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A Comparative Study of Gendered Loneliness in Selected African Novels and Biblical Marital Narratives

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Abstract

This study examines the paradox of marriage as a culturally and theologically celebrated site of companionship and as a recurring space of gendered loneliness in selected African novels and biblical marital narratives. The problem addressed is the tendency of dominant African cultural and Christian discourses to idealise marriage as emotionally fulfilling, socially stabilising and spiritually sanctioned, while giving limited critical attention to the silence, emotional neglect, reproductive anxiety, unequal affection and gendered power relations that may exist within the institution. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study reads Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of*

Motherhood and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* alongside Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Genesis 29-30 and 1 Samuel 1. The analysis is guided by Social Role Theory and Attachment Theory, which together clarify how culturally assigned marital roles and emotional bonds shape intimacy, alienation and dissatisfaction. The study finds that women's loneliness often emerges from enforced silence, reproductive pressure, emotional neglect, economic dependency and patriarchal authority, while men's loneliness is shaped by expectations of stoicism, provision, control and emotional restraint. By placing African fiction in dialogue with biblical narratives, the paper shows that scripture contains complex representations of companionship, rivalry, barrenness, unequal affection, longing and emotional alienation. The study concludes that marriage in African cultural and Christian contexts requires a more humane reimagining centred on empathy, mutual recognition, emotional reciprocity and gender equity.

Keywords: Gendered loneliness, marriage, African fiction, biblical marital narratives, emotional neglect.

Introduction

Marriage remains one of the most enduring institutions in human society. Across cultures and religious traditions, it is associated with intimacy, moral duty, social continuity, kinship consolidation and communal legitimacy. In many African contexts, marriage is not viewed merely as a private relationship between two individuals but as a social arrangement through which families, gender expectations and adult respectability are publicly organised (Lomotey, 2024; Sonkaya & Ocal, 2024). Within biblical and Christian traditions, marriage is also imagined as a covenantal institution shaped by companionship, fidelity, responsibility and spiritual order, even though contemporary Christian assumptions about marriage are themselves historically and culturally mediated (van Eck, 2020). These ideals explain why marriage is often publicly celebrated as the expected cure for solitude and emotional incompleteness.

Yet marriage can also become a site of tension, silence and emotional estrangement. Loneliness within marriage is particularly paradoxical because the institution is culturally and scripturally expected to offer companionship. In this study, loneliness does not mean physical aloneness; it refers to emotional disconnection within an intimate relationship that should ordinarily provide recognition, care and understanding. In many African societies, admitting loneliness within marriage may be interpreted as personal failure, moral weakness or spiritual inadequacy. As a result, emotional suffering in marriage is often endured privately rather than addressed openly.

African literature has repeatedly exposed this contradiction by representing marriage as a complex emotional terrain shaped by cultural prescriptions and unequal power relations. Works by African women writers, in particular, interrogate the distance between the ideal of marriage and the lived experiences of women who are expected to submit, reproduce, nurture and endure. Recent criticism on African women's writing shows that female characters are often used to question patriarchal regulation, local gender expectations and inherited assumptions about womanhood (Lomotey, 2024; Okoye-Ugwu, 2024). Through silence, interior conflict and psychological fracture, these texts reveal how marriage may produce gendered loneliness, especially when women's worth is measured through obedience, motherhood and self-sacrifice. At the same time, the narratives do not present men as emotionally whole simply because they possess social authority. Men are also constrained by dominant models of masculinity that demand emotional restraint, economic provision and control, thereby limiting vulnerability and intimacy.

Biblical narratives often invoked as models for marital conduct also present ambivalent portraits of marriage. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 celebrates companionship and mutual support, but Genesis 29-30

and 1 Samuel 1 depict marriages marked by rivalry, unequal affection, barrenness, reproductive anxiety and grief. Recent biblical scholarship on Rachel, Leah and Hannah shows that infertility, reproductive expectation and household rivalry are central to the emotional and theological complexity of these narratives (Claassens, 2020; Diko, 2025; Vivian, 2022). These texts complicate idealised theological readings of marriage by suggesting that emotional pain and loneliness appear even in scriptural households. They also show that marriage, while socially legitimate, does not automatically produce emotional fulfilment.

Existing scholarship has addressed patriarchy, oppression, resistance and gender relations in African fiction, but emotional loneliness is often treated as an implied consequence rather than a central analytical category. Similarly, theological discussions of marriage frequently emphasise doctrine, covenant and moral prescription, while giving less attention to affective experience. When loneliness is discussed, it is often treated in general terms, without sufficient attention to how gender shapes emotional isolation differently for men and women. The specific gap addressed in this study is that marital loneliness has not been sufficiently theorised as a gendered emotional structure across African literary texts and biblical marital narratives. This study responds to that gap by foregrounding gendered loneliness as an interpretive lens for examining marriage in selected African novels and biblical passages.

The study proceeds from the premise that loneliness in marriage is not merely a private psychological condition. It is also culturally, socially and theologically produced. Gender roles, reproductive expectations, religious interpretations and household power structures all influence how companionship is promised, denied or distorted. By comparing selected African novels with biblical narratives, the study examines how marital loneliness emerges through silence, emotional neglect, reproductive pressure, unequal

authority and masculine restraint. It argues that marriage becomes emotionally destructive when role fulfilment is valued above mutual recognition and relational care.

Methodology and Scope

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design based on close textual analysis. The primary African literary texts are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. They are selected through purposive sampling because they offer sustained representations of marriage, gender, emotional interiority and social expectation in African contexts. The biblical texts examined are Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Genesis 29-30 and 1 Samuel 1. They are selected because they provide three distinct biblical perspectives on companionship, marital rivalry, reproductive pressure and emotional suffering. This selection creates a clearer balance between three African literary narratives and three biblical textual units.

The analytical procedure combines thematic close reading with theory-guided interpretation. In the novels, attention is given to characterisation, silence and speech patterns, marital conflict, reproductive pressure, economic dependence, domestic ritual, bodily suffering, withdrawal and household power relations. In the biblical passages, attention is given to companionate imagery, naming patterns, rivalry, barrenness, prayer, tears, refusal to eat and the social meanings attached to fertility. These textual details are read as evidence of loneliness, not merely as background features of plot. The study therefore treats silence, delayed speech, prayer, tears, compulsive labour and bodily exhaustion as narrative signs through which marital loneliness becomes visible.

Secondary sources are drawn from African literary studies, gender studies, sociology of marriage, attachment studies and biblical theology. These sources are used to support interpretation, clarify

the relevance of the selected texts and identify gaps in existing research, especially the limited attention given to marital loneliness as a gendered emotional structure in African literary and biblical scholarship. The study is not a sociological survey of actual marriages, nor is it a doctrinal theology of marriage. Its scope is textual and interpretive, although it draws from social psychology and theology to enrich literary analysis.

Synopsis of the Primary Literary Texts

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Purple Hibiscus is set in postcolonial Nigeria and narrated largely through the perspective of Kambili Achike, a young girl raised in an affluent but emotionally oppressive Catholic household. At the centre of the narrative is the marriage between Eugene Achike and Beatrice. Eugene is publicly admired as a wealthy industrialist, church benefactor and principled critic of political corruption. Privately, however, he rules his family through fear, violence and religious absolutism. His moral reputation conceals a household structured by silence, punishment and emotional intimidation.

Beatrice's marriage is marked by profound loneliness. She fulfils the expected roles of wife and mother, but those roles do not protect her from emotional neglect or violence. Her speech is careful and restrained, and her suffering is often displaced into domestic ritual, particularly her obsessive care for fragile household objects. The marriage therefore becomes a site of emotional terror rather than companionship. Adichie exposes the intersection of patriarchal authority and rigid religious interpretation, showing how a marriage that appears respectable in public may be emotionally destructive in private.

The Joys of Motherhood by Buchi Emecheta

The Joys of Motherhood follows Nnu Ego, an Igbo woman whose identity is shaped by the belief that fulfilment lies in marriage and motherhood. Her movement from rural life to colonial Lagos

reveals how traditional expectations and urban economic pressures combine to intensify female suffering. Nnu Ego's marriage to Nnaife is organised less around emotional companionship than around survival and reproduction. Although she bears several children, her marital life offers little intimacy, security or sustained recognition.

The novel's irony lies in the collapse of the cultural promise that motherhood guarantees joy, honour and care in old age. Nnu Ego sacrifices herself for her children, yet she becomes increasingly isolated as they pursue their own lives. Her death by the roadside symbolises the existential loneliness produced by a system that values women for reproductive labour but fails to return emotional care. Emecheta therefore critiques a marital culture that converts womanhood into endurance and motherhood into an unpaid emotional economy.

***Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga**

Nervous Conditions explores gender, education and power in colonial Rhodesia through the experiences of Tambudzai and the women in her family. The marriage between Babamukuru and Maiguru is especially important. Babamukuru is respected as an educated patriarch and moral authority, while Maiguru is also educated and economically productive. Yet within the marriage, Maiguru's income is controlled, her opinions are marginalised and her intellectual identity is overshadowed by her husband's authority.

Maiguru's loneliness is quieter than Beatrice's and less materially desperate than Nnu Ego's, but it is no less significant. It emerges through invisibility. She is not excluded from marriage; rather, she is absorbed into it in a way that erases her autonomy. Her brief departure from the home becomes a muted protest against emotional and economic subordination. Dangarembga thus shows that education and modernity do not automatically free women

from gendered loneliness when marital structures continue to privilege male authority over mutuality.

Synopsis of the Biblical Texts

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 provides an ideal of companionship based on mutual labour, support and protection. Its central claim that two are better than one positions human partnership as a response to vulnerability. The passage is not exclusively a marriage text, and this point is important. Within the present study, it is used not as a narrow marital command but as a theological and ethical standard of mutual care against which marital relations can be assessed. It imagines relationships as reciprocity rather than hierarchy and highlights the emotional and practical value of support.

Genesis 29-30 narrates the marriages of Jacob to Leah and Rachel. Leah is fertile but unloved, while Rachel is loved but barren. Both women experience loneliness through different forms of deprivation. Leah longs for affection and repeatedly interprets childbirth as a possible route to recognition. Rachel, meanwhile, suffers the stigma of barrenness and seeks validation through motherhood. The household becomes a space of rivalry and emotional fragmentation rather than companionship.

In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah's marriage to Elkanah is shaped by love, childlessness and social humiliation. Although Elkanah loves Hannah, his affection does not erase the pain of Peninnah's taunts or the cultural shame attached to barrenness. Hannah's tears, fasting and prayer reveal a loneliness that is emotional, social and theological. The narrative demonstrates that marital affection alone may be insufficient where communal values define a woman's worth through reproduction.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship across African literary studies, gender studies, theology and psychology has examined marriage as a cultural and

emotional institution. In African women's writing, marriage is frequently presented as a paradoxical space where social honour coexists with isolation. Lomotey's (2024) study of African women writers shows how women's narratives negotiate local patriarchal conditions and create literary spaces for female voice, resistance and self-definition. This contribution is useful because it confirms that African women's texts are not merely personal stories but critical engagements with culture. However, Lomotey's emphasis on feminist negotiation does not isolate loneliness as a distinct structure of marital experience. The present study extends such work by making loneliness itself the centre of interpretation.

Studies of African fiction also foreground procreation as a major source of marital strain. Okoye-Ugwu's (2024) recent analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* argues that Emecheta's novel exposes how womanhood is reduced to motherhood within a patriarchal Igbo society. Kamankura and Njogu (2024) similarly show that Nnu Ego's conformity to tradition contrasts with Adaku's effort to imagine womanhood beyond oppressive marital and maternal expectations. These studies are relevant because they demonstrate how motherhood becomes both a source of value and a mechanism of emotional control. Their limitation for the present purpose is that they do not sufficiently connect motherhood to loneliness as an affective consequence of marital ideology.

Polygyny and marital hierarchy further complicate intimacy in African literary and biblical representation. Kamankura and Njogu (2024) observe that Nnu Ego's pain is intensified by the emotional cost of sharing her husband, while Claassens (2020) reads Genesis 29-30 as a trauma narrative shaped by reproductive rivalry, gendered competition and systemic household violation. This insight is important because *The Joys of Motherhood*, Genesis 29-30 and 1 Samuel 1 all depict households where plural marriage or female comparison creates rivalry and loneliness. However, the connection between biblical household rivalry and African literary

representations of marital loneliness remains underdeveloped in existing scholarship.

Biblical and theological scholarship also interrogates marriage as a constructed institution rather than a simple timeless model. Van Eck (2020) argues that many contemporary Christian assumptions about marriage have been shaped by historical and cultural contexts, including Greco-Roman norms, rather than by a single unchanging biblical pattern. Vivian (2022) also shows that biblical discussions of reproduction and infertility are tied to contested relations among God, men and women, especially in narratives where women's reproductive capacity becomes socially and theologically significant. This is important because scriptural interpretation influences the way marriage is taught, regulated and idealised in many African Christian communities.

Despite these insights, theological scholarship often prioritises doctrinal ideals over the emotional contradictions within biblical marriage narratives. Genesis 29-30 and 1 Samuel 1 are sometimes read mainly as stories of divine intervention, fertility or covenantal continuity, while their affective dimensions receive less attention. Yet these narratives contain explicit evidence of longing, shame, rivalry and grief. When read alongside African fiction, they reveal how marital loneliness is shaped by gendered expectations that cross textual and historical boundaries.

Psychological scholarship contributes another useful perspective through Attachment Theory. Mikulincer and Shaver (2022) argue that attachment orientations influence emotional regulation and relational responsiveness in close relationships. Shafique, Sajid, Yousaf and Imdad (2024) more directly connect attachment styles with loneliness among married women, showing that secure, avoidant and anxious attachment patterns affect marital loneliness. These findings are useful for literary analysis because the selected texts repeatedly depict marriages where emotional safety is absent,

communication is distorted and intimacy is replaced by control, anxiety or withdrawal.

The existing literature therefore provides important foundations but also reveals gaps. First, emotional loneliness in African marital narratives remains under-theorised as a distinct category. Second, biblical scholarship has not sufficiently explored the affective texture of marital suffering in relation to contemporary African literary representations. Third, limited interdisciplinary work connects literature, theology, gender theory and psychology in the analysis of marriage. This study addresses these gaps by treating gendered loneliness as both a literary theme and a relational structure.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Social Role Theory and Attachment Theory as complementary frameworks. Together, they allow marriage to be read as both a social institution and an emotional practice. Although both theories emerged largely from Western social-psychological traditions, they are applied here critically rather than mechanically, with attention to African communal marital expectations, Christian teaching, kinship structures and reproductive values.

Social Role Theory, associated especially with Alice Eagly and later Eagly and Wood, explains how gendered behaviours are shaped by culturally assigned roles. Eagly and Wood (2012) argue that societies distribute responsibilities in ways that produce expectations about masculinity and femininity. In marriage, men are often expected to provide, lead and control, while women are expected to care, submit, reproduce and preserve domestic harmony. These roles shape not only external behaviour but also emotional experience. Women may become lonely when their emotional labour is expected but not reciprocated. Men may

become lonely when masculinity discourages vulnerability and emotional communication.

Within African cultural contexts, where marriage is strongly communal and procreation is highly valued, Social Role Theory helps explain why women's loneliness is tied to motherhood, domestic service and marital obedience. A woman who does not bear children, or whose emotional needs disrupt expected submission, may be judged as failing her role. Men's loneliness, on the other hand, may emerge from the demand to appear strong, decisive and economically capable even when they are emotionally disconnected. Thus, gender roles produce different but interconnected forms of loneliness.

Attachment Theory, first developed by John Bowlby in the late 1960s and extended through Mary Ainsworth's empirical work on attachment patterns, focuses on emotional bonds and patterns of intimacy. Secure attachment encourages trust, responsiveness and mutual dependence, while insecure attachment may produce anxiety, avoidance, withdrawal or fear of abandonment. Applied to marriage, the theory helps explain why legal or social union does not necessarily result in emotional closeness. People may live together and still experience deep isolation when there is no emotional safety.

In the selected literary and biblical texts, many marriages reveal anxious and avoidant relational patterns. Beatrice's silence in *Purple Hibiscus*, Nnu Ego's desperate investment in motherhood, Maiguru's withdrawal in *Nervous Conditions*, Leah's longing for recognition, Rachel's despair over barrenness and Hannah's grief all point to emotional bonds strained by insecurity, non-recognition and social pressure. Attachment Theory therefore foregrounds the interior dimensions of loneliness, while Social Role Theory explains the social structures that produce and legitimise it.

The comparative movement of the study is important because African Christian marital thought often draws simultaneously on indigenous cultural expectations and biblical authority. In practice, these two systems may reinforce each other, especially when female submission, fertility and domestic endurance are treated as signs of moral maturity. The selected novels and biblical passages do not reject marriage as a relational ideal; rather, they expose the emotional damage that occurs when marriage is interpreted mainly as duty, lineage preservation or religious obedience. This distinction allows the study to critique oppressive marital formations without dismissing the possibility of companionship, tenderness and mutual responsibility within marriage.

Gendered Loneliness and Marital Disillusionment in Selected African Fiction

African fiction has persistently examined marriage as a site where cultural expectations and emotional realities collide. Rather than presenting marriage as guaranteed fulfilment, many African novels reveal it as an institution that can produce silence, estrangement and psychological isolation. *Purple Hibiscus*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Nervous Conditions* demonstrate that women's loneliness often emerges from silencing, reproductive burden and economic dependency, while men's loneliness is shaped by authoritarian masculinity, stoicism and emotional repression.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike's marriage to Beatrice appears exemplary from the outside. He is wealthy, religious, generous and politically courageous. Yet the home he governs is built on fear. Beatrice's loneliness is structurally produced by Eugene's authoritarian control, which combines patriarchal dominance with religious absolutism. She has no secure emotional space in which to express pain, disagreement or desire. Her silence becomes both a survival strategy and a sign of erasure.

Adichie gives this loneliness concrete textual form through Beatrice's miscarriages, Eugene's violence and the oppressive

quietness of the Achike household. Beatrice's careful cleaning of the delicate figurines becomes symbolic of her own fragility and of a marriage in which breakage is both literal and emotional. She performs the role of the obedient wife, but obedience does not produce intimacy. Instead, it deepens her isolation because the social role expected of her requires endurance rather than recognition. Her attachment to domestic routine becomes a way of managing fear in a relationship where emotional safety is absent.

The Joys of Motherhood presents a different but related form of loneliness. Nnu Ego's life is governed by the belief that motherhood is the highest fulfilment of womanhood. Marriage becomes the channel through which she is expected to achieve value through reproduction. Yet the more she fulfils this role, the more emotionally depleted she becomes. Nnaife offers limited companionship, and the household is shaped by poverty, labour and survival. Nnu Ego's loneliness is therefore not caused by her failure to meet cultural expectations but by the emptiness of the expectations themselves.

Emecheta's critique is especially clear in Nnu Ego's economic struggle, her repeated sacrifices for her children and her lonely death. Her labour sustains others, but it does not secure reciprocal care. Because her marriage does not provide secure intimacy, she invests her emotional future in motherhood. Yet the children for whom she sacrifices become distant, and the promised reward of motherhood collapses. The novel therefore exposes the cruelty of a system that teaches women to find meaning only in marital and maternal sacrifice but does not guarantee them affection, dignity or care.

Nervous Conditions extends the discussion by showing that education and economic productivity do not automatically prevent marital loneliness. Maiguru is educated, salaried and intellectually capable, yet Babamukuru controls her income and dominates

family decisions. Her loneliness is not spectacular but ordinary, embedded in the routines of a respectable marriage. She is visible as a wife but invisible as a person with desires, opinions and intellectual agency.

Maiguru's complaint about her salary and her temporary departure from Babamukuru's house provide direct textual evidence of this loneliness. Her departure is not simply rebellion; it is a demand for recognition. Although she possesses attributes associated with modern empowerment, the marital role still demands obedience and self-effacement. Her return to the marriage shows the weight of social respectability and familial expectation. Dangarembga therefore reveals a form of loneliness that does not always appear through visible violence but through chronic invalidation and the denial of personhood.

Across the three novels, marital structures privilege role fulfilment over emotional connection. Beatrice is silenced by religious patriarchy, Nnu Ego is exhausted by reproductive ideology and Maiguru is diminished by patriarchal respectability. These women are not merely unhappy wives; they are characters whose loneliness is produced by systems that reward endurance and punish emotional need. Their marriages appear socially legitimate but fail as spaces of mutual recognition.

The men in these texts are also emotionally constrained, although the novels represent their loneliness differently. Eugene's authority isolates him from tenderness because his masculinity is inseparable from control, purity and punishment. Nnaife's strained provider role, intensified by colonial economic instability, weakens his ability to build intimacy and turns marriage into a struggle for survival. Babamukuru's patriarchal dignity prevents mutual vulnerability because he must appear as the unchallenged centre of family order. These male figures are not victims in the same way as the women they dominate, but they are emotionally

impoverished by the very gender roles that grant them authority. Their loneliness is therefore less visible, often appearing as rigidity, anger, distance or failure to understand the emotional worlds of their wives.

These narratives show that gendered loneliness is systemic rather than accidental. It is produced when marriage becomes a structure of obligation rather than a practice of companionship. The women suffer because they are expected to submit, reproduce, serve and endure. The men suffer because they are trained to command, provide and suppress vulnerability. The tragedy is that both sides are trapped within roles that make genuine intimacy difficult, although the burdens are unevenly distributed and women bear the heavier emotional and bodily costs.

Companionship and Its Discontents in Biblical Models of Marriage

Biblical texts are often treated as prescriptive models for marriage, particularly in African Christian contexts. However, when read closely, they present complex emotional realities rather than a single harmonious ideal. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 offers a vision of companionship based on mutual support. Its images of lifting, warming and defending one another suggest that partnership should answer human vulnerability. The passage emphasises reciprocity, not domination. It therefore provides an ethical counterpoint to marriages built on hierarchy and silence.

Genesis 29-30 illustrates the distance between marital status and emotional fulfilment through Leah and Rachel. Leah is married to Jacob but unloved. Her repeated naming of her children is especially significant because the names disclose her longing to be seen and loved. Childbirth becomes her imagined route to emotional recognition, yet fertility gives her social value without securing Jacob's affection. Rachel experiences the reverse condition: she is loved but barren, and her barrenness becomes a

source of shame and despair. The sisters are positioned against each other in a household where reproductive success and male affection become competing currencies of worth.

The loneliness of Leah and Rachel demonstrates how marriage can become fragmented by unequal affection and reproductive pressure. Both women are socially located within legitimate marriage, yet both experience emotional lack. Leah has children but lacks love; Rachel has love but lacks children. The narrative therefore refuses a simple equation between marriage and fulfilment. It closely parallels African fictional representations in which women seek validation through motherhood or marital endurance but remain emotionally isolated.

Hannah's story in 1 Samuel 1 further deepens this pattern. Elkanah loves Hannah, yet his love does not resolve her grief. Peninnah's taunting, Hannah's childlessness and the cultural shame of barrenness create an emotional wound that cannot be healed by marital affection alone. Hannah's silence, weeping, refusal to eat and prayer are not incidental details. They are textual signs of embodied loneliness. Elkanah's question, "Am not I better to thee than ten sons?" reveals his inability to understand the social and gendered nature of Hannah's pain. Hannah's loneliness is therefore not simply personal sadness; it is produced by a communal structure that ties female worth to reproduction.

These biblical narratives complicate idealised theological readings of marriage. Scripture records women's grief, rivalry, longing and silence without reducing them to moral failure. The texts therefore invite affective interpretation. They also reveal that marital loneliness exists within sacred narratives and should not be dismissed as a modern or secular concern. When read alongside African fiction, they show that the gap between marital legitimacy and emotional companionship is a recurring human problem.

Comparative Discussion: African Fiction and Biblical Narratives

Reading African fiction alongside biblical narratives reveals strong continuities in the representation of marriage. Across both corpora, marriage is shaped by cultural and theological expectations that often prioritise role fulfilment over emotional reciprocity. The selected texts show that one can be married, socially recognised and religiously sanctioned, yet still be emotionally alone.

Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* resembles Leah in Genesis 29-30 in the sense that both women occupy legitimate marital positions while lacking emotional recognition. Leah bears sons in the hope of being loved, while Beatrice fulfils domestic and religious expectations in the hope of preserving family stability. Both are trapped in structures that reward performance but deny intimacy. Their loneliness is made worse by systems that normalise male authority.

Nnu Ego's experience in *The Joys of Motherhood* resonates with Rachel and Hannah. In each case, reproductive expectation becomes central to female identity. Nnu Ego is valued for motherhood but abandoned emotionally; Rachel suffers because she cannot initially bear children; Hannah is loved yet humiliated because of childlessness. These figures reveal that motherhood can function as both social validation and emotional burden. The promise that children will secure fulfilment is repeatedly shown to be unstable.

Maiguru's quiet loneliness in *Nervous Conditions* parallels biblical women whose emotional and spiritual depths are overshadowed by patriarchal arrangements. Like Hannah, Maiguru articulates dissatisfaction in a restrained manner, not as open rebellion but as a longing to be recognised. Her brief departure from the home resembles a form of lament, a signal that the marriage has failed to provide emotional reciprocity.

The texts also show that men's loneliness operates differently. Eugene, Nnaife, Babamukuru, Jacob and Elkanah occupy positions of male authority, but authority does not guarantee emotional intelligence or intimacy. Eugene's religious absolutism isolates him from tenderness. Nnaife's strained provider role reduces marriage to survival. Babamukuru's patriarchal image makes mutuality difficult. Jacob's unequal affection fractures his household, and Elkanah's attempt to comfort Hannah shows limited awareness of the social pressures surrounding barrenness. These men are not presented as emotionally fulfilled simply because they occupy dominant positions. Rather, their masculinity often narrows their emotional imagination and prevents them from seeing the loneliness of others.

Social Role Theory explains these patterns as effects of rigid gender scripts. Women are expected to submit, reproduce and preserve domestic harmony; men are expected to lead, provide and control emotion. Attachment Theory reveals the emotional consequences of such scripts: anxious longing, avoidance, silence, withdrawal and relational insecurity. Together, the two frameworks show that loneliness in marriage is not accidental. It is produced by structures that value hierarchy, reproduction and respectability more than vulnerability, empathy and mutual care.

The comparative reading also challenges simplified uses of biblical authority in African Christian contexts. Scripture should not be read only as a source of marital prescriptions; it should also be read as a record of marital pain. Ecclesiastes offers an ideal of support, but Genesis and Samuel reveal the emotional failures that arise when companionship is displaced by rivalry, hierarchy and reproductive pressure. African fiction continues this interrogation by showing the same issues in modern cultural settings. Both bodies of texts therefore call for a more humane understanding of marriage.

Conclusion

This study has examined gendered loneliness in marriage through a comparative analysis of selected African novels and biblical marital narratives. It has shown that marriage, despite its cultural and theological idealisation as a site of companionship, may become a space of emotional isolation when shaped by rigid gender roles, reproductive expectations, economic dependency, patriarchal authority and emotional repression.

The analysis demonstrates that women's loneliness is frequently produced through silence, neglect, reproductive burden and the demand for endurance. Beatrice, Nnu Ego, Maiguru, Leah, Rachel and Hannah all reveal different forms of female isolation within marriage. Their experiences show that social legitimacy does not necessarily produce emotional care. Men's loneliness, by contrast, emerges through stoicism, provider anxiety, authoritarian masculinity and emotional restraint. Male authority often becomes a barrier to intimacy rather than a path to relational fulfilment.

The study does not present African culture or biblical theology as inherently oppressive. Rather, it critiques rigid interpretations of culture and scripture that privilege hierarchy, duty and reproduction over companionship. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 offers a more humane vision of mutual support, while the biblical narratives of Leah, Rachel and Hannah show that this ideal is often undermined in practice. African fiction similarly reveals that marriages celebrated by society may conceal emotional suffering.

The major implication of this study is that gendered loneliness should be treated as a serious analytical category in literary, cultural and theological studies. For African literary criticism, it enables a reading of marriage beyond oppression and resistance by foregrounding interiority, emotional labour and relational fracture. For theology, it encourages readings of scripture that acknowledge pain and complexity rather than selecting only idealised models.

For cultural discourse, it challenges communities to reconsider marital ideals that praise endurance while neglecting intimacy.

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