

Uncovering Hidden Oppressions: Probing the Use of Patriarchal Language in Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 Through Poststructuralist Feminism

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Abstract

In this article I probe the use of patriarchal or male-centric language in Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 through the theory of poststructuralist feminism. By applying poststructuralist feminist theory, which stresses the deconstruction of binary oppositions and rejects the stability of meanings, I unmask how these biblical texts cement gender hierarchies and solidify male hegemony. Genesis 3:16's depiction of women's increased pain in childbirth and their submission to their husbands is scrutinised for its role in fuelling male-centric standards. Ephesians 5:22–24's directive for wives to submit to their husbands is critiqued in light of poststructuralist feminist evaluations of fixated gender roles, while 1 Timothy 2:11–12's prohibition on women teaching or exercising power over men is re-evaluated to uncover underlying cultural and historical prejudices. This poststructuralist feminist discourse aims to deconstruct traditional interpretations and offer alternative readings that question entrenched gender disparities. The overall findings underline the demand for more inclusive interpretations of these biblical texts and highlight the universal implications for contemporary gender dynamics within religious and social contexts. To further contextualise the argument, I engage a young woman who questions patriarchal or male-orientated expectations within her community, linking her journey to the three selected biblical texts.

Keywords: biblical interpretation; deconstruction; gender hierarchies; patriarchal language; poststructuralist feminism; women

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Introduction and Contextual Background

Language is a system of communication used by a particular community, consisting of spoken, written, or signed words and the grammatical rules for combining them (Finlayson 1982, 35). Language wields extraordinary power in influencing community-based principles and attitudes, as it both represents and cements the underlying power structures and ideologies, such as patriarchy or a male-centric perspective (Thobejane 2017, 57). On the one hand, patriarchy or male-centrism is a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property, frequently resulting in the oppression and subordination of women and children (Mtshiselwa 2016, 409). Together, patriarchy and language, or patriarchal language, refer to the use of language that drives and stiffens male hegemony and gender disparity within a society. In the context of biblical and theological feminist discourses, Masenya (2012, 206) proffers that patriarchal language exerts significant power by normalising and driving gender hierarchies, thus amplifying male dominance and female conformity. Certainly, this is true given that this punitive language constructs public perceptions and expectations, influencing how individuals discern gender roles and relationships. No wonder, therefore, that West (2002, 243) is of the view that this type of language marginalises women and other gender minorities, obstructing their opportunities and silencing their voices. As a direct result of this observation, it stands to reason to surmise that patriarchal or male-centric language sustains systemic imbalances and delays progress towards gender equity and justice. As I demonstrate later during the course of my interpretation and discussion, it becomes evident that the role of poststructuralist feminist theory regarding the use of patriarchal language is to deconstruct and question the entrenched gender hierarchies and power dynamics that such language prolongs, offering alternative interpretations that advance liberty and justice.

The Bible, composed of texts written over a span of centuries, mirrors the patriarchal societies in which it was produced. Considering this indication, discerning the use of patriarchal language in the Bible requires probing the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world's historical, cultural, and social contexts. While this is important, it is imperative to recognise that patriarchal language functions as a fossilised relic in the ecosystem of societal discourse, sustaining traditional gender roles and stereotypes that serve as genetic inhibitors to the evolution of personal growth and opportunities. Like an outdated algorithm in a rapidly advancing technological landscape, it accelerates systemic biases, rendering individuals trapped in rigid gender paradigms that stifle innovation and equitable progress. Consistent with this reality, Nadar (2009b, 552) suggests that language that celebrates men as leaders and women as caregivers establishes *restrictive social roles*. This paradoxical reinforcement of gender stereotypes is believed by Masenya (1995, 150) to sideline or overlook women's voices and contributions. Considering this view, Diko (2023, 615) proposes that using oppressive terms like "mankind" instead of "humankind" implies that men are the default or the norm, sidelining women's experiences and achievements. Diko (2023,

613) put forward that by defaulting to male-centric terms, such language advances the idea that men are the normative standard, while women's experiences and contributions are downplayed. On the grounds of this claim, I additionally argue that this operates as a corrosive element within the social fabric, not only fuelling gender prejudice but also serving as a gravitational force pulling against the forward momentum of efforts to advance gender inclusivity. It reduces the recognition and celebration of the varied contributions of all genders, weakening the collective potential of society, like a stubbornly persistent virus in the bloodstream of progress. It is for these reasons that I purport that the use of more unbiased gender terms like "humankind," "humanity," "person," and many others may help to counteract these gender prejudices and create a more equitable representation of both men and women.

By the same token, language influences how humanity perceives reality. Within this context, patriarchal or male-centric language influences attitudes and behaviours by normalising inequality and making it seem acceptable or inevitable. This ideology implies that patriarchal language, with its inherent prejudices and gendered principles, greatly influences attitudes and behaviours by interweaving inequality into everyday discourse. In other words, by routinely using words, phrases, and sentences that prioritise male experiences and perspectives, patriarchal language regulates gender hierarchies. It solidifies the ideology that male hegemony is both natural and acceptable (Pillay 2013, 54). The normalisation of gender hierarchies, therefore, functions like a slow-acting poison in the social bloodstream, conditioning individuals to accept gender disparities as the immutable laws of nature. This process mutates critical thought, acting as a virus that dismantles the community's ability to question or oppose systemic imbalance, leaving the structures of patriarchy to replicate unchecked. Even more evident, when language consistently oppresses women and other gender minorities, it maintains their exclusion from power and representation, making it challenging to envision a more unbiased society. Accordingly, changing patriarchal language is not simply about modifying words, phrases, and sentences but about transforming the underlying assumptions and power dynamic forces that influence public perceptions and practices. This is why Dube (1999, 34) contends that language mirrors and models cultural values. The unrelenting use of patriarchal language, especially in contemporary contexts, contributes to maintaining a culture of inequality and makes it harder to challenge and transform discriminatory practices and thoughts. In support of this intimation, Ruether (1982, 63) posits as follows:

This oppressive language entrenches power dynamics by subtly communicating that women's contributions and experiences are secondary or less important, which impedes progress towards gender fairness. So, by changing language to be more inclusive and equitable, we can challenge these entrenched norms and foster a cultural shift towards greater respect and equality for all genders. Similarly, language is a powerful tool for reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes. However, the persistent use of patriarchal terms and expressions not only reflects existing cultural values but also perpetuates them by continuously modelling and endorsing specific gender roles. For instance, language that predominantly highlights male achievements or roles can reinforce the stereotype

that men are more capable or suited for leadership and public roles, while women are relegated to domestic or supportive roles. This reinforcement makes it challenging to break away from traditional gender expectations and can limit opportunities for individuals who do not conform to these norms.

Therefore, the language used in everyday interactions, socially and culturally, and institutional contexts determines how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society. In this sense, when patriarchal language is dominant, it destructively impacts self-esteem and self-worth, particularly among women and children who, already and commonly, feel sidelined or undervalued. This implies that by continuously encountering language that accepts male dominance and female subordination, individuals may potentially internalise these biases, which may viably delay their desires and contributions. To this end, adopting inclusive and gender-neutral language operates as a recalibration of the societal philosophy, validating and affirming the diverse identities and experiences of all individuals. This linguistic shift serves as a psychological balm, leading to a healthier and fair self-perception while dismantling the entrenched prejudices encoded in male-orientated language structures. It is also important to accept that in professional and institutional contexts, male-orientated language adversely impacts policies and practices, leading to systemic bias and unequal treatment in areas like hiring, promotions, and leadership opportunities (Dube 1999, 37).

Bearing this contextual background in mind, this article has two aims. First, it aims to critique the role of patriarchal language in influencing gender dynamic forces in Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 through the perspective of poststructuralist feminism.¹ This aim seeks to unmask how patriarchal language within these biblical texts constructs and cements gender hierarchies, and how poststructuralist feminist theory deconstructs these narratives to unearth underlying power structures and assumptions. The second aim is to explore the implications of poststructuralist feminist critique on traditional interpretations of gender roles within these three selected biblical texts. This aim focuses on uncovering how applying poststructuralist feminist philosophies to these biblical texts challenges and transforms traditional interpretations of gender roles, and how this critique plausibly contributes to contemporary dialogues on gender equity within religious contexts. The rationale for this article emerges from the pressing demand to rethink how patriarchal or male-centric language within biblical texts sustains traditional gender roles and solidifies systemic disparity even in contemporary contexts. This linguistic prejudice not only distorts contemporary interpretations but also weakens fair applications of these sacred writings, creating ripples of sociocultural destruction that extend far beyond their original contexts. In particular, by applying poststructuralist feminist theory, I intend to contest entrenched

1 For the purposes of this article, biblical texts are directly quoted from the New International Version (NIV), published in 2011.

prejudices and promote more impartial and inclusive readings of these biblical scriptures.

Above all, an indirect personal experience was another driving factor for undertaking this scholarly discourse.² In a small, tight-knit rural community, a young Black woman named Masa grew up in a church where traditional biblical interpretations dictated her role in society. From an early age as a member of her church, she was taught that her primary duties were to support her husband and raise children, as prescribed by Genesis 3:16 and Ephesians 5:22–24. Despite her dreams of becoming a leader in the education sector, the church's patriarchal doctrine made her feel that her ambitions were secondary to her domestic responsibilities. Masa continually felt stifled by the expectations that her worth was tied to her compliance with these gender roles. Her community's reverence for these interpretations created barricades to her personal and professional growth, driving the belief that her voice and desires were secondary to traditional gender roles. In 2023, Masa began to question these doctrines, feeling a profound conflict between her self-worth and the limitations imposed by her religious upbringing. Her journey towards self-empowerment entailed challenging these patriarchal standards and seeking a more inclusive understanding of her place in the world. Bearing in mind this brief indirect personal experience, I submit that Masa's story and experiences suggest that rigid and male-centric interpretations of biblical texts significantly restrict the personal and professional growth of women, particularly within religious settings that celebrate male-orientated perceptions. Her journey highlights the internal conflict and struggles for self-empowerment that emerge when traditional gender roles are imposed. It highlights the demand for more inclusive and fair interpretations of religious doctrines to advance gender equality and individual fulfilment.

It is crucial also to observe that the three biblical texts were selected for their notable role in influencing gender dynamic factors within both ancient and contemporary religious contexts. The experience of Masa, a young Black woman constrained by male-orientated interpretations of these biblical texts, provides a narrative model through which the lived implications of these interpretations can be understood and challenged. Nonetheless, to meticulously critique the three biblical texts, this article applies poststructuralist feminist theory. The understanding and role of this theory is detailed in the next section.

Poststructuralist Feminist Theory

Poststructuralist feminist theory is a theoretical model that binds poststructuralist critiques of language, power, and identity with feminist concerns about gender

2 For the purposes of this article, the true identities of individuals discussed have been anonymised to protect their privacy. Any personal details or identifying information have been omitted to ensure confidentiality and to focus on the broader issue at hand. This approach is intended to respect the privacy of those involved while addressing the relevant themes pertaining to patriarchal language and male-orientated interpretations.

imbalance. By definition, poststructuralism is a literary theory that critiques the fixed structures and meanings proposed by structuralism, drawing attention to the fluidity and instability of meaning within literary and biblical texts and the role of power dynamic subtleties in forming knowledge and interpretation (Arndt 1985, 153). Along with this definition, poststructuralism questions the idea of objective truth, asserting that meaning is constructed through language and influenced by cultural and social interactions (Ferreirós 2023, 127).³ In addition, feminism is a universal or overarching movement and ideology advocating for the political, economic, social, and cultural equality of all genders, discountenancing the systemic disparities and discrimination faced by women and marginalised gender groups. It seeks to demystify patriarchal systems and advance justice, inclusivity, and equal rights for everyone (Nadar 2009a, 385; Phiri 2002, 19).

In view of these details, poststructuralist feminist theory, a blend of poststructuralism and feminism, challenges fixated and essentialist notions of gender, suggesting that identities are volatile and constructed through discourse. This theory underlines the role of language and social practices in modelling power relations and intends to deconstruct hierarchical binaries, such as male or female and masculine or feminine, to reveal the contingent and constructed nature of gender and other social categories. Poststructuralist feminist theory was developed by a number of feminist scholars.⁴ These scholars drew on the works of poststructuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, integrating their ideas on language, power, and identity with feminist critiques of patriarchy and gender norms (Aitchison 2000, 128; Butler 2001, 23; Derrida 2001, 7–17; Foucault 1971, 8–11; Foucault and Simon 1991, 26–29). Bearing these details in mind, in this article poststructuralist feminist theory is used to deconstruct the patriarchal or male-centric language in Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and show how these three biblical texts construct and intensify gender hierarchies and the power dynamics between men and women and thus sustain male hegemony and marginalise women and children. A critical gap in the existing body of knowledge is the insufficient application of poststructuralist feminist theoretical underpinnings to these biblical scriptures (Magubane 2001, 818; Masenya 2012, 207), which this article addresses by blending *poststructuralist* and *feminist* philosophies. The application of poststructuralist feminist theory provides a vibrant intellectual viewpoint through which the complexities of gender, power, and language are intricately deconstructed, unmasking the greatly entrenched structures that govern the societal ethos (Cuadro 2024, 29–30). It serves as a scalpel, delicately peeling away the layers of patriarchal discourse, and exposing the multiplicity of meanings that have long been obscured beneath hegemonic or traditional ideologies. In so doing, poststructuralist feminist theory invites one into an intellectual renaissance, where the very foundations of knowledge and power are questioned, and new, more inclusive paradigms emerge from the rubble of historical oppression. It is clear, therefore, that by robustly

3 Also see Jones (1993), Laws and Davies (2000), and Devetak (2009). These scholars extensively debate poststructuralism in its overarching context.

4 These scholars include Pratt (1993), Toye (2010), Drake and Radford (2022).

scrutinising the language and underlying assumptions of these biblical texts, this article unravels how traditional interpretations have maintained gender imbalance. Given that the theory of interpretation and discussion has now been explained, it is critical to focus on the thrust of this article, hence the next section.

Interpretation and Discussion

This section is divided into three subsections. Each subsection focuses on one of the three biblical texts, namely Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12. It is important to note that these three biblical texts are not necessarily compared against each other. Rather, they are critiqued and recognised for their respective representation of patriarchal or male-centric language. In so doing, reference to contemporary contexts is made in a bid to strike a balance between ancient religious practices and contemporary reinterpretations and contexts.

Genesis 3:16

The use of patriarchal language in Genesis 3:16 has been a focal point of scholarly debate over the years. This biblical verse reads as follows:

To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

This verse is part of the larger narrative of the fall, where Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22–24). This verse is frequently cited as a foundational text for understanding the oppression of women within the biblical tradition. Nestled within the grand narrative of humanity’s so-called “fall,” this verse is emblematic of an overarching scriptural machinery that is recurrently wielded to institutionalise the oppression of women. This does not exclude children who are also affected by gender imbalances. In other words, to ascribe the genesis of human suffering solely to the actions of Eve—a single figure—is not only a theological contortion but a moral travesty, a calculated process of epistemic violence against women. It is as if the Garden of Eden itself has been transformed into a courtroom, where the verdict of guilt is inscribed not on the stone tablets of justice but on the fragile body of womanhood. These ideologies, steeped in patriarchal allegory, are less the word of divinity and more the product of a profoundly flawed anthropocentric imagination—one that arrogantly cloaks misogyny in the garb of divine will. In particular, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children (אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה) (אָמַר, הָרְבָּה אֲרֻבָּה עֲצֻבוֹתָ וְהָרְבָּה בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים) is a spiritual punishment or sanction that introduces suffering into the previously harmonious process of childbirth. The implication here is that pain in childbirth is a direct consequence of the fall of humanity, resulting from Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden. This specific interpretation implies a theological rationale for the presence of pain and suffering in the human experience, particularly for women. It drives the idea that the natural order and human

experiences, including childbirth, were greatly altered by the original sin, shifting from a state of morality and ease to one epitomised by struggle and pain.

Having said this and by applying poststructuralist feminist theory, this biblical text, which ties women's suffering in childbirth to Eve's contravention, is deconstructed to uncover how it intensifies gender hierarchies by entrenching the notion of female culpability and subordination within the foundational texts of the biblical tradition. For this reason, I contend that this biblical text, tying women's suffering in childbirth to Eve's transgression, stands as a pernicious support of gender hierarchies, a theological indictment that weaponises biology to fuel female culpability and subjugation under the guise of divine justice—an ideology that poststructuralist feminist theory rejects as a cunningly disguised male-orientated construct. To the same extent, this interpretation is part of a broader narrative that underscores the themes of human insubordination and divine retribution, epitomising the complex relationship between humanity and the divine in the biblical tradition. In addition to its theological implications, this biblical verse has also been historically used to justify and consolidate patriarchal structures, repeatedly positioning women's suffering as a supernaturally ordained outcome and thus legitimising gender-based imbalances (Madise 2021, 3). However, contemporary readings, informed by poststructuralist feminist theory, contest this traditional interpretation (Madise 2021, 5; Punt 2006, 283). These contemporary readings emphasise the necessity to recognise the cultural and historical contexts in which these biblical texts were constructed and assembled and to explore more equitable and inclusive interpretations that do not promote detrimental gender principles. These contemporary readings seek to deconstruct the patriarchal expectations woven into Genesis 3:16 and promote a more intricate understanding of the roles and experiences of women within both religious narratives and broader societal contexts.

To elucidate the poststructuralist feminist debate, this article engages with the original Hebrew text of Genesis 3:16, a linchpin of male-centric interpretation, where words like “desire” (תַּשׁוּקָה) and “rule” (רָעָה) are laden with multiple layers of meaning obscured by centuries of translation bias. Far from being mere descriptors of divine intent, these terms mirror the sociopolitical realities of the ancient Near East, where gender hierarchies were vastly entrenched (Doukhan 2014, 1116). Poststructuralist feminist theory, with its incisive viewpoint, dismantles these linguistic structures, revealing them as cultural artefacts rather than immutable divine mandates. This theoretical underpinning transforms the verse from a static proclamation of female subordination into a dynamic battlefield of interpretation, ripe for re-evaluation in contemporary discourse. In any event, in the Hebrew context, the word “desire” (תַּשׁוּקָה) in Genesis 3:16 implies a longing or turning towards, frequently interpreted as a relational dependency or a struggle for control within the dynamic between men and women (Brown et al. 2000, 101). On the one hand, the word “rule” (רָעָה) denotes dominion or authority, reflecting a hierarchical power imbalance introduced as a consequence of the fall, rather than God's original design for equality (Baumgartner 2001, 11).

At the same time, the socio-historical discourse within this article highlights how such texts, when critically probed, expose the ideological scaffolding that has sustained gender inequality, providing an intellectual rallying cry for those committed to dismantling these oppressive constructs. This argument finds its living incarnation in Masa's reality, whose lived experience undertones the profound societal impact of these biblical interpretations. Raised in a community where Genesis 3:16 was weaponised to enforce female submission, Masa's early life mirrored the entrapment prescribed by patriarchal ideology within the church context. Her eventual defiance and recovery of independence coordinate powerfully with the poststructuralist feminist mandate to deconstruct oppressive narratives and replace them with affirmations of autonomy and equality. Comparative references to alternative Old Testament texts, such as Proverbs 31—which extols women's capabilities and leadership—serve as counterpoints that undermine the monolithic power of patriarchal readings. Masa's journey thus becomes both a case study and a call to action, illustrating how re-examining foundational texts through a critical, poststructuralist feminist viewpoint could inspire not only theoretical dialogues but tangible liberation for those historically bound by oppressive interpretations. This dual focus, on textual nuance and lived experience, underscores the transformative potential of poststructuralist feminist critique.

By the same token, the insinuation that “Your desire will be for your husband” (וְרָצוֹן תִּשְׁקֶה אִשְׁתְּךָ תְּשׁוּקָתָהּ) indicates a kind of longing or dependence, implying an inherent subordination of the woman to the man (Brown et al. 2000, 103–105). The phrase “he will rule over you” (וְהָיָה יָמֻשׁ לְבָךְ) unequivocally encodes a hierarchical framework, positioning the man as the presiding power over the woman (Holladay 2000, 77). This articulation is not just a textual observation but a deliberate intensification of patriarchal systems, a cornerstone upon which the architecture of gender imbalance is constructed. Crucially, this biblical assertion has been appropriated and calcified within various religious traditions, which, rather than interrogating its historical and linguistic complexities, have continually embraced it as an inevitable spiritual mandate for male supremacy. In view of this submission, such interpretations serve as epistemological blinders, cementing an uncritical acceptance of male dominance as divinely ordained. This implies that by failing to engage with the socio-historical and linguistic complexities of the text, these traditions risk sanctifying a philosophy that consolidates patriarchal authority, transforming what could be a metaphorical interplay of relational dynamics into a rigid framework of oppression. This exegetical rigidity not only oversimplifies Genesis 3:16 but also strengthens a legacy of inequity, intensifying an inherited imbalance under the guise of divine legitimacy.

For example, in some traditional Christian communities such as the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptist Convention, Orthodox Christianity, traditional Amish communities, and Assemblies of God, this biblical verse is used to rationalise the notion that women should be submissive to men, both in the family and within the church. From a poststructuralist feminist point of view, I argue that this uncritical invocation of biblical verses to rationalise women's submission in traditional Christian communities

is a political continuation of patriarchal dominance masquerading as spiritual fidelity. These interpretations weaponise biblical texts to cement hierarchical gender structures, effectively transforming faith into a tool of epistemological control and social stratification. Within this framework, the pain in childbirth is a divine punishment for Eve's delinquency, intensifying the idea that women bear a special burden as a result of the original sin. Consequently, this interpretation has been extended to imply that women are inherently more prone to sin and, therefore, must be under the authority and guidance of men to prevent further transgressions.

Through poststructuralist feminist theory, I submit that this understanding operates like a genetic code of patriarchal ideologies, interweaving male hegemony as the default structure in religious institutions. This coded framework systemically mutates the spiritual ecosystem, guaranteeing that men hold primary power and influence while women are segregated from leadership roles and decision-making processes. This system functions as a well-oiled machine of exclusion, powered by centuries of institutional prejudice and driven through the relentless replication of gendered hierarchies. The result is a theological laboratory where women's voices are silenced, their potential diluted, and their leadership excised like an unwelcome anomaly in a preordained patriarchal script. Regardless of this perspective, contemporary scholars and theologians ought to persistently denounce this problematic interpretation, arguing that it reflects a cultural bias rather than a true divine mandate. To do this, contemporary scholars and theologians should emphasise *re-reading* Genesis 3:16 with a critical eye towards the socio-historical context in which it was written, advocating for re-interpretations that advance gender equality and justice. This is particularly significant owing to the reality that the traditional interpretation has defended gender roles, deterring women's roles to the domestic sphere and emphasising their subservience to men.

Various scholars have challenged the traditional male-orientated interpretation, contending that it characterises a cultural prejudice rather than spiritual intent (Meyers 2014, 9; Njoroge 2005, 29–46; Oduyoye 2008, 82–89; Tribble 1973, 33). This feminist approach examines the socio-historical context in which Genesis was written, suggesting that the patriarchal language reflects the ethical codes of a male-dominated society rather than an unalterable divine decree. Based on these scholarly discussions, I put forward that Genesis 3:16 should be read as descriptive rather than prescriptive. This means that this biblical verse describes the consequences of the fall in a fallen world, rather than prescribing an ideal order. In any case, it is critical to observe that the patriarchal language in Genesis 3:16 is also comparable to other ancient Near Eastern biblical texts, which reflect similar hierarchical structures. In many ancient mythologies, women are depicted in subordinate roles, suggesting that the Bible itself is part of a broader cultural milieu.

For instance, in the mythology of Pandora, she is created by the gods as a punishment for humanity and is given a jar (or box) that, when opened, releases all the evils into the

world (Geoghegan 2008, 25). This particular mythology depicts Pandora as a source of trouble and suffering, reinforcing the notion that women are responsible for misfortune and should be controlled or constrained. Similarly, in the mythology of Persephone, she is abducted by Hades and becomes the queen of the Underworld, demonstrating a lack of independence and illustrating her role as a victim rather than a powerful figure (Ezzy 2011, 247). These mythologies mirror a broader cultural pattern in which women are depicted as secondary or subordinate to men, nurturing gender hierarchies and societal ethical codes. Ultimately, this context helps one understand how biblical texts, such as Genesis 3:16, which also places women in subordinate roles with respect to men, fit within a larger cultural and mythological framework that traditionally emphasised male hegemony and female subordination. This biblical text, therefore, is duty-bound to be regarded as part of this wider cultural milieu that immortalises gender imbalances through various mythologies and narratives. In addition to this perception, ancient Near Eastern legal texts, such as the Code of Hammurabi, reflect patriarchal ethical codes, maintaining the idea that the biblical text is culturally contextual.⁵

In contrast to these scholarly dialogues, I argue that the New Testament introduces philosophies on gender roles that frequently challenge or nuance the patriarchal implications of Genesis 3:16, rooted in the Old Testament. For instance, Galatians 3:28 proclaims, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” (אין יהודי ולא גוי, אין עבד ולא בן־חורין, אין) (אין) advocating for spiritual equality that transcends societal divisions. Similarly, Ephesians 5:22–33, while emphasising the submission of wives to husbands, simultaneously underscores mutual intimacy and value, depicting a more layered and reciprocal recognition of marital relationships. This chemistry between these biblical texts suggests a theological framework that oscillates between cementing traditional hierarchies and advancing principles of equity and shared dignity. In a nutshell, while Genesis 3:16, established in the Old Testament, outlines a patriarchal perspective, the New Testament contains biblical texts or narratives that contradict and reframe traditional gender roles. As just mentioned, Galatians 3:28 promotes a vision of equality in Jesus Christ, and Ephesians 5:22–33, while maintaining traditional gender roles, calls attention to reciprocated respect and adoration, exhibiting a more complex and relational acknowledgement of gender dynamic subtleties within the Christian faith. Inevitably, the patriarchal or male-centric language in Genesis 3:16 marks a complex chemistry of cultural, historical, and theological factors. While traditionally used to

5 The Code of Hammurabi is one of the oldest and most complete written legal codes from ancient Mesopotamia, established by King Hammurabi of Babylon around 1754 BCE. It consists of 282 legal frameworks covering various dimensions of daily life and justice, including trade, family relations, and criminal offences, and is known for its principle of *lex talionis*, or the law of retribution, exemplified by the phrase “an eye for an eye.” One patriarchal example from the Code of Hammurabi is Law 144, which states that if a woman is caught in adultery, both she and her partner are to be bound and thrown into the water. This law reflects a gender bias where the woman’s behaviour is harshly punished, whereas the male partner’s responsibility is less emphasised, illustrating the patriarchal norms of the time.

justify male hegemony, this biblical verse is reinterpreted to dismount and critique male-orientated regulations. Because of these biblical and theological ideologies, by comparing and contrasting traditional and contemporary readings, as well as considering the wider cultural context, one gains a more multifaceted acknowledgement of this foundational text.

Above all, it is central to observe that Genesis 3:16 has vicious implications for contemporary dialogues on gender roles and equality. Historically, this particular biblical verse has been used to drive male-orientated structures, influencing religious and societal norms that position women in secondary roles (Rugyendo 2024, 73). In many conservative religious contexts, this biblical verse has imposed traditional gender roles, underlining male authority and female conformity or submission. Regrettably, this interpretation has acted like a corrosive acid, slowly eroding the structural integrity of family dynamics, leadership roles, and collective expectations, leaving behind a weakened foundation that promotes gender-based disparities. It has planted profound roots of imbalance, with each branch extending to systemically inhibit women's opportunities, like an invasive species choking out native growth in the ecosystem of society. This distorted view, much like a malfunctioning compass, has misdirected generations, leading to the sustained oppression of women, whose potential has been confined by the shackles of outdated paradigms. As a result of this reality, the societal fabric remains frayed, unable to achieve its full, harmonious potential due to the entrenched imbalances that continue to stifle progress (Cobb 2024, 44). In this sense, this biblical verse has contributed to maintaining and crediting gender hierarchies within many contemporary communities.

Contrary to these assertions, contemporary reinterpretations of Genesis 3:16 are increasingly dismantling its patriarchal implications. Once more, this biblical text reflects the cultural norms of its time rather than a timeless supernatural mandate. Having said this, I believe that this biblical verse ought to be discerned in its historical context by describing the consequences of the fall rather than prescribing an ideal gender directive. This reinterpretation viably supports movements towards gender justice and liberation by advocating for a more sensible treatment of women and children and rejecting interpretations that propagate male supremacy. In other words, by critiquing traditional readings, contemporary scholars and non-scholars, as well as activists work to dismantle systemic imbalances that such ancient texts have justified. In addition to this score, contemporary Christian communities continue to grapple with reconciling traditional biblical interpretations with modern values of equality and human dignity (Ezzy 2011, 245). In this instance, several churches and denominations are re-examining their teachings on gender roles in view of evolving understandings of gender and sexuality (Ezzy 2011, 247). This includes concerted efforts to reconsider or move far beyond biblical passages like Genesis 3:16 to advance gender justice and inclusivity in leadership and ministry roles. In essence, as societal attitudes shift, religious communities should act as crucibles, forging a delicate balance between the immutable forces of scriptural authority and the dynamic currents of justice and

equality. This process is akin to re-engineering a complex system, recalibrating age-old principles to align with the evolving moral compass of society. The challenge lies in constructing an environment that functions like a well-designed ecosystem, where both men and women are not merely tolerated but actively nurtured, guaranteeing that they grow in parallel, equally supported and encouraged to thrive. To fail in this endeavour is to intensify a biological imbalance in the social fabric, where one gender thrives at the expense of the other, undermining the holistic health of the community.

Ephesians 5:22–24

Ephesians 5:22–24 is continually mentioned in dialogues about patriarchal language in the New Testament. It reads as follows:

²²Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

From a poststructuralist feminist standpoint, this biblical text unmistakably encapsulates a male-orientated paradigm, creating a hierarchical construct in which the husband is exalted as the “head” of the wife, mirroring the theological archetype of Jesus Christ as the head of the church. The metaphorical scaffolding of this biblical text elevates male authority to a divine echelon, interweaving asymmetrical power dynamics within a framework of sanctified relationality. This alignment positions the husband as both a spiritual and societal locus of control, a symbolic keystone in the edifice of marital order, thus enshrining patriarchy as a divinely ordained principle. This ideology characterises a system of authority where the husband has a leadership role, and the wife is required to submit.

Having said this, I contend that this gender stratification crystallises a definitive hierarchical schema, entrenching conventional gender roles that elevate male dominion to a structural apex. This hierarchical structure implies that men are naturally suited for leadership while women are expected to be submissive, thus preserving gender irregularities. In applying poststructuralist feminist theory, this particular understanding of gender roles and hierarchy confines women’s and children’s opportunities while undermining their autonomy, both within the family and in broader communal roles (Diko 2023, 612–614). As further outlined by Nadar (2023, ii), the expectation that wives ought to submit to their husbands has significant implications for women’s liberation. This is based on the idea that this dynamic element discourages women from pursuing leadership roles or asserting their independence, as they are socialised to prioritise their husbands’ demands and authority. No wonder, therefore, that West and Zondi-Mabizela (2004, 7) strongly suggest that this coercive context contributes to the systemic oppression of women and restricts their ability to comprehensively participate in various dimensions of life, including education, career, and community involvement.

By the same token, Diko (2023, 613) cautions that contemporary values increasingly draw attention to gender equality and mutual honour in relationships. In spite of this, the hierarchical model presented in Ephesians 5:22–24 may be at odds with these contemporary values, creating tension between traditional religious doctrines and the modern societal ethos. In view of this observation, I contend that this dissonance is problematic for individuals and communities striving to reconcile their faith with a commitment to gender equality. Poststructuralist feminist theory demonstrates that this biblical text is descriptive of its cultural milieu rather than prescriptive for all times. In this case, the metaphor of the husband as “head” is reconsidered in the selected theory, contesting its assumed implications of male superiority. Masa’s experience, previously presented, once again provides a practical view, as her struggle to balance traditional gender expectations with personal desires mirrors the tensions inherent in these interpretations.

Beyond this assertion, it is important to accept that contemporary interpretations, especially those that are acutely imbued with poststructuralist feminist philosophies, contest this hierarchical view, proposing instead a model of mutual reverence and partnership (Thobejane 2017, 58). Within this framework, the poststructuralist feminist theory contends that this patriarchal language bolsters gender disproportion and obstructs women’s roles within the family (Ademiluka 2021b, 3; Mutter 2018, 5). As previously pointed out, the metaphorical expression of the husband being the “head” of the wife bands together with traditional male-centric systems that prioritise male authority, as opposed to gender fairness. Considering this assertion, the patriarchal lexicon depicts the dominant sociocultural paradigm of its epoch, functioning as a linguistic echo of male hegemony greatly entrenched within the structural chromosome of the era. This hegemony, though systemically normalised, operated as a platform of exclusion, enabling biases that relegated women and children to the peripheries of societal value. This language, far from being neutral, was a codified instrument of power, cementing hierarchical constructs that privileged masculinity as the unchallenged axis of authority. Like a river carving its course through stone, this linguistic framework influenced societal perceptions, leaving indelible imprints of inequity on the cultural scenery.

In contrast to this submission, it is captivating to observe that other parts of the New Testament and broader biblical texts foreground mutual, bilateral, and interactive respect and equality in Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3:28, which suggests that in Jesus Christ, distinctions such as male and female are transcended). Therefore, this indicates that Ephesians 5:22–24 represents specific cultural norms rather than a universal, timeless principle. Similarly, I put forward that this biblical passage prescribes a specific dynamic where the wife is to submit to “everything” which could be regarded as intensifying traditional gender roles and limiting the wife’s sovereignty. While this is the case, some contemporary biblical scholars and theologians such as Ademiluka (2021a, 1) and Rednic (2023, 78–94) interpret this biblical passage in light of reciprocal submission principles found in Ephesians 5:21, which proposes that spouses “Submit to

one another out of reverence for Christ” (הִיכָנְעוּ זֶה לָזֶה מִתּוֹךְ יִרְאַת כְּבוֹד לַמָּשִׁיחַ). These biblical and theological scholars propose that this biblical text should be understood as part of a universal, more egalitarian framework where mutual love and deference are central.

With these contrasting philosophies in mind, I submit that striking a delicate balance in reinterpreting Ephesians 5:22–24 comprises acknowledging the traditional interpretations while considering contemporary scholarly perspectives that advocate for a more egalitarian method. This delicate balance could be achieved by contextualising this biblical text historically and theologically and applying its principles in a way that honours both traditional and contemporary understandings of gender justice. To attain this delicate balance, I propose five avenues that could be considered:

1. It is crucial to consider the historical and cultural context in which Ephesians was constructed and assembled. This is because the early Christian communities lived within the Greco-Roman world, where patriarchal standards were profoundly entrenched.⁶ In this context, the exhortation for wives to submit to their husbands resonated with existing communal ideologies. To this end, acknowledging this context helps contemporary biblical readers recognise that Ephesians 5:22–24 portrays specific cultural accommodations rather than a timeless, universal mandate.
2. In so far as some contemporary scholars, as outlined earlier, highlight the significance of mutual submission as delineated in Ephesians 5:21, I contend that this broader context undertones that the subsequent verses, including Ephesians 5:22–24, should be reinterpreted within a framework of mutual adoration and deference. Ultimately, the notion of mutual submission inevitably redefines the relationship between men and women, underlining reciprocity and equality rather than unilateral authority. This technique of re-interpretation alienates other biblical passages that promote love, deference, and partnership in marriage.
3. From a theological perspective, balancing these premises requires recognising the unity and equality of all believers in Jesus Christ, as emphasised in Galatians 3:28, which states that “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Consequently, applying this principle, Christian communities should re-interpret Ephesians 5:22–24 as advocating for a proportional and mannerly partnership, where both spouses honour each other’s dignity and contributions. This

6 The Greco-Roman world refers to the cultural, political, and social amalgamation of ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, spanning roughly from the eighth century BCE to the fall of the western Roman Empire in 476 CE. This period is characterised by the widespread influence of Greek philosophy, art, and science, merged with Roman law, engineering, and governance, influencing much of Western civilisation’s foundations.

particular approach does not negate traditional roles but blends them within a contemporary framework that upholds both partners' autonomy and value.

4. Practically, achieving this delicate balance alludes to creating space for diverse expressions of marriage within the church. In this regard, I put forward that some couples may choose to adhere to more traditional gender roles, finding personal and spiritual fulfilment in that structure. Others may embrace a more egalitarian model, emphasising collective responsibilities and decision-making. Therefore, I submit that churches should support both approaches by promoting doctrines that underscore mutual love, respect, and service, allowing couples to discern the dynamic forces that best suit their relationship. This is contrary to imposing a single and rigid model of marital relationships.
5. It is essential to honour diverse interpretations within the Christian community. Bearing this proposal in mind, by driving open dialogues and encouraging theological reflection, contemporary churches plausibly help individuals and couples navigate the complexities of these doctrines in ways that resonate with their convictions and circumstances. This inclusive approach not only honours the intricacy of biblical interpretation but also supports the spiritual growth and security of all members.

From a poststructuralist feminist viewpoint, balancing the traditional and contemporary interpretations of Ephesians 5:22–24 comprises understanding its historical context, buttressing mutual submission and intimacy, and applying these principles in a way that celebrates both traditional and contemporary understandings of gender justice. Nevertheless, it must be put to the fore that the metaphorical expression that obligates women to be submissive and compliant creates a structure of authority that positions the husband in a central leadership role while systematising the wife in a subordinate, submissive role. Bearing this view in mind, I argue that poststructuralist feminist theory regards this male-orientated language as representing and perpetuating traditional gender hierarchies and a societal ethos that prioritise male authority and obstruct women's and children's freedom. Once more, from a poststructuralist feminist theory, this biblical passage's oppressive language is consistent with the patriarchal systems prevalent during the time it was produced, where male hegemony was regularised and accepted. This exhibits a dominant societal ethos that has historically downplayed women's roles and voices.

Against this reality, I contend that this hierarchical yet oppressive metaphor is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, influencing how gender roles are comprehended and practiced within the family and broader society. This observation is based on the premise that biblical texts, especially those blended into religious doctrines and practices, continue to serve as foundational guidelines for believers (West and Zondi-Mabizela 2004, 6). On the grounds of this assertion, the prescriptive nature of Ephesians 5:22–24 is evident in its direct commands which denote that “Wives, submit yourselves

to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” (וְנָשִׁים, הַכְנֻעֶנָה לַבָּעֲלִיכֶן כַּאֲשֶׁר לַאֲדֹנָי) and “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (כִּי הָאִישׁ הוּא רֹאשׁ) (הָאֵשָׁה, כַּאֲשֶׁר הַמָּשִׁיחַ הוּא רֹאשׁ הַקִּהְלָה). These prescriptive declarations are not solely describing the status quo but instructing specific behaviours and relational dynamics. By the same token, in many Christian communities, this biblical piece is used to justify and maintain traditional gender roles in which men are viewed as leaders and providers, while women are caretakers and supporters. It is for this reason that I insist that the prescriptive use of this biblical text in contemporary settings is evident in the doctrines of various denominations that underline male headship and female submission as spiritual mandates. For instance, denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention explicitly reference this biblical piece to uphold complementarian views, which prescribe distinct and non-interchangeable roles for men and women both in the church and the home (Rugyendo 2024, 72).

Likewise, the hierarchical model prescribed in Ephesians 5:22–24 has historically influenced legal frameworks and cultural practices related to gender roles (Mutter 2018, 3). In many societies where Christianity has been a dominant influence, legal frameworks, and social norms have mirrored the male-centric systems supported by this biblical text. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, the perception of male authority and female submission has configured family legal frameworks, inheritance rights, and employment opportunities, fortifying gender disparities. For example, in Western societies, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women’s legal rights were significantly more restricted than men’s, exemplifying the biblical model of male headship (Masenya 1998, 82). Regarding this reality, women were denied the right to vote, own property, or work outside the home, and their legal identity was subsumed under their husbands. These legal restrictions were justified by appealing to biblical texts like Ephesians 5:22–24, 1 Corinthians 11:3, Colossians 3:18, and Titus 2:3–5 (West and Zondi-Mabizela 2004, 6–9). In the current milieu, in some regions and communities, cultural norms that obstruct women’s independence and leadership roles are justified using these biblical passages, demonstrating their ongoing prescriptive influence on gender role expectations (Masenya 1998, 83).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to accept that contemporary implications of Ephesians 5:22–24 are significant, especially in the context of evolving gender roles and marital dynamic undercurrents, as outlined in the poststructuralist feminist theory. As pointed out earlier, in traditional interpretations, this biblical text has been used to advance hierarchical gender roles within marriage, promoting a model where the husband is regarded as the power force and the wife is submissive. For contemporary contexts, I put forward that this interpretation prolongs gender discrepancy and obstructs the roles and self-governance of women and children within both religious and secular contexts. This idea is supported by Kgatle (2024, 6) who makes it clear that in societies striving for gender fairness, this biblical text could be contested for its fortification of patriarchal structures and for plausibly justifying disparate power dynamic undercurrents in relationships.

On the contrary, and as underlined earlier, many modern biblical scholars and theologians propose a reinterpretation or reconsideration of Ephesians 5:22–24 and many other gender-oppressive biblical texts in light of universal biblical dogmas on mutual deference and fairness. These scholarly views foreground the importance of interpreting patriarchal or subjugative language within the larger setting of Ephesians 5:21, which advocates for mutual submission among believers, both men and women. Differently put, the call for wives to be submissive and compliant should not be understood as endorsing a one-dimensional or predisposed authority but rather as part of a mutual, deferential relationship where both partners are called to adore and serve one another. This reinterpretation or reconsideration seeks to align this biblical passage with contemporary values of partnership, justice, and fairness, fortifying a model of marriage where both spouses contribute constructively to decision-making and leadership. In the same vein, the application of Ephesians 5:22–24 in contemporary contexts raises important questions about how religious texts influence societal norms and personal relationships. In consideration of this assertion, as gender roles continue to evolve, religious communities and individuals ought to grapple with how ancient texts and experiences equalise with current values and practices. For many, this involves reconsidering traditional interpretations and finding ways to defend the core values of love and respect while (re)adapting to contemporary understandings of equality and partnership. This pursuit is necessary given the progressing dialogues concerning this biblical piece reflecting broader conversations about how religious dogmas interact with modern concepts of gender and relationship dynamics.

1 Timothy 2:11–12

1 Timothy 2:11–12 is one of the key biblical passages in New Testament dialogues on gender roles within the church. It reads as follows:

¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

Within this framework, patriarchal or male-orientated language continually depicts and underpins gender hierarchies, suggesting a system where men hold power over women and children. For this reason, in 1 Timothy 2:11–12, this punitive language implies a hierarchical connection between men and women within the church context. Specifically, the gender-oppressive terms “quietness” (שָׁקֵט) and “full submission” (כְּנִיעוּת מְלֵאָה) for women mirror a controlled and passive role, while the prohibition against women teaching or having power over men strengthens a power dynamic privileging men. This is why religious leaders should be concerned about the use of patriarchal language in biblical texts and church contexts, as well as its damaging implications. As Maluleke (2020, 9) points out, several modern congregants, particularly younger generations and women, find the destructive language of “quietness” (שָׁקֵט) and “full submission” (כְּנִיעוּת מְלֵאָה) alienating. In support of this assertion, Mutter (2018, 11) strongly argues that this language creates an unreceptive

and exclusionary environment, leading to disengagement or departure from the church, and ultimately weakening the faith community. In the same context, I argue that contemporary public values increasingly call attention to gender justice and the empowerment of all individuals. Conversely, religious leaders who downplay these values could find their teachings increasingly out of step with broader public norms, reducing their relevance and moral authority in the eyes of the public. No wonder Cooke (2008, 23) shifts the responsibility on religious leaders by indicating that:

Religious leaders play a central role in emancipating women within religious contexts by challenging traditional interpretations of sacred texts that perpetuate gender inequality. Through progressive exegesis and hermeneutics, they can reinterpret scriptures to highlight themes of equality and justice, thereby providing a theological basis for the empowerment of women. By so doing, they can dismantle patriarchal norms embedded in religious practices and teachings, promoting an inclusive and egalitarian perspective that values the contributions and rights of women. This theological reformation requires religious leaders to engage in continuous education, dialogue, and advocacy, ensuring that their congregations are aware of and embrace these progressive interpretations.

This is unequivocally true owing to the reality that religious leaders in contemporary contexts should all serve as powerful advocates for women's and children's rights by utilising their platforms to address and denounce challenges such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and access to education and leadership roles within religious institutions. Accordingly, by modelling and promoting gender justice in their leadership styles and decision-making processes, they set a precedent for their communities to follow. This entails not only preaching about equality but also implementing practical policies and practices within their religious organisations that support and uplift women. Through these constructive actions, religious leaders plausibly foster an environment that encourages the active participation and leadership of women and children, contributing significantly to their liberation and the broader movement for gender equality within religious and societal contexts.

In any event, the dictatorial yet patriarchal language in 1 Timothy 2:11–12 ought to be discerned within its historical and cultural context, contrary to its rigid and face-value application in contemporary contexts. As Moo (1981, 199) reports, the early Christian communities were positioned within a Greco-Roman society where patriarchal norms were prevalent. Inevitably, this biblical context certainly influenced the way gender roles were presented in church settings, and not necessarily overlooking broader social contexts. This being the case, a poststructuralist feminist theory interrogates the biblical text's original references, where terms like "quiet" and "submission" are contextualised within the overarching socio-political concerns. This exposition reveals how the biblical text's male-orientated assumptions have been used to mute women in religious leadership. Rather than endorsing a timeless prohibition, this article positions 1 Timothy 2:11–12 within its historical context, where concerns about decorum and order influenced its composition. Alternative readings from other Pauline biblical texts, such

as Romans 16, which acknowledges women leaders, could be juxtaposed to provide a more intricate discernment.

When juxtaposed with other biblical texts, particularly the contentious 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, the hermeneutical scenery becomes a battleground for patriarchal hegemony, cloaked in the guise of divine ordinance. These verses, frequently wielded as linguistic platforms for male-centric power, epitomise the relentless challenge of androcentric narratives embedded within holy texts. Like a recurring algorithm in theological discourse, this language reasserts hierarchical structures, questioning contemporary efforts to reimagine equity and inclusivity within religious praxis (Wall 2004, 83). This biblical text is a directive from the apostle Paul, reflecting the cultural norms of the time regarding gender roles and the conduct of women in public religious gatherings. However, I must also indicate that there are several alternative interpretations that should be considered in the case of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, especially when a comparative discourse, as in the case herein, is carried out:

1. Waters (2004, 704) suggests that Paul was addressing specific concerns in the Corinthian church, where there may have been disruptions caused by women asking questions during services. In this case, the instruction is not a universal command but a situational response to maintain order during worship.
2. Machingura (2013, 234) put forward that these biblical verses may not have been part of Paul's original letter but were later interpolations added by scribes. This argument is based on some ancient manuscripts where these verses appear in different locations within the chapter.
3. Köstenberger (1997, 109) considers the broader context of Paul's letters, acknowledging the role of women in ministry (for example, Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 and Priscilla in Romans 16:3–4). Within this framework, Paul's views on women speaking in churches may be more nuanced than a forthright reading of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 would imply.
4. Hutson (2014, 392) proposes that Paul might have been quoting a Corinthian position that he subsequently refutes, especially given the ostensibly contradictory statements in 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul discusses women praying and prophesying in the church.

With these varying interpretations, I posit that Paul is establishing an order within the church that aligns with broader biblical teachings on the roles of men and women, as is evident in 1 Timothy 2:11–12. In my view, this directive is part of maintaining proper conduct and decorum in worship settings. This being the case, by adhering to this directive, the church upholds a sense of order and respect in its practices, affirming that the spiritual leadership and teaching roles remain primarily with men, as was customary in the early Christian communities. From a poststructuralist feminist theory perspective,

1 Timothy 2:11–12 undertones how religious texts operate as instruments of wielding power, configuring social ethos, and conserving patriarchal or male-orientated structures. It is for this reason that poststructuralist feminist theory rejects the obsessive meanings and conventions interwoven in these biblical texts, underlining that such oppressive language is not neutral but is used to sustain power relations. In this view, Paul's directive should be accepted as a product of its historical and cultural context, characterising and cementing the hegemonic gender standards of the time. Beyond this assertion, I put forward that this emancipatory perspective encourages one to question the naturalisation of gender roles within religious discourses. This denotes that by recognising that these gender roles are socially constructed rather than divinely ordained, one could begin to deconstruct the binary oppositions of male authority and female submission. In the same context, poststructuralist feminist theory emphasises the importance of multiple interpretations and voices, suggesting that the traditional reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–12 is not the only possible understanding, especially for contemporary contexts. Rather, one could explore how different readings may empower women and children, as well as contest patriarchal norms within religious communities.

1 Timothy 2:11–12, which prescribes *silence* and *submission* for women in the church and prohibits them from teaching or holding power over men, continues to have significant implications for contemporary dialogues on gender roles within religious communities. One of the primary implications is its influence on the ongoing dialogue concerning women's leadership roles in various Christian denominations. For many conservative and traditionalist communities, this biblical text serves as a foundational narrative that supports the restriction of women from pastoral and teaching roles (Ogidis 2023, 154). Regrettably, this has led to the continued exclusion of women from positions of power within these churches, fortifying a gender hierarchy that mirrors the patriarchal structures present in the ancient context of 1 Timothy 2:11–12. Conversely, progressive Christian groups challenge the applicability of 1 Timothy 2:11–12 to contemporary contexts (Hutson 2014, 393). This is against the backdrop that the cultural and historical circumstances of the early church, where this biblical text was constructed, differ significantly from today's contexts. In view of this fact, many of these progressive Christian groups interpret this biblical text as addressing specific challenges within the church rather than providing a universal mandate. This perspective has led to a broader acceptance of women in leadership roles and a re-interpretation of biblical texts to depict contemporary values of gender equality and inclusivity.

This biblical passage also influences broader debates about gender equality beyond religious settings. For example, in societies where religious doctrines heavily influence the cultural ethos and legal frameworks, the restrictions imposed by 1 Timothy 2:11–12 significantly contribute to broader gender disparities. This is based on the fact that the fortification of traditional gender roles within religious communities tends to spill over into secular domains, affecting women's and children's opportunities in public and professional contexts. This intersection between religious teachings and societal standards underscores the demand for dialogue and reform within religious institutions

to address and alleviate the destructive impact of such patriarchal doctrines. Above and beyond this pronouncement, the interpretation and application of 1 Timothy 2:11–12 have implications for interfaith and ecumenical relations.⁷

As diverse religious traditions navigate the complexities of gender dynamics, the varying hermeneutics applied to this biblical account serve as tectonic plates, shaping the terrain of interfaith collaboration and dialogue. Denominations that anchor themselves in rigid gender roles may find their foundations at odds with more progressive traditions, creating fissures for meaningful engagement. Consequently, I must caution that these interpretative divergences could erode the cohesion and synergy among religious groups, thus destabilising joint initiatives and communal missions. In essence, the unfolding debate over 1 Timothy 2:11–12 reflects overarching societal tectonic shifts towards gender equality and social justice. As gender roles evolve and the demand for fair treatment intensifies, religious interpretations that constrain women's roles are subjected to heightened scrutiny. This critical exploration compels faith communities to recalibrate their engagement with sacred texts and traditions, mirroring contemporary paradigms of social progress and gender inclusivity. Ultimately, by interrogating the implications of these biblical passages, religious communities recalibrate their practices to balance with advancing perceptions of gender equity and in so doing contribute meaningfully to transformative social change. In view of these scholarly debates, the concluding remarks and future scholarly implications are articulated in the forthcoming section.

Conclusion and Future Scholarly Implications

This investigation of Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22–24, and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 using poststructuralist feminist theory has revealed the profoundly entrenched male-centric structures that are interwoven in these biblical texts. These biblical texts have historically been interpreted in ways that advance male hegemony and female subordination, symbolising and propagating societal norms that privilege male power. Poststructuralist feminist theory, with its focus on deconstructing hierarchical binaries and dismantling the stability of meaning, provided a critical framework to contest these traditional interpretations and expose the power dynamic forces at play. Specifically, in Genesis 3:16, the pronouncement of increased agony in childbirth and the woman's desire for her husband, who ruled over her, has been regarded as a divine commendation of male authority. However, a poststructuralist feminist reading uncovered this as a narrative construct that represents the sociocultural context of its time rather than a prescriptive spiritual order. For this reason, I pointed out that this approach would allow for a reinterpretation or reconsideration that recognises this biblical text as a product of its historical circumstances, thereupon opening up possibilities for more just readings.

7 Interfaith relations refer to the interactions and dialogue between people of different religious traditions, aiming to promote mutual understanding and respect. Ecumenical relations, on the other hand, involve efforts to advance unity and cooperation among different Christian denominations, seeking common ground and shared expressions of faith.

Ephesians 5:22–24, which calls for wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Jesus Christ, similarly reflects a patriarchal philosophy. This is based on the reality that traditional exegesis tends to take this submission as a given, advancing gender hierarchies within Christian communities. Poststructuralist feminist theory, however, deconstructs the notion of fixated gender roles, highlighting how such interpretations serve to maintain power imbalances. This denotes that by questioning the presumed naturalness of these gender roles, this theory advocates for a more multifaceted discernment that recognises the plausibility of mutual submission and partnership. At the same time, 1 Timothy 2:11–12, which prohibits women from teaching or having authority over men, has been particularly contentious in dialogues of gender roles within the church. Within this framework, a poststructuralist feminist reading challenged the essentialist views that underpin such prohibitions, arguing that these biblical verses represent the socio-political concerns of the early church rather than a timeless spiritual mandate. Therefore, this perspective drives contemporary readers to reconsider the cultural and historical factors that influenced this biblical text and to seek interpretations that promote gender justice.

While this is the case, future scholarship could benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that blend perspectives from poststructuralist feminism, sociology, and anthropology. This could provide fertile soil for discerning the socio-cultural contexts in which biblical texts were assembled, constructed, and produced, and how these contexts influenced the construction of gender roles. Such interdisciplinary discourses could also explore the intersections of gender with other social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity, offering a more holistic view of the power dynamic subtleties at play. In addition to this potential future scholarship, further research could critique how poststructuralist feminist interpretations of these biblical texts influence contemporary ecclesial practices and policies regarding gender roles. This could involve case studies of communities that have adopted more egalitarian interpretations and practices, assessing the impacts on community life, leadership structures, and gender relations. Such scholarly discourses could provide valuable philosophies into the practical implications of re-interpreting patriarchal biblical texts and contribute to the development of more inclusive and reasonable religious communities. In closing, this article is dedicated to all women and children who have been marginalised and silenced by male-orientated interpretations of biblical texts. This is a scholarly tribute to their resilience and strength in the face of systemic exclusion. May this work inspire continued and concerted efforts towards equality and justice in both religious and societal contexts.

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