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**Abstract**

This paper addresses the rising marital tension in Nigeria through a socio-rhetorical analysis of Ephesians 5:21-33. Misinterpretations of biblical terms such as "submission" and "headship" have led to conflicts and misunderstandings in marriages. The study emphasizes the equal value of men and women before God, with different roles assigned to each: the man as the head and the woman as a helper. It argues that the leadership role of the husband should be characterised by Christ-like love and humility, rather than domination or subjugation. The paper proposes educational and cultural reforms, such as proper orientation for young couples and a review of patriarchal practices, to alleviate marital tensions. Additionally, it underscores the importance of mutual respect, open communication, and professional counselling to foster healthier marital relationships. By reinterpreting these biblical passages in the context of love and service, the paper aims to reduce power struggles and promote harmony within marriages.

Keywords: Tension, marriages, socio-rhetorical interpretation, New Testament, Ephesians 5:21-33

Introduction

Marriage is a divine institution that started with the creation of humanity when God mentioned that it is not proper that man should be alone and decided to make a partner suitable for the man. God accomplished this by taking a rib from the man to form a woman. He brought the woman to Adam who exclaimed that this is eventually a bone from my bone and a flesh from my own. (c.f Gen 2:18-22) Marriage is, therefore, a divine initiative. It is defined as a union of one man and one woman who have voluntarily accepted to spend their lives living together and have fulfilled the necessary customary and/or religious requirements required of husbands and wives (Wimalasena 2016). Through the ages, marriage has assumed different meanings influenced by cultural, social, religious, and personal differences. Both traditional and modern marriages share common elements such as seeking stability, engaging in sexual intimacy, and building a family. The primary purpose of marriage is not merely to legitimise a sexual relationship but to ensure the continuation of the people (Wimalasena 2016). Most importantly, companionship is a crucial aspect of marriage in all cultures.

In recent years, there has been much tension in many marriages because of differences in understanding and interpretation of the concept. The tension may exist in the form of cold wars and/or power tussles between husbands and wives. On many occasions, however, the tension degenerates into violence. Thus, the rate of domestic violence, abuse, and subjugation found in marriages in the world, and Nigeria in particular, is increasingly alarming. In many instances, the violence has resulted in the death of either of the spouses. Sahara Reporters stated that at least 49 spouses reportedly died between January 2021 and March 2022. The report shows that 35 women were killed by their husbands, while 14 men were killed by their wives (Sahara Reporters, 2022).

Sad stories like the above have become commonplace in Nigeria and some other African countries. Man's dominance and air of superiority are felt in every aspect of African society, especially in the institution of marriage. Women are marginalised, intimidated, and considered inferior to the male folk despite the level of enlightenment in today's world. However, many women are making effort to resist the prevalent male dominance and superiority. This has created a lot of tension in many marriages in Nigeria. Again, the quest for gender equality under different 'feminist' movements has ended up giving women greater societal considerations and privileges than men in some parts of the world.

Hence, Aziny (2023) expressed her opinion that viewing women always as victims who need protection reinforces the idea that women are weaker and depend on men to rescue them. This belief can also give women an unfair advantage in court cases where they are accused of committing an offence, while men are often seen as capable of causing harm to others without needing to prove it. It is evident that many women have taken advantage of this situation to dominate their men. Boothby (2013) argues that women are becoming the dominant sex due to extreme feminist equality reforms.

The decline of Western patriarchy has paved the way for matriarchy, driven by women's educational achievements, feminist dominance in political and academic discussions, and the vilification of men.

Boothby contends that the true aim of feminism is not equality but matriarchy. She believes that efforts to create equality for women have resulted in inequalities for men, who are now perceived as the weaker gender.

As a result of these extremes, there are tensions in many families. These have negatively affected the fabric of the marriage institution and the psychological development of the children of these families (Adewale, 2023). This research aims at examining the “tensions in marriages” through a socio-rhetorical interpretation of Eph 5:21-33. A socio-rhetorical Interpretation, according to Robbins (1996), is an attempt to understand the social and cultural contexts in which texts are produced and received, in order to interpret them more accurately and effectively. He argues that by examining the social and cultural factors that influence the production and reception of texts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of their meaning and significance. Socio-rhetorical analysis of much concerned about information or meaning a particular text communicates in its original socio-cultural and historical context vis-a-vis modern society.

Mutual Submission

The discourse on marital submission encompasses varied viewpoints. Schlessinger (2004) advocates traditional gender roles, asserting women's submission to their husbands as vital for familial stability, prioritizing husbands' roles as providers and protectors. Conversely, Churchill and Esomu (2021) advocate for mutual submission. They reject gender-based restrictions and emphasize egalitarianism. They suggest that Eph 5:21-33 promotes mutual submission as a choice rooted in respect and love rather than coercion. John Paul II (1982) emphasizes that the mutual relationship between husband and wife should stem from their common relationship with Christ, as described in Eph 5:21-33. He clarified that the "reverence for Christ" mentioned in the scripture is about respect for holiness, not fear of impending danger. This holy reverence fosters mutual submissiveness between spouses. The pope pointed out that the scripture does not imply that the husband should lord it over the wife, but rather that both spouses should be inspired by their relationship with Christ. This relationship, rooted in Christian pietas, should lead to mutual subordination, excluding one-sided domination or subjugation, and be expressed through love.

Context and Culture

Franklin (2016) argues that the statement about wives submitting to their husbands in Eph 5:21-33 was contextual and influenced by the cultural milieu of the time which was patriarchal. Paul's approach was to acknowledge and work within the traditional household codes of the Greco-Roman world while subtly challenging them by giving the husbands instructions that they should love their wives selflessly in imitation of Christ's love for his Church. This redefined headship as one of love and service rather than dominance. Franklin highlights parallels in other biblical passages like 1 Peter 3 and Titus 2:5, suggesting a broader cultural context for Paul's statements. He contends that Paul's intent was not to reinforce male dominance, but rather to challenge and subvert traditional household codes by emphasizing mutual love and service within marriage, drawing on Jesus as the model. Franklin emphasises the importance of understanding the cultural context of biblical statements and warns against using Paul's words to justify male dominance in marriages, as the statement was meant for a specific situation and should not be applied universally across all ages and circumstances.

Leadership Position

In analyzing Eph 5:21-33, Romig (2018) asserts that Paul designated leadership positions to husbands, emphasizing the responsibility of wives to submit to their husbands' authority. He argues that this leadership role encompasses both guidance and provision, with

husbands accountable to God for their families' well-being. He stresses that submission does not diminish women's inherent value, but reflects a relational rank within the marital structure. Similarly, Ezeogamba and Anaetoh (2019) advocate for male leadership within families, highlighting the necessity of hierarchical organization for societal stability. They assert that understanding and accepting one's role as a leader or follower is crucial for social and economic development. Both perspectives emphasize the importance of marital harmony and responsible leadership, cautioning against abuse or misuse of authority. Overall, they underscore the need for balanced leadership within marriages, devoid of control or subjugation, for the betterment of society.

Different Roles and Responsibilities

Smith (2019) and Trees (2022) present a perspective on marital dynamics rooted in distinct roles and responsibilities assigned by God. Smith emphasises Adam's authoritative role as the covenant head and the biblical narrative of Adam's accountability despite Eve's initial sin, suggesting a divine intention for husbands' loving leadership and wives' willing submission. Trees builds on this highlighting equality between men and women in God's image while asserting differing responsibilities: men lead, women support. She underscores the importance of Scripture in defining gender roles and calls for submission to God's ordained order. Both stress mutual dependence and joint mission within marriage, rejecting notions of superiority or inferiority. Their perspective promotes harmonious partnership, envisioning a relational dance where husbands lead and wives follow, moving together in unity. This understanding, they argue, offers clarity on marital relationships and seeks to mitigate tensions arising from misunderstanding of gender roles.

Male/Female Relationship in the Early Mediterranean World (Graeco-Roman World)

Having reviewed what some scholars have said on this topic, it will be good to have a look at what was obtainable in the early Mediterranean world regarding male/female relationships. This era had multifaceted socio-cultural values regarding male-female relationships. It was determined largely by the dominant religion, culture, and societal norms prevalent in a particular city. For instance, ancient Roman and Phoenician societies were not very patriarchal. Even though men were considered superior to women, women were allowed to own property, occupy some high political offices, and even inherit from their families (Arnold, 2010). Similarly, in ancient Egyptian society, women could hold some important religious positions. But such privileges for women were not obtainable in ancient Greek and Jewish societies (Arnold, 2010). These societies were extremely patriarchal. Prominent political, social, economic, and even religious positions were men's birthright. Men were considered strong and rational while women were considered weak, emotional, and irrational. Women were not regarded as important members of society. This was very evidently shown in the narration of the feeding of five thousand and seven thousand people in Mt 14:13-21 and Mt 15:29-39 respectively. In these two pericopes, it was stated that women and children were not included—evident of the insignificant socio-cultural status of women within the epoch.

However, the socio-cultural and political situation in Ephesus at that time was a bit different from the above-mentioned two scenarios. Ephesus was a very vibrant city in the ancient Roman Empire. Its strategic position on the Aegean coast made it a centre for trade and commerce, cultural exchange, and religious devotion, as its magnificent temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis was attracting pilgrims from different parts of the globe. Thus, the society was populated by people with multicultural, multi-social, and multi-

political backgrounds. All these had no less a significant influence on the social, cultural, and political life of the Ephesians.

Another important thing worthy of noting is that when the letter to Christians in Ephesus, was written, the cultural and socio-political situation of the great city was as complicated as it was multi-faceted because of the external influences. Even though Ephesus was a patriarchal society, there was an aspect of the culture that challenged traditional gender roles. This was the cult of Artemis—a very powerful force that defended and upheld virginity, dignity, and freedom of young women. This quest or struggle for the freedom of young women through the cult of Artemis created a paradoxically complex situation, apparent confusion, and tension (Arnold, 2010). One can therefore guess that Paul was influenced by the status quo in Ephesus at that time. He could be trying to meander his way through the prevalent complexities and strike a balance between the cultural complexities in Ephesus. When one looks at Eph 5:21-24 on the surface level, it will appear as if Paul was in favour of male domination, but it is not. Paul's teachings reflected a more egalitarian view of men-women relationships, where both parties had mutual obligations and responsibilities to each other.

Tension in Marriages in Nigerian

Nigeria is largely a patriarchal society where men are generally favoured over women in most areas of life. Igbelina (2013) explains that the term 'patriarchy' originally described the father's role as the leader of the household. However, it has evolved to signify a broader system of male superiority and female subjugation. This gender-based system creates social hierarchies, granting material advantages to men while restricting women's roles and activities, often reinforced by various taboos to ensure adherence to designated gender roles.

The cultural practice where bride price is paid is also a major issue. The traditional social role of bride price has been misconstrued by many people. Consequently, some people tend to see and treat their wives as one of the commodities they have bought with their money. Concerning this, Ademiluka (2021) believes that the domination of women in marriage is reflected in the rites and processes of traditional marriage ceremonies, with the bride price being a crucial element. According to tradition and culture, the bride price is a formal validation and consolidation of a marriage. Unfortunately, in a patriarchal culture, many mistakenly view the bride price as the husband's 'certificate' of ownership over his wife and the children born from the union. This belief reinforces the idea that 'a wife is her husband's property, to be inherited upon his death.' Similarly, Osezua and Agholor (2019) argue that marital discord arises from the husband's adherence to this patriarchal misconception, believing that paying the bride price grants him ownership of his wife. Viewing marriage as a continuous learning institution, the husband often positions himself as his wife's teacher, sometimes reprimanding her like a child during this "teaching" process. In some instances, these traditions lead to an 'entitlement syndrome' where some men feel justified in dictating marital terms, including sex, without considering their spouses' needs or consent.

Some African cultures frown upon women who ask for a sexual relationship directly or indirectly. Women are not expected to initiate the move for a sexual relationship with their husband nor are they allowed to show interest in, and enjoy sex. It is the prerogative of the man to dictate the "when" and "how" of the sexual relationship. In this case, the woman becomes an object without emotion that is used to satisfy the man at his whims and caprices. Regarding this kind of attitude, Adewale and Oyekan (2022) maintain that people should be taught that sexual pleasure is not the exclusive reserve of men, that women too should be allowed to initiate and enjoy sex. They further emphasised that it should be understood that sexual passion is God's

creation, and that every human being has the capacity. As such, none should be forced to suppress his/her feelings.

Consequent upon these cultural elements in Nigeria, many women feel inferior and believe that they must be under men before they can have respect in society. Hence, they are easily cowed with the threat of divorce by the men even when they are being maltreated and abused. On the other hand, some women, especially those who have been influenced by Western cultures, are making efforts to resist male dominance and assert the fact that women are equal to men. In some instances, some of the women have gone to the extreme of enthroning matriarchy as a substitute for patriarchy. All these complexities create tension in different families. Sometimes the tension escalates to serious violence that has claimed the lives of both or one of the spouses.

It is, however, very unfortunate that this tension and consequent violence in Nigeria is also obtainable in some Christian homes (Ademiluka, 2021). Even some men of God have been found guilty of such obnoxious and dastardly acts. Hence, Onwuka (2022) concludes that misunderstandings about the true meaning of marriage in the Bible, particularly in modern African society, have led to a distorted perception of people, especially women. Marriage should be a lifelong partnership of equals—a man and a woman, both created in the image and likeness of God. However, it is often viewed as a master-servant relationship. This misinterpretation is evident in the increase in domestic violence, divorces, and the mistreatment of women within marriages and as widows.

A misunderstanding of the terms 'Submission' and 'Headship' as sources of Tension

Paul's statement which says that wives should submit to their husbands as to the Lord because the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church his body, of which He is the Saviour. As the Church submits to Christ, so should wives submit to their husbands in everything (c.f Eph. 5:21-23) has created a lot of controversies due to wrong interpretations. Some have seen it as a justification of the subjugation of women in the marriage relationship and general societal life. The Greek word for 'submit' is ὑποτάσσω (*hypotassō*). This *hypotassō* can also be translated as to 'subordinate', surrender, or yield. This can create a confusion whereby one can begin to see the man and the woman relationship in terms of superior versus inferior form of relationship. In Eph. 5:24, Paul sheds more light on what he means by submission by emphasizing that wives should submit to their husbands in everything in the same way the Church submits to Christ. Christ has not brutalized the Church into submission. Rather the Church has voluntarily yielded or submitted to the authority of Christ.

Furthermore, husbands are instructed to love their wives in the same way Christ loved his Church and gave his life for the church.(c.f Eph 5:25). Here Jesus is presented as a perfect model that husbands should imitate. Husbands are therefore called to a life of selfless sacrifice and unconditional love for their wives. According to Arnold (2010), Paul's stand is counter-cultural. It is not a concession to the existing cultural patriarchy. Rather, he sets Christ as an example for men on how they are to exercise their leadership role in their homes. Instead of looking at the high-handedness and oppressive way that their fathers and fore-fathers ruled in their homes, they should look at Christ as a model of authentic leader. He thus redefined the traditional understanding and belief of the first century man in the church concerning husband and wife relationship that supports male dominance and subjugation of the female.

On the headship, the Greek word translated as head is κεφαλή (*kephalē*). This word when used figuratively can also mean "source" or "originator". Some scholars like Mickelson and Downers (1986)

have tried to argue that κεφαλή does not portray any sense of leadership or authority. They say that Paul was simply emphasizing the creation of woman from man (Gen. 2:21-23). They tend to support their reasoning with 1Cor.11:3 where it is stated that head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is the man, while the head of Christ is God. Their argument is that since there exists no hierarchy of persons in the Trinity, that Paul could not have meant any authority or leadership. This line of argument seems to have been seriously biased by egalitarianism. Leadership is indispensable in any human organization. Ogamba and Anaetoh rightly opined that two people cannot drive the same car simultaneously. One must give instruction, and another should follow. A man and a woman have different roles in the family. Man was given a leadership position right from the moment of creation. Hence, he was to give every other creature, woman inclusive, a name. (Gen 2:20-23). It is therefore inappropriate to eliminate any notion of authority from the use of 'head' (*kephalē*) in the passage (Arnold 2010). But it is a relationship modelled on the one that exists between Christ and his Church.

Paul further elaborates on the relationship between husbands and wives in subsequent verse by explaining that husbands should love their wives as they love their own bodies. He points out that no one hates their own body; instead, they nourish and take care of it, just as Christ cares for the Church (c.f Eph 5:28-29). The word used by Paul in this circumstance is ἀγαπάτε (*agapate*) 'which is the present imperative of ἀγάπη (*agapē*)—love. This implies that the love should be a regular, continuous, and unconditional characteristic of the husband's affection or behaviour towards the wife just as Christ has continued to love the Church even in her most unlovely, unbecoming and unwholesome state. This kind of instruction for men to love their wives was rare in Graeco-Roman culture (Arnold 2010) So, Paul established a different foundation for husband and wife relationship—a high standard which is predicated on the love of Christ for his Church. A man who possesses such a Christ-like love for the wife will not suppress or treat her as a second-class human being. A woman who is submissive to the leadership role of the godly husband does not become or feel inferior. She is just fulfilling her divine role as a helper. So, neither patriarchy nor egalitarianism has any place in Paul's admonitions concerning Christian marriages.

Paul reached the core of his message when he further says that a man will leave his parents and be joined to his wife so that the two will become the same flesh. (c.f verse 31). This statement dispels any misconceptions of hierarchy in Eph 5:21-33. Their unity encompasses every aspect of their being—emotional, physical, and spiritual. Hierarchy only applies when there are two or more individuals. Since husband and wife are one mystical body, the issue of hierarchy does not arise. Paul is neither advocating feminism nor patriarchy. Instead, he emphasizes that each person has a unique role in a typical Christian marriage.

To better understand what Paul meant by "headship" in Eph chapter 5, it's helpful to look at other New Testament passages where he uses this term, particularly in 1 Cor 11:3, where Paul says, "I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Most people readily accept the first and last parts: "the head of every man is Christ" and "the head of Christ is God." The controversy arises with the statement "the head of a woman is her husband." However, the first and third statements help to clarify the second one. According to Stedman (2023), when "head" is used metaphorically, it implies priority in function, similar to how the head directs the body. In this context, "head" refers to leadership. Paul uses "head" three times in this passage, with the middle one being "the head of the woman is her husband." He also

provides two other examples of headship to help explain what he means by the middle statement.

Christ is the Head of every Man

Because the culture of that period was patriarchal, the term "man" was often used to represent humanity. In that case, the Greek words ὅτι παντός ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν, (*hoti pantos andros hē kephalē hō Christos estin*) translated as every man's head is Christ can also be translated as "the head of humanity or human race is Christ." Paul is pointing to the fact that Christ being the "last or second Adam" (1Cor.15:45), is the leader of human race, the one who goes before and opens the way, the pacesetter, and the person to be followed. He is the pioneer of our salvation. He holds the position of authority and responsibility over humanity even though his leadership authority is not that of dominion or subjugation.

Christ teaches that leadership is best expressed in perfect love and humility. He teaches this by taking care of the spiritual and temporal needs of his disciples and washing their feet. He further instructed that the greatest should become as the youngest, while the leader should be the one that serves (c.f Lk 22:26). Hence the head of the Catholic Church - "The Pope" goes by the name "the Servant of the Servants of God". This kind of leadership responsibility could be adduced to be what Paul is referring to, in the husbands versus wives' relationship. Uwaegbute (2023) provides additional insight, highlighting the New Testament's perspective on submission and obedience to support this view. It is essential to emphasize that Jesus' teachings, which form the foundation of Christianity, did not promote subjugation or subordination among his followers. Jesus explicitly disapproved his disciples exercising authority over others.(c.f Mt 20:20-28) Therefore, Paul's use of the term ὑποτάσσεσθε in Ephesians 5:22 could not have implied subjugation or subordination of women to the men folk.

The Head of Christ is The Father

Jesus as the second person of the Trinity has equality with the Father in essence. As God made man, Christ is subject to the Father. Even though He was in the form of God, He did not consider equality with God something to cling to. Instead, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant and being born in human likeness. He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (c.f Philippians 2:6-8). In Jn 4:34 Christ says, that his food is to do the will of the father that sent him. Further he says he does not do anything by his own authority but rather speaks what he has been taught by the father (c.f Jn 8:28b). These and many other passages in the Scripture portray the leadership authority of God the Father over Jesus and his (Christ) willing submission to the Father. At Gethsemane Jesus requested the father to take away the cup if he (the father) is willing, Nevertheless the will of the father is to be done and not his (Jesus) own will (c.f Lk.22:42). The fact that Jesus was subject to the Father, and willingly submitted to his authority and leadership, did not make him inferior to the Father. His submission does not diminish his divinity. John 1:1 is very clear in stating that Jesus the word of God was with God from the beginning and that the word was God. In John 10:30 Jesus unequivocally says that he is one with the father. The terms "headship" and "submission" therefore, do not in any way suggest "superiority" and "inferiority." Neither do they suggest "dominion" and "subjugation". This kind of relationship sheds more light on what Paul means when he talks about submission of wives to the husbands. So, headship is not power, nor control, nor preference, nor is it favouritism or even special authority but leadership authority, which cannot be eradicated in any association. (Masonheimer, 2019)

Proposed Solutions to marital tension

As the tension in marriages in Nigeria has become a matter of great concern to many people within the country, the researcher wishes to suggest some measures that can help to ameliorate the problem:

(1) There should be a proper orientation for educating young couples about the requirements of marriage based on the proper interpretation of the biblical passages. This will help to clear the wrong notion they may have acquired from the society concerning marital relationships.

(2) Some aspects of the culture, especially, patriarchy need to be reviewed as it is no longer relevant in the present dispensation with the rate of changes in every aspect of societal life in the world. In the same vein, the practice of bride price should also be reviewed. This is because some weak-minded people see it as a “purchasing right” over their wives.

(3) Efforts should be made through serious enlightenment to eradicate the socio-cultural stigma that is associated with being single in our society or when married couples decide to “separate” and live independent of one other. This has made some people remain in abusive marriages and die silently.

(4) Young couples and those intending to get into a marriage relationship should be taught the importance of open and honest communication. Listening actively and expressing oneself clearly can help prevent misunderstandings, suspicion, and tension, while mutual understanding is promoted.

(5) Mutual respect is essential for a healthy relationship. Couples should learn to respect each other's opinions and values, and avoid belittling or demeaning language or behaviour. In that case, both spouses should be willing to make compromises to find common grounds and make decisions together.

(6) Couples are advised to seek professional help if tensions persist or become overwhelming. Seeking professional help from a qualified marriage counsellor or therapist is a good option. Marriage counsellors or therapists can provide guidance and support to help couples navigate difficult issues and find solutions.

Conclusion

Marriage is a divine institution that originated at the time of creation, established by God who created woman as a helper for man. In Marriage, a man and a woman are united based on agreed social, cultural, and religious guidelines. Tensions in modern marriages often arise from misunderstandings about roles and can lead to conflicts and even violence. This research, through a socio-rhetorical interpretation of Eph 5:21-33, seeks to provide a deeper understanding of marriage, emphasizing the equality in value of men and women before God. Both however are assigned different roles. The man is given a leadership role, while the woman is a helper, which should be seen as a matter of responsibility rather than authority or superiority.

The leadership role of the husband is to be carried out with selfless humility, love, and imitation of Jesus relation to the Church. Husband and wife should reflect in their relationship, Jesus relationship with the Church. This headship is not about hierarchy but about mutual responsibilities. The dynamic is likened to the Trinity. The Son submits to God his Father while the Holy Spirit the advocate is a helper. Yet the three retain their divinity or essence. When a wife submits to the husband, it is not a sign inferiority, rather she fulfills her role as a helper. The husband on the other hand, must lead with diligence and Christ-like love. Properly understood and practiced, this approach can alleviate tensions and prevent conflicts in marriages.

Conflict interest

The author(s) declares that he/she has no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The author(s) declares that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

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