


Feminist trauma theology of miscarriage as an embodied experience

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Miscarriage is the death of a foetus before it is born. Miscarriage is an event that can repeatedly occur in women's lives. Miscarriage can lead to trauma. This study aims to develop the concept of feminist trauma theology in the event of miscarriage and how the church should respond to this problem. The church is being challenged to give a serious response as evidence and a manifestation of its concern for the various struggles of Christian family life. The church can no longer just pray for a married couple to have children but also be a witness and provide the correct understanding to help families, especially women, become trauma survivors and experience recovery.

Contribution: This article describes feminist trauma theology as a significant proposition in answering the problem of miscarriage experienced by women. Building a theological understanding of the case of miscarriage must start from the body and women's experiences.

Keywords: trauma; feminist theology; body; women; miscarriage.

Introduction

The study of trauma was initially produced by literary scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, who came from the United States of America. In addition, a series of scholars in the field of psychology such as Judith Herman and Dori Laub can be called the driving force in this study (Kakoensi 2018:250). Their writings later inspired other fields of science, such as sociology and theology. The U.S. sociologist, Jeffrey Alexander, said that a sociological approach was also needed because according to him, trauma was not something natural, but a social construction (Alexander 2012:7). In turn, the writings of the scholars as mentioned earlier have become a reference for theologians in developing what is known as trauma theology.

The word 'trauma' is derived from the Greek word for 'wound', originally referring to an injury inflicted on the body (Caruth 1996:3). In the context of miscarriage, pregnant women who experience this condition will usually experience disturbances that crush their bodies and shake their souls after the traumatic event occurs. Besel Van der Kolk (2014), a psychiatrist said:

After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system. The survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their lives. These attempts to maintain control over unbearable physiological reactions can result in a whole range of physical symptoms, including fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, and other autoimmune diseases. This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain. (p. 53)

Trauma is not just an incident that happened or took place sometime in the past. Trauma is also what leaves an imprint on the mind, brain and body as a whole. Memories or things that leave an imprint have lasting consequences on the way an organism survives in the present (Van der Kolk 2014:24). Trauma is an experience that cannot be reduced to a memory problem that is stored in one's mind alone, but instead it participates in the body and changes one's physiological and psychological conditions. This is what is experienced by those who have experienced trauma, including the trauma of miscarriage. Miscarriage is the spontaneous loss of a pregnancy before 12 weeks (early miscarriage) or from 12 to 24 weeks (late miscarriage) of gestation (Giakoumelou et al. 2016:116). According to research, the level of depression and anxiety in women who experience miscarriage will decrease between 1 and 3 months after the miscarriage event occurs, but the permanent symptoms are trauma (Farren et al. 2016).

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The experiences of women who have had miscarriages

Some women who experience miscarriage describe it as a very sad experience, causing depression and guilt (Schwerdtfeger & Shreffler 2009:218). For many women, deep sadness, anxiety, confusion, guilt and depression persist for months, and even years after their miscarriage (Reynolds 2016:53). In fact, a study shows that more than one in 10 women report having thoughts of suicide after losing their pregnancy. Psychological research suggests that some women experience miscarriage and stillbirth as psychologically traumatic events, and many develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder following this incident (DeFrain, Millsbaugh & Xie 1996). According to Reynolds (2016), women who experience miscarriage are in a painful situation and often ask the question:

Is it my child I am mourning or my own lost hope for a child, or both? Should I name my baby? Whom should I tell about the loss? Can I mourn publicly? How publicly? Where can I be open about my grief? Do I bury the remains? Where? How? What if I have no remains to bury? At Mother's Day Mass, should I stand to receive a blessing, too? Is that blessing meant for me? When people ask me if I have children, or how many children I have, what do I say? (p. 54)

Theologically, women who have experienced the trauma of miscarriage also often ask the questions: Where was God when it happened? Why did not God stop it or send a helper? What kind of God do I believe in, who allowed this to happen to me? This article tries to answer the question of how the theological construction of this terrible experience is.

These questions will remind one of the problem of theodicy and it is further expanded in relation to the problem of trauma. Faced with this, the church often fails to see trauma as a serious problem. Often those who do not experience this directly will easily offer scripture verses accompanied by the statement 'God must have a plan'. This is not wrong, but it takes great empathy and awareness that the grief process experienced because of the miscarriage is not easy. In some cases, women will feel that they have been punished by God or they will blame themselves for the mistakes they have made in the past (Kakoensi 2018:261). On the other hand, some blame God for the miscarriage, so they feel negative things about their relationship with God.

Miscarriage as trauma

According to O'Donnell (2018), miscarriage or loss of pregnancy experienced by women is a normal part of women's experiences. However, the experience of miscarriage is an experience shrouded in silence and mystery (O'Donnell 2018:146). It is undeniable that not all women who have lost a pregnancy feel sad and depressed. However, for those who have planned and wanted a baby, losing a pregnancy is a tragic event and often leaves trauma, especially for those (women) who experience repeated miscarriages.

A woman who is pregnant already imagines her baby. The woman begins to imagine how the child's smile, hair, facial resemblance between herself and her husband will look like in the child. She may also image taking her child to school, or teaching her child to drive. In Paul Tillich's terms quoted by Jones, 'All time is expectation'. However, when bad things happen (infertility, miscarriage, the baby dies after birth), that hope also perishes and dies (Jones 2001:234).

In the context of Western society, there is an understanding that the desire to have children has become free will. In fact, many families choose to live without children. However, according to Anne Oakley quoted by O'Donnell, the above concept is not entirely correct. Western society still places a very high value on children, marriage, family and motherhood. For some people, it is considered the main role of a woman. Moreover, the church also often views the heteronormative family as the ideal (O'Donnell 2018:152).

This is also supported by Feske who believes that churches often position themselves as family-oriented churches (Feske 2012:8). Some churches focus their ministry on families and children. As a result, childless couples experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and perceive themselves as 'second class citizens' in the church. That is why church celebrations on Father's Day or Mother's Day can be very painful times for childless couples. Many people who do not have children have concerns that they will feel lonely in their old age (Feske 2012:9).

A traumatised person is haunted by a restless and helpless psyche. A person who experiences trauma is like living in a puddle of wounds. The horrors of the past are unspeakable. What is unspeakable is not wanting to talk about a traumatic event that is too horrific to tell. Unspeakable is a state of silence when faced with a moment that brings her back to a traumatic event in the past (Latumenten 2017:43)

The body stores not only memories, but also traumatic memories. Van der Kolk says that the body is a text that stores various memories and therefore remembers nothing less than reincarnation (Van der Kolk 2014). The body of a person experiencing trauma is like living documents that hold a history of violence. Even if the words are silent, the body is able to represent a tormented memory. The body has the power to store traumatic memories, even if it cannot voice it. Rothschild (2000:116) says the body is like a diary.

Miscarriage and the incomprehensible God

The Bible, neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament, gives a strong impression of hope for childless women. Indeed, in some parts of the story, especially in the Old Testament, there is an impression that God overcomes the struggles of childless women, for example in the story of the matriarchs of Israel: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel.

But unfortunately, according to O'Donnell, these stories actually reduce women's personalities to their fertility status. Instead, these stories are seen as lessons that God will do the same in the context of the church today (O'Donnell 2022:126). Is the Bible text that seems to give hope to today's childless families just a mere amusement? Why did God on the one hand relieve the suffering of the matriarchs but on the other hand allow women today to remain in this unfortunate situation? Isn't He the same and unchanging God? (Susanta 2021).

Undeniably, the Israelite matriarchs' story has become a stumbling block for childless women. This story is not the story of women. These stories are masculine stories packaged in women's stories (O'Donnell 2022:127). This is because the focus of the story is not on the women but on the children they gave birth to, namely the men who became the main characters in the history of Israel and the historical figures of salvation.

Keep in mind that the stories of barren women in the Bible are not meant to teach that every case of infertility that occurs today will have a happy ending too. Happy endings are not the message of these stories, but how God intervenes in the life of a family. In short, these stories are raised and told as an attempt to describe God's faithful love and mercy to his people and cannot be viewed as normative or as a benchmark for similar cases that occur today (Susanta 2020:187).

God is a free God. He can punish and retaliate, but he can also be touched and loved. According to Setiawidi, human error is to assume that God in the Bible can be tamed, wrapped and enjoyed according to taste (Setiawidi 2014:37). The God of the Bible is not a constant God. He is even an unexpected God who cannot be understood and cannot be tamed by humans because He is God (Setiawidi 2014:37). Why is God not completely intelligible? Because the God of the Bible is like that. Christians believe in a God who cannot be fully understood by humans. The question is, do we want to continue to have a dialogue and relationship with such a God? Do we want to worship an unpredictable God who often makes us restless? A holy God can never be tamed by the theologies that humans have built. God cannot be confined to any doctrinal understanding.

Therefore, for families today with no children, God in his mystery and freedom may or may not give the gift of offspring. This gift is God's to give and thus cannot be forced. The Bible seems silent and does not provide answers when dealing with the issue of miscarriage. Only three texts in the Bible specifically mention miscarriage: 2 Kings 2:19–21, Exodus 23:26 and Hosea 9:14. The miscarriages described in the three texts actually seem to give an indication that miscarriage is a bad thing and is God's punishment (O'Donnell 2022:29). This shows that Christian theology seems silent on this issue. However, women who have had a miscarriage can experience deep alienation from their own bodies. At first their bodies are believed to nurture and sustain life, but suddenly their bodies can appear like traitors,

antagonists, failures, maybe even murderers (Reynolds 2016:52). Therefore, discourse and theological reflection on the issue of miscarriage experienced by the woman is an urgent matter to do.

Feminist trauma theology of miscarriage

The earliest and most powerful Christian doctrines focused on embodiment. This can be seen, for example, in the doctrines of the incarnation, Christology, the Eucharist, the resurrection of the body and ecclesiology. Christianity has become a body religion (O'Donnell 2019:1). Trauma theology is closely related to the body and memory. Women's experiences of miscarriage are closely linked to the body and memory (O'Donnell 2019:3).

Therefore, efforts to build a theological understanding of miscarriage or pregnancy loss cases must start from the body and the woman's experience. Embodied experience is an experience that is lived and experienced in the female body or flesh. Theological response to those who have experienced trauma must start from their experiences, not from abstract doctrines that tend to suppress and ignore trauma experiences for the loss of the pregnancy (O'Donnell 2018:153). Based on the experience of miscarriage that she experienced, O'Donnell (2018) attempts to place the experience of the miscarrying woman as a site for theological reflection.

This is important because the experience of grief and trauma experienced by women who do not have children because of miscarriage does not exist in a vacuum. Social and cultural contexts also shape suffering, trauma and grief. According to Laurie Lisle, failure to bear a child is often related to cultural assumptions that strongly emphasise the importance of motherhood (Lisle 1996). However, according to Serene Jones, in many contexts women today have the social licence to resist such cultural pulls. Even so, the attraction continues, especially when it involves the dominant social and theological image of women as mothers (Jones 2001:232). The social construction that a woman will be perfect when she becomes a mother is painful for most women. That is why, Julia Kristeva said a mother is a crucified being. She is always branded by pain (Kristeva 1986:168). For Jones, talking about the issue of women who do not have children is a difficult thing because it means 'tries to honor women's stories of loss, no matter how uncritical, irrational or "unfeminist" they may sound' (Jones 2001:232). Therefore, this article intends to build a feminist trauma theology. Feminist trauma theology is a study that examines the relationship between trauma and feminist theology. This study highlights the concern for the theological and practical convenience between the two (O'Donnell 2019).

The experience of losing a pregnancy is a site rich in theological discourse. This experience challenges us to rethink the theological forms that have taken root in our respective traditions. The experience of losing a pregnancy requires a re-conceptualisation of who God is, who we are, and what we hope for. Theology needs to reconceive and

reimagine based on the experience of losing a pregnancy, to be able to support us through these experiences (O'Donnell 2022:12).

According to Samuel J. Youngs, one of the greatest needs for theological reimagining is in the context of trauma. According to Youngs, quoting Herman, trauma is a physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual wound (Youngs 2022). But in a more specific sense, trauma is an unhealed wound that festers and colours life through symptoms, flashbacks and impaired function. Theologians need to focus on what is known as trauma theology, namely trauma that is correlated with the social consequences of certain theological or doctrinal constructs. Whether we realise it or not, Christian doctrine actually silences the victims or survivors. The focus on theological trauma thus prompts constructive questions about how theology can be a source of healing, not hurt (Youngs 2022).

The problem is, miscarriage is often considered a matter of ordinary loss, not a deep loss like the death of a child. As a result, the church often neglects to provide pastoral care for those who experience miscarriage. There are many practical differences between the death of an infant before birth (miscarriage) and the death of a child who has already been born (Reynolds 2016:53).

Yet many studies suggest that most women, including those who experience early miscarriages, understand their loss as the loss of a baby (Reynolds 2016:53). Unfortunately, when a child dies in the womb, the church takes no pastoral action. Women are left to struggle alone, often in isolation, to understand their loss's meaning. The dangerous thing is when women are led to believe that they cannot grieve publicly, and that their grief does not deserve to be shared in the community (Reynolds 2016:52). Women seem to be forced to carry on with their lives as if nothing had happened.

Therefore, Rambo criticises and tries to overturn the mistaken concept that miscarriage is a common loss event. For a woman, miscarriage is not an ordinary loss. It is an experience of loss that goes beyond the grief of visible death:

Her body, my body, we were graves ... This death-site was inside us, deep in us. It was in a place even unknown to our own eyes, in a cavern from which we had believed a future would spring forth but from which only loss had issued. Not even death, for death supposes life and life was what we couldn't give. It was a tomb for the never-to-be: our bodies, ourselves. (Jones 2009:51–53)

The same thing was also expressed by Bauman (2019). The experience of being pregnant, giving birth, and having to lose her first child shortly after giving birth resulted in her being in dark times. This period is what she calls a painful experience with God. However, behind the suffering, she actually found a different perspective about God. Bauman views God as the womb. Her womb, which was pregnant, and had to feel pain as a result of the mental burden she experienced after losing a child, was a womb that was blessed

by God to create life, just like the womb of God who created it. On this basis, Bauman gives the highest appreciation to her own body.

Discussing and reinterpreting human suffering through the lens of trauma allows us to enter into the social struggles in which Christians live. Our theological response should come from the realities of trauma survivors' lives. Christian ethical responsibility is manifested in recovery efforts because we do not move from an empty space (Kakoensi 2018:273). Trauma causes a person to be in a void, the world around her becomes dim and almost lost, she experiences the unspeakable, there seems to be no future, even the ability to build hope is lost. In this context, the task of theology is to narrate what has not been described or imagined (Kakoensi 2018:273).

According to O'Donnell, there is no theological value in miscarriage. The incident was by no means a pedagogical tool that God used to teach some spiritual lessons to women. There is no sufficient theological explanation for why God allows women to have miscarriages (O'Donnell 2018:9). In her work, Serene Jones says that in the event of miscarriage, infertility or stillbirth, a woman often says: 'My womb is a bed of death, my body is a grave'. She feels dead, even though she is alive (Jones 2001:235). According to Jones, these women need a picture that can accommodate their grieving experience. They seek a divine image where they can crawl and find a place to rest. Jones believes that the women imagined and wished for 'God to be with her'. In this picture, the woman hopes to find the 'whisper of God's grace' that will restore her (Jones 2001:240).

Jones tackles the issue by inviting every woman who has experienced grief due to the loss of a child either due to infertility or miscarriage to understand God who has revealed himself in the history of mankind through Christ, his Son. how does the story speak to the suffering of women who have lost children? According to her, God's redeeming love is love for all people, including women who are barren, miscarriages and stillbirths; God is in solidarity with women's suffering (Jones 2001).

When Christ was crucified, the Son of God died. Because God sent his Son into the world with the hope of God's love, his death was the death of divine hope. This is in accordance with Moltmann's opinion in his book, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: Doctrine of God*, that God did not stop the crucifixion of Jesus, his son. He allowed it to happen, even sharing feelings of guilt (Moltmann 1993:21–22). According to Jones, the death of Christ is a death that happens deep within God – not outside of God, but in the very heart – perhaps the womb – of God. (Jones 2001:240). Just like the story of women who lost their children, God also experienced the same thing (Jones 2001:242). Jones (2009) also emphasises this in his other writings:

Jesus doesn't die outside of God but in God, deep in the viscera of that holy tripartite union. Because the union is so full, no part of God remains untouched by this death. It seeps into every

corner of the whole body of persons. If this is true, then, yes, God becomes quite literally the site of dying (p. 62).

The picture is not meant to identify women with God or vice versa, but to give a picture of God's solidarity to them as people who have lost their future so that they can have hope in the event of loss (Jones 2001). This image does not necessarily stop their sadness, but it may reduce their feelings of isolation as part of the recovery process (Jones 2001). Jones wants to show that the picture of God's redeeming grace is not a picture of a mother raising her child (mothering), but a picture of a mother who has lost her child (maternal loss) (Jones 2001:243).

Thus, through this depiction, Jones can imagine that God hugs women so that they feel God's presence in solidarity with him. The women could look at God in amazement. God and the women both felt grief for the loss of their child and their entire world. However, God in his loss has the power to save, the power to love, bound by his grace (Jones 2001).

This shows that God does not let and forsake women. God was present and showed his solidarity (and sincere empathy) for these women. The presence of God is a form of his participation and grace. Where is God when a woman is suffering, sorrowful and traumatised? God is there. He was with the woman who was oppressed, suffering and feeling abandoned. God was on the woman's side. He is present and feels the suffering of his people.

God who lost his son (death in God's self or womb) is an image of God who is in solidarity with humans (women). The figure of God who rises and goes through the grief is a picture of the fighting power of women who experience miscarriage. Shelly Rambo explained that the resilience of a person who has experienced trauma is a defence that is driven by past experiences of injury. Furthermore, Rambo said, 'Surviving is not a state in which one gets beyond death; instead, death remains in the experience of survival and life is reshaped in light of death – not in the light of its finality but its persistence' (Rambo 2010:25). The fighting power of someone who has experienced trauma is formed from the suffering left in that person. In fact, their life in the present is illuminated by the darkness of the shadows of the past (Latumenten 2017:124).

The role of the church as a witness to trauma

Communities and churches have a responsibility to witness the experiences of women who experience miscarriages (O'Donnell 2018:10). According to Agnes Howard as quoted by Reynolds, 'Churches meet an aching need when they offer a service, a public place, recognition and prayers for those who have lost children in the womb' (Reynolds 2016:59). This testimony takes place in the form of empathetic listening that truly hears the experience of female reproductive loss and validates the loss as real and heartbreaking. Furthermore, the community, in this case the church, has a responsibility to

begin to provide the theological framework for reflection on the experience and facilitate recovery. These theological frameworks will vary, but ecclesiastical bodies have a mandate to develop prayer, ritual, liturgy and theology that assist in processing experiences and facilitate restoration. Based on continued theological reflection, these prayers, rituals and liturgies need to focus as much on women's embodied experience as they do on babies who die (O'Donnell 2018:10). This means that in addition to rituals for naming dead babies and a liturgy of mourning for the loss, there is also a need for rituals that restore women from their liminal state and to rebuild their position in the community. There is a need for prayer that acknowledges the loss of hope and future, the pain experienced, theological confusion and distress caused by the experience of reproductive loss (O'Donnell 2018:10–11).

Rambo defines that a witness is, 'an observer, an onlooker, a bystander, or a spectator of a particular event or events' (Rambo 2010:38). The church is a witness to incidents of rape, mutilation, crucifixion, murder and other violent stories that are heard and witnessed to the church through biblical texts and the testimonies of members' lives. The idea of 'the church as a witness to trauma' was formulated by referring to the definition of a witness or witness (witness) initiated by Shelly Rambo. Rambo (2010) defines the concept of witnessing (witness) suffering through the metaphor of middle space:

Looking from the middle, we are orienting to suffering it in a different way – always in its dislocation, its distance, and its fragmentation. This orientation calls for a theology of witness in which we cannot assume presence or straightforward reception of a violent events but, instead, contend with excess of violence and its tenuous reception. (p. 8)

Rambo's middle space is a figurative site in which death and life are no longer separated (Rambo 2010:7). Furthermore, Rambo explained that, 'The middle speaks to the perplexing space of survival' (Rambo 2010:7). Jacques Derrida, as quoted by Rambo, explained that defining survival (survi-vre) or living after 'emphasized a thin and porous line between death and life' (Rambo 2016:304). The church is a witness to the suffering of women. The church as a middle space is a figurative site to witness death in the lives of women. Rambo wrote in an article, 'What does it mean to survive, to witness, to live beyond a violent event that was intended to be a final end?' (Rambo 2016:304). The church is a witness to the suffering of the past that still remains (remain) in a woman. Rambo defines *menein* (English: remain) to explain the condition of struggling for life after the event experienced, 'I employ "remaining" in order to connect it more explicitly to testimonial literature; there, the word "remain" is directly linked to the experience of survival. To remain – to menein – is to be one who survives Jesus and the horrifying events of the cross'. (Rambo 2010:102). The church is a witness to women survivors whose realities of life are shrouded in past experiences. By being a witness to suffering, the church

together with women need to speak the truth, namely the facts about their suffering. The church, as the middle space, is a witness to the struggles and anxieties of trauma survivors.

Conclusion

For many Christians, especially women, miscarriage is a frightening specter. Therefore, theological discourse is needed to build the right understanding in accompanying women through this. The feminist trauma theology built on shows that miscarriage is not God's punishment. Efforts to build a theological understanding of miscarriage must start from the woman's own body and experience. The experience of the miscarrying woman is a site for theological reflection. In addition, the churches must be a witness for women who have suffered from miscarriages.

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