

**From Tribulations to Triumph: A Study of Women Characters
in Francine Rivers' *A Lineage of Grace***

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Abstract

“From Tribulations to Triumph: A Study of Women Characters in Francine Rivers’ *A Lineage of Grace*” deals with the indomitable spirit and invincible determination of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary, the five protagonists in *A Lineage of Grace*, a series of historical novellas written by Francine Rivers, a contemporary American inspirational writer. Highlighting the positive attributes and natural gifts of women, this paper exemplifies these qualities of body and mind, inherent in the five Biblical characters portrayed in the novellas. However, these women In Jewish culture, like women everywhere, are often subjected to physical torture and their privacy is not respected. The burdens they bear are heavy, and often they are treated as mere chattels, commodities and child bearing machines. They are victims of society’s double standards, and subject to the dictates of patriarchal customs and traditions. In spite of all these challenges, Rivers’ protagonists draw sustenance from their faith and inner strength, and gain power to empower other women. They illustrate that being a woman is a supreme achievement, and not a deep fear, and prove the feminist concept “Sisterhood is Powerful”. The paper makes a plea to women to build bonds and triumph over tribulations, with mutual support and solidarity.

Key words: Women, Feminism, Discrimination, Courage, Indomitable Spirit

Literature is the manifestation of life. The life of every man and woman contributes to the longevity of the richness of society. Throughout history, the role of women in society has guaranteed the stability, progress and long-term development of nations. But gender equality is not found because of the many traditions which imply that women are inferior to men. They also insist that women should stay at home all day taking care of the children, doing household chores and making the food for their tired husbands. Feminist theory aims at understanding the nature of gender inequality. Discrimination, oppression, patriarchy and stereotyping are some of the themes explored in feminism.

Francine Rivers is a contemporary American inspirational writer. She has written fourteen Christian-inspirational romance novels. *A Lineage of Grace* is a series of five historical fiction novellas, published in 2002, and won the Retailer's Choice Award in 2009. Each novella details the story of a daring woman in the lineage of Jesus Christ described in the New Testament –Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. Rivers' protagonists are instilled with indomitable spirit and invincible determination.

A woman is a star and deserves the right to twinkle. She holds within her the power to create, nurture and transform. She strengthens the foundation of family as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife embracing everyone with the unconditional love. But often "Her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (Beauvoir 574). An empowered woman is powerful beyond measure. Every woman should celebrate womanhood, and fuel herself with self-confidence.

Every woman devotes her time, labour and talents for the welfare of the members of the family. Rivers' women take their part in the various activities connected with their homes, such as gathering fuel, looking after the sheep and cattle, driving them to the watering place, and fetching water. They are strong willed women with determination. They don't wholly depend on their men, instead contribute to the welfare of the family. Tamar is strong. She hoes the hard ground and carries rocks to the wall. "She knew how to plant a garden, tend a herd, cook, weave, and make pottery" (Rivers 17). Ruth is found flattening bread dough and laying it over the metal stove, and preparing savory stews for her mother-in-law while Orpha is mending a garment. In David's harem Bathsheba spends her time in sewing. Others are engaged in handwork to while away the hours. In *Unspoken* Bathsheba slowly gives up her dreams and starts fulfilling her duties to her husband. She carries water from the well,

washes, cooks, cleans and cards wool. She does everything she knows to make her husband's life comfortable and pleasant.

Female brain is wired to do things easily. Multitasking, solution finding and common sense are abilities that come naturally to women. They are the tactful managers of the family income and careful in spending money. Tamar is skillful in organizing servants. She is efficient in conserving food and water when times are bad and being generous when times are good. She could read and write enough to keep proper lists and records of household goods. But the prime duty of a woman is considered to bear sons to her husband. "But children would be the greatest blessing she could give her husband – children to build the household" (Rivers 17).

When a girl is bargained for marriage more stress is laid on her fertility than her appearance. "Judah didn't care about her smile or her teeth... He cared about her fertility" (Rivers 12). As Tamar comes from good breeding stock and her mother has produced six sons and five daughters, Judah believes that the young girl will be capable of building up his household. For, "A woman without a husband and sons might as well be dead" (Rivers 12).

The greatest of all the blessings of women is to be a mother. It is a boon to a woman which gives her a reason for existence. Tamar has been deprived of motherhood by Judah's sons, Er and Onan. Judah fails to keep his promise in giving his third son Shelah to Tamar as her husband. The amount of pain and insults that she has endured makes her cunning and scheming. She wants to assert "It's the law of both Judah's people and mine that I have the right to a child by Shelah or by Judah himself" (Rivers 73). Pretending to be a temple prostitute, Tamar begets the offspring of Judah, her father-in-law. She would risk everything, even her life, for the chance to bear a child. The sense of motherhood instills in her power and authority and she becomes the matriarch of the house.

In Jewish culture the laws on women are discriminatory in nature. Male children are regarded blessing to the family, whereas, the arrival of a female child is considered to be a mournful event. Judah has felt pride and joy when his sons were born. As Uriah is called away to war Bathsheba weeps in isolation. She has no son to carry on Uriah's name or "to take care of her when she was old" (Rivers 320). Naomi remembers the joy when she found she was with child, "the celebration when a son was born – first one, then another" (Rivers

206). But as the midwife announces Anne that she has given birth to another girl child, her heart sinks and she weeps, knowing her husband would be bitterly disappointed, “He had been fasting and praying for a son” (Rivers 423). Mary broods over being deprived of male children. “A son would work alongside his father... go to synagogue and give distinction to his father... provide for his mother if his father died ... But a girl? What use was a girl ... She would simply be another mouth to feed” (Rivers 423). Joachim names both his daughters Mary, which mean “bitterness and suffering” (Rivers 424), despite Anne’s pleading for the name Deborah, a strong name. As Mary finds a hindrance on her way to offer her life for God she regrets being born a woman. “Sometimes she almost wished she had been born a man. Then she could have gone to the desert cliffs of Qumran and dedicated her life to God” (Rivers 426).

Male children enjoy freedom and the privilege of socializing with people. Judah feels proud when he sees his little sons are rebellious with their mother. “He’d been amused by his son’s passionate rebellion, foolishly proud of it” (Rivers 13). But when Tamar, the little girl was adamant against her parents’ wish to marry the savage Er, she is assaulted and bullied by her mother and sisters. Bathsheba is not allowed in men’s company or to partake in any kind of discussion pertaining to intellect or governance. “Women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do” (Bronte 106).

The whole burden of child bearing and greater part of child rearing task is laid on the shoulder of the woman in the family. It is considered to be the sole purpose of a woman’s existence. Tamar’s mother admonishes her as she prepares her for marriage, “I have told you what you were born to do ...Be a good wife and bear many sons” (Rivers 10).

Mother is held responsible for the child’s habit of self-control, orderliness, industriousness, and behaviour pattern. She plays a key role in the shaping of the child’s personality. Religious and moral values are inculcated in children by their parents. Judah blames his wife Bathsua, who never cared about the public behaviour of her sons. They turn out to be drunkards with no responsibility for their family. In the same way Naomi also expresses her grief that her sons are not well instructed about God. They knew little of Hebrew customs and laws. In contrast to these mothers, Mary stands out to be the best example of a mother, who has inculcated great values in boy Jesus. Tamar reaffirms her

desire to learn about the God of Judah and bring up her sons to worship him. Bathsheba “kept her sons close – teaching them about God as she walked with them, teaching them as she sat with them” (Rivers 377).

Women are branded as weaker sex. They are judged to be feeble and vulnerable. As David plans to take all men to the battlefield to fight against Philistines, Ahithophel, an elderly man is infuriated. He asks, “Who will protect our women and children ...?” (Rivers 305). At the age of eight Bathsheba’s parents are on a look out for a mighty man to “protect a pretty and young maiden” (Rivers 303). Before going for war David expresses, “I don’t like leaving our women and children on their own” (Rivers 310).

Rivers’ women are often subjected to physical torture. As Tamar’s pregnancy is exposed she is beaten up and kicked by her father and brothers. Grabbing her by the hair they yank her to her feet and drag her across rocky ground to Judah. She scrambles away and rolls into a ball so that the baby wouldn’t be harmed. To protect her unborn child she gathers all her might and fights back with him, “She had the lion’s cub in her womb, and she would fight like a lioness to save it” (Rivers 75). As they struck her, “with all her pent-up fury, Tamar hit back” (Rivers 77).

Women’s privacy is not respected. To aid Zimran in convincing Judah that Tamar is old enough to conceive, her mother and the nurse Acsah decide to show him the cloth. Tamar is startled, “Was nothing private? Did everyone have to discuss the most personal events in her life? Her first show of blood had proclaimed her womanhood and her usefulness as a bargaining tool for her father” (Rivers 9). She becomes a commodity to be sold, a tool to forge an alliance between two clans, and a sacrifice for an assured peace.

Women are not given freedom to choose their own destiny. They have to look up to men or seek their approval. “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will” (Bronte 249), retaliates Jane in *Jane Eyre*. For most of Rivers’ protagonists all decisions are determined by men. They are forced to submit their will to those of men. Tamar is compelled to marry Judah’s son against her wish. As she battles, her mother cautions her, “Struggling against your fate is like wrestling the wind I would join your father in stoning you. ... Your father decides whom and when you marry. Not you” (Rivers 10). She has no choice but surrender to her mother and sisters’ ministrations. She

submits to her fate quietly, “I’m sorry. I’ll do what I must” (Rivers 11). As she is forced to be married on the very next day of her betrothal, she pleads for some more time. Her mother says that her father decides when she is old enough. She instructs her, “It’s not your right to question his judgment” (Rivers 10). Tamar clenches her jaw, closes her eyes and decides to resign herself to her fate.

Being beautiful is being positive and happy. All women desire to be beautiful. But this beauty is bargained as a commodity in the market of wedding. Tamar’s elegance and gracefulness is manipulated by her father as he brings her before Judah to be physically examined. He asks her to smile, so that Judah can see her beautiful teeth and be attracted.

Fathers, who ought to be the guardians of their daughters, seem to exploit them. Rahab’s father is a cruel man who even goes to the extent of sending his young daughter to the king’s harem as a harlot. He persuades her telling, “As long as you live in the palace and please him, I shall prosper” (Rivers 105). He takes advantage of her ruin and enjoys tax exemptions, land use and an elevated position in the court. The king’s generosity lasts only as long as his lust. Though she is bestowed with a prosperous living and the illusion of independence, her inner suffering is tremendous. No one knows the depth of her pain. But on the outside, she has an enviable life. People do not know what “it felt like to be used, stripped of humanity” (Rivers 107). But Rahab is a woman of present wit. She laughs with him, but continues to entice and solicit further benefits. Vowing not to end up as a discarded sandal, she finds a way to take advantage of her wretched situation. “Every moment in his company, her mind was crouched like a lioness studying its prey, watching, waiting for his weakness to show” (Rivers 106). Though she submits to her fate, triumphs with grace and multitude of blessings at the end.

Adultery is considered as one of the most grievous sins in Judaism and the punishment is also a cruel one. The scripture says, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife both the man who slept with her and the woman must die” (Deut. 22:22). But in day-to-day life, men with multiple partners are called players while women are ostracised for the same. When Tamar, the widow is found with child in her father’s house she is scorned by her family. The news of Tamar’s harlotry and her pregnancy rocks Judah and he is enraged. He orders her to be brought before the council and be stoned to death for adultery, not knowing he himself is the father of the child in her womb, “Bring her out and burn her! Burn

her, I say!” (Rivers 76). Mary’s innocence is doubted as she is found with a child before marriage. Joseph’s inner voice urges him to shun her telling, “Kill the girl. Kill her and the spawn she carries!”(Rivers 431).

The best protection any woman can have is courage. Rivers’ women are infused with self-confidence and indomitable spirit. Though they are pressed in the winepress of suffering they hold their spirits high. They prove themselves to be responsible and courageous women. After the death of Joachim, Anne boldly takes up the responsibility of marrying off her daughters. “When her father died, Mary’s future was left for her mother to settle” (Rivers 425).

Women need to develop a bolder and fearless attitude towards their own safety. They are sexually harassed in the absence of their men. Choosing to suffer in silence encourages men’s harassment. Women need to stop being the victims. Rivers’ women demonstrate manlike valour and gallantry in the face of danger. Bathsheba, though young proves herself to be a strong woman. As she sees an Amalekite rider knocking her mother to the ground she shrieks and runs at him in a fury. “Jumping on his back, she clawed his forehead and yanked his hair” (Rivers 310), screeching to let her mother go. Rolling over, she grabs the rope looped around her neck and kicks the man.

Rivers’ women are empowered with their strong faith in God. They always turn to Him for inner strength and power. Their constant companionship with God shoulders them to stand any kind of trials and tribulations. God has a soft corner for the suffering especially the women folk. “God Chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Naomi is a strong woman who is knocked down by every situation in her life. Life has turned cruel to her. She loses her homeland, husband, and two young sons. She is left alone with her two widowed daughters-in-law. To the end she battles with life holding on to the Only God she believed. She expresses in frustration, “God stands far off and watches everything I own turns to dust” (Rivers 203). Yet her will is well nourished with her strong faith in God. Despite her unanswered prayers Naomi continues to hold on to Him. “She prayed and prayed and prayed – and watched her life turn to ashes” (Rivers 203). But she senses God walking with her holding her tight in hard times.

Rivers' protagonists display remarkable courage and endurance at the time of childbirth. "Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They are much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them" (Exodus 1:19), exclaim the two midwives to Pharaoh. When Mary's time has come Joseph feels the need of a midwife. But she herself manages the situation and brings forth the Son of God to the world. "Mary worked quickly, using the yarn to tie off the cord before cutting it" (Rivers 442). She herself washes the baby and rubs him with salt to prevent infection. Acsah, an experienced midwife exclaims that Tamar's is the hardest labour she has ever witnessed, "though the girl suffered greatly, she did not complain" (Rivers 81).

Empowered women empower women. Rivers' protagonists are always accompanied by positive force. They are counseled by their fellow women how to escape from daily hardships. Tamar's nurse Acsah is a tower of comfort and solace to her. When Tamar is ill-treated by her mother and sisters, Acsah consoles her "Try to relax... Think soothing thoughts, dear one" (Rivers 8).

Naomi and her two daughters-in-law develop a close bond among them. They are as dear to her as if they have come from her womb. "Nothing brings people closer together than shared suffering" (Rivers 205). Ruth proves herself to be a faithful daughter-in-law. She serves as an anchor to Naomi in the stormy sea of life. Burying the agony of being widowed at an early age of her youth, she serves as a tower of unimaginable inner strength and encouragement to her lonely widowed mother-in-law, and becomes her confidant. The many hardships she has endured gains value in the eyes God. Her faithfulness and virtuous life is rewarded by God.

A woman with a voice is a strong woman. Being a woman should be her supreme achievement, and not her deepest fear. Behind every successful woman is a clan of other successful women who have her back. There can be no greater force than unity, so every woman must become each other's strength. They must become a backbone and support system for one another to triumph in every trial.

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