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Introduction

The Kingdom of Matthias is a great literary work that is as intriguing as it is captivating. Its capture of a myriad of characters with divergent cultures and social class and its basis on contemporary issues that affected the people of the time is particularly of great interest and makes the story equally authentic as it is relevant to the issues of religion and women position in the time. The central theme in the story revolves around two ladies whose lives are used by the author to discuss the thematic issues addressed in the story such as social injustice, affirmative action, equality and activism. The iconic women that are at the centre of the story are Isabella Van Wagenen and Isabella Matthews Laisdell. Drawing from The Kingdom of Matthias, class lectures, and the course textbook this paper examines the ways that race and gender affected the legal rights of both the Isabellas and of women in general during the nineteenth century. Specifically, it does so by determining the rights of their husbands and fathers and also includes a discussion of dominant notions of marriage and motherhood that examine whether these notions applied equally to both Isabellas.

The one Isabella Van Wagenen is a name remembered with an aura of awe, respect and honour to date. Isabella who changed her name to Sojourner Truth was born around 1787 in Ulster County New York as Isabella Hardenbreg (last name of her owner Colonel Hardenbreg). Upon the Colonel's death, she was inherited by his son, Charles, and subsequently auctioned off along with her brothers when Charles died in 1808. She lived in lamentable and terrible conditions most of her life (Johnson and Wilentz 93).

At Colonel Hardenbreg's plantation she shared a common area with twelve other slaves. She had several owners in her life; some were harsh and cruel work masters, some were kinder than other slave owners and yet others were indifferent. As difficult as her life would seem it is actually the trials and tribulations that she went through that forged her into the wise, determined and remarkable woman that she is remembered as (Johnson and Wilentz 93-95). The many years of slavery, losing her parents, beatings and humiliation by her owners only served to teach her the value of humor in tough times, made her a tough woman both mentally and physically and turned her into one of the greatest activist for rights of women and blacks and minorities. In their book, *The Kingdom of Matthias*, Johnson and Wilentz describe her as being mysterious. Life for women was very difficult in the nineteenth century but for a black woman it was particularly distressing and cruel. Living in a patriarchal society where women either belonged to their fathers or husbands or in the case of black women, their owners was particularly difficult (Johnson and Wilentz 45). Their everyday lives were dominated and dictated by these oppressive male figures in their lives and they were robbed off their dignity.

Women were whipped for real and perceived transgressions by their husband or fathers and were treated like children who knew no better. In the book *The Kingdom of Matthias*, the self proclaimed prophet of God, Matthias, had his followers living on a farmhouse a few miles outside of New York where he could dictate each and every minute aspect of their lives, from their clothing, diet, finances and even sexual life. Matthias ran the farmhouse (which he named Mt.

Zion) just like any tyrannical patriarch would, with a harsh hand and particularly intense hate for women (Johnson and Wilentz 85). He firmly believed in the subjugation of women and believed they existed to cook, clean, care for the home and act as sexual objects for the men. It is in such oppressive conditions that Isabella Van Wanegen lived. In fact at one time Matthias whipped Isabella when she was sick because he believed that the sick 'harbored detached spirits and devils' (Johnson and Wilentz 122-123). She joined Matthias' cult through her master Elijah Pierson the Tishbite who believed that he was an incarnate of John the Baptist preparing the way for Matthias' coming. The cult, despite its obvious flaw in doctrine, was a champion for the rights of the poor and oppressed and back then there was no shortage of poor and oppressed folk.

Life at Mt. Zion was about community and togetherness. The people who lived there all believed in their prophet, they had a common faith and they were intimate and very close to one another and this served to break down any racial or color barriers.

This enabled Isabella to feel accepted and valued among at Mt. Zion where she was an important source of information for Mathias. Isabella Matthews Laisdell was Matthias' daughter.

She was brought up in somewhat better conditions than Isabella Van Wanegen although she did not escape the patriarchal domination of her father. Being Caucasian, she was not subjected to slavery like Van Wanegen. Matthias, a firm misogynist, was so deep into his hatred of women that even his own daughter could not escape. In fact, before starting his cult, he had

applied to be a member of the Presbyterian Church but he was rejected because of his violent nature and it was this rejection that drove him to begin his own following based on the Old Testament teachings (Lecture notes 3). He declared that women who nagged and belittled their husbands would be cast away (Johnson and Wilentz 93). When he moved to Mt.

Zion, he was successfully seduced by Anne Folger, the wife of Benjamin Folger and he declared her to be his match spirit according to a revelation given to him by god, hence her marriage to Benjamin was nullified. Matthias then sent Benjamin to bring his children to the farm (Mt. Zion). Benjamin had sex with Isabella before bringing her back as payback to what Matthias had done to him, and made a point of informing her father of this. Matthias was furious and severely whipped his daughter before thinking through and deciding that she and Benjamin were ' match spirits' and ought to wed despite her current marriage to Charles Laisdell.

This clearly illustrates the similar troubles undergone by both Isabella Van Wanegen and Isabella Matthews Laisdell under the iron fist rule of Matthias. Isabella Mathews also experienced beatings from her father all her life. Matthias was a wildly violent man who easily lost his temper and this cost him several jobs. He frequently roughed up his wife (Margret) and children which included young Isabella. In conclusion, the nineteenth century society was very conservative about marriage. The role of the man was to provide for his wife (who he owned) and children.

The woman's function was to take care of her home and children and submit to her husband (Lecture notes 2). The patriarchal model was propagated and

enforced by the church which integrated domestic authority in its administration structure and men led their families to church. Infidelity was not tolerated at all. It is in this setting that Matthias fashioned and dissolved marriages between his followers in any manner that he pleased. He took Anne Folger as his wife even though she was already married to Benjamin Folger, Catherine Galloway, a widow, had sex with the married Benjamin and was confused and hurt when he was declared to be a 'match spirit' to Isabella and then married her.

Matthias and his preachers had several sexual partners plucked from their young female followers. This form of liberal living was just too much for the then society to accept as normal and it proved to be the downfall of Matthias and his cult after the death of Elijah when the gutter press had a field day with wild sexual accusations leveled against the cult.

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