

Gender Politics and Deconstruction in the Light of the Polemics of Ephesians 5:21-33 in Koro Christian Community of Nasarawa State

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Abstract

This research explores into the dynamics of cultural hegemony within Koro communities in Nasarawa, Nigeria, particularly focusing on marital relationships. The study draws inspiration from Ephesians 5:21-33, a biblical passage often cited to establish traditional gender roles in marriage. However, rather than reinforcing existing norms, this research utilizes Ephesians 5:21-33 as a starting point to deconstruct cultural hegemony within Koro couples. The research employs deconstruction and ethnography method to critically analysis the cultural hegemony and misinterpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33. By engaging with couples, and religious authorities, the study aims to unravel the layers of cultural expectations and power imbalances embedded in marital relationships. It seeks to understand how these dynamics impact the daily lives of Koro couples and how Ephesians 5:21-33 can be reinterpreted to promote equity and mutual respect within the marital context. Through the deconstruction of cultural hegemony, this research aims to foster a dialogue that challenges ingrained norms and encourages a more egalitarian understanding of marital relationships among Koro couples. It explores the potential for Ephesians 5:21-33 to be a catalyst for transformative change within the cultural and religious fabric of the Koro community in Nasarawa. The findings of this research contribute not only to the academic discourse surrounding cultural hegemony and biblical interpretation but also provide practical insights for community leaders and religious authorities seeking to promote gender equity within Koro marriages. By re-examining the intersections of culture, religion, and marital dynamics, this study aspires to contribute to the on-going efforts to create more inclusive and equitable communities within the diverse cultural landscape of Nasarawa, Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultural Hegemony, Marginalization, Subordination, Patriarchy, Deconstruction

Introduction

Ephesians 5:21-33 has long been a focal point of scholarly and theological debate, particularly within the context of gender relations. At first glance, the passage seems to promote a hierarchical model where married women are expected to submit to their husbands, linking it with that of the church with Christ. The interpretation has often been used to justify patriarchal structures and reinforce traditional gender roles. However, a deeper analysis reveals a more nuanced engagement with the text. The cultural and socio-political background of the letter, rooted in the Greco-Roman world, significantly influences its interpretation. The prevailing societal norms of male dominance and female subordination likely shaped the author's perspective and the expectations of the intended audience. It is crucial to acknowledge these cultural factors to avoid imposing contemporary values onto the text (Ngozi Ngwoke, 2021:122).

Ephesians 5:21-33 has been a subject of considerable debate within gender studies, often cited to support patriarchal ideologies (male dominance in sexuality, religious interpretations that subordinate women, cultural practices that promote gender-based violence) and reinforce traditional gender roles. These interpretations have been used to justify the subordination of women to men, limiting their agency and religious empowerment. However, feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Fiorenza (1983:268-69) have offered alternative perspectives, challenging these dominant interpretations. By employing feminist methodologies, Fiorenza have sought to uncover the underlying power dynamics and cultural contexts that have contributed to the historical marginalization of women. Through a critical analysis of the text, they argue that the passage has been misinterpreted and misused to perpetuate patriarchal structures. Therefore, this research explores the polemics of Ephesians 5:21-33, engaging with the on-going debates and controversies surrounding its interpretation by scholars who advocate for complementarity and egalitarian.

Consequently, within the Koro Christian community of Nasarawa State, the interpretation and application of Ephesians 5:21-33 has sparked significant debate and controversy. This passage, often regarded as a foundational text on gender roles and relationships within Christian theology, has been used to justify various forms of gender hierarchy and patriarchal ideology. This interpretation aligns with broader societal norms and expectations within the Koro community, which is characterized by a patriarchal structure that often privileges male experiences and perspectives. This dynamic can influence the

interpretation of androcentric texts within the scripture and shape the realities of women within the Koro Christian community (Chris Manus, 2000:35).

However, a critical examination of the socio-cultural context and power dynamics at play reveals a complex interplay of gender politics that necessitates a deconstructive approach to the interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 within the Koro Christian community. Through a deconstructive analysis and ethnographic methodology, this study aims to uncover the ways in which the text has been interpreted, negotiated, and contested within this specific context. By examining the power dynamics and gendered assumptions that underlie these interpretations, this research seeks to deconstruct dominant discourses and amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized women. This study contributes to on-going discussions on gender, power, and religion, exploring the potential for more inclusive and equitable interpretations of the text. Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate the complex intersections of gender politics, power dynamics, and religious discourse within the Koro Christian community. By doing so, it seeks to spark new perspectives on the role of religion in shaping gender relations and social justice, ultimately working towards a more equitable and just society for all.

Gender Politics in the Graeco-Roman Household Codes

This paper acknowledges that the origins of household codes can be traced to pre-Christian Graeco-Roman traditions, which were structured around a patriarchal ideology embedded with male hegemonic control over the life of women, cultural norms that courses gender-based violence among others. Scholars such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), Ernest Best (1998), Gordon Fee (2002), and Shi-Min Lu (2016) have shown that these codes reflect a historical context that emphasized male authority and structured familial hierarchies. This study does not delve into the broader historical development of these codes but instead focuses on the period relevant to the production and interpretation of Ephesians, as well as subsequent scholarly analysis. Understanding this background is essential to contextualize the letter's portrayal of household roles.

Ernest Best (1998:3) observed that the letter traditionally attributed to Paul is believed by some to have been directed to the Christian community in Ephesus, although there is significant scholarly debate on this point. Other scholars such as Ngozi (2021) propose that the letter was intended for a broader Christian audience, possibly in Asia Minor. Disagreement also exists regarding the letter's authorship, with some scholars questioning Pauline authorship due to linguistic and thematic differences from undisputed Pauline epistles. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, the letter will be treated in alignment with the traditional attribution

to Ephesus and Paul, given the weight of early church tradition and references by figures such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp. Situating the letter in this specific historical and social context aids in examining how the household codes within it may reflect, reinforce, or challenge contemporary socio-cultural values (Best, 1998; Moses, 2020:4).

Paul's instructions to the Ephesians, particularly regarding household relationships, are embedded within a historical and cultural context markedly different from contemporary society. As Gordon Fee (2002) argues, it is essential to exercise caution when interpreting or applying these directives to modern contexts. In the broader Graeco-Roman world, household codes were originally structured to maintain social order, with the family viewed inline microcosm of the wider community that patriarchal system dominates its structure. This was capture by Best (1998:523) that these codes reflect a system where power was concentrated in the hands of those in dominant positions typically men over those considered subordinate, such as women, children, and slaves. This dynamic created a distinct social hierarchy, reinforcing binaries between authority and submission and upholding a status quo that often-privileged male authority.

Scholars such as Fiorenza (1983), Lu (2016) agrees that the household codes in Ephesians mirror the ideals of the Roman Empire, where the "*paterfamilias*" ideology legitimized male dominance as the norm within familial and social structures. These codes, therefore, provide insight into how power and control were asserted within the household, as well as how broader societal norms may have influenced early Christian communities' understanding of family and gender roles. The codes reflect intent to preserve social stability, with limited space for questioning hierarchical structures, even when these were coercive or oppressive. This analysis highlights the importance of understanding Ephesians within its socio-cultural context, as it sheds light on how early Christian texts may have both reflected and reinforced the prevailing social norms of their time.

Shi-Min Lu (2016:10) observes that the patriarchal hierarchy of Roman society was clearly reflected within the family. From the ancient time, the role of the "head of the family" granted men extensive control over both property and family members within the household. As head of the household, the *paterfamilias* held the legal authority of a father, husband, and master, and this authority was protected by Roman law, granting him rights over the lives of his family members (Geza Alföldy, 1988:5). Lu (2016:10) describes this role as aristocratic in nature, akin to a head of state within the household, reflecting a societal model in which influential family heads held considerable political power as well. In this system, the social standing and honor of a man were closely tied to the behaviour and lifestyle of his wife, with

honor and shame often revolving around her conduct. Influential philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued that the male-dominant structure of family life reflected either a natural or divinely ordained order. Within this framework, women were generally positioned as subordinate, a role reinforced through both cultural norms and the legal system, which often left women on the margins of household authority.

Alfoldy (1988), Fee (2002) and Best (1998) noted that the household codes in Ephesians and Colossians reflect a Christian adaptation of these Graeco-Roman household codes, which were characterized by strong hierarchical structures. These texts have been variously interpreted suggesting that they reinforce existing social structures, while others argue that they offer potential for more egalitarian interpretations. Consequently, interpretations of these passages in different contexts have sparked debate on whether they serve to uphold or critique the cultural construction of gender roles and the associated power dynamics within the household.

Gender Politics in Interpreting Ephesians 5:22-33 within Koro Christian Community

The Koro ethnic group in Nigeria are divided into three regions: those in Niger, Kaduna, and Nasarawa with some in Benue state. The origin of the ethnic group is not far fetch; the popular view was linked to *Kororofa* (Jukun) Taraba State Nigeria (Muhammed *et al* 2017). This may be true because this opinion is well accepted by Idris and Usman (2015) who noted that the Koro people attest to their source from the Jukun of *Kororofa*. The origin can further be traced back to Bornu, due to the war between the Koro people and the Kanuri that they migrated to Nasarawa, Benue and Niger areas. However, this paper did not focus majorly on the history of the Koro (migili) people but their traditional and socio-cultural belief system with regards to marriage, gender, the place of the woman and the interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33. Similarly, the focus is not on all the Koro ethnic groups from the three different states of Nigeria but concentration is on those residing in Nasarawa State and the place of a woman.

In traditional Koro marriage customs, the concept of bride price is pivotal, representing a formalized gesture of intent in which prospective grooms provide goods to the family of the woman they wish to marry. Ethnographic interviews reveal that, within these customary frameworks, the bride price is sometimes interpreted by men as symbolizing a transfer of authority or responsibility from the woman's family to the husband.¹ This view, in certain

¹ An interview with some women after their monthly meeting in Lafia the state capital of Nasarawa State Nigeria on 28/04/2024 by 5:30PM at College of Agriculture Ombi 2.

instances, has contributed to a perception of marriage as a form of “ownership,” where women are subsequently expected to bear substantial responsibilities, including provisioning for essential family needs such as clothing, food, and occasionally financial contributions (Muhammed *et al* 2017:10).

Polygamy is another cultural practice among the Koro that shapes gender dynamics and social status. Commonly practiced in regions such as Niger, Kaduna, and Nasarawa, polygamy is often perceived as an indicator of social standing; a man with multiple wives is seen as wealthier, possessing the resources and influence to garner respect within the community (Goje *et al*, 1998; Goje, 2004:59). In contrast, monogamy may be viewed as indicative of lower economic standing, leading to social stigmatization. This study explores how members of this ethnic group, many of whom identify as Christians, interpret and apply biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:21-33 in ways that intersect with these patriarchal and cultural norms.

The Koro community’s socio-cultural structure is deeply embedded in a patriarchal system that influences social, religious, economic, and political life. This framework assigns authority to men, often positioning women in roles characterized by obedience, with limited opportunities for challenging male authority. Within these socio-cultural setting, interpretations of Ephesians 5:21-33 are frequently employed to reinforce existing gender hierarchies, lending biblical legitimacy to traditional power dynamics. For some, the passage is invoked to justify and perpetuate patriarchal norms, resulting in the marginalization of women within both familial and communal structures. This study critically engages with the historical and cultural factors shaping Koro interpretations of Ephesians 5:21-33, examining how these readings impact marital roles and reinforce gender expectations.

Ephesians 5:21-33 has been interpreted through various lenses, with applications to gender relations that differ significantly across cultural contexts. Within the Koro Christian community, this includes evangelical denominations that holds onto only patriarchal interpretations of this passage often align with prevailing social construction and cultural norms. A common interpretive method in the Koro community is a literal, or “face value,” reading of Ephesians 5:21-33. This approach emphasizes a straightforward interpretation of the text without consideration of its historical, cultural, or linguistic nuances. Such readings tend to reinforce traditional marital structures, as they do not incorporate alternative hermeneutical perspectives that might offer broader or more egalitarian insights.

The passage Ephesians 5:21-33 has frequently been interpreted within the Koro community as a basis for traditional gender roles, which often emphasize male authority and female submission. This interpretation, particularly of Ephesians 5:22, is commonly cited to

reinforce the expectation of wives' submissiveness toward their husbands, often overlooking broader themes of equality and mutual respect that scholars argue are also present within the text. This paper focuses on analysing and critiquing the prevalent "face value" interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 within the Koro community. The aim is not to critique individual religious beliefs but to investigate the social and cultural dynamics contributing to the marginalization of women in Nasarawa State. Elijah Ipole (2018:xxxii) also highlights the impacts of such interpretations, noting that a literal approach can lead to conditions where some women experience silent suffering due to their perceived lack of autonomy within marriage.

In the Koro context, this face value interpretation often aligns with a traditional concept of marriage in which men are seen as the dominant figures, while women are expected to comply without having an equal voice. Within this interpretative framework, women may be encouraged to remain submissive even in potentially harmful situations, reinforcing their limited role within both household and society. As such, the responsibility of domestic duties, child-rearing, and even agricultural work is frequently allocated to women, reflecting a deeply rooted cultural expectation of gendered roles.²

Ipole (2018: xxxii) describes the impact of such interpretations on marriage dynamics within Nigerian communities, suggesting that adherence to literal interpretations of Ephesians 5:21-33 may contribute to harmful gendered expectations. Interpretations focusing on absolute submission (as seen in Ephesians 5:24) without contextual consideration may reinforce oppressive structures, positioning women as subordinate to men and limiting opportunities for challenging inequitable marital norms. In this context, certain Koro cultural norms further enforce these interpretations, perpetuating a social order where men are viewed as dominant figures and women as subordinate, which may be reinforced within religious settings as well.

The emphasis on a wife's obligation to "submit in everything" has, in some instances, reinforced the notion that women should have limited agency over assets, decision-making, and personal well-being within marriage. Some Koro cultural norms hold that women should not own property, make decisions without spousal consent, or assert their own perspectives, particularly in matters related to health and finances. This dynamic may place women in positions of economic and personal vulnerability, as they are often expected to contribute all resources to the household under their husband's direction, regardless of how these resources are managed or distributed. Consequently, the expectation of submission may persist across all

² Participants that responded to the interview on Koro cultural and the interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 at Baptist church Akabba on 29/04/2024

aspects of marital life, positioning obedience as an unqualified requirement within Koro marriages.

Interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33 solely through a literal lens, without considering principles of mutual respect and equity, risks reinforcing unequal power dynamics within marriage. Such interpretations may prioritize wives' submission over mutual love and respect, which are essential to healthy marital relationships. The Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) *Women Fellowship Guide* (2012:92) states that marriage requires perseverance through difficult situations, implicitly endorsing a traditional model of endurance and submission, potentially at the expense of personal well-being. These findings underscore the need to contextualize Ephesians 5:21-33, taking into account broader themes of mutual respect to support more balanced marital dynamics within cultural and religious frameworks.

A second approach to interpreting marital relationships in Ephesians 5:21-33 within the Koro community involves a patriarchal reading shaped by cultural norms. In this interpretation, the husband is perceived to have authority over his wife and all associated familial assets, as children are traditionally regarded as belonging to the patrilineal line (Labeodan 2005:6). Consequently, interpretations of biblical passages on marriage are often influenced by cultural views that prioritize male authority, granting men certain privileges over women in marriage. For instance, polygamy is socially accepted and commonly practiced within the Koro community, with a man's social status often elevated by having multiple wives. However, women do not share the same social freedom; monogamy is expected of them, and any deviation is socially sanctioned. Such interpretations often reinforce these existing cultural hierarchies (Judy Mbugua *et al*, 2004:69) without a critical engagement with the broader context of Ephesians 5:21-33, a pattern observed in some Koro Christian communities.

This cultural alignment with patriarchal interpretations extends to church settings, as evidenced by the influence of early missionary teachings, which emphasized domestic rather than public roles for women. Musa Dube (1997:11) critiques this approach, suggesting that African communities often encounter the Bible through a Western lens, which may reinforce traditional gender roles. In Nasarawa State, the ECWA Women Fellowship International Bible Study Guide (2013:22) reflects a similar patriarchal interpretation, asserting that a woman's respect "starts with the husband" and that her "first duty" is submission. This perspective frames marriage as an enduring union where the wife's submission is expected to be "unconditional," mirroring the church's obedience to Christ's will.

The traditional headship exemplary reinforces a view of male authority that can marginalize women's agency within marriage, with some interpretations of Ephesians 5:22

stating “Wives, are to submit themselves to their own husbands” have been used selectively in justifying male dominance and even abusive behaviour. This selective interpretation overlooks the mutual aspects of marital relationships emphasized in broader biblical discourse. In certain cases, wives have also employed biblical texts, such as 1 Timothy 5:8 that states that "any man who does not provide basic amenities for his family members...is worse than an unbeliever" (paraphrase), to critique or pressure husbands who fail to fulfil expected roles.

The selective interpretation and application of biblical passages on marriage, often without critical reflection on the text’s context and intended message, can perpetuate harmful practices within intimate relationships. Both men and women may interpret these texts in ways that support specific power dynamics, with men often invoking Ephesians 5:21-33 to justify dominance and women invoking certain passages to critique neglect. The interviews with Koro women indicate that, while many women feel constrained by the traditional expectations reinforced by selective readings, some men also advocate for secrecy about marital challenges to preserve their social image. Limited access to nuanced theological interpretations has left many women feeling isolated, as they struggle to reconcile these teachings with their experiences. The absence of mutuality in these interpretations can undermine spiritual and emotional bonds, as women may feel disconnected from their partners and the supportive aspects of their faith community.

Deconstructing Traditional Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33

This paper has examined how patriarchal ideologies shape interpretations of Ephesians 5:21-33, often influenced by a literal, "face value" approach that reinforces gender hierarchies. Within such frameworks, women are frequently assigned a subordinate status, lacking equivalent rights or agency, and are expected to adopt a posture of submission to male authority that is oppressive by nature divorce of the text motif. Under this patriarchal interpretation of marriage, gender roles are defined in ways that support hegemonic submission, where the wife's role is often reduced to compliance with her husband and his family. This interpretive approach can lead to imbalances of power that may foster various forms of abuse. To critically engage with and deconstruct these hegemonic and patriarchal readings of Ephesians 5:21-33, this paper adopts a postcolonial perspective, using a "resistance" framework to challenge the reinforcement of rigid gender binaries within these interpretations. In particular, the paper employs an "*agape*" model, or a model of unconditional love, to re-examine the household codes in ways that contest patriarchal dominance, hierarchical gender roles, and interpretations that may inadvertently support gender-based violence.

The *agape* model emphasizes the husband's role to love unconditionally, as illustrated by Christ's love for the church, providing an alternative framework for interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33 as it is discussed later in this section. Many traditional interpretations, as previously discussed, have minimized the emphasis on the man's duty to love and cherish the woman he is married too in all circumstances, as per highlighted in Ephesians 5:28. A balanced interpretation that resists socially constructed oppressive gender roles would focus on the imperative of love found in the text, specifically the analogy of Christ's sacrificial love, which precludes any form of domination or oppression within the marital relationship. Ephesians 5:21, which instruct submission "out of reverence for Christ," imply mutuality that challenges traditional binaries of ruler and subject. Ngwoke (2021:127) argues that Ephesians 5:21 is often misinterpreted to imply that a husband may treat his wife with unchecked authority, while the wife is expected to submit unconditionally. However, such interpretations overlook the historical and linguistic contexts essential for understanding the text's intent and implications.

For a comprehensive interpretation, the historical context of Ephesians must be considered to grasp the author's intended message about gender roles. A closer examination of the passage reveals an effort to subvert the Roman Empire's established gender binaries and systems of male dominance, which often equated expressions of love with weakness (Moses, 2021:66-8). In Ephesians 5:21, the phrase "out of reverence for Christ" serves as a critical qualifier for the nature of submission, suggesting that mutual submission, rather than unilateral obedience, is the intended relational dynamic presented by Paul in the text. Some translations such as King James Version, New American Standard Bible, Christian Standard Bible among others have interpreted "reverence" as "fear," which can lead to connotations of dread or subjugation; however, an interpretation focused on mutual respect aligns more closely with the broader message of love and mutuality in the passage. This approach foregrounds the mutual aspects of submission as foundational, challenging interpretations that place one partner in a position of superiority over the other. By emphasizing mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ," this interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 not only encourages a balanced relational dynamic but also counters readings that might perpetuate oppressive structures within marriage (Lincoln, 1990).

When examined within its Graeco-Roman context, Ephesians 5:21-22 presents a nuanced framework of power dynamics within marriage. The term "submission" (ὑποτάσσεσθαι) is applied reciprocally to both husband and wife, indicating an ideal of mutual respect and deference. This interpretation challenges traditional readings that have historically prioritized male authority. The Greek verb ὑποτάσσω (hypotassō) is used, translated as

“submit.” This verb carries the meaning of placing oneself under the authority or direction of another. However, its use in this passage, particularly in the broader context of the epistle, can be interpreted as more nuanced than simple obedience or submission to hierarchical power structures especially when deconstructing patriarchal ideologies (BDAG, 2000:1042; Danker 2000:1042). In this light, ὑποτάσσω (submit) is not about reinforcing dominance or subjugation of one group to another. Instead, it is part of a larger ethic of love, humility, and mutual service. The call to "submit to one another" should be interpreted as a mutual exchange of love and respect, where power dynamics are flattened in the body of Christ (O’Brien, 1999:339).

Patriarchal ideologies (as noted above) often misinterpret passages like Ephesians 5:22, using them to justify unequal power dynamics within marriage and society. The interpretation of submission as a one-way, unidirectional act (e.g., women always submitting to men) is inconsistent with the idea of mutual submission outlined in verse 21. Patriarchy typically enforces a hierarchical relationship where women are expected to be submissive and men authoritative. However, when we focus on the verb ὑποτάσσω in its broader context (and in light of Ephesians 5:21), we see a deconstruction of patriarchal norms. The concept of submission here is not about maintaining rigid gender roles or asserting control. Rather, it's about the Christian community being characterized by mutual respect, love, and servant leadership, which inverts power dynamics. The Greek verb ὑποτάσσω as it is used here should, therefore, be seen as an invitation to mutual, voluntary humility and service, rather than an enforced submission rooted in power imbalances (O’Brien, 1999:412).

Instead of endorsing a hierarchical structure, the passage underscores the values of love and self-sacrifice within the marital relationship. Specifically, husbands are called to "love their wives" as a typology of that of Christ and the sacrificial act for the church as a replica of husband and wife (Ephesians 5:25), emphasizing a form of love that entails protection, care, and an active commitment to resist harm and oppression. This portrayal of sacrificial love for husbands implicitly critiques patriarchal norms and advocates for a more egalitarian and compassionate marital relationship (Best, 1998:538-9). Recognizing the cultural and historical context of the letter is essential for interpreting these passages accurately. The societal norms of the Graeco-Roman world influenced early Christian writings, and these norms must be considered to avoid anachronistic readings. A contextual approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of Ephesians 5:21-33, revealing its emphasis on mutual respect, compassionate love, and the rejection of rigid power hierarchies within marriage. This reading demonstrates that the text does not support oppressive dynamics; rather, it promotes an equitable partnership based on self-giving love and mutual submission.

The marital dynamics described in Ephesians 5:21-33 illustrate the interplay of power dynamics and gender roles within the Greco-Roman cultural context. The term to "submit" (ὕποτάσσεσθαι) has frequently been understood as endorsing patriarchal norms and restricting women's agency. However, a closer textual analysis reveals a more complex perspective. While the language of submission might seem to support a hierarchical structure, it is essential to consider the broader themes of love and mutual respect that permeate the letter to the Ephesians (Wallace, 2000:518; Danker, 2000:1042-43). The emphasis on ἀγαπάω (love) as the foundational principle for submission implies a more reciprocal relationship between spouses. Rather than advocating for unilateral subordination, the text suggests a model of mutual submission grounded in love and self-sacrifice (Lincoln, 1990:374).

Applying a deconstructive approach and examining the text from marginalized perspectives can uncover alternative interpretations that question traditional patriarchal readings. This perspective reveals the text's subversive potential to challenge oppressive structures, emphasizing a partnership model that values mutual respect and shared responsibility. Through a critical analysis that incorporates the cultural and historical context, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the text's nuanced meanings and its relevance to discussions on contemporary gender relations. Such an interpretation underscores the possibility of an egalitarian marital framework within the Christian tradition, informed by principles of love, respect, and mutual commitment (Jeremy Punt, 2008:261-290).

Interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33 from the position of those at the margins focuses on deconstructing hegemonic power play operated in different forms and guises at different levels right from the production of the letter using the concepts of "submission, obedience, and headship." For instance, a woman's reinterpretation of Ephesians 5:21-25 from her marginalized position in society will be as follows: my submission is either in the form of a duty which is not motivated by love, but rather by cultural and religious obligations. The second form is voluntary submission that is motivated by ἀγαπάω (unconditional love) which warrants submission from the heart without grumbling especially by women to their husbands.

To examine the verb "love" in Ephesians 5:21-33 from a Greek exegesis perspective, particularly in the context of deconstructing hegemonic male dominance, it's important to focus on the specific Greek word used for "love" in the passage: ἀγαπάω (agapáō). This verb plays a crucial role in understanding Paul's instruction to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church (Best, 1998:539). By unpacking the meaning of ἀγαπάω, we can gain insight into how the text redefines power dynamics and challenges traditional patriarchal structures. The verb ἀγαπάω (agapáō) is a term frequently used in the New Testament to describe the self-

sacrificial, unconditional love of God for humanity and, by extension, the love that Christ demonstrates for the Church (Wallace, 2000:518). It differs from other Greek words for love, such as φιλέω (phileō), which can refer to affectionate or brotherly love, and ἔρως (éros), which refers to romantic or sexual love. The Greek verb ἀγαπάω is often associated with a deliberate act of will and commitment, not based on feelings or emotions alone, but as a decision to act in the best interest of the other person, even at personal cost (Best 1998:538-39).

In Ephesians 5:25 sets the tone for what Paul means by love: it is self-giving and sacrificial. Christ's love for the Church was not a matter of authority, dominance, or coercion, but of a costly, selfless commitment to the Church's well-being. In the same way, husbands are called to love their wives not from a place of power or control, but from an attitude of sacrifice and service (Best, 1998: 539; Wallace, 2000: 518). Therefore, the marital instruction presented by Paul in Ephesians 5:21-33 encompasses more than physical cohabitation between husband and wife; it also encompasses a deep emotional and spiritual connection. The text presents the husband and wife as "one body" (Ephesians 5:29-31), emphasizing a union that integrates emotional, spiritual, mental, economic, and physical dimensions. This vision of marital unity encourages Christian couples to uphold their commitment to each other and maintain the integrity of their marital and spiritual faith (Ephesians 5:29-33). However, incidents of gender-based violence within marriages often reflect a misinterpretation or selective reading of the text. Fortune, Abugideiri, and Dratch (2010:131-132) argue that biblical passages, including those within Ephesians, imply a framework of sensitivity, mutual respect, and responsiveness in the husband's role. These scholars emphasize that Ephesians 5:21-33 cannot be reasonably interpreted to justify abusive behaviour or require unconditional submission from a wife in the face of harm. Rather, the passage calls for a relationship based on mutual respect, care, and responsibility.

The biblical text, for the followers of Christ, talks about mutual submission of the husband and the wife (Eph. 5:21) and the husband's self-sacrificial love for his wife (Eph. 5:25–33). The text from Ephesians 5:33 clearly emphasize the point that everyone should love his wife even as himself will motivate the idea of total submission from the wives without grumbling. Therefore, the biblical text from Ephesians 5:21–33 does not in any way give men authority to abuse their wives; rather, it states clearly how the husband is expected to love and care for the woman he is married too. Most importantly, when considering the religious perspective on marriage, it is wrong to take one single religious text and misinterpret it to suit one's selfish aim; rather, the fundamental principle of the text must be considered holistically (Ngozi, 2021:131).

Miles (2006:85) opines that the 1st century Graeco-Roman society idea on marriage is structured with the patriarchal ideologies (male dominance in sexuality, religious interpretations that subordinate women, cultural practices that promote gender-based violence) and aims at maintaining the social order; marriage was primarily viewed as a means for men to secure an heir and gain assistance with household responsibilities. Unfortunately, when an individual considers the Bible critically it demonstrates that the biblical narrative was recorded by male authors, often centring on male characters and experiences and women subject to men based on social cultural norms of their time.

Paul's references to household codes reflected the societal norms of his time, which required wives to submit to their husbands, but did not explicitly mention love as a duty for husbands. Paul's teaching on marriage, particularly his emphasis on husbands' care for their wives, represented a bold challenge to the patriarchal norms and values of Graeco-Roman culture, and introduced a more loving, mutual, and egalitarian ideal of marriage that transcended the conventional values of his time (Keener, 1993:552). An interpreter can see clearly the resistance in the theology of marriage by Paul which serves as a way for resistance and subverting the oppression of women by men. In contrast to the traditional patriarchal norms (Eph. 5:21-33), husbands are now called to a new standard of loving their wives with selfless sacrifice, nourishing and cherishing them (Miles, 2006:86). Turner (1994:1241) insightful analysis suggests that marital codes are revolutionary deconstructing the Roman oppressive ideology of hierarchical social order they uphold, the love in the text were transformative and profoundly empowering; Ephesians brings a novel Christian perspective on marriage, highlighting the importance of love, respect, and mutual submission.

Paul's redefined understanding of marriage softens the patriarchal edges. While submission is still expected, Christian husbands are to lead with profound love, echoing Christ's selfless love for the church. This approach reframes the husband's role, prioritizing love, empathy, and self-denial. The liberative element in Ephesians 5:21-33 is the precise limitation that is placed on the analogy of the husband and Christ. In the manner the church submits to Christ is such which the women are to submit to their husband. The husband's self-emptying as Christ did for the church is required here. This therefore connotes deliberate selflessness of husbands loving their wives as exemplified by Christ and the church typology (Chigbo Chiamaka, 2010:25).

Implication for Koro Christians in Nasarawa

The quest for deconstructing the male-centred and face value (literal) reading of marital codes of Ephesians 5:21-33 is a fight for right interpretation of the Biblical text from its context and author's intention, justice, peace and in keeping the sacredness of marriage as instituted by God which must go on until victory is achieved as observed by Diphus Chemorion & Keumju Jewel (2016:211). To deconstruct the patriarchal and face value interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 and the traditional gender roles ascribe to women within Koro community of Nasarawa State is in line with Pauline idea of mutuality as found within the idea of "submission" and "agape", gender justice and empowering women and addressing toxic masculinity. Paul's letters must be interpreted within the context of his audience, historical setting and cultural influence and the idea love he introduces as a way to deconstruct the hegemonic power play over women, children and slaves should be put under consideration. Women within the Koro Christian communities needs to resist any abusive and oppressive interpretation of the text and solemnly advocate for liberative ways of interpreting the text and speak out.

As the Bible is highly valued by the Koro Christians, it is crucial to adopt a thoughtful and contextual approach to interpreting 'husband love your wife,' seeking to understand the underlying principles and values that promote healthy, loving relationships. Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 from the context of husband love to his wife has yielded healthier interpretation as an alternative of taking it not based on face-value or through patriarchal culture. The Koro community needs to grasp that Paul's instructions were culturally and historically conditioned that does not lead to abusive way of husbands treating their wives, but rather resisting such hegemonic power that oppress and subordinate women to abusive husband in the guises of marriage. Paul challenged the Graeco-Roman and contemporary view on marriage (Fee, 2002) that oppresses women by noting that husbands should love their wives as Christ love the church (Eph. 5:25); thus Paul neutralized gender abuse and offer a marriage that seeks the good of all partners. Oduyoye (1995:182) correctly points out that the continued subjugation of women within the church contradicts the divine injunction, which intends the church to be a unified and inclusive body of believers, where women and men are equal and valued members of Christ body.

When understood through the lens of *ἀγαπάω* (agape), or unconditional love, the text resists interpretations that promote uncritical or oppressive submission, especially in contexts where such submission undermines individual dignity. Reading Ephesians 5:25 critically calls on husbands to love their wives as exemplified with "Christ love for the church," advocate a self-sacrificial love that precludes blind obedience and instead promotes mutual respect. This

Christological model of love, though perhaps unfamiliar within traditional patriarchal norms, serves as a hermeneutical framework that reinterprets "submission" as a shared commitment rather than one-sided compliance. In the context of the Koro community, this model contrasts sharply with existing patriarchal structures, offering an alternative reading that deconstructs power imbalances and mitigates potential misinterpretations of Ephesians 5:21-33. The Christ-centred love described in the text exemplifies an ideal that transcends conventional hierarchies, advocating for an egalitarian marital relationship rooted in mutual care and support.

There is a need to empower women; there are many women among the Koro people in Nasarawa who need to resist any form of violence at home through their songs and also their interpretation of the Bible and the theology of marriage. As Oduyoye (1995:181) notes that churches within Africa need to empower women on the need to engage with the Bible through critical interpretation of the Bible and for them to speak for themselves in matters of theology and its application to our context. The church's theology of marriage will only truly embrace both men and women when it undergoes significant change and reinterpreted as this paper suggested. As Oduyoye (1995:182) notes, liberation requires men and women to journey together, supported by the church's faith, hope, and love. The church must move beyond its current perception as a male-dominated institution that offers women only empty promises, partial truths, and the hope of future salvation.

A shift toward a more holistic and inclusive interpretation of marital theology in Ephesians 5:21-33 may offer valuable insights for both men and women within Koro communities, moving beyond traditional patriarchal frameworks. Such an interpretative approach encourages men to view marriage as a partnership grounded in mutual love, peace, and harmony, where each partner contributes to the other's growth and well-being. This perspective redefines the relationship dynamic, fostering respect and shared purpose rather than hierarchical treatment. One of the fundamental characteristics of hegemonic masculinity within the Koro Christian community in Nasarawa State Nigeria is the emphasis on power, control, and dominance. Koro traditional patriarchal views of marriage often hold that men should exert authority over women (Goje, 2004:58-9). However, the Greek verb ἀγαπάω in Ephesians 5:25 undermines this patriarchal understanding by calling husbands to exercise their "headship" (leadership) through sacrificial love rather than power and control. The act of giving oneself up for the other, as Christ did for the Church, points to a radical inversion of the typical patriarchal power dynamics prevalence in the Roman world where men are not called to serve but dominance and control over everyone in the household (Fee, 2002; Keener, 2014).

Similarly, the motif also points to the husbands are to love in such a way that it is self-sacrificial not self-assertive. The love described here is about the flourishing of the other, not the assertion of power or control. This undermines hegemonic masculine ideals that prioritize dominance, pushing toward a vision of mutual care and equality instead (Keener, 2014). The sacrificial nature of ἀγαπάω is transformative in nature that deconstructed the hegemonic nature of power of men to that of unconditional love to the wife. Christ's love for the Church which is an analogy is not about maintaining an established order or hierarchy, but about redeeming and transforming the Church (Ephesians 5:26) (Moses, 2021:66-68). Similarly, the husband's love should lead to the flourishing and transformation of his wife, not her subjugation. The transformational aspect of love in this passage resists and deconstructs the patriarchal view that men are "superior" to women and should dominate them that in most cases led to gender based violence. Instead, husbands are called to a kind of leadership that brings out the best in their wives leading not through coercion, but by loving, nurturing, and empowering them.

Additionally, Okure (2001:53) noted that the patriarchal system impacts not only women but also men, who may find themselves constrained by rigid gender roles that limit expressions of partnership and mutual care. Recognizing these limitations could inspire men within the Koro community to seek interpretations that emphasize equity and shared responsibilities within marriage. For Nigerian scholars, teachers, and clergy, are exploring Ephesians 5:21-33 through alternative hermeneutical frameworks, including postcolonial and feminist perspectives, could yield interpretations that address the complexities of gendered power dynamics more effectively. In particular, engaging in interpretive practices that amplify women's voices and experiences may help to focus on resolving issues of gender-based violence within marriages. Allowing for critical and context-aware readings of scripture, including postcolonial feminist approaches, can add to the interpretation of the text within the context of biblical texts and their relevance to contemporary marital relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how gender politics aid in the patriarchal interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 to promote hegemonic power control among the Koro Christian communities leading to misapplication and misinterpretation by some churches. The idea of submission which most are being used to oppress, abuse, and subjugated several Koro women to keep them in abusive marriages while neglecting the sole message of the text is void. In deconstructing patriarchal ideologies, this paper shows how the verb ὑποτάσσω in Ephesians

5:21 can be understood not as an endorsement of hierarchical or gendered submission, but as a call to mutual submission under the lordship of Christ which Koro Christians are to emulate. This reframing challenge traditional patriarchal interpretation embedded with cultural norms, social construction and emphasizes that true submission is about humility, service, and love, rather than domination or control as interpreted within the context. The passage calls both husbands and wives to a relationship of mutual respect and sacrificial love, echoing the core message of equity and mutual submission found in the broader teachings of in Ephesians 5:1-33. Similarly, the Greek verb ἀγαπάω in Ephesians 5:21-33 is essential to understanding how the passage deconstructs hegemonic male dominance. It calls for a love that is sacrificial, selfless, and transformative qualities that fundamentally subvert patriarchal notions of male authority and control. Instead of demanding dominance, husbands are invited to model Christ's love, which prioritizes the flourishing of the other through self-giving love. This understanding of love in the passage radically challenges traditional views of marriage and masculinity, offering a vision of equality and mutual respect that is deeply rooted in the love of Christ.

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