

The Silent Voice of the Cushite Woman: Race, Identity, and Power in Numbers 12

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Abstract: This article explores the biblical narrative of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12, focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and power within the ancient Israelite context. The background of this study lies in the marginalization of non-Israelite women in biblical texts, particularly the Cushite woman, whose identity and role have been largely overlooked. The purpose of this article is to investigate how her silence and the criticism from Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron, reflect broader themes of racial and gender-based exclusion. Using a qualitative analysis of the biblical text, this study examines the implications of her marginalization within the power structures of ancient Israel, as well as the racial prejudices embedded in the narrative. The results suggest that the Cushite woman's silence, while often interpreted as subjugation, can also be viewed as a form of subtle resistance against the patriarchal and racial systems at play.

Contribution: This article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how marginalized figures were portrayed in the Bible, and it reflects on the ongoing relevance of these themes in modern discussions of race, gender, and authority.

Keywords: cushite woman; race and identity; gender dynamics; power and authority; Numbers 12

INTRODUCTION

The biblical narrative of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12:1-10 has long been an enigmatic and often overlooked element in Old Testament scholarship. This passage briefly mentions a woman married to Moses, described as a "Cushite" without elaborating on her name, background, or significance. Her omission from the narrative, as well as the silence surrounding her character, raises important questions about her role and the reasons for her marginalization. While Moses is the central figure in the Exodus story, his wife remains largely a background presence, offering an intriguing case for analysis. This

study aims to examine the reasons behind her absence from the story, focusing on themes of race, identity, and power dynamics within the text.¹

The silence of the Cushite woman, as highlighted in the passage, invites exploration of how ancient Israelite society portrayed non-Israelite women, especially those of Papua descent. While many scholars have focused on Moses' leadership and the dynamics within his family, there has been little attention paid to the racial and gender implications of his marriage to the Cushite woman. Previous research has highlighted the marginalization of women in biblical texts but has often neglected the intersection of race and gender in stories such as this one. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by focusing specifically on the racial and gendered aspects of the Cushite woman's role, seeking to uncover why she is silenced in the narrative. Recent scholarship has largely neglected this specific intersection, and this research will address this gap by exploring the role of race and gender in her marginalization.

Scholars like Adamo² and Awabdy³ have made strides in addressing the racial and gender dynamics in biblical texts, but more focused work on the Cushite woman remains underexplored. Furthermore, scholars like Barton,⁴ Gorringer,⁵ and Lokel⁶ have examined other racial and gendered readings of the Bible, but there is a distinct lack of analysis regarding the specific case of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12. This research will provide a more nuanced understanding of her silencing and its implications within the broader cultural and theological context of ancient Israel.

One of the critical issues with the Cushite woman's portrayal is her racial identity, described by the term "Cushite," which is often linked to Papua heritage. The term "Cush" typically refers to regions south of Egypt, generally associated with modern-day Ethiopia and known for its black Papua identity. This racial identity has been a subject of debate,

¹ Mark A. Awabdy, "Numbers," in *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Daniel I. Block (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 275.

² David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1-10," *In die Skriflig* 52, no. 1 (2018): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v52i1.2370>.

³ Mark A. Awabdy, "Numbers," in *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 275.

⁴ Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics," *Feminist Theology* 9, no. 27 (2001): 68-80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500100002706>.

⁵ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20," *The Expository Times* 118, no. 4 (2007): 177-179, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524606074370>.

⁶ Philip Lokel, "Moses and His Cushite Wife: Reading Numbers 12:1 with Undergraduate Students of Makerere University," *Old Testament Essays* 19, no. 2 (2006): 538-547, <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC85796>.

with some scholars asserting that her portrayal as a "Cushite" reflects a deliberate racial distinction in the narrative. While this racial aspect has received some attention, there is still a gap in understanding how her identity shaped her exclusion from the broader narrative and why such a racial distinction was made in the context of ancient Israel. Scholars like Gier⁷ and Barton⁸ have touched upon these issues, but a more focused analysis is needed, especially in light of modern discussions of race and identity in biblical interpretation.

The social and cultural context of ancient Israel, marked by patriarchal structures, plays a significant role in understanding the treatment of women, especially non-Israelite women like the Cushite. Biblical texts, particularly the Torah, have been criticized for their portrayal of women as subjugated figures. The Cushite woman's silence can be seen as a reflection of the limited roles women were allowed to play within ancient Israelite society. While her racial identity is one aspect of her marginalization, the broader issue of gender inequality in the biblical text has not been fully explored in relation to her story. Previous studies have analyzed gender roles in other parts of the Bible, but the intersection of gender and race in the case of the Cushite woman remains underexplored, creating a gap that this study intends to address.⁹

The introduction outlines the key focus of this paper: examining the silence and marginalization of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 and the broader implications of race, gender, and power. While previous research has touched on these issues, there is a distinct gap in understanding how her racial and gender identity played a role in her exclusion from the narrative. By investigating the power dynamics at play, this study seeks to offer new insights into the biblical text, challenging the traditional interpretation that overlooks the significance of this character. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about race, identity, and gender in biblical scholarship, highlighting the need for more inclusive and intersectional analyses of biblical stories.¹⁰

⁷ Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism." *Journal of Religious Thought*, 46, no. 1 (1989): 42–52.

⁸ Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics": 68-80

⁹ Jacqueline Williams, "And She Became Snow White: Numbers 12:1-16," *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 2 (2002): 259-268, <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC85440>.

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 149.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article employs a critical analysis of the biblical text of Numbers 12 and its representation of the Cushite woman. The primary method used is textual analysis, examining how race, gender, and power dynamics are portrayed in the narrative. The study analyzes the relationships between Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, focusing on the racial and gendered dimensions of the conflict surrounding Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman. The research draws upon established hermeneutical theories, particularly those that address the intersection of race and gender in biblical narratives.¹¹ By closely reading the text, the study seeks to uncover the underlying cultural and theological implications that shape the Cushite woman's marginalization and silence. As noted by Ashley, understanding the theological context and its social underpinnings is crucial for interpreting these interactions.¹²

In addition to biblical exegesis, the article employs a comparative approach, incorporating scholarly perspectives on race, gender, and identity, specifically in relation to the context of Papua. Secondary sources are used to offer insights into how the marginalization of the Cushite woman reflects broader societal structures that also shape the experiences of women in Papua. By engaging with works that discuss the intersectionality of race and gender in both biblical and contemporary contexts, this study aims to draw parallels between ancient Israelite society and a reflection of the modern-day experiences of Papuan women.¹³ For example, Gorringer emphasizes the significance of race in the biblical story, arguing that understanding racial prejudice in ancient texts can offer valuable lessons for addressing similar issues in modern societies.¹⁴ The combination of textual analysis and scholarly perspectives offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the narrative's implications and its relevance to modern discussions of identity and power..

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Numbers: God and Man in the Wilderness* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2024).

¹² Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 245.

¹³ Vera Falinda & Rahmawati Retno Winarni. "Perempuan Papua dan Pemerintahan Desa." *Tuk Indonesia*, 2015, 1-14. <https://www.tuk.or.id/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Perempuan-Papua-dan-Pemerintahan-Desa-Final.pdf>; Zetkin V'ile dan Sharon Muller. "Penindasan Terhadap Perempuan Papua dan Sosialisme," *Arah Juang*, April 5, 2022. <https://www.arahjuang.com/2022/04/05/penindasan-terhadap-perempuan-papua-dan-sosialisme>.

¹⁴ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20": 179.

In addition to biblical exegesis, the article incorporates a comparative approach, drawing on secondary sources to provide broader historical, cultural, and sociological insights. Scholarly works on race, identity, and biblical hermeneutics are utilized to contextualize the story of the Cushite woman in both ancient and modern frameworks. This allows for a deeper understanding of how racial and gendered identities are constructed in the text and how these constructions resonate with contemporary issues of race and gender. For instance, Gorringer emphasizes the significance of race in the biblical story, arguing that understanding racial prejudice in ancient texts can offer valuable lessons for addressing similar issues in modern societies.¹⁵ The combination of textual analysis and scholarly perspectives offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the narrative's implications and its relevance to modern discussions of identity and power.

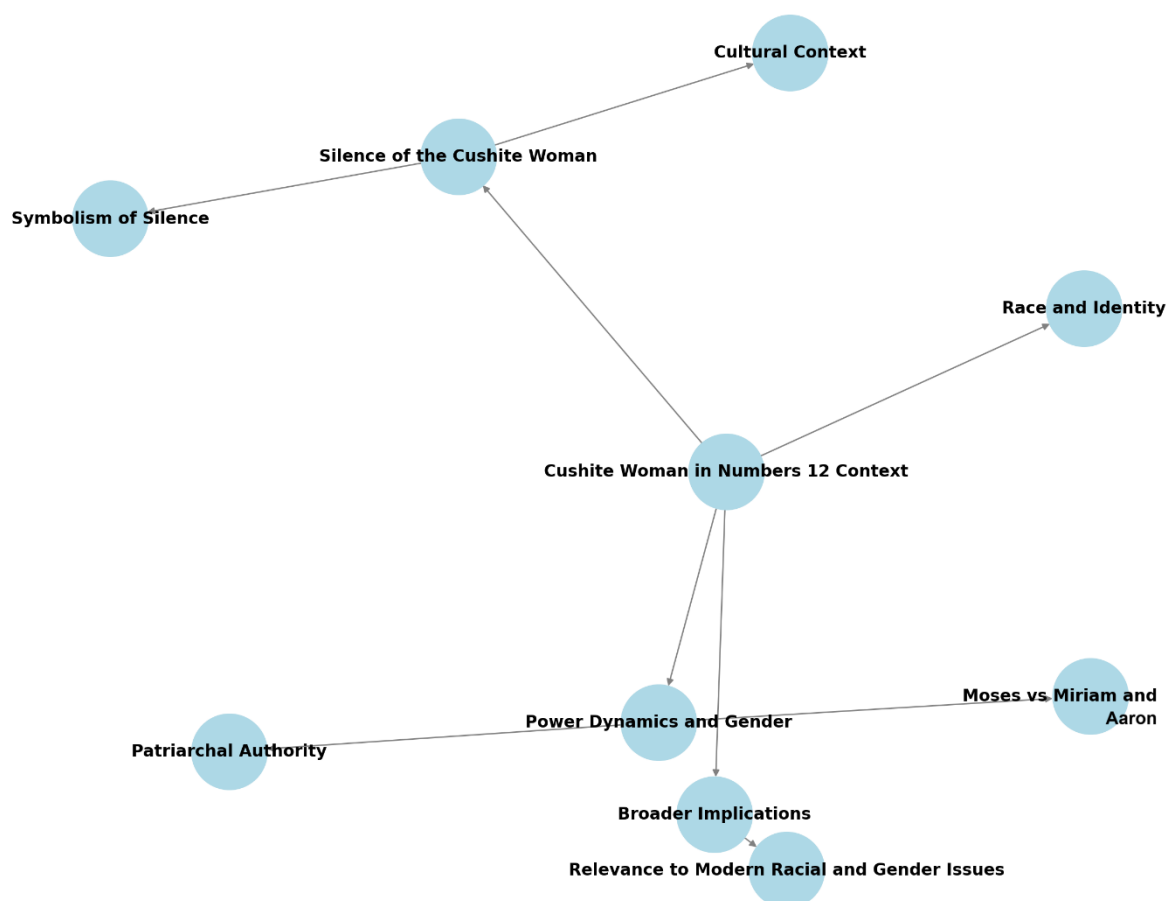


Figure 1. Flowchart Methods

¹⁵ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20": 179.

RESULTS

The Context of the Cushite Woman in Biblical Narrative

The Cushite woman in Numbers 12 is a character whose background remains largely unexplored in biblical scholarship. While the term "Cushite" indicates that she is from the region south of Egypt, typically associated with modern-day Ethiopia or Nubia, the exact nature of her relationship to Moses is not elaborated upon. The passage in Numbers 12:1-10 only briefly mentions her marriage to Moses, followed by Miriam and Aaron's objection to this union, but no further details are provided. This lack of information invites deeper inquiry into the cultural and racial context of her identity, as well as the significance of her presence in the narrative. Scholars such as Adamo¹⁶ and Ashley¹⁷ have noted the scarcity of details in this passage, which has led to a lack of comprehensive exploration regarding her role in the larger biblical story.

The absence of a name or detailed description of the Cushite woman in the text has caused her to be marginalized in biblical exegesis. However, several scholars have attempted to understand her through the limited information provided. According to Ashley,¹⁸ her portrayal as a "Cushite" might reflect a racial distinction, emphasizing her non-Israelite origins, which was a common concern in ancient Israel, as the Israelites were particularly concerned with preserving their purity. The Cushite's ethnic identity, based on ancient Israel's understanding of "Cush," represents an Papua¹⁹ or African²⁰ heritage that places her outside the dominant ethnic groups of the biblical narrative. This racial differentiation is essential for understanding the social dynamics between the Cushite woman and Moses' Israelite family, as noted by Gorringer²¹ in his examination of racial tensions within the context of ancient Israel.

The Cushite woman's role within the broader biblical narrative is complicated by the power dynamics in ancient Israelite society. As is typical in many biblical texts,

¹⁶ David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1-10": 1-8.

¹⁷ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 232.

¹⁸ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 232.

¹⁹ Vera Falinda & Rahmawati Retno Winarni. "Perempuan Papua dan Pemerintahan Desa." *Tuk Indonesia*, 2015, 1-14; Zetkin V'lle dan Sharon Muller. "Penindasan Terhadap Perempuan Papua dan Sosialisme".

²⁰ David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1-10": 1-8; Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism": 42-52; Philip Lokel, "Moses and His Cushite Wife: Reading Numbers 12:1 with Undergraduate Students of Makerere University": 538-547.

²¹ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20": 177-179.

women, particularly non-Israelite women, are often relegated to secondary or passive roles. This is evident in the way she is described in Numbers 12, where her identity is overshadowed by the conflicts between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. According to Gier,²² this reflects a broader tendency in biblical narratives to marginalize women and non-Israelite characters, making the Cushite woman's silence and lack of agency a reflection of patriarchal and ethnic dominance within the text. The portrayal of Miriam's and Aaron's discontent with Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman further underscores how power dynamics shaped the representation of non-Israelite women in the Bible.

While the Cushite woman's role is minimal in the narrative, it can also be seen as a critique of the tensions within the Israelite community, especially regarding ethnic purity. The objections raised by Miriam and Aaron seem to be rooted not only in familial dynamics but also in racial and ethnic prejudices. According to Barton,²³ the criticism of Moses' marriage is intertwined with color politics, suggesting that the Cushite woman's ethnicity plays a central role in her marginalization within the family. Moreover, Low²⁴ emphasizes how modern interpretations of the Cushite woman often ignore the racial implications of her presence, which reflects a broader tendency in biblical studies to overlook the significance of race and identity in the ancient texts. These perspectives challenge traditional readings of the text and invite further exploration into the deeper cultural tensions at play.

The Cushite woman's silence in the face of the criticism directed at her marriage to Moses can be seen as a form of resistance or protest. According to Lokel,²⁵ her lack of voice in the narrative might represent a refusal to engage in the power struggle between Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. This interpretation highlights the complex nature of silence in biblical texts, where silence can be both an act of submission and a form of defiance. Through this lens, the Cushite woman's muted role in the narrative opens up a discussion on how marginalized figures in ancient texts challenge dominant power structures, even in their silence.

²² Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism": 42-52.

²³ Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics": 68-80.

²⁴ Katherine Low, "Moses Married a Black Woman: Modern American Receptions of the Cushite Wife of Moses." *Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2022): 66-88. <https://doi.org/10.17613/xhgz-er18>

²⁵ Philip Lokel, "Moses and His Cushite Wife: Reading Numbers 12:1 with Undergraduate Students of Makerere University": 538-547.

The Silence of the Cushite Woman

The silence of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 has long been a subject of academic scrutiny, as her absence from the narrative's active dialogue suggests deeper cultural and social dynamics at play. Despite her significant connection to Moses, the text does not provide any voice or agency to her character, leaving her to be defined only by others. This silence raises questions about the nature of her representation in the biblical story, especially within the context of patriarchal structures that often diminish female presence. Adamo²⁶ asserts that her silence might indicate a deliberate marginalization by the text's authors, reflecting broader themes of social control and the exclusion of non-Israelite women in ancient Israelite narratives. This absence of a direct voice echoes broader patterns in biblical texts where women are frequently relegated to passive roles, particularly when they belong to marginalized groups.

Scholars have proposed various interpretations for the Cushite woman's silence, most notably exploring the symbolic weight of silence in the Bible. According to Barton,²⁷ silence in biblical narratives often functions as a means of protest or as an indication of powerlessness. In the case of the Cushite woman, her silence might not only reflect her marginalized position but also signify an act of resistance against the power dynamics at play, particularly the racial tensions between the Israelites and outsiders. This notion of silence as resistance is echoed by Gier,²⁸ who explores the intersection of race, power, and silence, suggesting that the Cushite woman's mute role challenges dominant racial and ethnic ideologies. By remaining silent, she may be engaging in a subtle form of defiance against the racial prejudices that inform the criticism she receives from Miriam and Aaron.

The concept of silence in the biblical context can also be interpreted through the lens of cultural and religious expectations. In ancient Israelite society, women were generally expected to remain passive and not speak out in public matters, particularly in the presence of male authority figures. As noted by Low,²⁹ the Cushite woman's silence

²⁶ David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1-10": 1-8.

²⁷ Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics": 68-80.

²⁸ Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism": 42-52.

²⁹ Katherine Low, "Moses Married a Black Woman: Modern American Receptions of the Cushite Wife of Moses": 66-88.

may reflect this societal norm, where her role is reduced to the background while male figures dominate the discourse. This societal expectation of female silence reinforces patriarchal control, limiting the expression and agency of women in biblical texts. By offering no voice to the Cushite woman, the text conforms to the patriarchal expectations that govern the actions and behaviors of women, especially those of foreign descent.

However, it is also important to consider the cultural implications of silence in African contexts. In many African traditions, silence is not always a sign of passivity but can instead be a powerful tool for communication and expression. As Gorringer³⁰ suggests, silence can function as a form of protest, resistance, or even a means of asserting one's presence in a society that demands invisibility. In this sense, the Cushite woman's silence in Numbers 12 may serve as a subtle assertion of her power and identity in the face of racial and gender-based opposition. Her silence may thus be interpreted as an act of defiance against the criticism she faces from Miriam and Aaron, as well as an assertion of her agency within the limits of the narrative.

The critique leveled by Miriam and Aaron against Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman can also be understood as a reflection of the racial tensions within the Israelite community. According to McGrath,³¹ the criticism directed at the Cushite woman is not only about her foreign status but also about the racial dynamics between the Israelites and other ethnic groups. Miriam and Aaron's objection to Moses' marriage reflects the Israelites' anxieties about maintaining ethnic purity and their fear of intermingling with foreign peoples. This racial prejudice becomes a key factor in understanding the Cushite woman's silence, as her mere presence in the story serves as a challenge to the racial and cultural boundaries that the Israelites sought to protect.

Moreover, the absence of the Cushite woman's voice might also be seen as a theological commentary on the nature of God's plan for the Israelites. As Harrison³² suggests, the lack of focus on the Cushite woman allows the narrative to maintain Moses as the central figure, with the tension between him and Miriam and Aaron serving as a pivotal point in the story. By keeping the Cushite woman silent, the narrative emphasizes

³⁰ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20": 177-179.

³¹ Elizabeth McGrath, "Moses' Cushite Wife: Christianity and Reception," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception: Volume 19*, ed. Constance M. Furey et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 1158-1161, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr.mosesushitewife>.

³² R. K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 162.

the conflict between Moses' leadership and the authority of Miriam and Aaron, positioning Moses as the sole spokesperson for divine will. This narrative choice underscores the centralization of Moses' authority, while the Cushite woman's silence reinforces her subordination in the broader theological and social structure.

The silence of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 opens up a complex dialogue about race, gender, power, and resistance in biblical narratives. While her silence may reflect the patriarchal and racial structures of ancient Israel, it also serves as a subtle form of resistance against the social and cultural expectations imposed upon her. As scholars have suggested, silence in biblical texts is not always passive; in the case of the Cushite woman, it may represent a quiet assertion of her agency and identity. The analysis of her silence provides important insights into the ways marginalized figures in biblical texts navigate power dynamics, offering a more nuanced understanding of their roles in the narrative.

DISCUSSION

Race and Identity: A Reflection in the Papua Context

In the context of the biblical story, the racial identity of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 presents a significant intersection between ancient Israelite views on race and modern interpretations of biblical texts. The term "Cushite" traditionally refers to people from regions south of Egypt, often associated with African or Black identities. In the Papua context, where the concept of race may often focus on a more varied spectrum of skin tones, including lighter or darker shades of brown, the interpretation of race becomes an intricate issue when analyzing the Cushite woman. Her racial identity is central to understanding her treatment within the biblical narrative, and it invites critical questions about how non-Israelite women were viewed in terms of their ethnicity. As scholars like Gier³³ and Barton³⁴ highlight, racial marginalization in biblical texts is often overlooked, and the significance of the Cushite woman's identity is frequently minimized by Western interpretations. This issue of race is not merely a theological or textual problem but one that also mirrors modern racial and ethnic struggles, including in

³³ Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism": 42-52.

³⁴ Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics": 68-80.

societies like Indonesia, where issues of race and ethnicity have complex social and political ramifications.

The Cushite woman's portrayal also highlights the broader themes of racism and exclusion present in the text. According to Brown,³⁵ the identification of the Cushite woman as "black" within the biblical narrative places her at odds with the dominant Israelite community. In a similar vein, Sadlers³⁶ argues that the portrayal of the Cushite woman reflects a deeper historical tendency in biblical writings to "other" people of non-Israelite or Papua descent, often reducing their roles to those of subjugation. This racial exclusion is not just a matter of ancient identity politics but is a recurring issue in how marginalized communities are represented in religious texts. For modern Papuan readers, understanding this racial bias within the Bible can provide valuable insights into the ongoing struggles against racial discrimination in contemporary society, where similar issues of racial marginalization persist in various forms. The study of the Cushite woman's racial identity invites reflection on the Papua context, where ethnic diversity and issues of racial categorization are also highly relevant.

In exploring the identity of the Cushite woman, scholars have often pointed out the ambiguity of the term "Cushite" and its relationship to the concept of race in the ancient world. The Hebrew word "Cush" refers to people from the region of Papua, which in the biblical worldview were regarded as distant and somewhat "other" civilizations. Kohlenberger³⁷ explains that the designation "Cushite" in the Bible does not solely indicate skin color but also geographical and cultural distinctions that were significant in the ancient Near Eastern context. However, this racial differentiation was often tied to negative stereotypes and prejudices, as seen in the treatment of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12. In the Papuan context, where racial identity is often more fluid and includes a variety of ethnic groups with different skin tones, understanding how race was constructed in ancient Israel helps clarify why the Cushite woman was subjected to the criticisms and exclusion she faced from Miriam and Aaron.³⁸

³⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 245.

³⁶ R.S. Sadlers, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity and Othering in the Hebrew Bible*. (Clark, New York, 2005).

³⁷ J.R. Kohlenberger III, ed., "Numbers 12," in *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderan Publishing House, 1987), 402–403.

³⁸ Zetkin V'lle dan Sharon Muller. "Penindasan Terhadap Perempuan Papua dan Sosialisme"; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation*, Anchor Bible Series, Vol. 4A (New York, NY: Anchor Bible, 1993), 225.

The rejection of the Cushite woman by Miriam and Aaron in the biblical story also serves as a stark reminder of how racial prejudices are often embedded in societal norms. According to McGrath,³⁹ the criticism of Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman was not only rooted in gender and familial authority but also deeply tied to the racial prejudices prevalent in the ancient Israelite community. The exclusion of non-Israelites, especially individuals from regions like Cush, is a reflection of the societal dynamics that prioritize purity and distinction from foreign races. In the Papua context, the concept of "race" is often tied to ethnic differences, with lighter skin being historically valued in certain circles. Just as the Cushite woman faced exclusion due to her race in ancient Israel, modern racial identities in Papua often lead to social exclusion, where skin color and ethnicity still play significant roles in how people are perceived and treated.⁴⁰

Modern interpretations of the Cushite woman's racial identity have often been influenced by Western theological and cultural frameworks. Many scholars, such as McKenzie,⁴¹ have pointed out that the Cushite woman's racial identity is frequently overlooked or even erased in contemporary interpretations of the text. Instead, her role is often associated with Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife, reflecting a tendency among modern biblical scholars to simplify or homogenize racial distinctions in the biblical narrative. This reductionist approach is problematic because it obscures the complexity of racial and ethnic identities in the biblical world. In the Indonesian context, where the understanding of racial and ethnic diversity is much more nuanced, acknowledging the distinct identity of the Cushite woman in the biblical text challenges oversimplified interpretations that fail to recognize the diversity of the ancient world and, by extension, the diversity within modern Indonesia, especially Papua.⁴² By bringing attention to this issue, this study advocates for a more nuanced and inclusive reading of the Cushite woman's role in the biblical narrative.

Power Dynamics and Gender

³⁹ Elizabeth McGrath, "Moses' Cushite Wife: Christianity and Reception", 1158–1161.

⁴⁰ Vera Falinda dan Rahmawati Retno Winarni. "Perempuan Papua dan Pemerintahan Desa", 1-14.

⁴¹ Steven L. McKenzie, "Moses' Cushite Wife: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception: Volume 19*, ed. Constance M. Furey et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 1154–1155, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebm.moses-cushite-wife>.

⁴² Vera Falinda dan Rahmawati Retno Winarni. "Perempuan Papua dan Pemerintahan Desa." *Tuk Indonesia*, 2015, 1-14.

The story of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 provides a lens through which we can examine the complex intersection of power, gender, and race in ancient Israel. In this biblical narrative, the silence of the Cushite woman contrasts with the vocal criticism of Moses' marriage by Miriam and Aaron, which highlights the prevailing gender dynamics within the Israelite community. As Brown notes, Moses' leadership is unchallenged, yet his marriage to a foreign woman becomes the subject of contention, revealing the gendered power structures that influenced the roles of women, even in the family of the leader.⁴³ Miriam and Aaron's criticism not only reveals their perception of racial and cultural boundaries but also underscores their struggle with their positions within the gendered hierarchy of leadership in Israel.

Miriam's involvement in the dispute highlights her prominent role as a female leader, yet it simultaneously reveals her subordination in relation to Moses. As Gorringer discusses, the criticism Miriam raises against Moses and his marriage reflects her challenge to Moses' authority, but this challenge occurs within a patriarchal context where her authority as a woman is inherently limited.⁴⁴ Despite her significant role in the Exodus story, Miriam's actions are relegated to the background in comparison to Moses' divine leadership. This dynamic is a striking example of how gender roles in biblical narratives restrict women's access to ultimate power, even when they hold leadership positions within their community.

The Cushite woman's silence in the face of this conflict serves as a potent symbol of her powerlessness within the narrative. According to Milgrom, the absence of a voice for the Cushite woman in this narrative reflects the broader cultural norms of silence imposed on women, particularly those who were not Israelites.⁴⁵ Her silence may symbolize her marginalization within both her marital relationship with Moses and the larger Israelite society. The contrast between her quietness and Miriam's outspoken dissent underscores the stark differences in gendered expectations for participation in social and theological discourse.

The power dynamics between Moses, Miriam, and Aaron further illustrate the patriarchal structures at work. Miriam's opposition to Moses' marriage can be interpreted

⁴³ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land*, 237.

⁴⁴ Tim Gorringer, "Three Texts about Moses: Numbers 12, 16 and 20": 177-179.

⁴⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 150.

as an assertion of familial and gendered authority, as she challenges not just Moses' leadership but the racial and cultural boundaries he has crossed by marrying a Cushite woman. As McGrath suggests, this dispute is not merely a personal matter but one that touches upon the larger social and theological order of Israel.⁴⁶ By opposing Moses' marriage, Miriam and Aaron seek to reassert their positions within the Israelite hierarchy, questioning the legitimacy of Moses' actions and his authority to lead the people, especially when those actions transgress social and cultural norms.

Additionally, the conflict between Moses and his siblings brings attention to the complexities of leadership and authority within a patriarchal system. As discussed by Gier, Adamo, Barton, and Williams, the Israelite leadership structure was heavily influenced by patriarchal norms that favored male authority while subjugating women and non-Israelites. The criticisms leveled against Moses by Miriam and Aaron reflect their perception that Moses' actions, including his marriage to the Cushite woman, undermine the purity and cohesiveness of the Israelite community.⁴⁷ This tension underscores the intersection of gender, race, and power in the biblical narrative, where both women and foreigners were often excluded from full participation in the religious and social life of the community.

The gendered aspect of the narrative is not only about the female characters but also reflects broader social and theological concerns about the role of women in leadership. The treatment of Miriam in Numbers 12 reflects the challenges that women faced in asserting their authority, even within their families. According to Pimpinella, while Miriam is positioned as a prophet, her role is still confined within the larger gendered structures that define the scope of her authority.⁴⁸ The contrast between her vocal dissent and the Cushite woman's silence suggests that women in biblical narratives were often confined to roles that restricted their ability to challenge the dominant power structures fully.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth McGrath, "Moses' Cushite Wife: Christianity and Reception", 1158–1161.

⁴⁷ Nicholas F. Gier, "The Color of Sin/The Color of Skin: Ancient Color Blindness and the Philosophical Origins of Modern Racism", 42-52; David T. Adamo, "A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman Whom Moses Married in Numbers 12:1-10": 1-8; Mukti Barton, "The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics": 68-80; Jacqueline Williams, "And She Became Snow White: Numbers 12:1-16": 259-268.

⁴⁸ Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Numbers: God and Man in the Wilderness*; Denise Pimpinella, "Miriam in Numbers 12," *CONCEPT: Interdisciplinary Journal of Graduate Studies* 29 (2006): 1–15.

The silence of the Cushite woman can be interpreted as a subtle act of resistance, particularly in the context of patriarchal control and racial exclusion. As Williams argues, silence in biblical texts is not always passive; rather, it can serve as a form of protest against the prevailing powers.⁴⁹ The Cushite woman's inability or unwillingness to engage in the dispute between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses may represent her resistance to becoming embroiled in a conflict that she has little control over. Her silence, then, can be seen not only as a sign of subjugation but also as a quiet assertion of her autonomy within a rigidly structured system.

The story of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 offers a rich analysis of gender, power, and resistance within the biblical narrative. The power dynamics between Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, as well as the Cushite woman's silence, reveal the patriarchal structures that shaped ancient Israelite society. These gendered and racial tensions provide insight into the challenges faced by women and marginalized groups in asserting their authority within a society that privileges male and ethnic purity. By examining these dynamics, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and power in biblical texts, and how these issues resonate in modern discussions of authority, identity, and social structures.

CONCLUSION

The story of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12 offers profound insights into the intersection of race, gender, and power within the biblical narrative. Although her role is minimal, her silence and the criticism she faces from Miriam and Aaron reflect the patriarchal and racial dynamics that shaped ancient Israelite society. This article highlights how women, particularly non-Israelite women, were marginalized and excluded from positions of power in both religious and social spheres. By analyzing the silence of the Cushite woman as a form of subtle resistance, we gain a deeper understanding of how marginalized figures in biblical texts navigate the dominant power structures, offering a fresh perspective on authority and autonomy within these ancient narratives.

The examination of the Cushite woman's story invites readers to reflect on broader societal themes, such as racial and gender-based exclusion, that continue to resonate

⁴⁹ Jacqueline Williams, "And She Became Snow White: Numbers 12:1-16": 259-268.

today. The tension between Moses, Miriam, and Aaron demonstrates how race, gender, and power were intricately connected in the formation of Israel's leadership. This study not only contributes to a more inclusive interpretation of biblical texts but also fosters contemporary discussions on the roles of marginalized groups in both religious and social contexts. Ultimately, revisiting the narrative of the Cushite woman challenges traditional interpretations and promotes a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of identity and authority in both ancient and modern settings.

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