CHAPTER - II

Matriarchs
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One of the unique features of the Bible is the way it exalts women. Far from demeaning or belittling women, Scripture often seems to go out of the way to pay homage to them, to ennoble their roles in society and family, and to acknowledge the importance of their influence. (John Mac Arthur)

Women of the Bible are admirable characters with different profiles of personalities that enhance the prominence of womanhood. The present chapter deals with distinctive matriarchs of the Bible- Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. They are and independent with powerful character traits and temperaments with their idiosyncrasies.

The word ‘matriarchy’ is coined as the opposite of patriarchy, from the Greek ‘mater’ which means ‘mother’ and archein ‘to rule’. Matriarchy is a term which is applied to gynocentric form of society, in which the leading role is by the female and especially by the mothers of a community. The Bible is shaped in the patriarchal society, the wives of patriarchs ennobled themselves to be called matriarchs because of their attitudes, aspirations and affirmations. They are recognized as cofounders of Israel equal in stature to their more renowned husbands.

Despite the restrictions of the day, women were respected and valued by God and the matriarchs were respected and valued by their husbands. The personal relationships involved in these stories transcend the cultural expectations of women and their place in the family. (Keith Women of the Bible-The Matriarchs Web.2008).
The women of Genesis are trendsetters as creators of transition and transformation as they are pivotal in shaping the destiny of the family through their novel actions, intrigues and commitment. Their stories provide an insight into the family and social lives of all times as they deal with a struggle between two systems—the familiar patriarchal God of the fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph) with a covert matrilineal tradition of powerful women (Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel). The biblical matriarchs are individual characters with distinctive personal histories that play decisive roles as agents in their destinies instead of passive victims of male domination. They present confidence, robust action, and the fundamental rights of speech, freedom and decision-making thus named as women empowerment. Tammi J. Schneider, Professor of University of Pennsylvania examines their role as,

The role these women play is different from that of other women in Genesis and needs to be considered in parallel with the patriarchs. (P 17).

The Patriarchal/Matriarchal stories deal with the three primary stories: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Their tales record profound human struggles of fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, daughters and sons, typical family story with all its joys and sorrows, love and hatred, deceit and cunning, famine and prosperity. In those days, the role of woman as a wife and mother has more importance as they play vital role in the continuation of a generation. “The women who bear Israel must be key concerns.” (Bruggemann P 45) Matriarch’s contribution to biblical history is parenthood. Child bearing is productive
social contribution in biblical times, thus women who are mothers performed a tremendous service to the family and society at large.

Their roles in the literature, especially in family sagas, are far more influential, complex and forceful than their legal status. They are all impressive women who dare to swim against the strong currents of patriarchy. Schera Aranoff, a famous writer elucidates on their passions as,

The matriarchs emerged, not as one dimensional figure, but as complex, formidable women possessing an array of universal passions. Their thoughts are uncovered, their voices given sound, their actions more fully explained. (P15)

The culture and the setting of the story of the matriarchs are in patriarchal scenario. The father is the head of the family. The sons and daughters with the spouses and children are all subject to the authority of the patriarch. By tribal law, the eldest son, women and mothers succeeds the father upon his death.

The role of matriarch is defined as follows:

The matriarch was the woman within the central family with the highest social standing, and she received the greatest respect. She was responsible for the well-being of all the members of the clan, and was expected to oversee all the tasks mentioned in Proverbs 31. She made the day-to-day rules for the clan and resolved disputes between women. The women of the central family shared in the status of the matriarch and supported her in her duties and responsibilities.
The first woman portrayed in the history of patriarchs is Sarah, beloved wife of Abraham, the first patriarch of the Bible. Sarah is a woman from Ur of the Chaldees, Babylonia. Her former name sarai, ‘princely’ identifies her family origin of upper class. She is the daughter of Terah and half-sister to Abraham, who is ten years senior to her. The story of Sarah and her husband, Abraham has adorned more pages in Genesis. The life of Sarah is a fascinating story, true to life, full of hopes and despair. Her life is a continuous trial of her faith in God’s promise that she is to be the Mother of Nations. Through her trials, tests and torments she emerges as a powerful matriarch. She is a woman-beautiful, tough, smart, resourceful and obedient who is unique as the ancestress of Israel. She is the only woman in the Old Testament whose age is specified.

The first glance of Sarah is as the wife of Abram, a faithful and pious man. The text projects her name Sarai and adds the tragic flaw as marked woman, who suffers under curse of barrenness. ‘Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.’ (Genesis 11:30 P 20) They live in Haran. God promises Abram enormous blessings of land and offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and tells him to go to the land of Canaan. Though, it is a long journey, Abram obeys and sets to Canaan, settles there, moving around and building altars. As there is severe famine in the land, they move to Egypt to live. She accompanies Abram in his wanderings out of Haran, encountering proselytes as they travel. After a long journey through dusty deserts and
under a scorching sun, at the frontiers of Egypt, Sarah at the age of sixty five looks still fair and beautiful.

Her natural beauty turns out to be a source of insecurity for her husband and a stumbling block for her safety. So Abram says to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my will be spared because of you." (Genesis 12:11-13 P.21)

As they are in Egypt as famine refugees, Abram pretends his wife as his sister. To save his life, he tells Sarah, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."' (Genesis 20:13 P 32). Pharaoh's officials praise her to Pharaoh and hence she is taken into his palace. As God is on Sarah's side, pharaoh is warned against Sarah and hence she is relieved from his palace. In return Abram is given rich share. Some time later in the story, the king Abimelech of Gerar takes Sarah, as he views she is Abram's sister. In both the incidents God, the central character of the Bible intervenes and saves Sarah. Abimelech accuses Abraham and Sarah for telling lies. Then Abram drives home the point that she is really his sister, born to his father but not to his mother.

Sarah has completely showed utmost obedience and loyalty to her husband. As such Sarah and Abram's relationship is wife-sistership. Speiser, a Polish-born American writer is of the opinion,
A woman could enjoy the special status of both wife and sister to the same man, her position as ‘sister’ being bestowed by adoption ‘into sistership’ (ana ahatuti), in addition to an existing marriage relationship.... That ‘wife-sister’ marriage was indicative of higher social status, and was possibly an internationally recognized custom. (P 15)

Sarah is barren for many years and grieves for a child. Her barren state is a constant torment as a woman. The shame and bitterness of her barrenness engulfs her. Being an intelligent and capable woman, she decides to take matters into her own hands. Hence she persuades Abram to take Hagar, an Egyptian maid as his wife. ‘But she had an Egyptian maid servant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.”’ (Genesis 16:1-2 P 25)

Her action is obviously motivated by her love for Abram and her desire for him to have a son. And sharing her husband with another woman would have been one of the most sacrificial things she could do. Sarah’s barrenness also endangers the promise and prompts her to give her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate womb a custom known in Mesopotamia.

As a result Hagar conceives. She feels proud of her present position and begins to despise her mistress generosity. *When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.* (Genesis 16:4, P.25). The plan goes awry when the pregnant Hagar no longer acknowledges Sarah’s superiority. Sarah feels hurt and turns her anger on Abram, declaring, “You are responsible for the wrong I am
suffering. May the Lord judge between you and me." (Genesis 16:5 P.25) It is very pathetic on the part of Sarah to experience humiliation from her servant. H.V. Morton explicates the fact that,

Childless wives must sympathize with the righteous rage of Sarah, who, already humiliated in the very core of her heart, was forced to suffer the sneering triumph of a younger woman. (P22)

Her initiative and her own decision to have a child through surrogacy of Egyptian maid led her to face much agony, frustration and indignant which she shares and moreover blames her dear husband. Her resentment conveys her relationship with her husband. Hence Speiser is of the view that,

These lines of female resentment convey a sense of living speech and complexity of feeling and relationship one does not encounter before the Patriarchal Tales: the frustrated long-barren wife at cross-purposes with herself and with her husband, first aspiring to maternity through the surrogate of her slave-girl, then after the fact of her new co-wife’s pregnancy, tasting new humiliation, indignant at the slave’s presumption, ready to blame her husband, who has been only the instrument of her will. (Hagar in the Aggadah Ahmann P 20)

Sarah though barren for several years still enjoys the love and confidence of her husband and his recognition of her supremacy over a maid, even one who is to bear him a child. Abram says, "Your servant is in your hands, Do with her whatever you think is best." (P 25). According to Norah Lofts,
Not one man in a thousand would have given that answer, not one woman in a thousand could have elicited it. It is a triumph unrivalled in the history of marriage. (P 12)

Therefore, Sarah’s relationship to Abram is considered coherent at best. Sarah mistreats Hagar and hence she runs away from her but however with divine intervention again she comes to her master’s house. When Abram is ninety years old, God blesses Abram as father of many nations and changes his name to Abraham and his wife Sarai to Sarah as mother of nations and changes her name from Sarai to Sarah.

At the age of ninety, Sarah gives birth to a son, Isaac at her older age. Her joy knew no bounds and says, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” (Genesis 21:6 P 28) Her laugh of doubt turns to laughter of joy. As time passes, Isaac grows and stops weaning. Hagar’s son mocks at Isaac and Sarah becomes unbearably jealous of Hagar and her son. She orders her husband to send them away. In this story, Sarah acts independently, taking the initiative to decide the future of her family, even against her husband’s wishes. She struggles to preserve the matriarchal traditions of her homeland (Ur and Haran) against the patriarchal society in Canaan. The Genesis narratives thus form a bridge between the matriarchal pre-historic world and the patriarchal historic world. Her statement to expel Hagar, the slave shows her rage. H.V.Morton states on her attitude as thus,
It is a note of triumph that Sarah’s long life ends. She becomes the proud mother of Isaac. And once again her rage blazes out against Hagar. Magnificently true to life, she becomes the mother fighting for the rights of her own child: ‘Cast out this bondwoman and her son,’ She cries, ‘for the son of this bondwoman shall not be the heir with my son, even with Isaac.’ (P 24)

At the age of one hundred and twenty seven years she dies in the city of Hebron. Abraham buys the cave of Machpelah from one of the residents of the city and buries her there.

She is a loyal wife as she always calls her husband ‘Master’. Sarah is commended twice by New Testament writers, once for her faith (Heb. 11:11) and once for her submission to her husband (1 Pet. 3:5, 6). Her faith is severely tested and her submissiveness sorely tried. Sarah’s life became Abraham’s, wherever he goes she goes, not as his shadow but as a strong influence. Together they have experienced the vicissitudes of nomadic life and has found in them great spiritual significance. Abraham man of God, is willing to forsake home and country for the unknown, with Sarah ever at his side. Her love and loyalty are blessed by Abraham’s devotion to her. Abraham is the fountainhead of the Hebrew hero life and Sarah is the heroine of such life.

Sarah is a complex figure as her name is changed from ‘Sarai’ to Sarah. The story of Abraham and Sarah has been utmost significance to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Sarah does not always accept the doormat role. Her character shows different traits of temperament- anxious Sarah, skeptical Sarah, jealous Sarah,
obedient Sarah. The importance of Sarah has been overshadowed by her husband's fame and his well known close relationship with the Almighty. She is practical and realistic with different traits and temperaments.

Sarah, a woman masterful yet obedient, intolerant of rivalry yet capable of self-sacrifice, practical to the last degree yet possessed of those qualities of the mind which, in an age when a childless woman was often put away as a worthless thing, made her the cherished and unrivalled companion to her husband. (Morton P 24)

Fulfilling three roles, namely protecting and advising Abraham, giving birth to and raising Isaac, and obeying God’s will transforms her into matriarch of self-esteem. She is also associated with the Virgin Mary, on the ground of the miraculous conception.

Sarah’s character finds place in many literary works. In Chaucer’s ‘Merchant’s Tale’ (CT 4.1703-05) Sarah is depicted as an example of the perfect wife for youthful May to emulate. One literary remembrance of Sarah’s feminine appeal is in Burns’s song “Ken Ye ought o’ Captain Grose?,” which asks, “Is he to Abram’s bosom gane?... Or haudin Sarah by the wame?” (13, 15). The Dublin Abraham play (Non-Cyclic Plays and Fragments, ed. N.Davis (1970) is the first of these and the only English medieval drama which includes Sarah. Apart from poetry and drama based specifically on Genesis Sarah makes few appearances in English literature. J.Vogel, a famous writer remarked that there are many prominent Sarah’s in Dickens, all “jealous, crabbed, reactionary, wizened, primitive-souled” ( Allegory in Dickens 1977 P278) are based on the Old Testament Sarah.
Sarah features in several novels, as she is the central character. In ‘Sarah’ by Orson Scott Card, in the Women of Genesis series, ‘Sarai’: A Novel by Jill Eileen Smith, and ‘Sarah’ A Novel by Marek Halter. In the Christian fiction novel ‘Redeeming Love by Francine Rivers’, the protagonist, called Angel, is barren. At the end of the book, she reveals that her birth name as Sarah to her husband who takes the revelation as a promise from God that they will one day be able to have children.

In ‘Twelve Extraordinary Women’ by Pastor John F. MacArthur, her life and story is analyzed along with that of Eve, Rahab, Ruth, Hannah, Mary the mother of Jesus, Anna, the Samaritan woman, Mary of Bethany, Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and Lydia. (2008). Philo allegorizes Sarah as Virtue giving birth to happiness (Legum allegoriarum, 2.82). The tendency to endow Sarah with pious qualities is also evident in Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy,’ where she is placed in ‘Paradiso’ (32.10), in the amphitheater of the celestial rose. One of the more remarkable Sarah’s in recent literature is in Archibald MacLeish’s drama ‘J.B. ‘(1956), an adaptation of the Job story set in modern America.

Genesis is a book that includes family literature. Patriarchal stories not only present relationship between men and women but also the rivalry between the dominant and the dominated, racial hatred ness, class-consciousness, woman –on woman verbal violence and so on. The story of Hagar is one of the most human and poignant in the Old Testament. It deals with multiple oppressions – poverty and Slavism in terms of class, gender and race. The story is quintessentially about the social unraveling and the unsustainable ness of patriarchy- the dominant culture, in full flow. According to Danna Nolan Fewell and David M.Gunn famous theologians,
one of the most obvious structural features of the Biblical patriarchal family is the location of women within the roles of motherhood or child bearers. The point is that this role is regarded as the primary. If not the only, legitimate place for women; it is the place where women get social identity and approval. (P 68)

Hagar plays a very crucial role in Abraham’s life, being the mother of his first born. Her story gives an insider’s point of view in the household of polygamy—rivalries, jealousies, favoritism, envy, quarrels over inheritance, succession feuds, injustices and hatred. It is the first story in the Bible which reflects a power conflict between two women. It is interpreted as a story of a slave woman’s pride, who dared to defy domestic violence with dauntless courage and endurance. It also repudiates surrogacy as a form of exploitation. Thus Jessica Grimes, an African American writer rightly points out,

The story is about an enslaved woman who symbolizes the struggle for survival of colonized people because she experiences subjugation and freedom twice. Her story serves as a commentary on people who are deemed as formerly colonized. (P 86)

Hagar’s character appears from a two-act episode in Genesis sixteen and twenty one. Hagar is a young Egyptian girl and maid servant to Sarah. She is an Egyptian. Her name closely resembles the root of the Arabic ‘flight’, which means ‘fugitive’ or ‘immigrant.’ Hagar enters the story by default, as a colonized person, her story is the subtext of Sarah and Abraham’s story. She is presented as a pivotal character in three scenes. Sarah persuades Abram to take Hagar as his second wife.
Hagar has submitted herself to be a second wife to Abram. When she becomes pregnant, her lowly state of being a slave woman disappeared from her mind and begins to look down upon her mistress, Sarah, who is wife, and manager of Abram's household. Thus Phyllis Trible Professor of Columbia University rightly points out that Hagar's pregnancy enabled her to perceive Sarah in a new way. In her opinion

the hierarchy between the mistress and slave woman suddenly vanished. (P79)

Then Sarah complains her husband and gains his permission to act as she desires and mistreats Hagar and so she flees from her. In this situation Hagar, a discarded concubine has no voice and choice either to argue or to demand her place. She feels the lonely, desolate desert is better than her master and mistress's tent. Under such circumstances, it is a great risk to her life as well as the baby's to wander in the desert. Inspite of being a slave, a woman, above all a pregnant she tries to fight against the strong currents of patriarchy with self worth. According to Renita J. Weems African theologian and writer states,

pregnancy would awaken the slave woman's self-worth, which is dormant before.(P 432)

In the desert an angel of God appears to Hagar and orders her to return to Sarah and asks her to treat Sarah with respect as she is her mistress. Hagar, a woman in complete despair responds favourably and returns to her mistress house. She surrenders herself to the will of God and returns as Sarah's servant and not as Abraham's concubine. She believes in the angel of the Lord and commemorates the event by giving name the water well where she encounters the angel as the 'Beer
Lahai Roi.' (Well of the Living One who sees me). Though she is an Egyptian maid, she obeyed the word of God of Abraham who directed her she has not desires to hear. In turn, God blesses her with the promise of a strong son. Moreover she is blessed in an even greater way. She is the first woman in the Bible, aside from Eve, who sees the Lord himself and receives a promise of blessing and protection directly from him. Hagar is the only woman in the Bible receiving the promise of innumerable descendants. Alone and abandoned in the desert as a discarded concubine, She receives divine presence and commemorates the event by naming God God El-Roi which meant 'God of my seeing'.

Later she gives birth to a son, Ishmael. Fourteen years pass, Sarah bears a son, Isaac. A great feast is arranged in Abraham's house as Isaac stops weaning milk. Sarah sees Ishmael, son of Hagar mocking Isaac, her son. She demands Abraham to send away Hagar and her son. "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:10 P32) Her situation as slave grew worse and harsh which resulted in her expulsion from Abraham's house.

Abraham grieves at Sarah's decision for his first born son Ishmael. Bur God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah's words. Early in the next morning Abraham provides them some food and water and sent them away. Later as they walk out in the desert, running out of bread and water, and desperate, Hagar cries and thinks, "I cannot watch the boy die."(Genesis 21:16 P 33). Then God consoles her "Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."(Genesis 21:18 P 33).
Miraculously she opens her eyes and finds a fresh well of water. Ishmael lives in the desert and becomes an archer. His mother finds him a wife in Egypt.

In this two act narrative, Hagar shows remarkable heroic traits faith, strength and fortitude particularly in light of the utter powerlessness, hopelessness and bitter physical conditions in the desert. There are various identities for Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, the maid of Sarah, one of the women in the life of Abram, surrogate mother, a refugee, foreigner, the woman who heard God's messenger ordering her to go back and be a slave, a single parent and Ishmael's mother and the liberated woman. Hagar's story is interpreted as the story of a desperate, brave, rebellious, and at the same time helpless woman's attempt to flee into the desert, hoping to seek freedom from bondage, slavery and exploitation. She is a powerful woman who made a valiant effort to challenge her mistress and hence faced humiliation.

Hagar's story has universal appeal and is applicable to oppressed women of all times especially Black women in America. Kowk Pui-Lan, biblical feminist thinks that

Hagar's story can be significant to the African-American women in United States, because their ancestors had been enslaved as domestic servants and were exploited by wealthy and powerful owners. (P 105)

Dalit Indian women who worked hard also identify themselves with Hagar because they are exploited by Zamindars (rich landowners) and high caste masters. The condition of women as a victim is a perennial struggle for ages.
Hagar's life is a continuous trial and perpetuates as a victim of domestic violence in patriarchal society. Her story raises the issue of the exploitation of the poor, helpless woman's body as a mere vessel to produce male heir. Her status is merely that of a foreigner and a slave woman in a Hebrew household. She struggles for survival, constant compromise and adjustment. The portrayal of Hagar is of importance to the postmodern world of science, biotechnology and genetic technology, which is still creating surrogate mothers. As a foreigner, Hagar and her struggle to survive in Hebrew culture focus on the issue of cultural violence and domination.

Hagar is a victim of cultural oppression perpetuated by her mistress and her husband. The removal of Hagar's own cultural identity and the imposition of the new one throw light on the condition of people suffering from slavery. It reflects the suffering and trauma of the two thirds of the people in the world who lived for centuries under the threats of colonial and neo-colonial powers.

The African-American community has taken Hagar's story unto itself. Hagar has 'spoken' to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people. She and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of the poverty to which ruling class economics consign it. Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side. The
story of Hagar demonstrates that survival is possible even under harshest conditions. (Scholz P235)

The pathetic tale of Hagar throws light on the fact that she is 'the Desert Matriarch', a persecuted Madonna. As a single parent, she struggles and starts her own community. It reflects many single mother’s struggles and obstacles when they have the same fate as Hagar. Apart from being the tragic story of persecution, oppression and humiliation, Hagar’s story is interpreted as a story of liberation of a slave woman. Her banishment indeed highlights injustice; however, the silver lining in the cloud is that she and her son are not sold. She is no longer the slave woman, the property of her master, but a liberated and proud woman who raised her son alone. She is indeed courageous, who shook the status quo of her mistress and challenged the power which exploited her. She bravely faces life in the midst of immense suffering. She weaves the tapestry of liberation with three basic fibers- risk, struggle and hope, which all played a crucial role in Hagar’s emancipation from bondage and humiliation.

Hagar, is an inspiring character which made several writers to portray her story and role. William Shakespeare refers to Hagar in ‘The Merchant of Venice ‘Act II Scene 4 line 40 when Shylock says "What says that fool of Hagar's offspring, ha?" This line refers to the character Launcelot, who Shylock is insulting by comparing him to the outcast Ishmael. It also reverses the conventional Christian interpretation by portraying the Christian character as the outcast. Milton’s Satan implies, as he commences his temptation of Christ, that the latter’s desert condition is like that of Hagar and Ishmael (‘Paradise Regained’, 2.308). Hagar's destitution and desperation
are used as an excuse for criminality by characters in the work of Daniel Defoe, such as 'Moll Flanders' (The Review no.3, Sept. 15, 1711) and the conventional view of Hagar as the mother of outcasts is repeated in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's play 'Zapolya', whose heroine is assured that she is 'no Hagar's offspring; thou art the rightful heir to an appointed king.' Blake anticipates modern feeling, however, and puts Hagar and Ishmael back with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac in his 'The Last Judgement.'

In the nineteenth century a more sympathetic portrayal became prominent, especially in America. Edmonia Lewis, the early African American and Native American sculptor, made Hagar the subject of one of her most well-known works as strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered. In novels and poems Hagar herself, or characters named Hagar, are depicted as unjustly suffering exiles. These include the long dramatic poem Hagar by Eliza Jane Poitevent Nicholson (pen name Pearl Rivers), president of the Women's National Press Association; 'Hagar in the Wilderness' by Nathaniel Parker Willis, the highest-paid magazine writer of his day; and 'Hagar's Farewell' by Augusta Moore. In 1913 this is joined by the overtly feminist novel 'Hagar', by the American Southern socialist and suffragist Mary Johnston's.

Several Black American feminists have penned about Hagar as a story comparable to that of slaves in American history. Wilma Bailey in an article entitled 'Hagar: A Model for an Anabaptist Feminist', refers to her as a 'maid servant' and 'slave'. She portrays Hagar as a model of power, skills, strength and drive. In the article, 'A Mistress, A Maid, and No Mercy', Renita Weems argues that the
relationship between Sarah and Hagar exhibits ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and social exploitation.

A similarly sympathetic view prevails in more recent literature. The novel 'The Stone Angel' by Margaret Laurence has a protagonist named Hagar married to a man named Bram, whose life story closely imitates that of the biblical Hagar. A character named Hagar is prominently featured in Toni Morrison's novel 'Song of Solomon' which features numerous Biblical themes and allusions. Hagar is mentioned briefly in Salman Rushdie's controversial novel 'The Satanic Verses,' where Mecca is replaced with 'Jahilia', a desert village built on sand and served by Hagar's spring. Hagar is mentioned, along with Bilhah and Zilpah, in Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale', a controversial dystopian novel which centres around the women whose duty it is to produce children for their masters, assuming the place of their wives. In the recent book of nonfiction, 'The Woman Who Named God: Abraham's Dilemma and the Birth of Three Faiths,' by Charlotte Gordon provides an account of Hagar's life from the perspectives of the three monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

The third of the matriarchal figures is Rebekah. She is one of the most prominent matriarch in terms of her active role and her control of events. She is the daughter of Bethuel and grand daughter of Nahor, the brother of Abraham, the first patriarch. She is a young virgin. Her name cannotes 'tie rope for animals' or 'a noose' in such a rope. In an article on 'Marian Types of the Old Testament', Rebecca is delineated as,
She is the most clever and authoritative of the matriarchs, and yet she epitomizes womanly beauty and virtue, in her conduct (her virginity, her actions at the well), in her energetic speech, in her thoughtful courtesy, and in her self-assurance. (Freedman P 629)

Her story is the conclusion of the Abraham saga. At old age Abraham gives birth to Isaac. As time passes, Isaac becomes man and Abraham sends his servant, Eleizer, to his native land Nahor, to get a suitable wife to his son. The servant who is intelligent, prudent, and obedient and God fearing goes to Nahor. He prays God to help him in his task to find a wife for Isaac and he keeps a sign to identify the right bride for Isaac, that the girl who gives water to him and to his camels would be Isaac’s wife. As Alexander Whyte, a Scottish writer states,

A sweeter chapter was never written than the twenty-fourth of Genesis.

The picture of aged Abraham swearing his most trusty servant about a bride for his son Isaac; that servant’s journey to Padan-aram in the far east; Rebecca, first at the well, and then in her mother’s house; and then her first sight of her future husband—that long chapter is a perfect gem of ancient authorship. (P78)

Before the servant finishes praying, Rebekah comes out with her jar on her shoulder. She goes down to the spring, fills her jar and comes up again. The servant hurries to meet her and asks to give him a little water from her jar. She happily gives water to drink and draws water for his ten thirsty camels too, until they finish drinking. Rebekah’s gesture reveals the generosity, the selflessness and the inner beauty that Eliczer is looking for in a wife for Isaac. After she had given him a drink,
she said, 'I'll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking. So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels,' (Genesis 24:19-20, P.37).

The Bible gives an appealing line to Rebekah. The girl was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever lain with her. (Genesis 24:16, P.36) In his remarkable cameo of Rebekah, George Matheson uses the following expressions to describe her as 'a fine manner' – 'remarkable tact' – 'a sunbeam to her household' – 'a very beautiful young woman, with the gift of physical charm which is apt to produce self consciousness' – 'the gift of intellectual sympathy' – 'Rebekah's morning ray is a ray of sympathetic insight.' Modest and meek, frank and open, ready kindness, great energy and faith, graciousness matching her physical charm, is Rebekah. She is a woman of sympathy, foresight, and religious fervour.

It depicts her kindness and hospitality to help a stranger. Abraham's servant gazes in silence, believes all the more in God's goodness. He asks her about her origin and feels extremely happy to find her as her master's relative. He rewards her with an earring and two bracelets, all of heavy gold. The negotiations for Rebecca's marriage are carried out by her brother Laban. As she has to depart from her dear ones, Rebecca is given her choice – 'Will you go with this man?,' 'I will go,' she said. (Genesis 24:58, P.23). A woman of positive direction, Rebecca also shows the courage and spirit which would enable her to leave home and family for a new life in a strange country. However, they are not completely strangers. She is the granddaughter of Abraham's brother and therefore Isaac's second cousin. Before she leaves, she is blessed by her own kith and kin. 'Our sister, may you increase to
thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies.

(Genesis 24:60, P.39)

The caravan sets out for Abraham’s home, and a superb touch is given in the romantic story of Isaac and Rebecca. Isaac is out in the fields at eventide for his usual period of meditation at Beer-lahai-roi. He sees the approaching camels and feels the success of Eliezer in bringing him a wife. Rebecca sees an upright man walking forth in his field, bearing in his measured tread the aspect of one in holy meditation. She dismounts out of respect for her intended husband. She took her veil and covered her self’ (Genesis 24:65 P 24).

When Rebecca sees the handsome, mild-mannered and meditative Isaac, her heart went out to him. Isaac instantly falls in love with Rebecca. Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death. (Genesis 24:67 P 39) In the words of Dr. Herbert Lockyer, a clergy of Leeds Road Baptist Church:

The story of Isaac and Rebecca as a love lyric full of romance and tender beauty has been retold times without number, and is a charming record that never loses its appeal. It constitutes one of the most romantic scenes in the Bible, its ‘moving scenes, so fresh and artless in their old world simplicity’ have a pertinent appeal for present day society. (P 135)

Rebecca is barren for twenty years. In an age of polygamy, Isaac takes no handmaid, concubine, or second wife. Rebecca and Isaac are bound together by the
bonds of mutual affection. He pleads God on behalf of his wife to bless her with a child. *Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren.* (Genesis 25:21 P.40). Later she conceives after a long period of marriage. Rebecca’s pregnancy is so painful that she wonders if there is any point of living. So she enquired God about her pregnancy. *He babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘why this happening to me?’* So she went to enquire the Lord. The Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other’ and the older will serve the younger. (Genesis 25:22, P.24).

Rebecca gives birth to twin sons, Esau and Jacob with very different temperaments. *Isaac ... loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob.* (Genesis 25:28, P.40). being the mother of twins she has to love both her sons equally. But she loves her second son very much.

Isaac finds in Esau that strong practical nature, and energetic character which distinguished the woman he so dearly loved; and Rebecca saw in the gentle Jacob a replica of the father who had so strangely attracted her that first day when she met him meditating in the fields at evening. (Lockyer, P.138)

She is bold and a beautiful woman. So Isaac feared that her beauty may cause endanger to his life when he is in foreign land. There he pretends as if she is his sister. A famine occur, Isaac takes his family to Abimelech, king of the Philistines in Gerar. *When men of that place ask him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” because*
he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful." (Genesis 26:7 P 41)

Years pass by. When Isaac is old and his eyes are weak that he can no longer see, he calls for Esau, his elder son to bring him tasty food and so he wishes to give him blessings. Rebekah listens to their conversation and hence devises a plan for Jacob’s blessings. This is a woman whose wisdom is a wisdom of women that involves listening closely and working behind the scenes to accomplish goals. Newsom & Ringe says,

Rebekah, like all women in a patriarchal system, is marginalized. Her power is not the sort of empowerment to which most modern women aspire. It is the power of those not in authority. It is the power of the powerless.(P 45)

She tells Jacob “Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies” (P.43). Jacob apprehends and informs her mother that if treachery is revealed, he has to receive curse than blessing. Rebakah’s answer to him shows her deep love and bond upon her second son. My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say, go and get them for me.(P.43)

Jacob obeys his mother and acts upon Rebekah’s directions. By the repeated lies of Jacob, the deceived father bestows the unalterable blessing upon his son, and
Jacob, by fraud, became the father of Israel's race. To his discredit, he plays the role successfully which his mother drilled into him with mastery skill.

Jacob is clearly less concerned with the rightness, the morality, of his mother's suggestion than he is with what from the Life of Isaac, happens to him if his disguise is discovered and his impersonation revealed. (Deen P 16)

Esau decides to take revenge upon her brother. Rebekah fears the loss of both her sons. Rebekah advises her husband to send Jacob to her mother's land to get a suitable wife. Hence it is said,

her broaching the subject of Jacob's marriage was a masterstroke: it played equally on Isaac's self-interest and his principles.(Deen P 157)

Rebekah's deceit secures the blessing for Jacob, but resulted in his flee from his home. Hence, she never sees her dear son again. More than twenty years pass before he returned. The last picture of Rebecca is the tearful witness of the hasty departure of her favorite son. A strong minded, decisive girl had grown into an autocratic matriarch, and ends her days as a broken hearted woman. Her single-mindedness, fidelity, and love of predilection for Jacob are qualities that perjure in the narratives about her Isaac, although much older than Rebecca, is still living when Jacob returns to Canaan over 20 years later. She dies during Jacob's long absence, buried in the cave of Machaphela near Hebron.

Among all the heart-moving episodes in the Bible, none is as compelling and touching as the story of Rebekah. She is the first of the two Bible women mentioned
as giving birth to twins. The character of Rebekah has a peculiar charm and fascination. She appears first as a beautiful, confident, unselfish, loving girl, later turn into a woman of great strength of mind and depth of character, a monument of fierce and doting motherhood, a woman of insight and determination, and a woman of accomplishment oriented. She is clever, creative, active, energetic, farsighted, shrewd, physically robust and strong-willed and masterful wife.

Rebekah is a dynamic woman and is able to swim against the strong currents of patriarchy. She takes matters into her own hands. Deception is one of the options available to her. Her assertive, independent action crosses over the rigid boundaries of the prescribed female role. She steps outside of her limited role, becomes a primary actor, and manipulates the events with a power, passion and purpose. Most of the Biblical matriarchs are infertile and their journey to motherhood is a template. As well, the domain of childbirth and fertility blessings has been the domain of Jewish women for centuries. Her life is true to it.

In this story, the character of Rebekah reveals different temperaments—a loving mother, a disappointed mother, a loving wife, a manipulating wife. She is a contradiction of herself. She is a much maligned matriarch and is one of the strong female characters in the biblical narrative.

Rebekah may be my favorite matriarch in the Genesis narrative. She is portrayed as a strong character, who makes decisions that are followed through, drives the narrative, pulls the strings... I think she is great! In fact, I think is one of the few female characters within the narrative to truly outshine
and out perform the male characters within her story. She is portrayed as being stronger and smarter than her father, Isaac, Esau and even Jacob.

This narrative is the most pleasant and charming of all the patriarchal stories. The narratives of the Bible are of the highest artistic quality ranking among the foremost literary treasures of the world. Characters like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, are extrinsically portrayed in Genesis.

Its characters are episodal in that it is not self-contained but finds its raison d'être in its relation to the larger story or narrative of which it is a part. Its purpose is to arouse suspense and sustain interest by recounting episodes which threaten or retard the fulfillment of what the reader either suspects or hopes or knows to be the ending of the story (Swindoll P 230).

In Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' (in The Clerk's Tale), Rebekah is evoked with reference to the scene of giving water to Eliezer and his camels at the well, an episode that has attracted many pictorial representations throughout the ages. In Henry Vaughan's 'Isaac's Marriage' (ca.1650), a poem in Silex Scintillans presents her as 'lovely object of thy thought', chaste, with virginal blushes and fears, bearing her pitcher, 'O sweet, divine simplicity.' She is given one line in Dryden's 'To my Honour'd Kinsman, John Druden,' where Druden, a second son, is likened to 'Rebecca's Heir'(43). She is mentioned in Pope's paraphrase of Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale'. Matthew Arnold mentions her in 'The Future', where her innocence is contrasted with the evils of industrial society.
What girl
Now reads in her bosom as clear
As Rebekah read, when she state
At eve by the palm-shaded well?
Who guards in her breast
As deep, as pellucid a spring
Of feeling, as tranquil, as sure?

The figure re-emerges in nineteenth century English literature, usually with negative connotations. In Thackeray's portrayal of Becky is Rebekah in Sharp in 'Vanity Fair.' In Coleridge's 'Black ey'd Rebecca,' the epitome of woman's wiles in 'The wills of the Wisp, and especially in Scott's 'Ivanhoe', with its beautiful Jewess heroine, burlesqued by Thackeray in 'Rebecca and Rowena.'

Hitchcock's film Rebecca, based on Daphne du Maurier's novel, evokes some of the dark associations that the name acquired in the Gothic novel. In the 20th century, Richard Beer-Hofmann, German Jewish writer's play 'Jaakob's Traum' (Jacob's Dream) portrayed her as a decisive and strong-willed character. Thomas Mann's Joseph and His Brothers depicts Rebekah's character. Her independence of mind is developed in the novel 'Jacob' by the American writer Irving Fineman.

The last two matriarchs are Rachel and Leah, wives of Jacob, the third patriarch. Rachel and Leah are the two powerful but contrasting personalities, each representing a world of their own. Their triangle romantic story is significant and appealing to the history of Israelites, as it deals with the representatives of twelve tribes of Israel. The name 'Rachel' means 'ewe' employs more or less a title of
endearment. Leah means 'wearied' or 'faint from sickness'. Their lives are truly portrayed as their name stand and justify their character. The characteristic feature of the Bible in pairing certain individuals make the research to compare and contrast the lives they lived together. Invariably, as in the instance of Leah and Rachel, their lives are closely associated.

Upon his parent's advice Jacob arrives in Paddan Aram, his maternal uncle's land to find a wife for him. Soon after he reaches there he sees Rachel, daughter of Laban, a prosperous sheep farmer in Padanaraam, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's mother at the well. Rachel is beautiful, lovely to look upon, and instantly attracted the attention and love of the handsome stranger. Jacob stays there for a month and Laban proposes to fix a wage for him, Then Jacob reveals his heart for Rachel.

The Bible states, Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." (Genesis 29:16-18 P 47) Jacob serves seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage. Those days are like only few days to him because of his love for her. To explain Jacob's love for Rachel, Edith Deen elucidates that,

These words are unsurpassed in the whole literature of romantic love. In fact Jacob's service for Rachel marks him as the most devoted lover in the Bible. And his love for Rachel was not a passing fancy. It would last until the end of his life. (P 29)
At the end of the specified time, however, the elder sister Leah is secretly led to his bed instead of Rachel. It is an easy trick in primitive times, because it is the custom to conduct the bride to the bed chamber of her husband in silence and darkness. According to the laws of the time, the elder daughter should be married first, but it is not according to the agreement Laban has made with Jacob. Well feasted, Jacob takes his wife, Rachel’s image in his mind. In the morning, Jacob’s image is shattered and Leah’s lament begins. Seven more years are enjoined by the deceitful and rapacious Laban upon Jacob, in order to the possession of his beloved Rachel. The Bible states, Jacob’s union with Rachel is celebrated at the close of Leah’s marriage festivities, lasting for about a week. Altogether he has to serve fourteen years as a shepherd, for his beloved Rachel. Laban gives servant girls Zilpah, to Leah and Bilhah to Rachel. *Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven more years.* (Genesis 29:30 P48) Herbert Lockyer states,

\[\text{Jacob is outstanding among male lovers in the Bible for the true, romantic, abiding love he bore for Rachel (P 128)}\]

Leah is the most tragic figure in this triangle love story. She sincerely loves her husband but Jacob’s heart is for Rachel. Rachel is the wife that Jacob chooses, Leah is the wife that Laban gives to him. Leah’s lament is the outcome of her father’s deceitful action and her husband’s angry response. Both men betray her. Leah’s image is the broken image of the promised Rachel. The elder sister and younger sister are unequally yoked in competition for their jointly owned husband. Leah is the unloved matriarch and Rachel is the best loved matriarch. Leah embarks on the unfruitful occupation of working to win her husband’s affection.
The Lord sees that Leah is not loved, he opens her womb and gives her a child. She names the boy Reuben, for she says “It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.” (P.48). She conceives again and says “Because the lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.” So she named him Simeon. (P.48). A third son is born to her and this time she names him Levi and says, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have born him three sons.” (P.48) For the fourth time she conceives a son and says, “This time I will praise the Lord.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. The fourth birth reports Leah’s recognition in the house. God’s discriminatory blessing brings Leah to the fore as a character in the novella. She develops a character with relationship and speech. At the birth of her sons Leah responds to each circumstance of change by giving voice to prayer. The meanings of the names of the sons “are to be explained solely by the rivalry between the sisters.” (Westermann, P 472)

On the other hand Rachel is barren and feels jealous of her sister bearing children. She expresses her grief at her husband and tells “Give me children, or I’ll die! (P.48) The conflict between the sisters centre on the contest between love and motherhood. Leah has many children and wishes to have Jacob’s love, while Rachel has Jacob’s love and desires to have children. The barren-fertile opposition of the tale develops in response to the blessing of God to the matriarch Leah. To elicit their conflict G.W.Coats views,

Jacob hates Leah.... The point is rather that Rachel hates Leah. The barren-fertile opposition highlights the tension posed by the hate. Jacob’s failure to love Leah is then a minor reflection of Rachel’s hate. (P 214)
Rachel remains barren for so many years, decides to give her servant Bilhah to be a surrogate mother for her. Bilhah becomes pregnant and bears a son. Rachel’s feels happy and expresses her joy, “God has vindicated me, he has listened to my plea and given me a son.” (P.48) Rachel’s servant conceives again and bears a second son. Then Rachel said, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.”(Genesis 30: 10). Leah also takes the same decision and gives her servant Zilpah to be surrogate mother. By her she has two sons whom she names Gad, (good fortune), Asher, (The women call me happy).

During harvest time, Reuben the first son of Leah, brings mandrake plants which cures barrenness. Rachel trades her husband to have mandrakes, she agrees to send Jacob that night to Leah. This time Leah becomes pregnant and gives birth to fifth son. Again she conceives and exclaims, “God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons.” ( Genesis 30:19P 49). Some time later she gives birth to a daughter, Dinah, the first daughter in the Bible whose name is mentioned at birth. God blesses Rachel and gives birth to a son, Joseph and says, “God has taken away my disgrace.” (Genesis 30:22). The names given to their children by Rachel and Leah express their condition, situation, trait and temperament.

All eleven names are mentioned and interpreted in the framework of the bitter struggle, the poisoning envy between Rachel and Leah. (Fokkelman P133)
Then Jacob decides to go to his native land. He assembles his wives and discuss the plan. They both agrees to her husband's proposal. In the words of Edith Deen,

When Jacob did not make the decision alone, but consulted his wives, he demonstrated that he, like other patriarchs, took no major steps without counseling with his wives. And Rachel and Leah regarded themselves as their husband's equal. (P 33)

Jacob along with his wives, children and great possessions flees to his native land. Rachel has taken household Gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and sits on them. On the seventh day Laban sets off in hot pursuit, but Rachel deceives him cunningly and lies to her father, "Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence. I'm having my period." (Genesis 31:35 P 52) She has played a trickery to hide the idols in order to preserve her family deities.

Fearing his brother Esau, who has threatened his life when he left his homeland twenty years earlier, Jacob as he now nears the edge of Canaan, thinks of his family's safety. Out of his great love for Rachel, Jacob assigns to her and to Joseph the place of greatest safety. He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. (Genesis P55) Fortunately Esau greets them and goes before them. As the caravan nears Ephrath, (present Bethlehem city) the pains of childbirth came upon Rachel, and she gives birth to her second son, Benjamin, in a cave and dies. Rachel is the first woman in the Bible to die in childbirth. Jacob sets a pillar upon her grave, again showing his great love for
her. Years later, when Jacob is aged, he makes a poignant reference to Rachel, a lovely woman whose beauty has dominated his life.

Leah is Jacob’s first wife, quite, contemplative and fruitful. Rachel is Jacob’s first love, active, beautiful and beloved. The charms of Rachel wins the heart of her husband, the piety of Leah also tries to command his esteem. From Leah’s son Judah hails the tribe of Judah, an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Jacob is buried beside Leah, his first wife. The love story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel is one of the most amazing love stories in the Bible. Rachel and Leah exhibit their potential in fullest sense to lead the life. Thus the Saga of Matriarchs- Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah ends.

In English literature, Rachel the mourning mother is alluded to with considerable frequency. In Chaucer’s ‘Prioress’s Tale’ (7.627), the slain boy’s mother is a ‘newer Rachel’ as she swoons by his bier. Melville’s ‘Moby Dick’ describes the captain of the Rachel hunting for a lost son, weeping for children who are not. Charles Lamb “In Praise of Chimney Sweepers’ describes many noble Rachels weeping for their children, referring to the Victorian practice of abduction of boys for the sweep trade. In T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land,’ a ‘murmur of maternal lamentation’ (367) recalls Rachel’s inconsolable grief.

Associations with the Genesis narrative inform the characterization of Rachel in Dickens’s ‘Hard Times’. Thirty five unmarried, and childless, Rachel is loved by Stephen Blackpool, who wants to marry her even though he is already married to a drunkard; he must work (to afford a divorce) in order to marry Rachel. Trollope’s novel ‘Rachel Ray’ of that name can be won only after service on her part of Luke; Angel Clare in Hardy’s ‘Tess of the D’Urbervilles’ has ‘three Leas to get one
Rachel' (Chapter.23). Thackeray’s novel ‘Henry Esmond’ is the story of a man’s service for Rachel, whom he loves but who spurns him, his subsequent labors for another woman, and his final marriage to Rachel. The same theme is treated ironically by Thackeray in the sequel, ‘The Virginians.’

Rachel’s barrenness is considered in the 20th century novel by Margaret Laurence, ‘A Jest of God.’ An unmarried, thirty-four-old younger sister, Rachel has an affair which she believes results in pregnancy but which in fact turns out to be a benign tumor which is surgically removed; bereft of both child and lover, she is left only with a childish old mother and the sense that God has somehow made a joke of her daring to sin. The opposition between the two sisters, with a clear bias towards the elder with her ‘soft eyes’, is found in Thomas Mann’s ‘Joseph and His Brothers’, which is an explicit elaboration on the biblical story.

The triangle of love and deception among Leah, Rachel, and Jacob prompts a variety of literary responses. The ‘bed trick’ substitution of one woman for another becomes a significant feature of Shakespearean drama- specifically in ‘Measure for Measure and All’s well That Ends well.’ ‘Rejected like Leah, wronged like Tamar, Shakespeare’s Helena and Mariana imitate their desired rivals, tolerate more or less consciously the degradation of being loved for someone else and work a kind of salvation out of an ambiguous sexual encounter.’ (Jagendorf, 56). Thomas Wyatt recalls Jacob’s chagrin at the discovery of his deception: ‘For Rachel have I served,/ For Lya carried I never’ (Perdye I said it not, 45-46). A character in Robert Browning’s ‘The Ring and the Book’ suggests that a divorce might be possible if the listener, ‘taking thought to wed/ Rachel of the blue eye and golden hair./ Found
swharth-skinned Leah cumber couch next day' (5.1304-06). William Blake's prophetic poem 'Jerusalem' ascribes the evils of war to children 'born in contentions of Chastity and in / Deadly Hate between Leah and Rachel, Daughters of Deceit and Fraud.' (pl.69, lines 10-11).

The five mentioned matriarchs of Genesis are interesting characters for modern day readers to know and appreciate. The mere fact that women, specifically in Genesis, are given such prominent roles and storyline is a commentary all on its own. The stories of matriarchs often contrast the conventional norms of the culture with the respect and compassion God shows to woman. They represent a God who takes the side of women, rescuing them from abandonment, barrenness, and oppression, and assuring them of noble destiny. In a patriarchal narrative, their role is minor and supportive to the patriarchs. But the narrator could not resist including their character and decisive roles.

Women did not need to be included. Women did not need to be named. Women did not need to save the day. Women did not need to direct the action of the story. Women did not need to 'trick' the men in their lives. There is a lot that women did not need to do, but they did and the narrative supports that. (Blonde Matriarchs of Genesis Web. April 2011)

Most of the matriarchs are barren for several years and they tried their best to overcome it with their faith and distinctive temperament. Barrenness in a way becomes a boon to them as a blessing in disguise to achieve miraculous conception and thus transforming themselves to life-giving action.
Barrenness is the way of human history. It is an effective metaphor for hopelessness ... But barrenness is not only the condition of hopeless humanity. The marvel of biblical faith is that barrenness is the arena of God's life-giving action. (Brueggemann, P 55)

The matriarchs have recurring narrative patterns typical of traditional literature. Their narrative roles parallel social positions and attitudes toward women in male-dominated cultures in which women are marginal and supporting characters. Yet paradoxically their roles as the people 'in between' are powerful and critical for the development of the stories and for the progress of human civilization and Israelite culture. Thus women who are mothers performed a tremendous service to the family and to society at large. In actual life, however, the matriarch too is a dominant figure, for example Abraham’s wife Sarah and Isaac’s wife Rebecca. That is, in both their cases,

In the domestic sphere, the woman ameliorative counsels and her motherly feelings are taken seriously. (Teubal P 456)

The stories of these women characters appear to contemporary women as far off, distant, and hard to identify with. This research closes the gap and has explained how one can relate to the matriarchs, how one can get a glimpse of what they have gone through and what one can learn from them in a practical way. Liz Curtis Higgs an award-winning author of both fiction and non-fiction books views the story of matriarchs as,
A spiteful boss, a defiant employee, a manipulative mother, a desperate housewife, an envious sister...honey, we know these women. We've lived with them, worked with them, or caught a glimpse of them in our mirrors. Sarah mistreated her maidservant. Hagar despised her mistress, Rebecca manipulated her son. Leah claimed her sister's husband and Rachel envied her fertile sister. They were far from evil, but hardly perfect. Mostly good, yet slightly bad. In other words, these matriarchal mamas look a lot like us. (P 45)

Having made discussion on the role of matriarchs, their decisions and destinies from reinterpretation feministic perspective, the next chapter in tune with the theme of the study discusses in detail on Career Women of the Bible.