familial, and social hierarchical structures. Ruth is repeatedly introduced as the daughter-in-law of Naomi (Ruth1:6-8, 22; 2:20-23; 3:3, 18; 4:15) and referred to as the wife of the dead man (Ruth4:5) and the wife of Mahlon (Ruth4:10) by Boaz. This familial affiliation with the clan to which Boaz belongs further conveys the assimilation. Schipper accentuates the technical nuance of the preposition עִמָּהּ in Ruth 1:7 as 'under her [Naomi's] authority.'[27] It appears 15 times in Ruth and is usually translated as 'from' or 'from among' (Ruth2:12; 4:10) and 'with her' (Ruth1:7). Both Milgrom and Schipper identify עִמָּ is used as 'under the authority of' in various text in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Gen 23:4; 29:14, 25; Deut 15:12, 16, 18).[28] This is used to depict the asymmetrical relationships among household members in 1:7, 11, 22; 2:6, 19 (two times). This is also shown in the last chapter that the birth of a son is proclaimed to Naomi rather than to Ruth (Ruth 4:17). Ruth thus is praised as a fulfilment for continuing the lineage of Elimelech under the levirate customs. However, even when Ruth is assimilated into the family, she is muted twice, showing that she is excluded from the community in silence.[29] Her voice disappears when she enters Bethlehem (Ruth1:19-21) and when she bears a son (Ruth4:14-17). Both show a parallelism associated with the ties of kinship (Ruth1:8-18 and 4:1-12). Sanjk further underscores the foreignness, ambiguous class, and social status that make foreign domestic workers fictive 'members of the family.'[30] The labour laws and contractual nature of their job make it difficult to disguise with familial metaphors and fictive kinship terms.[31]

Ruth in the 'fields of violence'

The social location of Ruth in the field exposes her vulnerability to violence. The Book of Ruth situates itself 'in the days of the Judges.' Boaz asks Ruth to stay gleaning in his field and his instruction to young men not to 'touch' or 'molest'[32] or 'assault'[33] or 'harass'[34] Ruth in 2:8-9,

[27] Schipper, *Ruth*, 85.
[28] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, 1991), 2205–6; Jeremy Schipper, "Translating the Preposition 'm in the Book of Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum* 63, no. 4 (2013): 665.
[29] Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, 2 (1965): 167.
[30] Roger Sanjek, *At Work in Homes: Household Workers in World Perspective*, ed. Shellee Colen (Washington, D.C, 1990), 3–4.
[31] Nicole Constable, "Sexuality and Discipline among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 3 (1997): 543.
[32] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York, 2004), 35.
[33] Schipper, *Ruth*, 116.
[34] L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth*, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Nottingham, England, 2015), 80.

showing the hostile environment to women.[35] The same verb נָגַע is used in Gen 20:6, where God has protected Abimelech from touching Sarah.[36] Therefore, it represents the danger of sexual attack. Indeed, two recent reports highlight the physical and verbal abuse or exploitation of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, like the 'field of violence' in Ruth.[37] Verbal abuse, such as swearing, calling names, verbal threats, and insults to embarrass, humiliate, or disregard the worker, and time exploitation are the most common forms of abuse.[38] 'The cupboard is my private bedroom; I belong to the kitchen.' Migrant women in Hong Kong speak up about the deplorable living conditions and under the employment law to live-in, they are constantly living under surveillance, suspicion, and discipline by employers.[39] Besides, the use of physical force that creates injuries and sexual abuse is present in unwanted and unwelcomed behaviours that are conducted sexually without consent.[40] They are vulnerable to sexual abuse like Ruth in the gleaning field.

The marginalized status and imbalanced power relations have muted their voice in their workplace, making them nonconfrontational and accepting the conflicts as norms and leaving them with high depression levels. The live-in policy has made them remain in an extremely unfavourable and insecure position.[41] Women with darker skin colour, underprivileged social status, and working as 'servants' at home are usually despised by their employers. Due to fear and labelling of their differences, they are excluded en masse by society. Such disturbing culture is widely accepted in Hong Kong, and very often, the migrant women also embrace the devaluation of themselves. The migration policy, working conditions, and loose control of

[35] David J. Shepherd, "Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence," *Biblical Interpretation* 26, 2018, no. 4–5 (2018): 528–43.
[36] Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth* (Louisville, Ky, 1997), 58.
[37] J. T. K. Cheung et al., "Abuse and Depression among Filipino Foreign Domestic Helpers. A Cross-Sectional Survey in Hong Kong," *Public Health (London)* 166 (2019): 121–27; Chin Yung Choy, Leanne Chang, and Po Yee Man, "Social Support and Coping among Female Foreign Domestic Helpers Experiencing Abuse and Exploitation in Hong Kong," *Frontiers in Communication* 7 (2022).
[38] Choy, Chang, and Man, "Social Support and Coping among Female Foreign Domestic Helpers Experiencing Abuse and Exploitation in Hong Kong," 1.
[39] Zhuofan Chen, "Carving through Rigid Space: Filipina Domestic Workers at Statue Square, Hong Kong," Race + Space by McGill University, accessed November 8, 2024, https://www.mcgill.ca/race-space/article/arch-355/carving-through-rigid-space-filipina-domestic-workers-statue-square-hong-kong; Jessie Yeung, "The City Where Hundreds of Thousands of Women Have to Live with Their Boss," CNN, July 10, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/09/asia/hong-kong-helper-live-in-rule-intl-hnk/index.html.
[40] Akm Ahsan Ullah, "Abuse and Violence against Foreign Domestic Workers. A Case from Hong Kong," *International Journal of Areas Studies, 2015, Vol. 10, Iss. 2, p. 221-238*, 2015.
[41] Jason Hung, "Hong Kong-Filipino Deadlock Over Filipino Domestic Helper Issues," *Journal of International Affairs, Columbia University*, June 22, 2018, https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/hong-kong-filipino-deadlock-over-filipino-domestic-helper-issues.

human trafficking force them into prostitution to survive.[42] Even their home government neglects the rights of these overseas migrant women as the legislation of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act RA10022 has not been enforced effectively.

Ruth also survives in an environment excluding them, perpetuating hatred and violence against them. We can see the cultural discrimination in close reading of the text. The repeated description of the supervisor boy draws our attention to his words, showing prejudice against and a deceptive portrayal of Ruth in 2:6-7. He added the verb וְאָסַפְתִּי (to gather) after אֲלַקֶּטָה (to glean), and this verb is used in Israelites complaint in the desert about gathering manna in a haphazard manner (Num 11:7-8).[43] Garsiel interprets this as the supervisor boy intending to condemn Ruth.[44] His ambiguous and apologetic voice to Boaz shows that he is not sure whether the 'boss' would approve him to let Ruth stay for gleaning.[45] He fails to name Ruth, which shows the anonymity of Ruth and further emphasizes the foreign origin of Ruth. Grossman suggests the supervisor boy feels Ruth has gathered too much grain, and she must be carefully watched.[46] The vulnerability of migrant women make them the 'perfect victims' of sexual abuse and violence, and miserably Ruth's experience is still valid in modern society.[47] In such a bleak and potentially disempowering context, only systemic change could offer a meaningful path forward. The strength of shared experience and identity-based politics would powerfully transform the way we understand the routine violence against migrant women.[48]

Ruth's agency and Boaz's response as a symbol of the intersectional intervention of justice

The climatic scene in Ruth 3:8-9 also accounts for Ruth's patiently waiting by Boaz's feet in the darkness and does not begin to speak until Boaz acknowledgment of her presence. This scene arouses a sense of shock and functions as a pivotal turn of the story. Here, Ruth, being the minority, is in touch with Boaz, the majority is atypical. Throughout the biblical text, when a female protagonist encounters the male protagonist, even if she is the initiator, the male is

[42] Sylvia Yu, "'I Sold My Body in a Hong Kong Bar,'" South China Morning Post, February 19, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2071873/i-was-forced-sell-my-body-hong-kong-bar-filipinos-experience.
[43] Jonathan Grossman, "'Gleaning among the Ears': 'Gathering among the Sheaves': Characterizing the Image of the Supervising Boy (Ruth 2)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 4 (2007): 708–10.
[44] Moshe Garsiel, "The Literary Structure, Art of the Storyteller and Development of Plot in the Book of Ruth.," in *Hagut Ba-Mikra*, 3 (Tel-Aviv, n.d.), 71.
[45] Avi Hurvitz, "Ruth 2,7 - A Midrashic Gloss," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95, no. 1 (1983): 122–23.
[46] Grossman, "Gleaning among the Ears," 710.
[47] Kelly D. Dagley, "Women's Experience of Migration and the Book of Ruth." (Thesis Ph.D.-Fuller Theological Seminary, Center for Advanced Theological Study., 2019), 189, 212.
[48] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1241.

always the dominant voice. Interpretation outside the patriarchal framework offers us a new lens to view the interaction of Ruth and Boaz. Avnery highlights the attitude of Boaz to Ruth represents 'the attitude towards the Other is multi-faceted, fraught with different, even conflicting, emotions—alienation and estrangement coupled with curiosity and attraction.'[49] This climatic scene deviates from nature, guiding us to recognize the unique moments of interaction between the peripheral and the central.

Many scholars associate the encounter of Ruth and Boaz is by chance (וַיִּקֶר Ruth2:3), similar to Isaac and Rebekah in Gen 24. Abraham's servant and Naomi use the exact same words to praise YHWH, אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ, who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and the dead.[50] Feminist reading considers Boaz as the reactor of Ruth and Naomi's initiative.[51] Nail defines migrant labours as active agents whose movements challenge and redefine borders, norms, and systems of power.[52] He introduces 'kinopolitics,' or the politics of movement, to analyze migration not as a series of isolated events but as a force that continuously transforms societies.[53] By rethinking the migrant women as a pivotal figure, it light on how their mobility affects global structures and disrupts fixed identities, thus reshaping our understanding of sovereignty, citizenship, and belonging. Indeed, Ruth is the woman of noble character (*eshet chayil*, אֵשֶׁת חַיִל, Ruth3:11) functioning as the feminine equivalent of Boaz, the nobleman (*gibor chayil,* גִּבּוֹר חַיִל, Ruth2:1). Migrant women are subjects who can interpret their own mobility in a reflexive manner, rather than as economically driven labours responding to a global force. Gibson draws upon the anti-essentialist Marxist theory of class to interpret the multi-faceted experience of Luz, a Filipina contract worker in Hong Kong, to oppose the proliferation of economic identities and political strategies.[54] It offers a new discursive of dynamics of class transformation where Luz participates in the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labour with a capacity for political subjectivity and economic agency.[55]

On the other hand, the reinterpretation of Boaz as the redeemer (גֹּאֵל, *gō'ēl*), his *hesed* and kindness to Ruth further provides a new social praxis that recognizes Ruth's plight and showing solidarity with her by providing protection, other than familial-centred solutions to Ruth

[49] Orit Avery, "Ruth and Esther: A Journey Through Gender, Ethnicity and Identity," in *Megilloth Studies: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Brad Embry (Sheffield, 2016), 66.
[50] Schipper, *Ruth*, 42.
[51] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 196.
[52] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, 2015)
[53] Nail, 21–22.
[54] Gibson, Law, and McKay, "Beyond Heroes and Victims."
[55] Gibson, Law, and McKay, 373.

resisting the social and ethnic prejudice. The reserved manner of the supervisor boy is a minor figure to illuminate the hospitable action of Boaz in chapter 2. 'Gleaning among the sheaves' serves as patronage, providing Ruth food with a very generous amount (an ephah of barley) that is enough for a year, showing an extra step taken than the gleaning law (Lev 19:9-10) requires. He exhibits social inclusion by inviting Ruth to eat and drink with him (Ruth2:14). After nearly three decades of political mobilization, the composition and agendas of NGOs supporting contract domestic workers in Hong Kong have become increasingly diverse.[56] The Asian Migrant Centre (AMC) in Hong Kong particularly launched the Reintegration Programme to empower migrant domestic workers by organizing them into unions and savings groups, encouraging collective saving and investment in home-based businesses as sustainable alternatives to continuous labour migration.[57] Instead of just providing services like crisis counselling and paralegal assistance, AMC provides training in entrepreneurial and business skills, these women view themselves as economic agents with multiple identities, expanding the cultural and economic possibilities for both their home communities and their roles in Hong Kong. By fostering transnational connections and encouraging economic aspirations, AMC symbolizes Boaz's intersectional injustice to allow migrant labour to regain diverse class subjectivities as a dynamic force capable of reshaping economies and strengthening communities.

Lastly, I believe it is also the encounter with the face of the 'Other' that awakens Boaz's infinite responsibility, as suggested by Levinas. This responsibility arises from recognizing the Other within the self and rejecting the reduction of the social other to sameness. In his face-to-face encounter with Ruth's identity and devotion, Boaz responds with hospitality and actively intervenes against systemic injustice. Tan accentuated the foreignness of ethnicity has shifting boundaries dependent on the historical and ideological context.[58] By showing inclusiveness to foreigners, the discourse of foreignness changes, welcoming them as real family members. Recently, feminists also joined in to reject the cultural sameness and stigma of migrant women. They advocate for domestic work as professional labour deserving respect, fair conditions, and legal protections that honour the worker's agency and contributions. This requires a review of

[56] Lisa Barbara Law, "Sites of Transnational Activism: Filipino NGOs in Hong Kong," in *Gender Politics in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Brenda Yeoh, Peggy Teo, and Shirlena Huang (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 205–22.
[57] Gibson, Law, and McKay, "Beyond Heroes and Victims," 378.
[58] Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The "Foreignness" of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, Bd. 381 (Berlin ; Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 171.

the ‘global care-chain’ where the emotional and social labour provided by migrant women holds both economic and familial value, underscoring the need for policies that recognize the personal and professional sacrifices involved.[59] Although God seems to be absent or hidden in the Book of Ruth, the Boaz in daily life glaringly signifies the presence of God. Using Bretherton’s quote: ‘As an eschatological social practice, Christian hospitality is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the church to host the life of its neighbours without the church being assimilated to, colonized by, or having to withdraw from its neighbours.’[60]

Conclusion

Biblical studies should not just provide religious meanings but also explore the liberative potential and the subversive nature of the text that has the potential to shape the norms and values of our society. It calls for the reassessment of social norms to restore agency and rights to Asian migrant women so that they should not be reduced by generalization. Reinterpretation of the intersectionality of Ruth provides resistance to the dehumanization of Asian migrant women in Hong Kong. Boaz embodies the essence of Christian hospitality and provides judgment calls against the human tendency of exclusion as a response to differentiation. It demonstrates radical openness to strangers, which advocates mutuality, equity, and responsibility in the care of the marginalized. The inclusiveness transforms the intersectional injustice of the social systems. Perhaps, as Vanier suggested, we all need strangers to disrupt our lives by introducing the unexpected and different.[61] It is the encounter with radical exteriority that we experience the inbreaking of the Infinite God.[62] Entering into the foreignness of Ruth, welcoming a heart-to-heart relationship with people like Ruth, and restoring agency to individual life stories through systemic social intervention would transform strangers into friends and oppression into hope.

[Total: 3968 words]

[59] Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value,” in *On the Edge: Living With Global Capitalism*, ed. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens, First Edition (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization | Stanford University Press* (Stanford University Press, 2015); Nicola Yeates, “Global Care Chains,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 3 (January 2004): 369–91.

[60] Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness axmid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, England ; Ashgate Pub., 2006), 143.

[61] Judy Chan, *No Strangers Here: Christian Hospitality and Refugee Ministry in Twenty-First-Century Hong Kong* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 45.

[62] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne Studies. Philosophical Series 24 (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

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